

Recommendations for Mitigating COVID-19 at Higher Education Institutions

As Minnesota continues to see transmission of COVID-19 and the need to minimize its spread, a balance must be struck in how educational opportunities are offered. Thus, when planning for the return of on-campus instruction at colleges and universities, it is important that everyone take steps to reduce transmission opportunities and minimize risk to people at high risk, while also supporting the importance of having a strong higher education sector that supports students and communities.

This document is intended to provide guidance and parameters for colleges and universities to use in their planning for possible reopening of campuses in fall 2020. More guidance and detailed strategies will be released in the coming weeks.

Planning for fall

The Office of Higher Education (OHE) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) are supportive of universities and colleges planning modified operations that would support both having students back on campus and mitigating COVID-19 transmission.

Please note that all recommendations below are contingent on disease transmission levels in Minnesota. Colleges and universities should have contingency plans in the event there is another Stay-at-Home order or some other significant mitigation effort.

MDH and OHE recognize that there is a need for defining what criteria should be met for colleges and universities to feel safe about reopening; these criteria include disease activity levels and trends, testing capacity, and personal protective equipment (PPE) resources. These are all pieces that are currently being worked on and developed; expect updates as those are finalized.

Higher education in Minnesota is diverse, including to the extent there is a residential component. Therefore each institution will have to implement the following guidance in a way that is most applicable and feasible to its unique situation. As such, institutions should think through the following scenarios and guidance as they create their plans. As plans develop, please continue to reach out to OHE and MDH as needed.

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These recommendations were developed from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's \(CDC\) Guidance for Institutes of Higher Education](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html>), [American College Health Association's Considerations for Reopening Institutions of Higher Education in the COVID-19 Era \(PDF\)](https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf) ([https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA Considerations for Reopening IHEs in the COVID-19 Era May2020.pdf](https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf)), MDH (see [Coronavirus Disease 2019](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/>)) and Minnesota industry-specific guidance (see [Guidance on Safely Reopening Minnesota Businesses](https://mn.gov/deed/newscenter/covid/safework/safe-reopening/) (<https://mn.gov/deed/newscenter/covid/safework/safe-reopening/>)).

Have two sets of plans

- Create plans for how your institution will:
 - Return to campus this fall, including timelines and steps to bringing people back on campus to minimize congestion.
 - Monitor both illness and overall student and staff behavior once back in session.
 - Contain the spread of illness when it occurs.
 - Shut down if directed to by the state or as a result of a significant outbreak on campus.
- Create scenarios for campus life and classroom settings based on the following:
 - Current social distancing recommendations are in place with at least a 6-foot distance between people.
 - A Stay-at-Home order is directed, similar to what Minnesota had this spring.
- Domains to consider when creating the above plans include: instruction delivery; instruction schedule; classrooms; libraries; study spaces; lab instruction; studio instruction; outreach; housing; housing occupancy; residential dining; retail dining and catering; rec centers; student unions; student life programming; and events.

Basic tenets for preventing COVID-19 transmission

All of these tenets contribute to a layered approach in disease transmission; each layer that can be added provides extra support for preventing transmission. This is important to keep in mind as colleges and universities navigate the uniqueness of their institution.

- Adhere to social distancing protocols.

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- Recommend and reinforce (as appropriate) that students, staff, and faculty wear face coverings while on campus, and especially when inside buildings, unless eating or drinking.
 - Create policies to allow for alternative options for those students who are not able to wear a face covering. *Note: MDH is exploring other options for those who cannot wear cloth face coverings.*
 - Institute hand hygiene protocols, including “sanitize-in and sanitize-out” protocols for classrooms and other learning settings.
 - Develop a protocol to quickly identify sick students, faculty, or staff.
 - Have symptom check signs at key entry points such as when entering a classroom, libraries, or dining halls.
 - Protect the most vulnerable and those at high risk.
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Bringing students back on campus

- Consider a range of start times from on-time, early, or delayed. This includes strategies such as having an earlier or later start date, and/or expanding or removing breaks to mitigate the amount college students are going back and forth between communities.
 - Consider phasing in of students; some institutions are bringing in different classes or different groups to allow for staggering of campus arrivals and reducing congestion.
 - Make it clear that students, faculty, and staff should not return to campus if they are sick; ensure sick policies support a delayed start for them.
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The learning environment

- Develop a hybrid learning environment that allows in-person and online coursework, activities, and engagement opportunities. This can help reduce the number of people in a classroom at any one time.
- Support social distancing in classrooms, labs, and other learning settings.
 - Space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart when feasible. For lecture halls, consider taping off seats and rows to ensure 6-foot distance between seats.
 - Host smaller classes in larger rooms.

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- Offer distance learning in addition to in-person classes to help reduce the number of in-person attendees.
- Provide adequate distance between individuals engaged in experiential learning opportunities (e.g., labs, vocational skill building activities).
- Create distance between students in college or university vehicles (e.g., skipping rows).
- Consider moving large classes to online only, break out into smaller sessions, or rotate pods of in-person vs online (Pod A is in-person Monday/Tuesday, online Wednesday/Thursday, Pod B vice versa). Definition of maximum class size will be established in future guidance.
- Consider ways to reduce bottlenecks when students come into and leave class. Consider creating one-way guides, or directing flow in narrow hallways or in areas where congestion is high.

