

HOMEPAGE

Professors at Florida's 12 state universities, plus MDC, want remote-only courses in fall

BY JIMENA TAVEL

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Florida International University closed its campuses in early March for most of its students, faculty and staff to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.
MIAMI HERALD FILE

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Citing the surge in Florida's COVID-19 cases, thousands of professors who teach at state universities and colleges demanded that Gov. Ron DeSantis and state education officials immediately change course and move to remote-only courses when schools reopen in August.

Members of the United Faculty of Florida, the union that represents more than 20,000 instructors across the state, held a virtual press conference Monday to announce they sent a letter outlining their concerns to DeSantis; Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran; Marshall Criser, chancellor of the State University

System of Florida; and Kathy Hebda, chancellor of the Florida College System, which represents public colleges.

“We love face-to-face teaching and miss our students, but, as much as our faculty and students fervently wish to get back to our classrooms, the steadily rising COVID-19 infections and deaths warn against it,” reads the document, signed by Karen Morian, UFF president, and Jaffar Ali Shahul Hameed, UFF first vice president.

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Corcoran, DeSantis and Hebda’s offices didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Renee Fargason, spokeswoman for the Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the state’s 12 public universities, said Monday that “universities designed their plans with the agility necessary to respond to changed conditions and enhance the resiliency of each institution.”

Most higher education institutions in Florida, which [on Monday confirmed 8,892 additional COVID cases](#) and a total of 432,747 cases, the second highest in the nation, plan to partially repopulate their campuses, offering remote, in-person and “hybrid” teaching.

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Administrators have announced a variety of safety measures, including amped-up cleaning, mandatory facial coverings, social distancing, and quarantine for students who test positive.

Morian said the majority of the reopening plans haven’t been updated since drafted six to eight weeks ago, when the pandemic conditions “were decidedly different.” Florida has had a surge of cases in July, with an average of more than [10,000 cases a](#)

[day over the past week](#), a 6 percent increase from the average two weeks earlier, according to The New York Times database.

In June, local and state educational authorities said blueprints accounted for change and would be updated frequently.

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But Morian said the current plans show “too many common shortcomings” including how to deal with sick students and employees. The letter calls the testing and contact tracing protocols “inadequate or non-existent.”

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UFF held the virtual event with the Florida Education Commission, which recently sued [DeSantis and Corcoran to stop the “reckless and unsafe reopening”](#) of K-12 schools in the state. Morian said the letter was the “first step,” adding, “This will be continuing through the next month or so.”

FIU AND MDC REOPENING PLANS

Marshall Ogletree, UFF's executive director, couldn't comment on any specifics about Florida International University's reopening plan, but said “Southeast Florida is certainly an area where campuses should not reopen next month.”

Miami-Dade County, the epicenter of the pandemic in the state, reported 2,560 more cases of COVID-19 on Monday; the county had a total of 107,315 confirmed cases as of Monday, about a quarter of the state's cases.

Nobody at the FIU chapter of UFF could be reached for comment.

FIU, which [will hold one third of all fall classes face-to-face or hybrid](#), will require students, faculty and staff to respond to a series of health questions this fall on a mobile app and to take their own temperatures each day.

Maydel Santana, an FIU spokeswoman, said Monday the Miami-based public university will continue to consult with FIU healthcare experts and local and state officials.

“At FIU, we are monitoring the local COVID-19 situation very closely and understand the apprehension faculty and staff may have about returning to campus,” she wrote in an email.

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UFF doesn't include Miami Dade College, the largest community college in the nation. But Elizabeth Ramsay, the president for the United Faculty of Miami Dade College, told the Herald on Monday that the union, which represents about 700 faculty members, shares similar concerns.

MDC announced July 20 it will begin its fall term Sept. 1 remotely, but will bring back courses to its campuses Sept. 28. Ramsay said that's a "terrible idea."

UFMDC [issued a memo last week](#) criticizing the midway transition, describing it as "educationally unsound" and arguing it "creates an unstable and inconsistent learning environment." On Monday, [the union launched a petition opposing the move](#).

Ramsay said Lenore Rodicio, the executive vice president and provost, sent out an email and video addressing the anxieties shortly after the memo release, but didn't yield to the professors' request to stay online until spring. UFMDC leadership and the college's administration will meet Tuesday to discuss further.

Juan Mendieta, an MDC spokesman, wrote in an email Monday the college's plans "are consistent with other state colleges and school districts."

"The safety and health of students, faculty and staff remain our top priority," he said.

Ramsay said the college hasn't responded to requests by faculty members with health conditions to teach remotely this fall. MDC told them it will decide by Aug. 21, she said.



MDC had set up temperature checks at its entrances [this summer](#), during which it held mostly online courses, and aspires to do the same come fall. Ramsay said her “confidence level in those checks is low” because of the high percentage of asymptomatic cases and because people could suppress fevers with medication.

She also said she visited an MDC campus recently and the staffer who took her temperature didn’t survey her on symptoms.

“The choice to risk people’s health when it isn’t necessary is really questionable,” she said.



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