



## Presidential Announcement of the Plan for Fall 2020 on Virginia Tech's Blacksburg Campus

JUNE 8, 2020

To Virginia Tech students, faculty, and staff, and our neighbors across the commonwealth,

Amid a tumultuous spring in the U.S. and the world, I hope you, your family, and your friends are well and beginning to find the capacity to turn your attention to the future – a better, more equitable future. Education is the key to achieving our aspirations, both as individuals and as a society. We at Virginia Tech are privileged to be in a position to enable that better future, and we are looking forward to returning to this most important mission in the fall semester.

I am pleased to announce Virginia Tech's plans for the fall semester. Hundreds of individuals and several working groups and task forces – at the university, in our communities, and at the state level – have contributed to the shaping of fall plans for all Virginia Tech locations. Although the plans we present here will continue to evolve over the summer with additional input and data, significant elements are firm, and it is now time for our students, faculty, and staff to shift from planning to preparation. We will hold a variety of town halls in the summer to continue to seek further input and to keep you apprised of developments.

Today we are sharing our plan for Blacksburg, where we will blend in-person and online teaching and learning in a manner that preserves valuable on-campus experiences and engagement while also reducing the potential for exposure to the coronavirus for those who are most vulnerable. Instruction on campus will start on Aug. 24 and the semester will conclude on Dec. 16, as originally scheduled. In order to mitigate the risks associated with an anticipated late-fall resurgence of this disease, we plan to pivot to online instruction and exams after Thanksgiving break.

Our holistic, [principles-based approach](#) means that much of our planning for Blacksburg will pertain to all Virginia Tech locations. However, conditions in other regions of Virginia warrant distinct plans for each location. For example, the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine and the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine will phase in clinics and in-person instruction over the summer months. As these site-specific plans become available, they will be shared internally through list-servs, the Virginia Tech Daily Email, and online on our expanded COVID-19 site, newly named [vt.edu/ready](#).

To our students, employees, and community members in the New River Valley, gratitude is the most appropriate word to describe my appreciation for your individual and collective commitment to serving our community during these challenging times. Your swift and persistent adherence to public health guidelines – from physical distancing, to voluntary self-isolation, to the wearing of face coverings – has limited the impact of COVID-19 in the Blacksburg area.

Our university researchers responded to the dire need for [rapid testing](#), enterprising students

and employees [used their skills](#) to address [shortages of critical equipment](#) and supplies, [Virginia Cooperative Extension](#) agents continued to serve by moving quickly online, and our campus and community hosted a federal personal protective equipment (PPE) [decontamination site](#). These are examples of how you stepped up when needed. The contributions of essential employees who remained on campus, the application of Virginia Tech's [world-class expertise](#) to help the public [better understand this disease](#), and the care for each other that sustained us through these difficult months make us proud to be Hokies.

This strong community response provides an opportunity for a phased transition to an in-person fall semester, allowing research, student clinics, and athletic training to ramp up over the summer following appropriate public health protocols. Our faculty, teaching assistants, and instructional designers are actively planning for a fall semester that utilizes a combination of in-person and online teaching and learning that preserves, to the extent possible, the experiential learning that distinguishes Virginia Tech's "hands-on, minds-on" approach.

At the time of this announcement, the incidence of COVID-19 in the New River Valley has been largely suppressed and appears to be declining across the commonwealth, yet there are still hot spots in other regions of the U.S. and across the world. We can anticipate further outbreaks and resurgences of the disease over the coming months. While we are hopeful for vaccines and effective treatments that reduce serious symptoms and mortality, we cannot count on those solutions in the near term. It is reasonable to assume that we will be living with COVID-19 for the foreseeable future, and during this time we must rely on each other. We will learn together how to live well and work effectively as we take the precautions necessary to mitigate the health risks for our community. We also deeply value our relationships with the local communities that host our programs and campuses. While we transition back to more traditional operations and an on-campus academic semester, the safety, security, and well-being of our community will remain the principal focus, and we will make changes in our plans and practices as conditions on campus and in our community evolve.

