MEMORANDUM

TO: ECU Community
FROM: Ron Mitchelson, Interim Chancellor
DATE: October 7, 2020
SUBJ: Navigating Spring 2021

I don’t know about you, but I am looking forward to spring. It’s a good time of the year under normal circumstances and given what we’ve endured together over the past eight months, this spring could be exceptionally rejuvenating. I am optimistic that we will continue our progress toward normalcy during the spring months. That’s something we could all celebrate.

ECU leadership is working with faculty, staff, students, the UNC System, and county and state health officials to continue planning for the spring. While some aspects of spring will be determined by the behavior of the coronavirus and the persistence of COVID-19, I think there are some things you should count on for spring semester and I’d like to share those with you now. Some of the details will be worked out and announced as they are finalized. Below are a few updates that we can provide now.

A foundation of planning, just as it was in the preparation for fall semester, is the health and safety of our entire ECU community. That planning element comes first. As was the case in fall, the plan might need adjustment as we very carefully monitor key metrics but we have learned a great deal since last summer and that base of knowledge is central to Spring 2021 planning.

What ECU Has Learned So Far

Since last March, we’ve all learned a great deal from our collective efforts to provide opportunities for in-person learning, living and working. The disease science has matured and our local health care experts have had opportunity to witness this disease in ECU’s local context. Here are some lessons learned.

- In general, ECU efforts in testing and tracing were successful in helping keep our community safe. Through the tremendous work of Dr. LaNika Wright and her team in Student Health Services in collaboration with county and state health officials, we’ve been able to trace how COVID-19 spread at ECU. As of Oct. 5, 2020, this has involved analysis of more than 1,250 confirmed student cases and over 60 employee cases.
- ECU’s on-campus safety efforts worked! We have not seen community spread in our classrooms or our office spaces. Some of our most worrisome spaces like the student centers and the restrooms have not been involved in community spread.
- We’ve had very low levels of infection among staff members and no evidence that COVID-19 was transmitted at the workplace. This includes staff working in housing and dining facilities.
- What we have seen is that COVID-19 is easily and quickly spread through small- and large-scale social gatherings where safety rules (the 3 W’s) are relaxed. Once a household member is infected, the household setting becomes the primary environment for transmission (e.g., residence halls and Greek Life housing).
- The initial surge of cases – over 500 confirmed student cases in a six-day period that included a peak of nearly 125 new cases in one day – overwhelmed our capacity for isolation and quarantine.
- With the opening surge behind us, the average number of confirmed new student cases has dwindled to fewer than six per day.
Looking to Spring

As we continue our spring planning, the following are a few important items that are already known.

- The Spring 2021 Academic Calendar, published in the fall, remains effective. Classes will start on Jan. 19 and finish on April 27. The university will have no spring break. Final exams will take place April 29-May 6, and Spring Commencement is scheduled for Friday, May 7.
- We plan to offer a diverse mix of in-person, hybrid and online classes for undergraduate and graduate students. Details about delivery mode for specific courses will be determined over the next few weeks. However, we will also work to ensure any students who want to take courses remotely will have the opportunity to do so.
- The default duration of classes will return to the normal 15-week semester. The 7.5-week block may continue in specific programs that have employed the approach prior to fall 2020.
- We are planning to provide the option of on-campus living in the spring at reduced capacity. All rooms will be single occupancy, and we waived – for Spring 2021 only – the residency requirement. Campus Living will send messages to students who lived on campus earlier in the fall to determine their preferences for spring housing.
- We will establish a very large capacity for on-campus isolation and quarantine. We are updating our COVID-19 testing plans.
- With single occupancy and expanded capacity for isolation and quarantine, we are preparing to keep on-campus housing open throughout the spring semester.
- We are working to provide safe in-person and online engagement opportunities for students. Our successful protocol for experiential learning will remain intact.
- Our health care professionals will develop a vaccination plan for students in anticipation of the availability of an approved COVID-19 vaccine.
- Community safety standards, the 3 W’s, will be intensely communicated for all campus and off-campus settings. Improved compliance, especially in social gatherings, is an institutional goal. Face coverings continue to be required and social distancing will be in place when practical.
- As the spring semester unfolds, and in concert with N.C. and UNC System guidance, we expect to see a larger return of employees to campus.

Stay Informed

As was the case in preparing for our fall semester, ECU will keep the campus community updated as spring plans are completed. Please pay attention to your emails and regularly visit our Return of Pirate Nation website for important updates.

Also, I encourage everyone to receive a flu vaccine this fall. Student Health Services and ECU Physicians are prepared to help protect us, but we have to roll up our sleeves. ECU Physicians even has a drive-thru option.

I conclude by simply expressing my gratitude to each and every Pirate. THANK YOU! You have been flexible and resilient as we have coped with these uncharted waters. I could not ask for a better crew to meet the challenge.

Regards,
RonM