

Private Colleges and Universities Respond to COVID-19

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The winter months typically bring on the cold and flu season. College students and employees are encouraged to get a flu shot, stay home if they feel sick, wash hands regularly, avoid touching the face and eyes, and to cover a cough in order to decrease potential spreading of disease.

This winter season brought a new disease – COVID-19 (coronavirus). While this virus is considered new, similar recommendations have been advanced by national, state, and local health organizations to limit its spread.

The CDC Guidelines

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published guidelines for institutions of higher education (IHE) intended to help them prevent the spread of COVID-19 on campus.

Through collaboration with local health agencies, IHEs are encouraged to put procedures in place to share information about the disease including possible transmission and risk factors. The CDC suggests comprehensive plans should be designed to minimize disruption and to protect students, faculty, and staff from disease.

Plans should include the following:

- review, update, and implement emergency operations plans
- develop information-sharing systems with partners
- monitor and plan for absenteeism
- establish procedures for those who are sick on campus
- prepare campus health clinics
- perform routine environmental cleaning
- create plans to communicate accurate and timely information
- review CDC guidance for business and employers

Creating Information Pages for Campus Community

Private colleges and universities are responding to this new virus by heeding the CDC guidelines. Many, if not all, have created a specific COVID-19 information page link that is accessible through their website homepage.

Additional links are included to local, state, and national departments of public health in order to provide the most accurate, current information. Daily messages are posted from presidents and other officials updating students, parents, faculty and staff on recent instructional decisions and efforts to prevent exposure.

Many have extended spring break, cancelled study abroad classes, and shifted to online course content delivery.

Focusing on Humane Care and Readiness to Respond

In a February article published by *Forbes*, Vassar College President Elizabeth Bradley urged college and university presidents to heed public health experts' advice regarding how they respond to public health emergencies.

She encouraged them to “focus on practicing humane care and readiness to respond” in order to show both compassion and preparedness. As leaders, exhibiting clear thinking and evidence-based responses can limit both panic and the spread of disease on campus.

As a result of the CDCs guidelines and the daily updates regarding this virus, additional efforts have been made that go beyond the personal responsibilities of hand washing, covering a cough, and getting a flu vaccine.

Adapting Cleaning Strategies

Colleges and universities have adapted cleaning and disinfecting strategies, increased the flow of information, limited group activities, and encouraged social distancing.

In February, Cornish College of the Arts (Seattle, WA) created a Pandemic Plan, published on their website on March 3, 2020. This plan established preparatory guidelines and four stages of response to pandemic based on available information and reports.

In the preparatory stage, college employees increase the frequency of surface cleaning, adhere to CDC recommended hygiene procedures, and increase awareness through posters and email campaigns.

The operations and finance departments are authorized to procure and store infection prevention supplies and create and display appropriate signage. An advisory committee is established in order to oversee these efforts and to execute the remainder of the plan should it become necessary.

Brenau University's (Gainesville, GA) COVID-19 Task Force developed a COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Preparedness & Response Plan, published on their website on March 5, 2020.

Measures taken to reduce risk on campus included a media campaign comprised of email, social media, and flyers posted in key areas; an increase in hand sanitizer pumps in public spaces; and recommendations to employees to clean work areas every 2 hours with disinfecting wipes and sprays.

Colgate University (Hamilton, NY) implemented a plan designed by the University's Emergency Operations Committee. Campus employees created informational posters and

distributed them across campus as part of a public health awareness campaign. Information was also dispersed via digital signage prominently displayed in academic and student buildings. The university provided additional hand sanitizer stations and increased disinfection of public spaces as well as developed plans for isolation of those affected, if it became necessary.

A Campus Pandemic Plan

Concordia University Irvine's (CA) pandemic plan is overseen by their COVID-19 Management Team. As of March 11, 2020, they had implemented new protocols regarding the health of the students, faculty, and staff.

These included the installation of twenty new hand sanitizer stations in addition to existing stations and stricter cleaning routines for housekeeping staff. Hand-washing posters were placed at the entrance of every building and every bathroom. New check-in guidelines were established at the Wellness Center for students who may have a fever, and existing flu quarantine protocols were expanded to include more rooms in residence halls.

Accurate communication is the key to ensuring the entire campus community can decrease the possibility of widespread disease. Convening leadership meetings and establishing protocols is a first step.

Covering the campus with posters, updating digital signage inside and outside of buildings, increasing the availability of hand sanitizer, and increasing the frequency of disinfecting and cleaning public spaces are actionable ways to both increase communication and decrease spread of a disease.

Leaders in private colleges and universities play a major role in campus response to public health emergencies. Dr. Bradley's suggestions to stay informed, support students whose families may be in affected areas outside the US, follow recommended hygiene procedures, listen to your community and be ready to respond parallel those of the CDC guidelines for IHEs.

With such protocols and procedures in place, your campus community is more connected, more informed, and better able to respond with care and safety in the event of a public health emergency.

About the Author:

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