Our primary objective is to care for those who are most vulnerable from serious disease. As with other diseases and hazards that we live with every day, we won't be perfect, but we can attempt to minimize the risk so that the mission of Virginia Tech – preparing the next generation to lead, generating new knowledge and applying that knowledge in the communities we serve – can continue as it has for nearly 150 years. We will emerge stronger as a university and as a community.

Before I offer details of our plans, I would like to ask those new to Blacksburg, or returning to our community after being away, to be mindful of our [Principles of Community](#) and to take personal responsibility for the health and safety of those you know and those you have not yet met. For us to achieve our collective goals, we must remain vigilant, disciplined, and exceptionally considerate of others.

Life on campus and in town will be different. Adhering to public health imperatives will at times be frustrating, cumbersome, and exhausting, but our commitment to living *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) in every moment has never been more important. It will be the difference between a successful fall and a chaotic and possibly interrupted semester. If we do this right, we will manage to preserve the best of the residential campus experience for which Virginia Tech is known. Hokies can do this! You can do this!

With gratitude,

Tim Sands  
President

## INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Planning for this fall on Virginia Tech's Blacksburg campus is proceeding amid the backdrop of a phased return in the nation and in the commonwealth toward the pre-pandemic state of society, albeit with some significant and possibly permanent changes. As we plan, we must focus on mitigating the risks for the public health and the well-being of the most vulnerable in our communities, while ensuring that Virginia Tech retains the agility, flexibility, and resourcefulness that we have all demonstrated through this initial wave of the pandemic. Hence, our plan for fall 2020 should be viewed as a "living" series of documents that everyone in our community will continue to shape in the coming months.

The following sections summarize our plans for the fall as they stand as of early June. Links have been provided to more detailed information.

### ACADEMIC CALENDAR

The fall 2020 academic calendar has not been changed, with the exception that the eight instructional days after Thanksgiving break and final exams will be conducted entirely online. Instruction will begin on Monday, Aug. 24 and the semester will conclude on Dec. 16, as previously scheduled. Holidays and breaks prior to Thanksgiving will be observed, but nonessential travel away from campus is discouraged. Those who travel away from Blacksburg at any time before Thanksgiving break may be subject to quarantine upon return, depending on the location of travel and potential exposure to the coronavirus.

### HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN THE BLACKSBURG AREA

We are working with the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), town leaders, and regional leaders to coordinate a community-wide approach to managing the response to COVID-19. At the time of this writing, the cumulative per capita rate of positive and probable novel coronavirus cases in Virginia stands at about 600/100,000. Cumulative per capita deaths attributed to COVID-19 have reached 18/100,000. Although every life lost is a tragedy, it is important to recognize that the total number of COVID-19 deaths in Virginia through the spring of 2020 amounts to less than 10 percent of expected deaths in Virginia by all causes for this period. There is no doubt that practicing physical distancing and staying home has reduced the COVID-19 death toll.

In Montgomery County where the Blacksburg campus is located, positive and probable cases have reached about 90/100,000, with one death attributed to COVID-19. The exponential growth phase of the pandemic occurred while Virginia Tech was on spring break and the campus was operating with a reduced population. Pivoting to remote operations for the remainder of the spring semester and moving the summer sessions online has allowed university leadership, the Incident Management Team (IMT) working groups, and our shared governance committees to focus on [campus-wide and community planning for the fall semester](#).

### INFLUENZA SEASON

As we do each year, we urge every member of the Virginia Tech and Blacksburg community to receive an influenza vaccine before the onset of flu season. This year, it is particularly important that we minimize the impact of influenza on our local health care system. [More information on flu prevention](#) is available online and through the Schiffert Health Center.

## TESTING, TRACING, AND ISOLATION

Our objective of minimizing risks for the health of our students, faculty, staff, and community members is supported by a robust plan for testing, contact-tracing, and isolation of those infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. Virginia Tech has established a surveillance work group that is tasked with developing solutions to these complicated questions.

