Higher Education

The “Tennessee Pledge” is a plan to help Tennesseans get back to work in a safe environment, restore their livelihoods and reboot our state’s economy.
Higher Education

For All Colleges and Universities

As both public and private institutions of higher education seek to serve students in the wake of COVID-19, an array of measures available to ensure that high quality instruction continues while pursuing the most important goal: the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. Ultimately, decisions related to instruction in Fall 2020 are solely the purview of the governing boards and presidents; this document provides a set of safeguarding protocols for colleges and universities based on the current recommendations of the CDC and OSHA. Just as businesses throughout the state have used the Tennessee Pledge as a template to reopen safely, this document provides foundational guidance on safe campus operations. Nothing in this document should be construed to stipulate or require campuses to reopen in the Fall; rather, it is an advisory document for those that do choose to reopen.

In all cases, colleges and universities should consult guidance issued by OSHA, the CDC, and the State of Tennessee. Many of the recommendations in this document are based on the report from the American College Health Association Considerations for Reopening Institutions of Higher Education in the COVID-19 Era, as well as the University of Tennessee System’s recently released Best Practices document and previously released Tennessee Pledge documents. Additionally, it is imperative to emphasize that these guidelines do not replace or supersede any applicable federal guidance or other regulatory requirements.

Safeguarding Guidance

In addition to making decisions informed by OSHA and CDC guidelines, the State recommends higher education institutions implement a range of measures to protect students and employees. Tennessee’s colleges and universities have already taken extensive measures to do so, and these guidelines serve as a supplement. Institutions are encouraged to implement additional precautions as feasible.
I. Faculty, Staff, and Administration Protection

General Considerations

- **Creating policies and protocols to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19 on campus:**
  - Should be customized to meet the needs and capabilities of each campus, in consultation with local health officials.
  - May include: daily screenings, no-touch temperature checks, or a comprehensive communication plan to alert campus officials if employees and/or students are experiencing symptoms or have been in close contact with someone that has tested positive or is experiencing symptoms, pursuant to applicable laws and privacy policies.

- **Developing checklists to maintain a safe learning environment and distributing them to each faculty member.**
  - Checklists could include, but should not be limited to:
    - Screening students upon arrival to each class period or other in-person meeting using a questionnaire developed in cooperation with local health officials;
    - Notifying administrators as identified in campus COVID-19 plan if a student is exhibiting symptoms;
    - Encouraging students to maintain social distancing when entering and exiting the classroom/lab;
    - Monitoring student absenteeism to aid in contact tracing; and
    - Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces and objects in classroom/lab according to CDC guidelines.

- **Maximizing opportunities for remote working and online classes.**
  - Encourage faculty and staff to work from home when necessary, engaging with students and colleagues via distance-learning applications (i.e., Zoom).
  - For courses taught on campus, institutions should consider:
    - A hybrid model that allows for online instruction and in-person instruction, allowing for social distancing and other precautions.
    - Staggering schedules with more time between classes to reduce congestion in walkways and buildings.
    - Spreading out classes/sections across days to reduce class size to maintain proper social distancing.
• Monitoring virus spread in consultation with local health officials, and preparing to shift to increased or solely online instruction as needed due to the potential need to quarantine or shelter at home.

Possible Best Practices:
Colleges and universities may consider the following:

• **Offering employees flexible work hours** and staggered shifts to reduce the number of employees on campus at one time;
• **Establishing virtual office hours** for faculty and student advising functions;
• **Encouraging those with increased risk of severe illness** or over the age of 65 to communicate any concerns about returning to campus or participating in large gatherings of greater than 10 or other situations of potential exposures, including travel;
• **Providing staff and custodial workers** with appropriate PPE and training consistent with their duties;
• **Practicing proper social distancing of at least 6 feet when possible.**
• **Providing hand sanitizer in employee areas;**
• **Recommending that employees wear face coverings,** and other personal protection items as recommended by the CDC (i.e., gloves);
• **Increasing hygiene practices** – wash hands more frequently, avoid touching face, practice good respiratory etiquette when coughing or sneezing; and
• **Directing any employee who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms** (i.e., answers yes to any of the screening questions or who is running a fever) to leave the premises immediately and seek medical care and/or COVID-19 testing, per Tennessee Department of Health and **CDC guidelines**. Employers should maintain the confidentiality of employee health information.
II. Student Protection

General Considerations

- **Creating policies and protocols to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19 on campus:**
  - Should be customized to meet the needs and capabilities of each campus, in consultation with local health officials.
  - May include: daily screenings, no-touch temperature checks, or a comprehensive communication plan to alert campus officials if employees and/or students are experiencing symptoms or have been in close contact with someone that has tested positive or is experiencing symptoms, pursuant to applicable laws and privacy policies.

