

Report from
IHL Safe Start Task Force

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Commissioner of Higher Education Dr. Alfred Rankins Jr. established the Safe Start Task Force for the Mississippi public university system. The task force was charged with crafting a system-level plan for starting and completing the fall 2020 semester in the safest and most effective way, so that students and universities can achieve the best possible outcomes, regardless of the challenging circumstances.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented disruption to all facets of our society and university operations are not excluded,” said Dr. Rankins. “Regardless of the challenges, our universities are committed to providing the best and safest educational experience possible for their students and the most productive and safest work environment for their employees. To achieve this goal, key leaders from each of the eight universities will provide valuable input through the task force.”

This pandemic continues to be a very fluid situation; thus, the recommendations from the task force are best available thought as of the submission date. Adjustments will continually be required due to the constantly evolving situation.

Following are the baseline practices and recommendations from the IHL Safe Start Task Force.

Academic Continuity

Baseline Practices

- Develop plans for physical distancing in all classrooms. This will include spacing of student desks, ingress and egress control, and assessing alternative or non-traditional classroom space locations.
- Develop changes in attendance policies that do not penalize students for missing classes if they have COVID-19 symptoms.
- Utilization of online education for some courses either totally or in course-specific hybrid formats.
- Maximize video capture of lectures to provide students more flexibility in keeping up with coursework given the uncertainty for the fall semester.
- Prepare plans for changes within the semester based on potential disruptions with COVID-19 reoccurrence.

- Consider changes in the academic calendar that would provide more flexibility in response to potential changes or disruptions.
- Develop plans for reasonable accommodations for students, faculty and staff under new guidance related to medical vulnerabilities to COVID-19.
- Prepare campuses with the technology and training resources to accomplish these goals.
- Ensure SACSCOC is notified for any relevant changes that could impact institutional accreditation.
- File a waiver request as needed with US Department of Education to allow a reduction in the number of weeks for the fall semester.

Needed IHL Actions:

- Preemptively authorize institutions to adjust the academic calendar to minimize disruption of academic programs based on potential COVID-19 related disruptions.

Finance and Business Operations

Baseline Practices

- Prepare contingency plans for a wide range of reductions in budgets based on enrollment and state appropriations.
- Carefully account for all COVID-19 related funds for potential federal reimbursement.
- Carefully monitor and forecast to determine whether adequate unrestricted institutional liquidity will be maintained to fund the mission and existing obligations.
- Develop multiple, comprehensive, and aggressive expense mitigation strategies in all areas of institutional operations. As conditions unfold, be prepared to implement these plans quickly and decisively to preserve the financial integrity of the institutions.

Needed IHL Actions:

- Appropriate legislation should be passed immediately to protect institutions from undue legal liability related to COVID-19 infection and spread.
- Develop a system-wide informed consent document for students, student athletes, and campus visitors.

Health and Safety Considerations

Baseline Practices

- Strongly promote a culture of health and safety on all campuses. This would include responsibility to not come to campus when symptoms occur.
- Develop educational programs on health and safety requirements for COVID-19.
- Strongly encourage wearing face coverings while on campus.
- Develop a protocol for screening on each campus, with follow-up testing and contact tracing for those displaying symptoms.
- Urge all students and faculty/staff to obtain a flu shot, so as to reduce flu as a potential source of symptoms that would confuse COVID-19 diagnosis.
- Develop protocols for isolating students, faculty and staff when suspected or confirmed cases develop.
- Revise policies on telework to encourage where possible during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Establish and clearly articulate cleaning protocols for all campus facilities.
- Develop a robust program to address mental health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Revise work schedules as appropriate to accommodate social distancing requirements. This could include shift-based scheduling, telework, and workspace isolation.
- Clarify and revise leave policies to reflect recent changes in Emergency Paid Sick Leave and Expanded Family Medical Leave Act for COVID-19 related circumstances.
- Clearly articulate a protocol for university employees and students traveling on university business, guiding safe travel procedures as well as testing or quarantine upon return.

Needed IHL Actions:

- Recommend to the Mississippi legislature a temporary adjustment to employee leave policy that would allow the first day of absence to be counted toward medical leave rather than personal leave.
- Request resources from the Mississippi State Department of Health to provide massive testing and contact tracing capabilities.

Campus Life

Baseline Practices

- Develop plans for campus life facilities (e.g. residence halls, dining halls, fitness centers) that promotes health safety for all students, faculty, staff, and visitors.
- Develop protocols for co-curricular activities and campus services with physical distancing requirements and spread reduction techniques in place.
- Develop protocols for all visitors to campuses.

Needed IHL Actions:

- Develop common informed consent document for use by all IHL institutions specific to housing and student life activities.

Research Continuity

Baseline Practices

- Each IHL institution has unique research programs that will vary dramatically in how COVID-19 safety can be ensured. Each university should develop specific plans to promote safe and effective conduct of research while observing appropriate physical distancing and health requirements.

Athletics

Baseline Practices

- Closely follow guidance provided by the NCAA.
- IHL institutions must follow guidance from the conferences for which they are a member; thus, overarching guidance from IHL would be to align with both NCAA and conference requirements.

Communications

Baseline Practices

- Effectively communicate to all new and existing faculty, staff, students, their families, and the general public the plans our universities are making to ensure the safety and academic progress of all students.
- Provide this communication on a frequent basis, through all available communication channels, and as quickly as possible to create positive public perception.
- Explain the sound, science-based logic behind decisions to instill confidence in those decisions.
- Post all Safe Start news and information on the university's COVID-19 microsite to serve as a repository where information can be accessed, shared and archived.

Needed IHL Actions:

- Utilize the COVID-19 IHL website/repository to link to the universities' COVID-19 microsites, which will include all Safe Start news and information, to serve as a repository where system wide information can be accessed, shared and archived.

Resources used to inform recommendations and campus-based practices:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/Schools-Decision-Tree.pdf>
- <https://www.aplu.org/news-and-media/communications-resources/coronavirus/index.html>
- <https://www.nga.org/coronavirus/>
- https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf
- <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/shared-housing/index.html>
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/07/live-updates-latest-news-coronavirus-and-higher-education>
- <http://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/coronavirus-covid-19>
- <https://www.acuho-i.org/resources/cid/7284>
- https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf
- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>
- <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mental-Health-Higher-Education-Covid-19.pdf>