Our plan, which will be published by July 3, will be based on guidance from Virginia Department of Health epidemiologists working in concert with Virginia Tech researchers. It is important that every member of our community becomes familiar with this plan and other mitigating strategies. Please note that plans will be refined and updated as we learn more about the novel coronavirus and we gain new tools in limiting its spread.

The testing, tracing, and isolation plan specific to Virginia Tech will have two primary components: 1) a strategy that appropriately considers the need for symptomatic, prevalence, and surveillance testing; and 2) identifying and controlling outbreaks using a tracing and case management approach directed by the New River Health District. Identifying those with the virus and controlling outbreaks will be achieved by a combination of testing, contact-tracing, quarantine, and isolation. Working in collaboration with the VDH and the New River Health District, we are evaluating existing and emerging tools to assist with voluntary symptom-tracking and contact-tracing.

To prevent community spread, those identified with active virus infections will be isolated and monitored. The initial testing will include risk-based testing for the virus and its antibodies. Self-disclosure of symptoms, prior testing results, and exposure will be important elements of this initial phase. Ongoing testing guided by epidemiological models will be used to monitor the prevalence of the virus in our community and will be one of the key indicators for relaxing or tightening public health practices.

For students, we will set aside separate housing for those in quarantine or isolation. We will facilitate the continued engagement of these students in their academic curriculum, research, or teaching assignments during the required time period.

For employees, accommodations should be arranged in consultation with the department head or supervisor.

## PERSONAL HYGIENE

We will follow the governor's guidelines. Face coverings are currently required in all indoor places shared by groups of people who are in close proximity to each other, and also outside when physical distancing is not possible. [Specific details and guidelines will be updated as the semester approaches.](#) Face coverings will be made available to faculty, staff, and students. Research operations are subject to specific requirements and guidelines for PPE and details are available on our [Office for Research and Innovation site](#). The university is installing nearly 2,000 hand-sanitizer stations, which will be located at building entrances, outside general assignment classrooms, and at other locations where people gather. We ask that all members of the university community continue to practice frequent and thorough handwashing and follow public health guidelines.

## LIMITED GATHERING SIZE

Gatherings of 50 people are now permitted in Virginia, in accordance with the governor's order. Today, June 8, Virginia Tech will begin transitioning into its second phase of operations, in alignment with the governor's phased reopening. This limit on gathering sizes may change as we

approach fall and move into winter. For now, our planning accommodates the possibility that the 50-person limit in confined spaces with specified physical distancing guidelines will be in effect through the fall semester.

## **MODES OF INSTRUCTION AND SIZE LIMITATIONS**

We will take a phased approach, placing emphasis on in-person instruction that enhances experiential learning. In-person modes of instruction will be prioritized for courses, labs, studios, and performances that cannot be offered remotely at comparable quality.

Professional students at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine and the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine will return to clinics and in-person instruction in a phased approach over the summer months.

Due to the limited capacity of most instructional spaces that have been modified to accommodate physical distancing, many lectures and discussion sections will be delivered online, preferably synchronously to enable real-time interactions between students and instructors. Depending on the availability of suitably-sized instructional spaces, lectures and discussion sections may also be presented in-person and synchronously transmitted to other spaces, as long as physical distancing and other public health requirements are met in all locations.

Smaller lectures, sections, and laboratories will be offered in person, providing that the spaces allow for proper distancing. Depending on capacity and the availability of instructors, we may need to schedule classes in the evenings.

At the time of this writing, a planning process is underway to design each course in a manner that best accomplishes academic goals while addressing public health considerations and the resource capacity of the university. It is anticipated that many courses will be delivered using a hybrid of in-person and online learning and that some will be fully online. Decisions on modes of instruction on a per-course basis will be published by July 13 so that students and faculty can plan accordingly.