- **Establishing policies and protocols for on-campus housing** to decrease the risk of student exposure. Policies and protocols may include:
  - Utilizing single resident rooms and restrooms, whenever possible;
  - Requiring face coverings in common areas;
  - Frequent reminders on proper personal hygiene practices; increased communications about COVID-19 prevention;
  - Enhancing cleaning in all common areas and high-touch surfaces according to CDC guidelines;
  - Providing training on reducing the spread of COVID-19 for all live-in professionals, residence advisors, etc.;
  - Restricting events and social activities to those that can maintain proper social distancing;
  - Restricting building access to non-residents; and
  - Establishing policies for high-risk students.

- **Developing policies, in consultation with local health officials, for isolating and caring for students** who exhibit symptoms of COVID-19.
  - Policies to consider if a positive case occurs on campus, could include:
    - Alerting local health officials immediately and coordinating response;
    - Consider closing any affected areas of campus for an appropriate amount of time for cleaning and disinfecting;
    - Communicating with students, staff, and faculty;
    - Contact tracing;
  - Positive or symptomatic individuals will need to self-isolate and monitor for worsening conditions.
    - Institutions may need to isolate the individual in temporary housing locations, ensuring continuity of meal programs.
Contact tracing and consider isolating individuals who have had close contact with the ill student.

Possible Best Practices

Colleges and universities may consider the following:

- **Providing hand sanitizer** and ensure sinks are working properly and are maintained with soap and paper towels;
- ** Recommending that students wear face coverings**, and other personal protection items as recommended by the CDC (i.e., gloves);
- **Encouraging students to remain on campus** as much as possible and establishing policies to manage college/university-sponsored travel;
- **Developing policies for international students** that may include flexible course delivery offerings, with consideration for their travel to and from campus;
- **Conducting all counseling and advising sessions virtually**, if possible;
- **Limiting the number of visitors on campus**, including guest lecturers, tours, parents, etc.;
- **Reinforcing social distancing requirements**, whenever possible, in all common areas, classrooms, and dining areas.
  - Consider limiting the number of attendees for in-person classes or creating multiple sections/shifts to reduce numbers.
  - In dining areas, tables should be placed at least six feet apart.
    - Consider the use of takeout style dining or other strategies to scale back or adapt dining services.
- **Increasing cleaning protocols for common areas**, high traffic areas, and high touch surfaces according to [CDC guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov).
III. Operational Process Adaptations

General Considerations

- **Working with local health department to develop or update COVID-19 response plan**, including continuity plan in case of campus outbreak.
  - Monitor changes in community spread with local health officials and enact plan accordingly.
  - Develop protocols with local health officials in case of positive tests.

- **Conducting a tabletop exercise with campus and local health leaders** regarding COVID-19 outbreak response.

- **Establishing procedures for caring for students and staff** who arrive sick or become sick on campus; establishing policies for self-isolation of employees and students if they are experiencing symptoms.

- **Requiring employees and students to report any illness** to supervisor or administrator.
  - Communicating to employees and students to stay home when sick, cover coughs and sneezes, wash hands, clean surfaces, wear face coverings, and practice proper social distancing.

Possible Best Practices

Colleges and universities may consider the following:

- **Appointing a senior leader on campus to coordinate all COVID-19 related actions**;
- **Considering a phased re-opening of campus**;
  - Options include phased re-opening or term-based cohorts based on classification.
- **Implementing residential housing move-in protocols** with staggered dates and times and limitations on the number of family and friends present and time spent on campus;
- **Shortening the fall term** by the option that best fits the campus structure.
  - Possibilities include eliminating Fall Break and ending the term at the Thanksgiving holiday.
- **Implementing and maintaining social distancing policies**;
  - Consider installing plexiglass or other barriers in workspaces where people must face each other or are unable to be 6 feet apart.
Define and post allowable occupancies in order to control workflow and/or establish maximum attendance.

- **Developing and maintaining a communication plan for faculty, staff, and students** on infection prevention and control measures, as well as any campus updates.
  - Increasing use of on-campus signage and social media outreach.
  - Possible signage options could include the following documents to help educate staff and students on COVID-19 best practices:
    - CDC guidance to stop the spread of germs
    - CDC guidance on COVID-19 symptoms

- **Discontinuing the use of drinking fountains.**
- **Limiting elevator capacity** and encourage use of stairs.
- **Controlling congestion on high-traffic walkways** by creating one-way paths, using signage and barriers; establish one-way entrances and exits to buildings and classrooms as possible.
- **Monitoring student absenteeism** to aid in contact tracing.
- **Increasing mental health and student support services** for students and staff.
  - Ensure regular interrogative communication with students regarding their mental health and reminding them of on campus resources.
- **Developing a strategy for on-campus transit**, including but not limited to maintaining at least 6 feet of social distancing, not sitting or standing within 6 feet of bus driver, wearing a face covering, and routine cleaning and disinfecting.