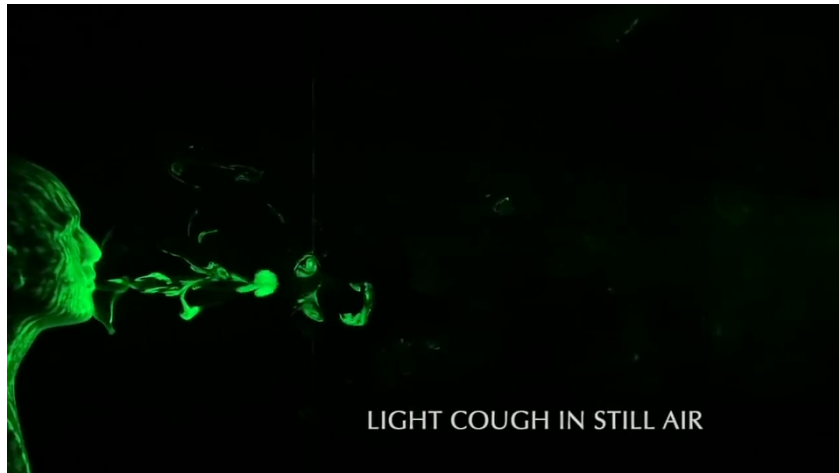


EDUCATION

Colleges, universities look at COVID lessons learned from spring to prepare for fall

BY JIMENA TAVEL

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From FAU: Researchers from FAU's College of Engineering and Computer Science test effectiveness of face masks and social distancing. BY FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

She created a plan to avoid infection at all costs: She'll drive 20 hours from her parents' home in Chicago to her apartment in Miami. That way, she'll stay away from airports and use her car in South Florida come fall, instead of relying on Uber rides like before.

After months of mulling it over and even considering a gap semester, she finally decided she would return to the University of Miami this fall to play the viola face-to-face with her professors and classmates as a rising junior studying music.

But every day, as soon as Marissa Katz checks the skyrocketing tally of confirmed COVID cases in Miami-Dade County, she flinches.

TOP ARTICLES

“I’m terrified,” the 20-year-old said. “I think I’ll go back, but who knows, really? That could change any minute.”

Katz is not alone. The uncertainty of the novel coronavirus pandemic maintains its firm grip on many students, who constantly re-examine what risks they’re willing to take and wonder if they’ll be forced to upend their lives somehow this fall, like they did last spring mid-semester.

Meanwhile, with scheduled start dates for fall classes in mid August and early September looming as deadlines, college and university administrators rush to hash out details about who they’ll allow to come back on campus and how they’ll minimize the spread of the virus for them.

Additionally, citing the surge in confirmed cases across the state in late June and July, [faculty and staff continue to push back against](#) the institutions. [Demanding the right to choose](#) if they teach from the physical classrooms or not, educators have pointed to the lack of trust in the schools to establish working protocols and in students to follow the rules.

Katz raised similar concerns. She said she doesn’t think the reopening of the University of Miami “is a smart idea” and wished she could still benefit from using the practice rooms on campus without the anxiety.

“I’m scared about a lot of students and the decisions that they’ll be making in regards to partying and the use of masks,” she said. “Universities won’t control what everybody does. They can’t.”

FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES THIS FALL

In South Florida, most large schools have announced safety measures like social distancing, facial coverings and quarantine for those who test positive.

For some students, like Mallyn Mendez, those precautions to protect physical health will have to do, because the alternative will affect mental health.

“I understand people feeling unsafe, thinking others will not collaborate with social distancing and masks and such, but for me at least, I’m more than ready to get back

on campus,” the 27-year-old majoring in mathematics at Florida International University said. “Being cooped up in my apartment has been rough.”

FIU’s repopulating plan calls for courses to resume in person, online and with hybrid schedules Aug. 24. [About a third of all classes will meet at least occasionally face to face](#) after a summer of all-virtual classes..

The Miami-based public university had initially planned to return to normal operations gradually, following three reopening phases, but then [suddenly dropped that staged approach without explanation](#). Stopping short of requiring testing for COVID, FIU will ask students and faculty to use a mobile app to answer a series of questions regarding symptoms each day.

