

Central Mass. colleges plan strict measures for returning out-of-state students

By [Scott O'Connell](#)

Posted Jul 25, 2020 at 1:47 PM | Updated Jul 26, 2020 at 12:59 PM

Normally a hopeful time of year, the return of students to college campuses next month will carry a new level of anxiety, as the region braces for arrivals from the country's COVID-19 hotbeds.

Even before Gov. Charlie Baker's new mandate that out-of-state visitors will have to quarantine for two weeks upon entering Massachusetts, colleges in Central Massachusetts had devised strict measures to ensure their reopened campuses would not reverse the state's long battle toward getting the virus in check.

But even those efforts depend in part on the cooperation of students, hundreds of whom could be coming from states where the coronavirus is running rampant.

"We're very concerned about it," said Dr. Michael Hirsh, Worcester's medical director, who added the city would be holding a summit with all of its colleges sometime in the next two weeks to get a better handle on how the campuses will tackle the problem. "There are a lot of moving parts here."

Most colleges and universities in the region are planning to resume in-person classes and reopen on-campus living to some degree, the exceptions being the two community colleges, Quinsigamond and Mount Wachusett, which will primarily deliver remote instruction.

The campuses that are reopening are relying heavily on a stringent COVID-19 testing regimen, especially during the first few weeks of the new academic year, to filter out any ill students or staff as quickly as possible.

Clark University is even paying to test students in their home states, said Jack Foley, vice president of government and community affairs, who added the school is working with Quest Diagnostics on that initiative. If they test positive,

their local departments of health will almost certainly order them to quarantine in place, he added.

The university as of last week was expecting 1,711 students from outside Massachusetts, including 16 from Texas, 22 from Florida and 51 from California, all states where the virus is spreading quickly.

“The way we’re trying to contain the spread is to have frequent testing with timely results,” he said, adding for the first three weeks, all students will be tested twice a week.

Clark is also asking all students, not just ones from out of state, to self-quarantine for two weeks on campus, during which time their movement on campus will be considerably restricted, according to Foley.

Assumption University is taking similar steps, requiring out-of-state students to quarantine for two weeks. They will still be allowed to get fresh air outside, as long as they’re staying 20 feet away from people, but will otherwise have to stay in their rooms, where their meals will be delivered, according to Deborah Cady Melzer, Assumption’s vice president of student affairs and dean of students.

Those students will also have to take a nasal PCR test upon arrival to campus, and will be tested again every third day after that. They’ll also be arriving much earlier to campus – as soon as Aug. 1.

“We’ve told them they need to be starting their quarantine by Aug. 3,” Cady Melzer said.

Compared to Clark, however, Assumption is expecting relatively few out-of-state students this fall. Originally the university was planning for 92, but around 30 of those had already notified the school as of last week they will stay in their home states, according to Cady Melzer.

The region’s two state universities, which typically cater to local students, also do not expect a large number of out-of-state arrivals next month, although both Fitchburg State and Worcester State are also planning testing/quarantine regimens for those students who do come to campus.

“They will be able to check in in advance of school starting in order to self-quarantine for the designated time period” of 14 days, said Worcester State’s assistant vice president for communications and marketing, Maureen Stokes, who added the university is setting aside campus housing specifically for those students.

As of Friday, however, the university only had five students outside of New England, New York and New Jersey. “We do not know yet what our out-of-state enrollment for fall 2020 will be,” Stokes said.

Fitchburg State as of last week was expecting 70 out-of-state students and following similar quarantine guidelines, according to Laura Bayless, vice president for student affairs. On Wednesday, she said students from within the region, including New York, New Jersey, and New England states where the coronavirus activity is relatively low, would not be subject to the same strict isolation requirements as students from elsewhere in the country.

On Friday, Gov. Charlie Baker issued new guidelines calling for residents of all states outside of the Northeast and Hawaii, as well as Massachusetts residents who had been traveling outside the state, to quarantine for 14 days as of Aug. 1, unless they provide proof of a negative test result. That mandate includes students returning to college campuses.

One of the big questions facing local schools, however, is how they can ensure students are following those directives. Clark, for instance, is making students sign an agreement holding them to the university’s coronavirus rules, but Foley acknowledged the school’s plans hinge in part on good faith.

“We have an open campus – it’s not a closed campus where we can control” where students are going, he said, adding “18- to 22-year-olds may make some challenging decisions.”

Foley and other college officials said education and constant messaging will be a critical piece of their reopening plans this summer and fall.

“Every employee and student will be trained in the behaviors we recommended to reduce the risk of exposure, and are very clear of the expectation that each person adopt those behaviors,” Bayless said of Fitchburg State’s strategy.

None of the campuses reached by the Telegram & Gazette last week, meanwhile, are considering any delayed arrival or outright ban of out-of-state students, nor had the city made any formal recommendation to do that, according to Hirsh.

“I don’t think I saw any proposal to single those students out in particular,” he said.

If there’s one reason for optimism that reopening of campuses could go well, however, it’s that the last time local colleges and universities saw a huge influx of returning out-of-state travelers – during spring break in late February and early March, right before the pandemic officially shut things down in Massachusetts – it did not dramatically affect virus transmission in the state.

“We didn’t see any visible effects from that,” Hirsh said.