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WKU students return to campus Tuesday

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On Tuesday, Western Kentucky University students will return for the start of classes, but once again, it won't be a typical semester in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

With spring break canceled and no breaks built into the semester, faculty are adjusting their courses to help keep students from burning out. That means more generous late work policies and mental health days, among other tactics.

“There are no breakpoints built into the spring term, so everyone has to keep moving forward without this extra free space in our time. Promises we make in our personal and professional lives to get something done tomorrow that could not get done today will have to be honored without this valuable ‘free time.’ For us and for our students, this creates the risk of an unmanageable workload where unhealthy and unproductive sacrifices are made to rebalance demands for our time,” WKU Psychological Sciences Professor Andrew Mienaltowski said, according to a university webpage that outlines several changes faculty are making.

As it awaits the arrival of widespread vaccination against

COVID-19, WKU Acting Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Cheryl Stevens wrote in a recent campus message that a university restart committee decided face-to-face final exams will be appropriate to at least some degree.

“Face-to-face final exams are allowable for face-to-face and hybrid courses (with a face-to-face component) as long as social distancing protocols are followed,” Stevens wrote. “Fully online courses should have online final exams. Of course, faculty could choose to have an online final for face-to-face or hybrid classes.”

Additionally, despite criticism from at least one faculty member, the practice of allowing five minutes between classes will continue.

“Initially, the purpose of those extra five minutes between classes was to allow time for classroom cleaning and longer pedestrian pathways through or around buildings. While it has been determined that COVID-19 is not easily transmitted from surfaces or from passing people in hallways, teaching faculty expressed that the additional five minutes provided extra time for them to set up technology and prepare their classrooms. Therefore, during the spring 2021 semester, we will continue to allow faculty to take an extra five minutes between classes with the expectation that those five instructional minutes will be assigned to other forms of academic work.”

That said, Stevens added that the university would have to plan for that under the guidelines put forward by its accrediting body.

“(The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) guidelines require that we define a number of instructional minutes that correlate with credit hours earned. Therefore, we must account for those five minutes,” Stevens wrote.

In her message, Stevens urged the campus to stay vigilant as vaccines gradually roll out to the broader public.

“Despite the challenging circumstances, our campus community did an excellent job of limiting virus spread by following our Healthy on the Hill guidelines” during the fall 2020 semester, Stevens wrote. “We need to continue to be vigilant this semester as we await vaccine distribution.”

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