Reconfigure and reimagine dining halls

- Arrange chairs to support at least 6 feet apart when feasible.
- Have ≥ 6 feet between tables.
- Take other steps to reduce congestion.
 - Assign students specified times to come to the dining hall, making a “reservation system,” or altering course schedules to reduce potential congestion.
 - Have more grab-and-go options available.
 - Have fewer people in dining hall at any one time.
 - If disposable items are not feasible or desirable, ensure that all non-disposable food service items are handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water or in a dishwasher. People should wash their hands after removing gloves or after directly handling used food service items (see [When and How to Wash Your Hands](https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html) [<https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>]).

Evaluate other settings where students gather

- Maintain at least 6 feet in public settings.
- For common areas: arrange chairs at tables to support at least 6 feet between people as much as possible, and ≥ 6 feet between common furniture.

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- Space furniture out such that gatherings are contained, that there is adequate space between groups, and that crowding is minimized.
- Restrict number of people allowed in the common area.
- Consider closing off an area if social distancing rules are not being followed.
- Implement ongoing evaluations of student and staff behavior and continue to adjust approaches and education needs to help continue to guide appropriate behaviors and norms.

Implement housing plans that support reduced risks of transmission

- Try to maintain a maximum of two people per shared bedroom (traditional dorm room, or room attached to a suite, or room attached to an apartment). Ensure there is enough space for heads to be at least 6 feet apart.
- Add physical barriers, such as plastic flexible screens, between bathroom sinks or other areas that cannot be at least 6 feet apart.
- Strongly consider not having dorms at full capacity.
- Reserve space or create a plan to be able to adequately isolate sick people and quarantine close contacts when planning for on-campus housing.
- For colleges or universities with students living off-campus housing, consider reaching out to landlords of units known to be commonly rented by students to explore partnerships in preventing COVID-19.

Create testing and surge capacity plans

- Ensure adequate access to testing. MDH is working on Minnesota's testing capacity to meet the needs of higher education for fall.
- Design response and surge capacity plans (for example: plans for one case, 10 cases, 100 cases, and 200 cases).
- Have spaces set aside for sick or quarantined students. This may include dedicated floors or dorms. Reach out to area hotels now to discuss options for possible surge capacity.

Promote new norms

- Plan how you will communicate with students, including new expectations and ways to inform them about illness in your higher education community. Use media, posters, and other tactics to promote health etiquette expectations.
- Engage students in developing creative promotion of new norms and solutions to concerns about changing norms.
- Use visuals and barriers to support social distancing.
- Organize a task force to focus on how to implement social and cultural changes to behavior norms to support COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

Develop policies that promote the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19

- Develop a task force to address the needs of high-risk students, staff, and faculty and ensure that those who are high risk are included in surge capacity planning.
- Offer options for faculty and staff at higher risk for severe illness (including older adults and people of all ages with certain underlying medical conditions) that limit their exposure risk (e.g., telework and modified job responsibilities).
- Offer options for students at higher risk for severe illness that limit their exposure risk (e.g. virtual learning opportunities).
- Put in place policies to protect the privacy of people at higher risk for severe illness regarding underlying medical conditions in compliance with applicable federal and state privacy and confidentiality laws.

Future guidance

This document offers broad scope guidance. In the coming weeks, MDH will release further interpretive guidance and strategies that will build out from this core guidance; additional guidance will also be developed from workgroup recommendations created by staff from across Minnesota's higher education institutions. MDH will update strategies and guidance as more is learned from experiences in Minnesota and as directed by the CDC.

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Subsequent guidance and strategies from MDH will include greater detail on the strategies addressed above and further details and resources on:

- Cleaning
- Isolation and quarantine
- Identifying people on campus who are sick
- Case investigations and contact tracing
- Athletics and on-campus activities
- Clarified criteria that colleges and universities can use to feel safe about reopening (disease activity thresholds, testing capacity, access to PPE, etc.)
- Testing access and surge capacity

Higher education resources

- CDC Guidance for IHE – [Considerations for Institutes of Higher Education](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html>)
- CDC Guidance for Congregate Living – [COVID-19 Guidance for Shared or Congregate Housing](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/shared-congregate-house/guidance-shared-congregate-housing.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/shared-congregate-house/guidance-shared-congregate-housing.html>)
- American College Health Association – [COVID-19 Resources](https://www.acha.org/ACHA/Resources/COVID-19_Novel_Coronavirus/ACHA/Resources/Topics/2019_Novel_Coronavirus_2019-nCoV.aspx?hkey=2356711c-9890-4c1d-bea5-8aaed88769fd) (https://www.acha.org/ACHA/Resources/COVID-19_Novel_Coronavirus/ACHA/Resources/Topics/2019_Novel_Coronavirus_2019-nCoV.aspx?hkey=2356711c-9890-4c1d-bea5-8aaed88769fd)

Other resources

- [MDH Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/>)
- [Department of Employment and Economic Development Guidance on Safely Reopening Minnesota Businesses](https://mn.gov/deed/newscenter/covid/safework/safe-reopening/) (<https://mn.gov/deed/newscenter/covid/safework/safe-reopening/>)

Food service resources

- [Food Service Worker Safety Information \(PDF\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/foodservice.pdf)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/foodservice.pdf>)
- [Industry Guidance for Safely Reopening Restaurants & Bars](https://mn.gov/deed/assets/restaurant-bar-industry-guidance-ACC_tcm1045-432897.pdf)
(https://mn.gov/deed/assets/restaurant-bar-industry-guidance-ACC_tcm1045-432897.pdf)

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