Recommendations for Different Scenarios of COVID-19 Transmission Among 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 “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 non-residential 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.
- Vaccination levels may also vary from campus to campus and may impact implementation of these recommendations at the institutional level.
- Institutions are encouraged to communicate with Local Public Health (LPH) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) when they are experiencing increases on campus and planning on changing mitigation efforts. Institutions can reach out to MDH at Health.HigherEd.COVID19@state.mn.us

Not all recommended actions will be possible in all settings, and therefore should be tailored as appropriate.

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).
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 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.

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?
- 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.

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 defined 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.
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Scenario 4 – Sustained level of high transmission in the institution (red)

Transmission levels have seriously depleted or exhausted institutional resources.

**Please Note:** Recommendations may change if the local jurisdiction or state experiences a surge resulting in extensive community-wide spread. In addition, local jurisdictions may establish their own requirements, so it is important to monitor developments in the jurisdiction where the institution is located.

Action items in response to scenarios

Scenario 1 – Low level of transmission (green)

Transmission levels are not taxing the institution’s resources.


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 and 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 where the vaccine is not as effective.

**General considerations**

- Extracurricular activities, clubs, and organizations should be significantly scaled back in terms of attendance, frequency of meeting, and moved to virtual wherever possible; consider postponing or canceling where 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, PPE related supplies).

**Communication**

- Ensure regular updates to campus on 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 (2 weeks, for example).
- Consider designated space for students to join remote classes with reliable internet connection.

**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 virtual learning and reduce number of students to one person per room in a residential facility.

**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 to be 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.
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Athletics and recreational programs
- Consider moving to individual development and exercise only for athletics.
- 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 level of high transmission at institution (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 should move to online only until the next semester or after 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:

- EAB: How will we know that an outbreak on campus has become uncontainable? (eab.com/insights/expert-insight/academic-affairs/when-an-outbreak-on-campus-has-become-uncontainable/)
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Resources

General


Signage

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

Campus recreation

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

Housing

- ACUHO-I: COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Resources (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)
- Mental Health America: Mental Health and COVID-19 Information and Resources (mhanational.org/covid19#ForMentalHealthProviders)