

UVI to Reopen This Fall With Mandatory Face Masks, Reduced Classrooms and Strict Social Distancing

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University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) President Dr. David Hall addressed the UVI community on Tuesday during a virtual town hall meeting to discuss the University's fall 2020 semester plans and operations, in light of the continued challenges posed by COVID-19. According to UVI, Dr. Hall outlined plans to gradually resume in-person instruction this fall with restrictions and preventative measures to ensure the safety of students, employees and the public. In the virtual meeting hosted on Zoom, Dr. Hall also answered questions from students relative to University housing and dining services, the resumption of classes and Coronavirus testing.

"The first principle we are keeping in the forefront of all our actions and decisions is to ensure the health and safety of our students and our employees," stated Dr. Hall. "Secondly, we will continue to base our decisions on the guidance provided by the V.I. Department of Health (VIDOH) and

the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)," he said. "These principles are the bedrock for what we are trying to do to lower the risk to everyone while returning to our campuses and fulfilling our mission as a University."

When campuses reopen in early August, all staff and students will be required to wear face masks on campus, in all common areas, in offices and when entering and exiting classrooms. The University will try to provide reusable face masks to students at the beginning of the fall semester and will make masks available at a nominal cost to ensure compliance with this requirement. In adherence to the social distancing guidelines as set forth by the VIDOH and CDC, individuals participating in campus activities including indoor and outdoor gatherings, classes, or congregating in waiting rooms and lobbies will be required to maintain a distance of at least six feet from each other.

To maintain this physical distance in the classroom environment, classroom capacity will be significantly reduced from 840 seats to 269 seats on the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix and from 911 to 276 seats on the St. Thomas Campus. As a result of the reduced classroom capacity, UVI will implement a mixed-modality approach to deliver instruction to students in various formats. "We are inviting students back on campus; therefore, we recognize the need to have a healthy mix of in-person and virtual instruction," said Dr. Hall. Mixed modality approaches will include a combination of in-person, remote, videoconference and flipped instruction with cohorts of students attending in person on different days. "Throughout the summer, the UVI provost, academic deans, faculty, and support staff will continue to fine tune plans and determine the appropriate approaches for courses within the different schools and colleges of the University," said Dr. Hall.

University housing capacity will also be dramatically reduced to comply with social distancing guidelines. Given the size of each room, only single room occupancy will be permitted on both campuses. Additionally, no visitors will be allowed in residence halls and students' arrival in the fall will be staggered to minimize risk.

Prior to the commencement of classes, students and employees will be required to be tested for COVID-19 before returning to campus. "We understand testing is not foolproof, but our goal is to start the year with a baseline and the ability to identify individuals who could be bringing in the virus," explained Dr. Hall. A testing provider to administer off-campus testing will be identified soon and the University is also considering partnering with a second provider to conduct contact tracing services, if needed, in addition to the use of an app.

President Hall thanked the more than 400 attendees for participating in the meeting noting, "staying informed is a two-way street." He asked employees and students to be vigilant and report anything on campus that might need improvement and vowed to continue communicating with stakeholders through virtual town halls, via the website and by use of other channels. "Our goal is to keep everyone safe and well informed," he concluded.

The UVI COVID-19 Taskforce, a team of 27 individuals across both campuses, has been meeting, researching and discussing the University's response to COVID-19 for many months. Their work served as a basis for the recommendations set forth in the reopening plan recently approved by the UVI Board of Trustees. Additionally, the administration received input from the academic deans, the president's cabinet, faculty, and student government leaders. Dr. Hall emphasized that should science shift or circumstances in the Territory regarding COVID-19 dramatically change, the guidelines would be revisited and adjusted accordingly in a similar process.

