

Resource Guide for New Jersey’s Institutions of Higher Education

Fostering a Transparent, Supportive Campus Culture amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

To supplement the efforts of New Jersey’s institutions of higher education in responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) is offering a series of best practice recommendations, the first of which focuses on fostering a transparent and supportive campus culture. While circumstances differ from one institution to another, these practices can aid institutions in communicating to students the importance of adhering to COVID-19 protective measures, including wearing masks, maintaining social distance, answering the call from contact tracers, and protecting the broader community. The entire campus community has a role to play in preventing outbreaks.

Campus leaders who are determining how to encourage compliance with COVID-19 protective measures and foster supportive campus cultures in which individuals feel comfortable sharing information should take into account the developmental processes of college-age students that influence their behavior. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [published a report including recommendations](#) for colleges that factor in the psychological, habit-forming processes that young adults experience during this critical point in their lives. This resource guide provides the following: general best practices for supporting specific student populations, and best practices for supporting both students with disabilities and student athletes in building a campus culture where case reporting and contact tracing protocols are the norm.

General Best Practices

Cultivate Personal Responsibility & Commitment to Community

“Shaming” or publicly highlighting noncompliance among college students can be detrimental to an institution’s sense of campus community and could convey the message that there are low expectations for compliance among this age group. To counter this:

- Consider whether your institution’s policies may deter students and others from coming forward with vital information.
 - Students may be fearful of how the information they share may impact their collegiate experience. Create a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable reporting positive diagnoses or symptoms and sharing other details related to COVID-19 exposure without fear of punitive repercussions.
 - With this in mind, institutions should consider adopting amnesty policies for students who come forward with critical information relevant to a COVID-19 public health investigation that could be integral to the mission of contract tracers.
 - Institutions may consider pursuing less punitive disciplinary action against students for violation of any COVID-19 student life policies. In lieu of disciplinary action, students can still be required to comply with wellness follow-ups, including, but not limited to: educational requirements, guidance by medical or public health officials, and quarantine and isolation.
- Emphasize development of students’ sense of personal responsibility in slowing spread rather than reinforcing the social behaviors they should avoid, which could actually lead to increased engagement in those riskier behaviors given the risk/reward tendencies of this age group. For college students who value the ability to socialize with peers and perceive the risks of COVID-19 as low, socializing outweighs the perceived risks, as the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine point out.
 - Reinforce that students living both on- and off-campus are a part of the campus community. Any messaging and/or strategies should target both student populations.

Communicate Quickly and Regularly

- Promote transparency of information through frequent campus communications alerts and regular updates to public COVID-19 dashboards.
- Tailor messaging around how students becoming infected with COVID-19 could affect others and less about health risks to the students.
 - Many students adhere to protective measures but also want to engage in social interaction with peers. Consider offering socially-distanced, outdoor activities to allow students to enjoy safe interactions with each other, and encourage them to play a role in planning those activities.
 - Encourage students to consider that their personal actions pose broad implications, particularly on those who may be from at-risk and vulnerable populations, such as their peers and/or family members who may be immunocompromised.
- Emphasize the activities that could be curtailed if cases spike (e.g. in-person instruction, sports events and activities, social events, etc.) and how grades could be impacted if students become ill.
 - This helps put risks into perspective by highlighting what students stand to lose if they do not comply.

Provide Students a Voice in the Process

- Students can enhance the creation and implementation of policies impacting them, which could lead to more buy-in of these policies. Empower students to have a voice in the decision-making processes and issues impacting their experience.
- Peers are more likely to listen to each other than institutional leadership imposing policies that students may perceive as hindering their collegiate experiences. Identify peer leaders and student ambassadors who can help amplify and reinforce health and safety messaging. Identify trusted messengers, amplified by social media and other influencers.

Encourage Students to Support Contact Tracing Initiatives

- Contact tracers have several objectives: identifying others who may have been exposed and identity where exposure may have occurred, as well as ensuring individuals have the necessary resources to safely quarantine and/or isolate to slow the spread.
- A majority of individuals – about 78 percent¹ – are not cooperating with statewide contact tracing initiatives, risking further community spread.
- Encourage members of your campus community – students, faculty, staff, and visitors – to take the call from community contact tracers and share information honestly to prevent transmission.
- Reinforce that reporting a positive COVID-19 case is more about protecting others to whom they may have been exposed and breaking the transmission cycle than disclosing personal information.

