

Midway University welcomes 700 students back to campus

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Students returned to Midway University's campus for classes Monday. Currently, 700 traditional undergraduate students are taking classes on campus, according to Ellen Gregory of Midway University. She said 320 of those students moved into on-campus housing beginning last Friday.

The students and their families are excited about starting this academic year with in-person instruction, said Midway University President Dr. John Marsden. The students' return to campus comes five months after spring semester classes were moved online to slow the spread of COVID-19.

"At this point," Marsden said during an interview last week, "our enrollment looks quite strong in relation to previous years." That continues a growth trend for the on-campus daytime student population in recent years, he added.

"We believe that it's important to move forward," Marsden said of resuming in-person instruction. "We have had, probably, more students interested in returning, more families interested in their students returning for face-to-face (instruction). And we're excited to do that."

Before coming onto campus, all residential and commuter students were required to have a negative COVID-19 test result within seven days of their arrival, explained Trish Jones, Midway University's director of human resources and healthy at work officer. She pointed out tests are available in Kentucky at no cost because of an executive order signed by Gov. Andy Beshear.

Jones said several other safety measures have been put in place at Midway University. Masks are required to be worn in all open and common spaces, but staff does not have to wear one when alone in their offices, she said.

Employees are required to complete an online health assessment and take their own temperature before coming onto campus each day. They will also get temp checks when they come to work on Mondays. Visitors are required to have a temp check before they are allowed on campus, and they are not allowed in residence halls, Jones said. Students are provided masks and thermometers, and will be required to complete a self-assessment each day, Jones said.

Planning for a return to campus this month began after the spring semester ended, Marsden said. "We never officially closed as an institution even though most employees were working remotely March, April and May,"

he explained. He said summer enrollment, with all online classes, was actually higher than it has been for several years.

Midway University resumed on-campus operations for its employees on May 26, according to Jones. She said the university has been following the healthy at work guidelines provided by the governor's office and direction from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for institutions of higher education. "We have given maximum social distance occupancy for each classroom," Jones said. "We have created additional spaces across our campus to accommodate our larger classes. And we're using our auditorium for some of our even larger classes so that we can social distance and spread out appropriately to maintain the safety and health of our students."

Recent building projects, including the addition of a third residence hall and the completion of Hunter Field House, and being able to repurpose spaces have allowed Midway University to spread out, Marsden said. "We never knew when we were planning for this that we would need that (additional space) during a pandemic," he said, "but that has certainly helped us ..." Midway University also has an average class size of 14 students, according to Gregory, which is smaller than public elementary schools.

Occupancy has been reduced in residence halls to minimize the number of students in each dorm room, Jones explained. So there will be fewer students living on campus, Marsden said. He also said Midway University will not conduct any large-scale events right now.

Limitations on group activities have prompted "us to be very creative with what we can do virtually and also how we can create different activities that keep students engaged while socially distancing at the same time," Marsden said.

Midway University participates in 25 sports, and its teams are currently slated to play games this fall in the River States Conference, Marsden said. He also acknowledged that could change at any time, depending on what happens with COVID-19.

"All of our coaches are going to be trained and they will be taking temperatures (of student-athletes) before ... any kind of practice or physical activity ...," Jones said. She said the university has taken an educational perspective in terms of reminding students about the importance of wearing masks and completing their health assessments on a daily basis.

Midway University has also installed an electronic gate at its main and farm entrances to monitor the vehicles on campus. "We are not encouraging visitors on campus right now. We have to know who is on campus because that may be needed for contact tracing in the future," Marsden said. Students, faculty and staff will be able to pass through the electronic gate, but visitors will be required to call security for admission, he added. If a Midway University student, or faculty or staff member tests positive for COVID-19, the Woodford County Health Department would be notified, Jones said. She said there are isolation (quarantine) spaces on campus for students who may have been exposed to the virus or are symptomatic.

Jones said she's "excited to announce that we've entered into an agreement this year with a medical partner, Capital Family Medical out of Frankfort. They will be an on-campus presence in our medical clinic staffed by nurse practitioners."

Because of the faculty's experience and familiarity with teaching online classes, Midway University was able to transition to online course delivery last spring and will be ready if that becomes necessary this fall, Marsden said. Gregory said Midway University's faculty and staff have been looking forward to seeing students back on campus after a spring when so many year-end traditions were missed.