



## COVID-19 Next Steps: Higher Education Strategies for Moving Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one of the most formidable challenges faced by the global economy. Higher education institutions, with their population densities and unique heterogenous operations, are a prime environment for “superspreader” virus opportunities. As such, academia as a whole swiftly responded to the pandemic in mid-March 2020, taking dramatic first steps to safeguard their employees and students. They closed physical campuses and transitioned to remote operation and educational instruction with practically every known operational constant changing.

As some state restrictions are lifting and the prospect of resuming an altered state of operations materializes, what are some of the strategic next steps that should be taken? We are in this learning curve together and PMA Companies is committed to providing guidance to help you adapt and effectively respond.

This article provides a tactical overview of “next steps” and their timeline, along with peer insights and industry-specific resources. We summarize current industry best thinking — from extensive research and client shared experiences — for preserving the health and wellness of people when resuming broader operations. This list is by no means exhaustive but provides a framework of risk management considerations.

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# What Can Institutions of Higher Education Do Now?

## Develop an Integrated Task Force

If not done so already, develop an integrated task force that addresses and manages an eventual return to appropriate campus operations and mission continuity. This task force should operate as a command center and evaluate each university operation in light of the state and local public health departments' guidance. Include various senior leadership in executive, operational and academic operational areas in the task force. Depending on the size and composition of the campus' operations, separate subcommittees may be needed for operations and academics. The task force should engage input from faculty and staff, including unions. The task force and subcommittees should meet and communicate daily at a minimum.

The integrated task force should focus on two key efforts:

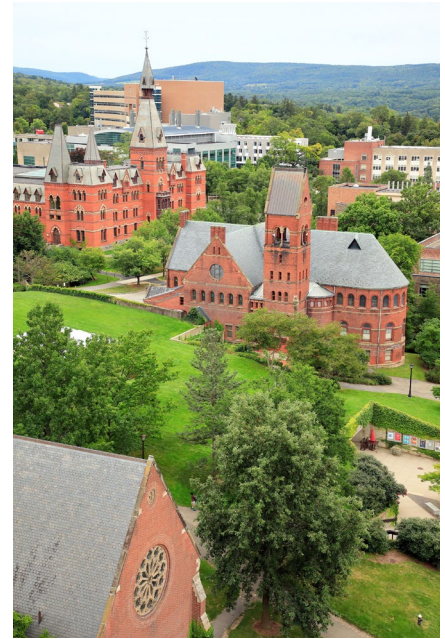
- Developing an Infectious Disease Preparedness & Response Plan. First, they should be working on or have developed a formal written *Infectious Disease Preparedness & Response Plan*. The purpose of the plan is to protect people from the spread of COVID-19 through adherence to protocols consistent with precautions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Health (DOH) and the World Health Organization (WHO).
- Where possible, develop a good working relationship with public health authorities with jurisdiction (township, county and/or state public health departments). Clients have expressed their leading source of frustration as inconsistent and frequently changing pandemic data and state directives. Consistent and accurate information is pivotal for the task force to make the most informed decisions related to reopening. If you are unable to develop a local contact, consider other options. Many organizations have accessed or created new information streams through daily local and state virtual meetings or press releases. In addition, clients with hospital or medical centers have discovered a reliable communication conduit through virtual local or state Environment of Care (EOC) COVID-19 briefings.

## TIMELINE



## Engage with Industry Peer Organizations

Time and resources are both limited and logistically stressed during this pandemic. Other than the CDC's *Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Institutions of Higher Education*, there are no additional federal COVID-19 publications available to date specifically for higher education. Engaging with industry peers can ease this burden and avoid "reinventing the wheel" for best practices and programs. Peer sharing and networking have always been evident in higher education, but this has become a necessity during this pandemic. Consider joining national higher education organizations or their local chapters to benefit from rapidly developing Covid-19 resources as well as member-shared best practices and insights. This may include policy/program templates and examples, webinars, podcasts, community discussion boards, state regulation guidance updates, etc. Clients shared they have benefited immensely from these pandemic resources and connecting with peers specifically through University Risk Management and Insurance Association (URMIA), Campus Safety, Health & Environmental Management Association (CSHEMA) and American College Health Association (ACHA). (Please refer to "*Higher Education Reopening Resources*" at the end of this article for links to these organizations).



