

Universities scramble to deal with virus outbreaks

August 18 2020, by Susan Montoya Bryan



University of North Carolina students wait outside of Woolen Gym on the Chapel Hill, N.C., campus as they wait to enter for a fitness class Monday, Aug. 17, 2020. The University announced minutes before that all classes will be moved online starting Wednesday, Aug. 19 due to COVID clusters on campus. (Julia Wall/The News & Observer via AP)

North Carolina's flagship university canceled in-person classes for

undergraduates just a week into the fall semester Monday as college campuses around the U.S. scramble to deal with coronavirus clusters linked in some cases to student housing, off-campus parties and packed bars.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill said it will switch to remote learning on Wednesday and make arrangements for students who want to leave campus housing.

"We have emphasized that if we were faced with the need to change plans—take an off-ramp—we would not hesitate to do so, but we have not taken this decision lightly," it said in a statement after reporting 130 confirmed infections among students and five among employees over the past week.

UNC said the clusters were discovered in dorms, a fraternity house and other [student](#) housing.

Before the decision came down, the student newspaper, The Daily Tar Heel, ran an editorial headlined, "UNC has a clusterf—k on its hands," though without the dashes.

The paper said that the parties that took place over the weekend were no surprise and that administrators should have begun the semester with online-only instruction at the university, which has 19,000 undergraduates.

"We all saw this coming," the editorial said.

Outbreaks earlier this summer at fraternities in Washington state, California and Mississippi provided a glimpse of the challenges school officials face in keeping the virus from spreading on campuses where [young people](#) eat, live, study—and party—in close quarters.



In this Wednesday, March 18, 2020, file photo, people remove belongings on campus at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, N.C., amid the coronavirus pandemic. The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill announced it has identified two clusters of the coronavirus on campus in its first week of fall classes. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome, File)

The virus has been blamed for over 170,000 deaths and 5.4 million confirmed infections in the U.S.

In Boone, North Carolina, the faculty senate at Appalachian State University—part of the 17-member UNC system—passed a vote of no-confidence in school chancellor Sheri Everts on Monday, in large part for failing to shut down the campus after a recent COVID-19 outbreak.

Professors have "moved from a concern about people's livelihoods and the institution's reputation to, now, a concern for people's lives," the declaration read. Everts said in a letter to faculty Monday night that she has received support from the school's Board of Trustees, including a July 6 resolution of confidence in her leadership.

Meanwhile, officials at another UNC school—East Carolina University—said Monday that they had identified a COVID-19 cluster at a dorm. They didn't say whether they were considering switching to online classes.

At Oklahoma State in Stillwater, where a widely circulated video over the weekend showed maskless students packed into a nightclub, officials confirmed 23 [coronavirus](#) cases at an off-campus sorority house. The university placed the students living there in isolation and prohibited them from leaving.

"As a student, I'm frustrated as hell," said Ryan Novozinsky, a junior from Allentown, New Jersey, and editor of the student newspaper. "These are people I have to interact with." And, he added, "there will be professors they interact with, starting today, that won't be able to fight this off."



Baylor Garland, left, arrives to move in for his freshman year, assisted by his father Alan, right and mother, Teena, after they arrived from Eaton, Ga., at the University of Alabama on Saturday, Aug. 15, 2020, in Tuscaloosa, Ala. More than 20,000 students returned to campus for the first time since spring break with numerous school and city codes in effect to limit the spread of COVID-19. (AP Photo/Vasha Hunt)

OSU has a combination of in-person and online courses. Students, staff and faculty are required to wear masks indoors and outdoors where social distancing isn't possible.

The University of Notre Dame reported 58 confirmed cases since students returned to the South Bend, Indiana, campus in early August. At least two off-campus parties over a week ago have been identified as

sources, school officials said.

Paul J. Browne, vice president for public affairs at Notre Dame, said the university is prepared to suspend or otherwise discipline the hosts of such parties.

"We believe we have a very strong chain of health protection, but these parties represent the weak link in that chain, and they can be responsible for a disproportionate spread," he said.

University officials in Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama were likewise frustrated by the lack of social distancing and scenes of crowded bars and other nightspot areas on the first weekend many students returned to school.



Professor Stefan France helps his co-instructor on the first day of classes Monday, August 17, 2020, at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. More of Georgia's public universities are opening for the fall term, trying to balance concern about COVID-19 infections against a mandate for on-campus classes citing financial needs and student desires. (AP Photo/Jeff Amy)

In Tuscaloosa, the home of the football-mad University of Alabama, Mayor Walt Maddox appealed to students' love of the game in urging them to take precautions.

"If you don't want to protect yourself and you don't want to protect your family and you don't want to protect your friends and thousands of jobs,

maybe, just maybe, you would want to protect football season so we can have it this fall," Maddox said.

Many schools already have flipped from in-person classes to mainly online in recent weeks, and more are expected to do so, said David Long of Tuscan Strategy Consulting, which teamed up with the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to develop reopening recommendations for colleges and universities.

"It's because it's so difficult to create these systems where everybody is essentially behaving appropriately, meaning social distancing, wearing PPE and not gathering in groups," he said, referring to personal protective equipment. "It's challenging when you're trying to control behavior in young adults, particularly in areas that are outside the classroom and off campus."

Some schools are opting for social contracts and strict codes of conduct as a way for students to keep pressure on their classmates, he said.



A graduate assistant sits in an empty auditorium during an online lecture on the first day of classes Monday, August 17, 2020, at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. More of Georgia's public universities are opening for the fall term, trying to balance concern about COVID-19 infections against a mandate for on-campus classes citing financial needs and student desires (AP Photo/Jeff Amy)



A protester holds a sign opposing in-person classes Monday, August 17, 2020, at a "die-in" at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. More of the state's public universities are opening for the fall term, trying to balance concern about COVID-19 infections against a mandate for on-campus classes citing financial needs and student desires (AP Photo/Jeff Amy)

Among universities moving ahead with in-person fall classes is Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, where a dozen students tested positive last month after an off-campus gathering. Classes start Aug. 26 and students are moving into dorms this weekend.

"We have tweaked the move in process this year and are requiring

students to sign up for a time slot so we can keep things spaced out and distanced," university spokeswoman Renee Charles said.

Balancing the health risks with educating students has been keeping university presidents up at night, said Mildred García, head of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. She said many are reconsidering their plans as things change rapidly.

"They are doing the best they can with their staff and trying to educate the students about masks and social distancing and the effects of this virus," she said.

"They're doing all they can—and yet these are young people. When we think back about when we were young, sometimes you think you're invincible."

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