Based on CDC guidelines as of early June, and in consideration of the instructional space available on campus, our goal is for the typical student to experience at least one-third of instruction in an in-person format, with the remainder online in synchronous or asynchronous (recorded) modes. Should guidelines relax over the summer and into the fall, in-person teaching and learning will be expanded.

## **REMOTE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS**

We understand that some members of our community will not be comfortable engaging in the residential campus environment this fall due to underlying medical conditions or a concern over transmission to friends or family members. To the extent possible, academic department leaders and advisors will consult with students to design plans to maximize learning opportunities. Students desiring to enroll only in fully online courses may not have access to the same courses originally included in their plans of study, in the event that these courses are in-person or a blend of in-person and online. Although we are planning to offer some classes fully online, not all courses will have a remote option.

## GRADUATE STUDENTS

Graduate students who hold teaching or research appointments should discuss remote opportunities with their supervisor. Supervisors are asked to be as accommodating as possible. Unresolved issues may be addressed through the Graduate School [Ombudperson's Office](#). Graduate teaching or research assistants with an underlying medical condition and/or a disability that places them at a higher risk should contact [ADA and Accessibility Services](#).

## REMOTE WORK FOR A/P FACULTY AND STAFF

We support the implementation of remote work arrangements when appropriate. Salaried A/P faculty and staff should work with department heads and managers to explore remote work opportunities for the fall. After fall plans for remote work are determined in mid-July, a remote work agreement should be completed prior to Sept. 1.

Resources will be made available through Human Resources to support A/P faculty and staff, and leadership in determining the best fit for remote work and the associated processes and training to support the arrangement.

Should remote work not be an option for a specific role, consideration will be given to determine if alternate work is possible; if not, the use of paid and unpaid leave may be needed for the fall. More details are available through our [Office of Human Resources](#).

## REMOTE WORK FOR INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY

Academic leaders are engaged in ongoing deliberation and gathering input necessary to design delivery of all courses for the semester. Department heads will have responsibility for assigning faculty to instructional duties, taking into consideration the willingness and availability of faculty to deliver in-person instruction and adopting a flexible approach that may necessitate asking faculty to cover for one another.

We understand that there will be special circumstances, and we expect to be able to manage these through ongoing conversations as we finalize the academic plan. Should remote work not be an option for a specific circumstance, consideration will be given to determine if alternate work is possible; if not, the use of paid and unpaid leave or a reduction in FTE may be appropriate for the fall. Graduate student assistant assignments will be incorporated into these plans, with similar provisions and flexibility to address personal health risk circumstances.

## RESEARCH OPERATIONS

Virginia Tech developed a [framework and process for scaling operations](#), with the goal to move from “essential operations” status to a modified operations mode that continues to recognize the importance of safety, transitions back to an in-person student-learning experience, and ramps up research programs. As research carefully transitions to Virginia Tech’s Phase Two, it must do so in accordance with commonwealth and Virginia Tech policy, allowing researchers to resume additional research activities with appropriate PPE and with continued strict adherence to safety/hygiene and physical distancing requirements. The speed of reopening labs will vary, and many operations will not be at full functionality. Allowable research activities continue to require the approval of deans, vice presidents, or institute directors or their designee(s). The [COVID-19 Research and Continuity Guidance](#) microsite contains various resources for researchers, including [Phase Two: Reopening Guidance](#).

## RESIDENCE HALLS AND DINING

Virginia Tech is committed to the health and well-being of the residents of its campuses and local communities. Each student accommodated in an on-campus residence hall will be asked to sign a housing contract that includes a Hokie Wellness Commitment that acknowledges our public health requirements to mitigate the health risks for the university community. Adherence to these commitments is vital to the safe and continued operation of our university and local community. The [Dean of Students Office](#) will assist students as they navigate the personal, academic, career, and social challenges that will occur throughout the coming year. [Please go online to register](#) for upcoming [Q&A sessions](#) focused on on-campus and off-campus housing.

