

Recommendations for Different Scenarios of COVID-19 Transmission At Higher Education Institutions

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This document is organized into recommendations for scenarios based on levels of disease incidence occurring in or around a campus. Many campuses are using corresponding color codes to indicate their current scenario or transmission level, which are also referenced in this document. The recommended actions are meant to help minimize transmission of COVID-19 for students, staff, and faculty. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the Office of Higher Education (OHE) recognize there are diverse learning environments that will require teams to use thoughtful strategies when applying guidance to meet the health and safety needs of all students, faculty, and staff.

The scenarios are built on the following principles:

The scenarios are “stackable,” for example, Scenario 2 should include Scenario 1’s activities.

Institutions are encouraged to develop methods to monitor the level of COVID-19 activity among students, faculty, and staff.

All recommendations apply to both residential and nonresidential campuses, unless otherwise indicated.

Due to sizes of student bodies and campus communities, different institutions may have different capacities to handle an increase in cases, thus implementation of these recommendations may vary from institution to institution. Additionally, not all recommended actions will be possible in all settings, and therefore should be tailored as appropriate.

Vaccination uptake levels may influence mitigation decisions on campus.

When deciding to shift into another scenario or when developing mitigation measures, campuses can also consider levels of vaccination coverage on campus. Higher vaccination rates help reduce transmission potential.

Additional mitigation efforts for any scenario may be influenced by community transmission rates or local requirements.

Masking in public indoor settings is recommended by CDC and MDH when the surrounding county has substantial or high community transmission levels; during these times of substantial or high transmission levels in a community, MDH further recommends masking in crowded outdoor settings.

In addition, local jurisdictions may establish their own requirements, so it is important to monitor developments in the jurisdiction where the institution is located.

[Recommendations for wearing Masks \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecover.html)

[CDC: Guidance for Implementing COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in the Context of Varying Community Transmission Levels and Vaccination Coverage \(www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm\)](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm)

To find county specific community transmission levels, refer to the [CDC COVID Data Tracker: COVID-19 Integrated County View \(covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view\)](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view).

Institutions are encouraged to communicate with local public health (LPH) and MDH when they are experiencing increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases on campus and planning on changing mitigation efforts. Institutions can reach out to MDH at Health.HigherEd.COVID19@state.mn.us.

For more guidance related to higher education institutions, refer to [Institutes of Higher Education \(IHE\): COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html).

Transmission level indicator decision points

Level of transmission risk is associated with the likelihood of viral spread or outbreak. The likelihood of outbreaks is directly tied to vaccination levels among students, staff, and faculty.

This section provides a list of strategies to consider implementing, depending on the risk level of transmission on campus. Institutes of higher education can use these scenarios as they navigate activity and to determine applicable conditions when students are on campus.

Scenario 1 – Indicators for low transmission levels (green)

Transmission levels are seen as manageable by the individual institution.

- Cases of COVID-19 on the campus are manageable by the institution.
- Isolation and quarantine rooms are less than 50% full.
- The surrounding county is at a low community transmission level. To find county-specific community transmission levels, refer to the [CDC COVID Data Tracker: COVID-19 Integrated County View \(covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view\)](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view).

Scenario 2 – Indicators for medium transmission levels (yellow)

Transmission levels are beginning to increase on campus.

If **two or more** of the following indicators are met, strongly consider implementing mitigation efforts suggested in Scenario 2 action items below.

- Cases reported among those students who are routinely on campus comprise more than 1% of students over a 14-day period. Also, consider the setting where cases are being reported when using this indicator. Is it mostly confined to a specific group and able to be contained?

- “Routinely on campus” is defined as those living on campus or coming to campus for classes or activities.
- 50-75% of campus isolation and quarantine beds are full.
- Other internal metrics are showing concerning signs, for example, increased absenteeism among faculty or staff.
- The surrounding county has reached a moderate community transmission level. To find county-specific community transmission levels, refer to the [CDC COVID Data Tracker: COVID-19 Integrated County View \(covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view\)](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view).

Scenario 3 – Indicators for high transmission levels (orange)

Transmission levels have further depleted or exhausted institutional resources.

Increased case activity may be occurring on campus, in the community, or both. If **two or more** of the following indicators are met, strongly consider implementing mitigation efforts suggested in Scenario 3.

- Number of infections continue to increase for the two weeks after Scenario 2 mitigation efforts were put into place.
- Clusters of cases are not confined to one specific group; cases are increasing across the total campus population.
- Cases reported among students who are routinely on campus comprise more than 3% of students over a 14-day period.
- More than 75% of isolation and quarantine beds are full.
- The surrounding county has reached a substantial or high community transmission level. To find county-specific community transmission levels, refer to the [CDC COVID Data Tracker: COVID-19 Integrated County View \(covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view\)](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view).

Scenario 4 – Sustained high transmission levels (red)

Transmission levels have seriously depleted or exhausted institutional resources.

Action items in response to scenarios

Scenario 1 – Low level of transmission (green)

Transmission levels are not taxing the institution’s resources.

Follow guidance as outlined in the Guidance for Mitigating COVID-19 at Higher Education Institutions found on [Institutes of Higher Education \(IHE\): COVID-19 \(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html).

Scenario 2 – Medium level of transmission (yellow)

Transmission levels are taxing campus resources. All prior recommendations apply, with the following additional recommendations.

