

Back-to-College
Health Director Update - 8/7/2020

Good afternoon Durham. I'm Rod Jenkins, director of the Durham County Department of Public Health. It's back-to-school month now, and many students are moving back to colleges and universities. So this week, there has been a lot of conversation about transition, and I want to address some of that today.

First, I want you all to know that we at the health department have been working with our higher education institutions since this pandemic arrived in Durham in March, and we continue to do so now. We are in ongoing communication with leadership at Duke University, North Carolina Central University, and Durham Technical Community College as we all continue to monitor COVID-19 in Durham and consider how our educational institutions will function during this pandemic.

We have also heard from you all in the community. This week, North Carolina health departments received a letter expressing the concerns many of you feel about returning to campus. And for months, we and your university leadership have been listening to these concerns and more. We have heard from high-risk students wishing for virtual learning in order to avoid coming into contact with others on campus, and we have also heard from students wishing to return to campus in order to leave unsafe home environments, or to have better digital connectivity for their academics. Similarly, we have heard the concerns of staff who wish to return to on-campus employment opportunities, as well as from those who feel it is unsafe to return to this work. So unfortunately, Durham, as you can see, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

At the health department, we continue to work alongside city, county, and state leadership to track and share COVID data and to help communicate state and federal COVID guidance to our higher education institutions. Our top priority is your safety, and our guidance to higher education institutions will always prioritize this safety while considering the importance of educational opportunities.

It is clear to us all that our fall semester cannot and will not run the way it has ever before. Whether classes are held in person or virtually, our students, faculty, and staff will have to adjust to a brand new learning environment, and it will take everyone working together to make this transition as smooth as possible. If classes and student housing are on campus, this means working together to maintain social distancing, wear face coverings, and hold each other accountable to do the same. If classes are held virtually, this may mean checking in with one another to offer support however we safely can. No matter what, it is critical that whether you are a student, parent, staff, or faculty, you continue to stay tuned to the guidance and updates offered by your college and university.

This is an unprecedented situation, and no matter what this semester looks like, pieces of this adjustment will be more difficult for some than others, so remember to be kind to yourselves and your peers. And reach out to ask for help when needed, or to offer help with you can. We can do this Durham.