Residence halls are places where students come together, and are considered “congregate settings” by design. While reducing density in residence halls would make them easier to manage from a public health perspective, the resulting increase in density in off-campus housing could counter that advantage. A better approach is to adopt a holistic perspective to finding an appropriate balance that will yield better health outcomes for the entire community.

To strike that balance, we will populate the residence halls with single and double occupancy to the extent possible and consider roommates as we would members of a family who live together. In fall 2019, our campus was home to 10,400 students. This fall, to create the best living situation, we estimate that we can accommodate approximately 9,100 on campus, taking into account the need for space to accommodate students who may need to be quarantined or isolated.

To reduce the risks further, the use of shared restroom facilities will require heightened hygiene practices and frequent sanitization by staff. Those prospective residents who provide a medical doctor’s attestation of susceptibility to serious disease can contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](#) to request an accommodation for single occupancy.

Dining facilities are also congregate settings that must be carefully controlled for occupancy and physical distancing. Grab-and-go, mobile ordering, and pick-up will be available to those with dining plans. Services will follow the guidelines of the Commonwealth of Virginia and VDH. When dining-in is permitted under Virginia guidelines, strict protocols will be in place, such as hand-sanitizer stations at all entrances, spacing in lines, and limited occupancy to allow for physical distancing.

## ATHLETICS AND PERFORMANCES

One of the most challenging aspects of life on campus during a pandemic is the management of large crowds at performances and athletic events. At the time of this writing, such events are not possible at the densities to which we are accustomed. As the summer progresses, we will have increasing clarity on the health precautions that will be necessary for occupying spaces such as Lane Stadium, Cassell Coliseum, Burruss Auditorium, and the facilities in the Moss Arts Center. As information is available, it will be shared through the Virginia Tech Daily Email, online on at [vthoki.es/ready](http://vthoki.es/ready), and other places as appropriate.

With respect to football, the NCAA and the ACC are evaluating return-to-play models. If practices cannot be conducted safely by mid-July, the start of the season could be delayed. Under the direction of the team physician, some of our student-athletes are returning to campus for voluntary training. Protocols to help lower the health risks for spectators are under development and are tentatively planned to be announced on or about July 1.

## WELLNESS RESOURCES

The mental health and well-being of every member of our community is a top priority. We have been increasing and diversifying our Hokie Wellness resources to meet the needs of our community members. If you are in need, someone is available to help you. Please reach out to us for yourself or someone you know who needs support. We are in this together, for each other and the community.

## BEYOND BOUNDARIES PERSPECTIVE

In our [2015 vision for Virginia Tech a generation into the future](#), we aspired to evolve toward a university that enabled teaching, learning, research, and engagement anywhere in the world. In that envisioned future, a student could participate in an internship or a service-learning project away from Blacksburg without losing access to a quality teaching and learning experience; a graduate student or faculty member could pursue research on another continent while engaging seamlessly with a class in Blacksburg; a staff member could perform an essential service for Virginia Tech while living in another state; and a student with a disability could fully engage in a quality Virginia Tech experience regardless of whether a trip to campus was possible on a given day. Adapting to the pandemic, as difficult as it has been, has brought us closer to that exciting, inclusive, and engaging future. The spring semester demonstrated what was possible with remote learning, even as it exposed the limitations of our current technologies and pedagogy. And although our limited human, fiscal, and physical resources will not allow us to achieve the full richness of the Beyond Boundaries vision immediately, we will take another important step this fall.

## FINAL NOTE

This outline of our plan to resume campus operations and academic functions in Blacksburg this fall is based on the best information we have today. As necessary, we will alter plans as the beginning of the semester approaches. Please stay in touch with the latest updates by checking [vt.edu/ready](https://vt.edu/ready). We are confident that the plan outlined above provides the necessary flexibility and agility at both the individual and collective levels to allow a return to a campus environment that preserves the most important aspects of the Virginia Tech residential campus experience while minimizing the health risks for the most vulnerable in our community. Success will depend on each individual accepting responsibility for the community at large in the spirit of *Ut Prosim*.