The University of Miami will also offer in person, online and hybrid instruction, and will also use a mobile app and ask its community members to self-screen for the deadly disease on a daily basis. The private school, headquartered in Coral Gables, will begin its fall semester on Aug. 17, a week earlier than usual, to prevent post-Thanksgiving travel.

UM President Julio Frenk, a physician and former Mexican secretary of health, has described the situation as “serious,” but clarified it can’t be addressed with a black-or-white solution.

“The choice before us is not a binary one — keep campus closed or just open it. Instead, we must creatively devise intermediate solutions, which are both adaptive to the current circumstances and responsive to the varying needs of our students,” [he told the Canes in late July](#).

Miami Dade College, which opened its facilities in early June for classes like aviation and cooking that couldn’t be held remotely, [has been enforcing temperature checks at campus entrances](#) and plans to continue doing so.

The largest community college in the nation, spread out among eight campuses, will kick off its fall term Sept. 1, operating similarly to the summer with the vast majority of courses held remotely. [But it announced it would transition to in-person teaching starting Sept. 28](#).

FIVE MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC

Both MDC and UM reported an improvement in enrollment for the summer terms but couldn’t weigh in — as of July 28 — on the impact for fall.

It is unknown how FIU’s enrollment fared. Maydel Santana, an FIU spokeswoman, declined to comment for this story.

“Please move forward without us,” she wrote in an email.

Lenore Rodicio, the executive vice president and provost for MDC, said students who struggled with the pandemic this spring would withdraw from the courses (dropping them) or arrange for an incomplete grade with their professors (meaning both parties agree to finish the coursework at a later point).

MDC registered a “significantly higher” number of incomplete grades than normal, she said, because a lot of hands-on teaching couldn’t take place and automatically got labeled “I” for incomplete.

“We usually see incomplete grades in the hundreds and the number this spring was around a thousand,” she said.

In terms of withdrawals, MDC saw a total of 13,552, compared to 15,141 in spring 2019. She credited the decrease to students’ resilience and said it will be “interesting” to see if the trend holds up past summer (held entirely online, instead of partly like spring).

Jeffrey Duerk, UM’s executive vice president for academic affairs and provost, said UM extended the deadline to withdraw from courses because of the public health crisis and allowed students to withdraw without leaving a mark on their transcripts.

The university also allowed students to choose the “credit or no credit” option after the semester ended (usually students must pick if they want that grading method for a course at registration).

It is unclear how many UM students used those measures.

[FIU offered a pass/fail option for all students in the spring](#), but it is unknown how many took advantage of it.

NEW RESOURCES FOR PROFESSORS, STUDENTS

MDC ran into technological issues at the beginning of the pandemic, Rodicio said, because the increased amount of users overwhelmed its learning management system and proctoring platform for testing.

The college expanded its agreement with Blackboard, the online platform, to provide 24/7 customer service and contracted an additional company to allow faculty to monitor final exams.

MDC also bought and distributed 3,000 laptops to students and connected them with internet service providers who offered free connections. Rodicio said the administration might still get more equipment if necessary.

“Now we’re making a list of the things that we still need,” she said, “and trying to balance that with how much we’ve already invested to pay for additions.”

Duerk said UM experienced a “completely new revolution in terms of educational technology” this spring. The institution purchased web cameras, new microphones, computers, software updates and writing pads, among other technological advances, to accommodate remote courses.

As part of the pandemic reckoning, [UM also announced it would stop mandating standardized test scores](#) in applications as a pilot program for its 2021 class. Duerk said the administration considered the move even before March.

“I don’t think standardized testing is an accurate reflection of a student’s ability to succeed and graduate,” he said, adding admissions officers will measure factors like leadership skills and “life perspective” — not measured by the SAT or ACT, which he linked to socioeconomic status.

The Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the 12 state universities, including FIU, indicated in June it would not order a bypass of standardized testing.



MDC staff checks temperatures of their students and faculty at the Hialeah Campus checkpoint on June 23, 2020. *MIAMI DADE COLLEGE*





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