COVID-19 Guidance: Triggers for Changes to MVSU Campus Operations

Overview

The American College Health Association's (ACHA) Considerations for Reopening Institutions of Higher Education in the COVID-19 Era stress two critical points: (1) The high touch, highly interactive, mobile, densely populated living and learning environment typical of most campuses is the example of a congregate setting with multiple risk factors for ready transmission of COVID-19; and (2) Particular adherence to public health practices including temperature checks, hand hygiene, properly wearing face covering in public, physical/social distancing, proper cough/sneeze etiquette, frequent disinfection of common and high traffic areas, and symptom assessment is the campus' new normal. This should be widely communicated to students, employees and all campus visitors.

Dr. Thomas Dobbs, Mississippi State Health Officer, said, "There is not one specific trigger or threshold for campus closures. Factors would include healthcare system capacity, number of positive cases in students or faculty, number of outbreaks in clusters… For K12, he is recommending a threshold of 5%, or 3 or more outbreaks in clusters. He did not recommend 5% as a threshold for higher education… Rather than closing an entire university campus, we should plan on closing individual classes, wings or floors of residence halls, etc. And these closures should be for specific periods rather than the entire semester…" (IHL Safe Start Task Force Meeting with Dr. Dobbs, 8/3/2020). Additionally, the Mississippi State Department of Health released their COVID-19 Isolation, Quarantine and Outbreak Guidelines for Colleges and Universities (9/2/20).

Using such guidelines, triggers/thresholds were developed to assist the President, and the Executive Cabinet, in determining if and when campus operations may shift in response to the evolving nature of the pandemic. We recognize that this virus is relentless and highly contagious, thus our efforts are to strive for the health and safety of our campus community.

This guidance covers most situations and will be revised as our understanding of COVID-19 and situational awareness changes. It is intended to decrease the risk of disease spread but cannot eliminate all risk. In places where specific suggestions for applying the guidance are made, it is understood that this is not always feasible and that individual units have to make decisions that are within the spirit of the guidance about how best to operationalize the guidance.

Decision Triggers

A combination of overarching and campus criteria might lead to further campus restrictions, partial closure or full closure. Messaging/communication methods will be vital in incentivizing faculty, staff and students to get tested.

Overarching Criteria

1. Significant, applicable action by the governor, IHL or other public official
2. Escalation of the Mississippi State Department of Health COVID-19 risk-based guidelines
3. City of Greenwood isolation hotel has limited occupancy capacity
4. Trends among sister Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs)
5. Upward trajectory of influenza-like illness - when compared to traditional rates - and COVID-19-like syndromic surveillance within a 14-day period
6. Upward trajectory of documented cases or percentage of positive tests (with flat or increasing volume of tests) for 14 days
7. Hospitals unable to treat all patients without crisis care
8. Degradation of robust testing capacity in the campus and surrounding communities including screening and contact tracing for symptomatic individuals

Campus Criteria

1. COVID related death of student, staff, or faculty in the MVSU population
2. Evidence that our campus community is disregarding MVSU's social distancing and face covering requirements
3. Employee absenteeism with focus on critical areas such as Facilities Management (ability to maintain a safe, hygienic campus)
4. Acknowledges possible under-reporting by faculty and staff and serves as a marker for illness -- Need to identify critical areas
5. Increases in percent positives in testing
   a. Symptomatic and surveillance (scheduled testing)
   b. Cumulative total (sustained daily increases)
6. Significant and sustained increases in hospital admissions of faculty, staff, or students
7. Personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages impacting ability to test and care for COVID-19
8. Inability to adequately test for COVID-19 due to supply chain issues (e.g., collection kit, processing reagents)
9. Clusters
   a. If the activity from clusters overwhelms our ability to quarantine/isolate and contact trace
   b. Number, location and type of cluster (cluster in a single hall versus multiple, widespread)
10. Positive tests increase (10% increase or 10 more new cases in one week)
11. Upward trajectory of influenza-like illness and COVID-19 syndromic surveillance within a 14-day period over baseline rates
12. Upward trajectory of documented cases or percentage of positive tests (with flat or increasing volume of tests) for 14 days
13. Increasing cases of community transmission (no known source) in student population
14. Degradation of containment capabilities

Response Options

In the event that data exceed the limits on any one of the decision triggers, the President may initiate an automatic pause and shift of University operations as outlined below. After a thorough review of the situation, the President may choose one of the following options:

1. Advance/heighten social distancing, environmental cleaning/sanitizing, and conduct contact tracing in consultation with local health officials, as needed
2. Shift to virtual delivery and remote work/telework **for a designated time** (such as, 1 week, 2 weeks, etc.); students remain on campus
   a. Instruction and Learning
      i. Suspend all in-person classes; fully online instructions (faculty and students)
      ii. Faculty provide all academic instructions virtually
   b. Residence Halls
      i. Possible decrease in occupancy due to students'/parents' choice
      ii. Students who remain on campus must shelter in place
      iii. It might be worse to send people home
   c. Work for Staff Personnel
      i. Non-essential staff shift to remote work/telework
      ii. Only essential staff allowed on campus
   d. This will allow for further assessment of the infection situation on campus (e.g., is this an anomaly or a real trend, is it evidence of community spread or a localized outbreak), including a review of the monitored criteria, to allow the President to make an informed decision, in coordination with public health officials, IHL and local officials, to return to campus operations or shift to a virtual environment
3. Shift to virtual delivery and remote work; students in the residence halls are required to leave campus
   a. Instruction and Learning
      i. Cancel all in-person classes; fully online instructions (faculty and students)
      ii. Faculty provide all academic instructions virtually
   b. Residence Halls
      i. Closure of residence halls
      ii. Mass departure may inadvertently expose individuals to the virus
      iii. Travel will be harder
   c. Work for Staff Personnel
      i. Non-essential staff shift to remote work/telework
      ii. Only essential staff allowed on campus
   d. This will allow the President to involve additional key stakeholders that may inform decisions as appropriate.
4. Return to University operations as they were before the shift.

Operationalization

1. This document is effective upon approval by the President and the Board of Trustees and implementation of the MVSU Testing Programs.
2. The President may convene a core group of advisors at any time to discuss the current situation and make recommendations based on events not covered by the triggers. The COVID-19 Response Team will provide weekly updates throughout the 2020-2021 academic year to refine the triggers, analyze the data, and advise University leadership.

References

American College Health Association. "Considerations for Reopening Institutions of Higher Education in the COVID19 Era." https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID19_Era_May2020.pdf

Mississippi State Department of Health COVID-19 COVID Isolation, Quarantine and Outbreak Guidelines for Colleges and Universities https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/10472.pdf (9/2/2020)

The University of Texas at Austin, Guidance #8: Decision Triggers for Discussion of Closure, Partial Closure and/or On-Campus Reduction

University of Kansas, Pandemic Medical Advisory Team, Decision-Making Framework for Changes to State of Campus Operationsfile:///D:/COVID-19%20Recovery%20Committee/Other%20Institutions/UofK%20Pandemic%20Medical%20Advisory%20Team%20-%20Decision%20Making%20Criteria%20and%20Structure_8.21.20.pdf