General recommendations

- Consider hosting a vaccine clinic, or expanding existing clinics, if clusters are due to low vaccine coverage on campus.
- Promote importance of self-screening.
- Reinforce health etiquette expectations.
- Reach out to LPH and MDH for testing support, if needed.
- Review mask use practices and policies based on your campus operations and a careful review of cases.

Academic programming

- Professors and instructors should be prepared to continue teaching students who are in quarantine or isolation via alternative learning options to ensure academic continuity for students at any point in the semester. Academic policies should accommodate these situations.

Scenario 3 – High level of transmission (orange)

Transmission levels have seriously depleted or exhausted institutional resources. All prior recommendations apply with these additions.

Campuses reaching this level likely either have low vaccine coverage among students, faculty, and staff; or are experiencing increased transmission due to a variant for which the vaccine is not as effective against.

General considerations

- Extracurricular activities, clubs, and organizations should be scaled back significantly in terms of attendance and the frequency of meeting and moved to virtual gatherings whenever possible; consider postponing or canceling when feasible.
- Consider implementing social distancing practices of at least 6 feet between individuals wherever possible.
- Consider imposing a campus curfew if review of cases suggests a curfew would be a useful mitigation measure.
- Monitor and maintain proper inventories of critical supplies (e.g., cleaning and disinfectant agents, hand sanitizers, personal protective equipment supplies).
- If not already in place, strongly consider institution-level requirements on masks, according to MDH and CDC recommendations, especially in high traffic areas of campus prone to crowding, such as dorms, and dining halls.

Communication

- Ensure regular updates to people on campus about the status of case levels.
- Review plans to cease in-person classes if Scenario 4 must be activated.
- Plan social media outreach, monitoring, and response.

Academic programming

- Consider moving classes to a hybrid format with online options, or move to online only for a period of time (two weeks, for example).
- Consider designated space with a reliable internet connection for students to join remote classes.

Residence life and dining

- Restrict outside access to dorms and residence halls.
- Work with off-campus housing where possible to consider limits to visitation.
- Consider allowing some students to move home to do virtual learning and reduce the number of students in a residential facility to one person per room.
- Consider offering more to-go options and limiting the number of people that can be in the dining facility at any one time.

Student support services

- Consider how to support students who already experience racial, ethnic, or socio-economic disparities; COVID-19 is exacerbating those disparities.
- Allow for students being involved in designing or choosing the type of accommodation they need; be supportive of multiple forms of accommodations, as needs will vary. Examples may include anything from technological support to food security.

Information technology

- Ensure access to loanable computers, including desktops, laptops, tablets, etc.
- Ensure remote access to computer labs, and check availability of Wi-Fi hotspots.

Athletics and recreational programs

- Consider moving to only allowing individual development and exercise for athletes.
- Consider closing weight rooms.
- Consider reducing spectators at events.

Campus operations and maintenance

- Increase frequency of cleaning and disinfecting on campus.
- Consider modifying or limiting hours of operation (especially for areas where students tend to gather or cluster).

- Continue to monitor and enforce recommended MDH guidelines for social distancing.
- Ensure that enforcement ensures compliance with the institution's policies and procedures.

Third-party use of facilities, events, and rentals

- Consider canceling all third-party events and refund deposits, to the extent possible.

Plan for Scenario 4 if numbers do not decrease

- Consider ways to further reduce the number of residents in residence halls.

Scenario 4 – Sustained, high transmission levels (red)

Transmission levels have exhausted institutional resources.

The above mitigation efforts have not resulted in an improvement over a two- to three-week period after Scenario 3 has been put in place. Campus instruction and activities should move online only until the next semester or after a semester break.

Development of this document

This document was created using the following resources and in collaboration with partners in higher education, including guidance from the MDH IHE Surge Capacity Workgroup. Transmission risk level thresholds were created based on current MDH higher education and K-12 guidance, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance, MDH and IHE workgroups, and EAB (formerly the Education Advisory Board) threshold indicators:

- [Institutes of Higher Education \(IHE\): COVID-19](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html)
(www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/ihe.html)
- [Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHE\) CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html) (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html)

Resources

General

- [CDC: Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Institutions of Higher Education](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/guidance-administrators-college-higher-education.pdf)
(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/guidance-administrators-college-higher-education.pdf)
- [Minnesota COVID-19 Response: Who should get tested?](https://mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/who-should-test/index.jsp) (mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/who-should-test/index.jsp)
- [CDC: Caring for Someone Sick at Home](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/care-for-someone.html) (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/care-for-someone.html)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIFFERENT SCENARIOS OF COVID-19 TRANSMISSION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Signage

- [CDC: COVID-19 Print Resources \(www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html)

Campus recreation

- [NIRSA: Coronavirus Updates and Resources for Campus Recreation \(nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/\)](https://nirsa.net/nirsa/covid19/)

Housing

- [ACUHO-I: COVID-19 \(Novel Coronavirus\) Resources \(www.acuho-i.org/covid19\)](https://www.acuho-i.org/covid19)

Mental health support

- [HEMHA College Counseling from a Distance: Deciding Whether and When to Engage in Telemental Health Services \(hemha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HEMHA-Distance-Counseling_FINAL2019.pdf\)](https://hemha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HEMHA-Distance-Counseling_FINAL2019.pdf)
- [SAMHSA: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus)
- [Mental Health America: Mental Health and COVID-19 Information and Resources \(mhanational.org/covid19#ForMentalHealthProviders\)](https://mhanational.org/covid19#ForMentalHealthProviders)



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