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Colleges make COVID-19 contingency plans as spring break looms



D'Youville College. (News file photo)

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Spring break could take on a brand new meaning this year.

College lectures and instruction have begun to move from their hallowed halls on campus to being taught remotely online as a precaution against COVID-19. From Harvard and Ohio State University to Syracuse and Hofstra, a succession of schools

have begun to announce moves designed to keep students and instructors from gathering in classrooms.

The only local school to make a dramatic change to its academic approach is D'Youville College, which announced Tuesday that classroom instruction will go online for students starting next week after spring break.

"These are extraordinary times," D'Youville President Lorrie Clemo said in a prepared statement explaining the decision.

Other local institutions are preparing to take similar steps if and when they need to.

"That's something we're evaluating every day," said John DellaContrada, vice president for university communications at the University at Buffalo. "It's a distinct possibility. That's why we're developing a contingency plan."

Spring break is next week at UB with exams scheduled for early May.

Should an outbreak of the new coronavirus disrupt the academic calendar, UB officials are developing an "academic continuity plan" to ensure students can complete their courses either through "online instruction, independent study or other approaches," DellaContrada said.

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The transition will be easier for some courses than others, he said, but the university's Center for Educational Innovation has been providing guidance to faculty on how to transition their courses to online.

In fact, Frederick E. Kowal, president of United University Professions, which represents faculty and professional staff of the SUNY system, is hearing from its members at a number of SUNY campuses that distance learning is being seriously considered, and many campuses are setting up training for faculty.

But union members also have raised concerns about the potential shift to online courses, from preparing to IT capacity to whether students would be able to access the courses.

“There’s a lot of work involved in preparing such a course,” Kowal said. “It’s not something that is easily done in a few days or even a week.”

“It is an incredibly dynamic situation,” Kowal said. “It literally is presenting challenges the likes of which I’ve never seen in my 30 years in SUNY.”

Meanwhile, colleges and universities around the country are adding “social distancing” to the lexicon, with many either canceling classes or transitioning to long-distance learning.

Elsewhere:

- Syracuse University is telling students leaving campus at the end of the week for spring break to bring any devices, textbooks and other critical materials for remote learning, as well as “personal effects, valuables or other items they may need for a potential extended period of time away from campus.”
- Hofstra University cancelled all in-person classes for the week of March 9 after a student reported flu-like symptoms after attending a conference where an attendee tested positive for the coronavirus.
- The University of Rochester is limiting campus events to 100 or fewer participants, and spectators will be banned from athletic contests.
- Ohio State University moved to virtual instruction at least until March 30. Columbia University and Fordham University in New York City suspended classes Monday and Tuesday and will continue instruction remotely.
- Princeton University, Harvard University and American University plan to have all classes available online after spring break.

“I would say for most private colleges there are very few of us who don’t already have that ability,” said Hilbert College President Michael S. Brophy.

“I think more difficult is just the reality check that within 24 hours notice, 1,000 people will be online between our students and faculty,” Brophy said. “That’s a bit unusual for everyone, for sure.”

The college in Hamburg is monitoring the situation with the help of the Erie County Health Department and the Council of Independent Colleges, Brophy said. Like others, Hilbert is preparing for the same scenario, but colleges, in general, don't seem to be moving online unless they feel there is someone on campus carrying the virus, Brophy said.

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SUNY Buffalo State President Katherine S. Conway-Turner said in a message to the college Monday that the school is "working vigorously on options and technology" so that the semester may continue.

At St. Bonaventure University, classes are still being held on campus, but "at the same time, we are developing plans for online delivery in case we have no choice but to stop holding face-to-face classes," chief communications officer Thomas Missel said in an email.

And at D'Youville, the decision to move lectures online was made in anticipation of students returning from spring break.

While there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Western New York, a significant number of students and faculty from area colleges will have traveled to regions of the country with confirmed cases, D'Youville officials said.

The campus on Porter Avenue will remain open and operational for students to participate in their course-required labs and simulations, but transitioning to this "hybrid" learning model should help reduce opportunities for potential exposure, officials at the college said.

At the same time, it will allow cleaning staff to concentrate on sanitizing laboratories and heavily-used areas on campus.

The college plans to re-evaluate the situation by the end of the month.

"The best time to protect the health and safety of our campus community is before the disease knocks on our door, said Jeremiah Davie, an associate professor of biology who is leading a campus task force on COVID-19.

In the meantime, colleges like Hilbert, St. Bonaventure and Daemen have been asking students and faculty to self report if they have traveled to high-risk countries or areas while on spring break.

"I think we're doing all the things we need to be doing while also creating a sense of confidence in people and not a sense of panic – which is my No. 1 concern in all of this," said Greg Naylor, vice president for strategic initiatives at Daemen.



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