Developing an integrated task force and leveraging peer organizations are the most pivotal steps higher education can take right now to help ensure they are making precise and informed reopening decisions that adequately address personal safety and welfare.

## Short-Term Considerations

### Formulate Rigorous Scenario Reopening Plans

Once the task force and industry resources are assembled, detailed, but flexible, reopening plans should be formulated. Consider a broad range of operational scenarios that may be dictated by local or state public health departments. Scenario plans, ranging from fully remote operations to complete campus re-immersion, should include both short-term and long-term strategies:

- A plan for *repopulation* of the campus (which will likely be a phased process).
- A plan for *monitoring* health conditions to ensure the detection of infection.
- A plan for *containment* to prevent the spread of the disease if detected.
- A plan for an additional *shutdown(s)*, either because of a serious outbreak on campus or another statewide order.

Further direction on developing emergency operation reopening plans can be found in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education* developed by a multi-federal agency collaboration through the Department of Education. (Please refer to "*Higher Education Reopening Resources*" at the end of this article for a link to this guide).

Clients have shared that their efforts in creating a continuum of phased reopening scenario plans, with these core elements, have enabled them to quickly adapt and respond more effectively to new state directives within often tight implementation timelines.

### **Determine Campus “Gateway” Reopening Prerequisites**

To ensure safe repopulation, health monitoring and virus containment scenario plans should all include scalable gateway prerequisites that adhere to developing state guidelines. These criteria are essentially mandatory requirements or conditions necessary to enter campus or to resume physical campus operations. Examples of campus gateway prerequisites include, but are not limited to, the following:



- Established target numbers for community sustained infections and non-increasing new hospitalizations and infection rates. The prevalence of the disease must be low enough to safely resume campus operations.
- Sizable custodial staffing to meet ramped-up disinfecting schedules with an ample supply of cleaning products/tools.
- Adequate supplies of approved viral diagnostic tests and means to administer and process them in adherence to state mandates on test timing, frequency and recipients.
- Customized virtual training programs on up-to-date public health guidelines and the institution’s *Infectious Disease Preparedness & Response Plan* for faculty, staff and students.
- Proper training and capacity for contact tracing.
- Adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and/or face masks deemed for the level of potential exposure.
- Sufficient physical space(s) allocated for proper isolation and quarantine of confirmed infected students on campus.
- Ample surge capacity availability at nearby healthcare facilities and hospitals.

While developing these criteria is fairly straightforward, procuring the items to support them has proven to be the most challenging. Many higher education departments have their own budgets and typically purchase for their own needs, e.g., PPE and tools. However, during the pandemic, this departmental purchasing system may create bidding competition within the same university for the limited supply of essential resources. Those who have been able to create centralized purchasing have had greater success and less frustration in getting what they need.



## **Refer to Other State and/or Peer Guidelines in Moving Forward**

At this time, Connecticut is the only state that has published higher education reopening scenario guidelines. These guidelines provide a granular level of direction. Additional state post-secondary reopening guidelines are being developed and are anticipated in the coming days and weeks. Clients have found the state guideline document, along with national peer organizations' resources, very valuable in developing and customizing their reopening plans.

While the future remains a question in everyone's minds, the time to employ task forces and develop contingency plans is now. These tactical next steps are designed to help you create effective long-term strategies and secure the future of what may be a new normal.

*PMA Companies has a nationwide Education Specialist team with a track record of success in collaborating with academia clients to create and implement effective risk management solutions. If you have any questions, please contact your local PMA Risk Control Consultant or email us at [heretohelp@pmagroup.com](mailto:heretohelp@pmagroup.com). PMA is proud of our longstanding commitment to protect the health and safety of our employees and clients and is here to support you during these challenging times.*

