

Hope - And Skepticism - As Local Universities Welcome Students Back

By BRIDGET MANLEY · AUG 11, 2020

<https://www.wmra.org/post/hope-and-skepticism-local-universities-welcome-students-back>



Remember when students could gather like this to study? Not this fall, not during a pandemic. Masks and physical distancing will be required. Here, students study between classes on the campus of JMU just before the University shut down due to COVID-19 in March.

CREDIT BRIDGET MANLEY

Universities and colleges continue to tweak and fine tune their re-opening plans as the days count down to the start of fall semester classes. And some faculty want more say in re-opening in the midst of this pandemic. WMRA's Bridget Manley reports.

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After administrators at the University of Virginia noticed an uptick in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks both locally and nationally, they began to look at the plans they'd made for in-person reopening of classes this fall.

UVa quickly made the difficult decision to [delay in-person classes for two weeks](#), and move to an online format for at least two weeks while they monitor conditions.



Brian Coy is UVa's university spokesperson.

CREDIT UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

BRIAN COY: So we are going to wait and see, our plan right now is to bring students back two weeks later than we were anticipating, which would mean classes will begin in person around September 8th. But if conditions make it so that we can't do that safely, we'll change the plan again.

Brian Coy is UVa's spokesperson.

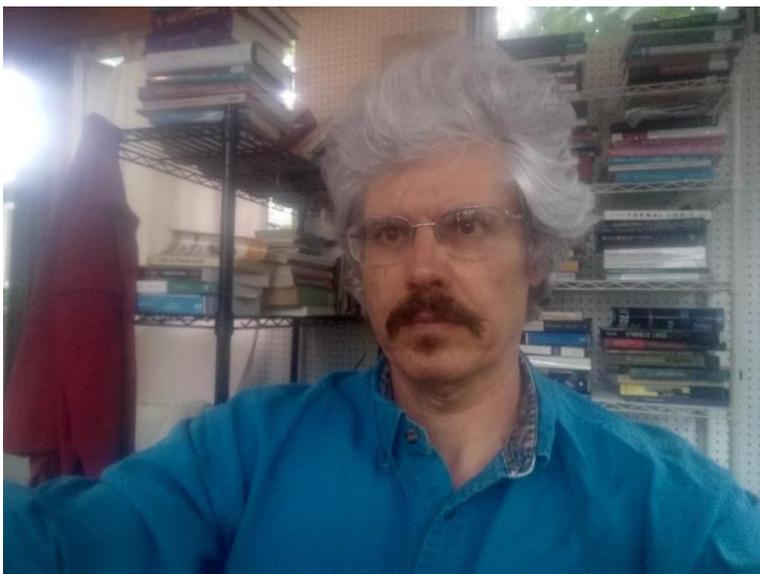
COY: The executive leadership at UVa has promised to be back in touch by August 28th to update [the campus community] on where we are, and we are going to continue to monitor the conditions. These are circumstances that are beyond anyone's control in terms of at a university level, and so we're going to have to keep watching and find out where we are in a couple weeks.

The move by UVa is one of many difficult decisions facing colleges and universities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the numbers of cases and deaths continue to climb in the U.S.

UNC-Chapel Hill Reopens With Students On Campus

[Governor Ralph Northam issued a set of guidelines for higher education institutions in June](#), but ultimately gave each school the freedom to chart their own course. That means that each university's approach to reopening safely is different, as each campus juggles its own unique and different student populations, cultures, and geographic locations.

Meanwhile, faculty and staff have had mixed views on returning to the classroom, and some are asking universities to include their voices in the decision-making process.



Dr. Thomas Adajian is one of three professors at JMU who started an online petition asking Virginia universities to include faculty and staff when decisions regarding COVID-19 are being made. The other JMU profs are Dr. Doe Pollanz, Associate Professor of French, and Dr. Jennifer Lang-Rigal, Associate Professor Spanish.

CREDIT THOMAS ADAJIAN

Dr. Thomas Adajian is [an associate professor of philosophy at JMU](#). He is one of three professors who have [started an online petition](#) asking Virginia universities to include faculty and staff voices when COVID-related decisions are being made.

DR. THOMAS ADAJIAN: What's been important to our petition, and I think what's been important around the state and around the country, is the process by which these decisions are being made. And the unfortunate fact of the matter is that these decisions were made at JMU in a top down, rather opaque way, where the faculty was not involved to the extent that shared governance, in fact, requires that faculty be involved.

CAITLYN READ: Our primary focus is giving students the experience that they've come to know, which is that those relationships with the faculty and the staff are sometimes hard to emulate online.



JMU spokesperson Caitlyn Read.

CREDIT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

Caitlyn Read is JMU's spokesperson. She says the administration has seen the petitions and heard from faculty, but argues that JMU has taken faculty opinion into consideration and are making all accommodations possible to keep them safe.

READ: So while we understand these are uncharted waters - this is completely unprecedented - we are doing everything within our control to make sure that not just our students start safe, but our faculty and staff. We understand that many of them are in a more vulnerable population, that is something we have taken carefully into account, and the university has been more than flexible in working with those faculty who have relevant concerns, who may have health issues, who are lobbying for the opportunity to teach online. I think, in that regard, the university has been very accommodating.

Some universities are planning to utilize larger spaces such as arenas to physically distance while in class, giving students a choice for in-person and virtual class hybrids, planning meal delivery services and installing Plexiglas shields for professors.

Students at both UVA and [Shenandoah University will be asked to track their symptoms in apps that have been developed specifically for each school](#), and [testing will be offered at UVA for anyone who requests it](#).

Schools are also relying on students to wear masks at all times to help stop the spread.



Mitch Moore is the senior vice president at Shenandoah University.

CREDIT SHENANDOAH UNIVERSITY

MITCH MOORE: I think what has been challenging is the changing environment. I would liken it to building a building on quicksand. You think you have a set of plans and all of a sudden something changes for appropriate reasons and you have to adjust.

Mitch Moore is the Senior Vice-President at Shenandoah University. [They plan to reopen and welcome students back on campus on August 24th.](#)

Moore says that the size of their student body is much smaller than other institutions - the main campus will only have 2,000 students for class every day - making it easier to physically distance students inside classrooms.

MOORE: This is one of those situations where Shenandoah University is perhaps in a little better position to take care of students because we don't have the volume that a place like JMU has.

JMU will conduct a phased move-in of its freshmen class on August 21st.