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WKU to extend spring break, temporarily suspend in-person classes

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy C. Caboni announces the university's COVID-19 response to transition face-to-face classes to an alternative delivery format from Monday, March 23 through Sunday, April 5, and to extend Spring Break through Sunday, March 22, during a press conference at the Augenstein Alumni Center on Wednesday, March, 11, 2020. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Western Kentucky University's COVID-19 response to transition face-to-face classes to an alternative delivery format from Monday, March 23 through Sunday, April 5, and to extend Spring Break through Sunday, March 22, during a press conference at the Augenstein Alumni Center on Wednesday, March, 11, 2020. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Responding to the growing coronavirus outbreak, Western Kentucky University will extend its spring break through March 22 and then suspend in-person classes in favor of “alternative delivery” methods through April 5.

“To be clear, no cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed on or near our campuses. Therefore, the time to take action is now,” WKU President Timothy Caboni told reporters during a news conference Wednesday at the Augenstein Alumni Center.

At the same time, the university released a campuswide message from Caboni discussing changes to course delivery, events, travel and telecommuting. WKU students are on spring break this week.

“Students are encouraged to remain at home, but residence halls will still open as planned this Sunday, March 15, at noon for those students who need to return to campus,” Caboni wrote in the campuswide memo. “Extending the break allows our faculty time to prepare for a change in delivery of instruction.”

Beginning March 23, WKU will suspend in-person classes in favor of an “alternative delivery format.” Speaking to reporters, Caboni shared a few examples of what that could mean for students.

That could mean classes streamed through videoconferencing platforms, assignments posted online through Blackboard or classroom discussions facilitated through online discussion threads.

“Depending upon an individual’s facility with the different tools, it will take a shorter or longer period of time,” he said. Although he’s confident faculty can meet this challenge with proper support, it will be a heavy lift to accomplish by March 23.

“It will not be easy, we’re all going to learn a lot in the next few weeks,” he said.

Caboni stressed this will not impact the university’s graduation date: “Every student who wants to graduate and planned on doing that will graduate this May,” he said.

Effective immediately, employees will also be given flexibility to work from home. However, Caboni also said the university is committed to maintaining services, like on-campus dining, albeit on a much smaller scale.

“Closing our residence halls is not an option. There are students that need a place to live,” he told reporters Wednesday. “... That being said, for students who are able to go home, that’s a good decision and we encourage folks to consider that.”

That includes students who may not have internet access back home. “They should come back,” he said.

Beginning Monday and through April 5, Caboni also said on-campus, non-athletic events involving more than 50 people will need to reschedule, cancel or virtualize that event.

He added that decisions about athletic events will be made in consultation with the NCAA and Conference USA. Shortly afterward Wednesday, NCAA President Mark Emmert announced that upcoming championship events, including Division I men’s and women’s basketball tournaments will be conducted with “only essential staff and limited family attendance.”

Also beginning Monday, Caboni said, “WKU is suspending all but mission-critical, university-funded travel, both international and domestic.”

Faculty, staff and students are being encouraged to complete a voluntary travel disclosure form to provide emergency management officials with as much information as possible about recent travel.

These decisions by WKU come just one day after Berea College said it would end the spring semester early, halting classes and asking students to move out of their dorms by the end of the week.

Prior to the announcement at WKU, the Courier Journal in Louisville reported that the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky would be temporarily suspending in-person classes as well.

They join colleges and universities across the country suspending in-person classes, either responding to coronavirus in their area or taking precautionary steps, according to USA Today.

There are currently eight confirmed cases of coronavirus in Kentucky, five of which are in Harrison County north of Lexington, two in Fayette County and one in Jefferson County.

On a global scale, the World Health Organization declared Wednesday that the coronavirus crisis is now a pandemic, generally defined as a disease becoming widespread around the world.

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