Encourage Campus Community to Download [COVID Alert NJ](#)

- This free and secure exposure notification app anonymously alerts users if they have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 without the use of location tracking technology. This notification app uses only [Bluetooth proximity detection](#).
- It provides users with up-to-date information on New Jersey reopening news, key COVID-19 metrics, and an interactive symptom tracking tool.
- Every phone is another tool to fight this pandemic.

¹ <https://nj.gov/governor/news/news/562020/approved/20201214b.shtml>

Supporting Students with Disabilities

As New Jersey institutions of higher education continue offering programs and classes via remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to remember that institutions receiving federal funding continue to have an affirmative obligation under federal law (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA]) to provide equal access to educational services for eligible students with disabilities.

- Students with disabilities should continue to be provided accommodations allowing for the completion of coursework as institutions move to remote instruction.
- Institutions should work to provide such accommodations in consultation with their office responsible for student disability services.
- Faculty should be supported by the institution in developing course adaptations or accommodations as they transition to online or remote instruction in compliance with the ADA.
- Institutions should make certain that the technology for delivering remote instruction course materials are accessible to students with disabilities, including but not limited to ensuring:
 - o Document compatibility with screen readers;
 - o The use of closed captioning in videos on services such as Zoom or Blackboard;
 - o Student access to participate in online video discussions;
 - o Reducing screen-time where it creates a particular challenge for students with disabilities; and
 - o Appropriate accommodations provided for testing.
- Institutions should address the increased difficulties or risks related to transportation to campus that students with disabilities may face.
- Institutions should address the difficulties for students who read lips and are unable to do so if others wear masks.
- Institutions should create policies recognizing that students with special needs or students who are immunocompromised may not be able to maintain social distancing, hand or respiratory hygiene, or wear a face covering or mask.
- Students with disabilities should be provided with the contact information for the office within the institution that is responsible for student disability services and be encouraged by the institution to contact that office if accommodations or other assistance may be needed.

For further information about the federal guidance on serving students with disabilities and for other matters pertaining to COVID-19 related school interruptions, please refer to the April 3, 2020 guidance memo published by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). <https://ifap.ed.gov/electronic-announcements/040320UPDATEDGuidanceInterruptStudyRelCOVID19>

Supporting Student Athletes

For many student athletes, the impact of COVID-19 has not only resulted in a shift in their academic learning environments but has also caused a major disruption in their ability to compete in their respective sports. With a number of student athletes having their identity, emotional well-being, and academic success deeply associated with their athletic experience, it is important for institutions to recognize the needs of this population. Institutions may consider:

Maintain Athletic Connections

- Coaches, advisors, and athletics support staff should check-in on student athletes frequently to maintain their sense of connection with the institution and team.
- Conduct virtual team meetings focused on providing student athletes with fun activities to help them de-stress and stay connected with their teammates.

- Conduct virtual wellness checks for mental health and academic support.
 - Make student athletes are aware of what academic and mental health supports are available to them, as well as how these supports can be accessed in a remote environment.
- Consider ways to highlight and recognize students throughout the season, especially for seniors who may not have the ability to participate in their ‘senior night.’

Build Peer-to-Peer Support Networks

- Provide student athletes with a virtual forum to connect with other student athletes on campus or at other institutions.
- Encourage student athletes to serve as peer counselors or engage the services of existing peer counselors

Maintain Clear, Transparent Lines of Communication

- Ensure that student athletes are informed of any eligibility and scholarship implications if they opt to abstain from athletic conference participation for any indicated time period or opt to transfer to another school/division.
- Provide information to students about how the sport season(s) will be impacted by COVID-19, which could include information about the transfer portal, scholarships, travel, etc.
- Give student athletes a chance to contribute to policies that may impact them. One option could be hosting a regular town hall with the athletic department and student athletes to share updates and provide feedback.
- Make sure student athletes are clear about the safety protocols and resources available to them throughout the pandemic.
- Emphasize the importance of COVID-19 compliance and reporting for the health and safety of the entire athletic community.