

# Covid-19 Planning for 2020-21 at Oberlin College

June 10, 2020

Dear Oberlin Community:

Our discussions about the reopening of our campus have continued to occur in the midst of the events of the last several weeks. In my recent [email](#) about the killing of George Floyd, I wrote of great personal sadness and pain for a community that I love, but I also wrote of hope. That hope springs each year at the return of our students to campus.

It is in this spirit, and the hope that the fall represents for me, that I write to you today.

I am proud of our approach to the 2020-21 academic year, as we respond to COVID-19. It is based upon a fundamental goal: **to provide an in-person experience, as safely as possible, and for as many students as we can.** Of course our plans are contingent upon the Governor of Ohio's directives, the spread of COVID-19 in Ohio, and the guidance of health professionals. It is true that these elements could change our plans in the ways that we experienced in March, but we are hopeful that we can preserve the on-campus experience with the strategies that we have developed.

To meet our goal, we have devised innovative approaches to the academic schedule and the student experience as well as a layered approach to campus health that includes aggressive testing and significant adjustments to how we all conduct ourselves as a community.

We are adapting to the new realities and the unknowns that we will confront. Our faculty, academic leaders, administrators, and staff have been working tremendous hours for weeks, collaborating to prepare a dynamic and flexible educational experience that allows those in high-risk groups such as people over 65 and those with pre-existing conditions to participate without feeling they are putting themselves at risk. We are reinventing our residential and classroom facilities and food services, with public health and safety at the forefront of our thinking.

We do not have all the answers yet. You will invariably have numerous questions (probably more than we have answers to), but I believe that it is important to share our thinking to date.

Even as I do so, I am going to ask for your patience and some grace. I have described the experience of planning for a return to campus in the era of COVID-19, as one in which "we are building the college from the ground up in 2 1/2 months." So yes, there are many unanswered questions. There will be some aspects of the changes we are instituting that require community sacrifices. I believe, however, that we will all be willing to do so with the goal of supporting individuals' health while having a special residential liberal arts college and conservatory experience. While many decisions have yet to be made, the overall structure is coming into place.

## **In this time of uncertainty, what is certain is Oberlin.**

Our academic year will maximize students' educational opportunities while maintaining social distancing and other best practices that will help us remain healthy. With these fundamental goals in mind, **Oberlin College and Conservatory will invite students to return to campus on time in the fall**, with the following adjustments, including changes to our semester schedule, enhancements to our campus health strategies and other measures.

**Academic Year 2020-21: Oberlin will shift to a three-semester, year-round schedule consisting of fall, spring, and summer sessions that will allow us to reduce the number of students in residence at one time and therefore “de-densify” the campus.** This change is first about our layered public health strategy because it will not only reduce the number of students in residence halls, in dining facilities, and in classrooms, in our libraries and in common areas, but it will also allow each student to have a single room.

## **Enhanced Layers of Public Safety and High Quality Residential Educational Experience**

- Students will live in single dorm rooms
- De-densified campus
- High quality on-campus education
- Special Summer Term focused on 2nd- and 3rd-year A&S Students
- Early end to spring term (mid-April) for Con, DD, and A&S 1st- and 4th-years
- Flexible Winter Term for A&S Students: August (1st- and 4th-years), September (3rd-years), January (2nd-years)
- No fall or spring breaks to reduce travel to and from campus
- Students will not return to campus between Thanksgiving break and January
- Athletes will be assigned according to their sport designation

By adding a third semester, we will have the opportunity to expand our career excellence and internship programs, even more firmly linking our excellent liberal arts education with career skills development, for those students not on campus in one of the three terms. Students will attend two of the three semesters. For those who attend class here in the summer semester, you will see the campus and town from a new perspective. Oberlin in the summer is fantastic.

**Organization of the Three-Semester Plan.** Students will be organized by class year as defined by the number of completed semesters at Oberlin, which includes study away. Arts & Sciences first-year students and seniors will attend the fall and spring terms. All Conservatory and Double Degree students will attend in the fall and spring. (Double Degree students, advisors in both the Conservatory and the College of Arts & Sciences will work with you to fulfill your degree requirements.) Arts & Sciences sophomores will attend the fall and summer terms, and juniors will attend the spring and summer terms.

For our student athletes, you will have the opportunity to attend semesters as your sport dictates. The reason that we need to maintain this class cohort framework is that the faculty is literally building the course offerings for each semester essentially student by student, to ensure that all of our students can meet their academic requirements. That's why this is so complicated and requiring hours and hours of work.

**Educational, career and mentoring opportunities for students who are not on campus.** Students who are not on campus for a particular term will have career- and skill-building opportunities to develop new competencies and hone existing skills through internships, alumni mentoring, research, off-cycle group Winter Term projects and other experiences. Third-year students will be able to enroll and engage remotely in the Junior Practicum program and participate in a Career Readiness Summit in September for Winter Term credit. When registering for the program, students will select a complicated problem (like police brutality, immigration issues, income disparity, or public health) and career community they would like to explore. Throughout the Winter Term experience in September, students will be clustered around a common complicated problem and grapple with real-world issues using a career readiness lens. Students who complete the project will be connected with an alumnus to pursue a 4-6-week micro-internship. The Sophomore Opportunities and Academic Resources program (SOAR) will take place as a remote January Winter Term followed by an experiential component throughout the remainder of the spring semester. These two elements will combine to provide sophomores with academic and co-curricular support, as well as access to career development pathways, during their semester off campus.

**What will the fall semester and the rest of the academic year be like?** We will hold our first of three Winter Terms remotely in August this year for first years and seniors, which I know sounds a bit odd, but the experience will remain as exciting as ever. Students who are away during the fall and spring terms will also have their Winter Term off campus.

Fall in-person classes will begin on August 31, with move in and orientation scheduled for mid-August, with orientation mostly done remotely. There will be no off-campus fall break and on-campus classes will end just before Thanksgiving. The balance of the semester will be completed with remote, off-campus instruction, and the reading period and final exams will be conducted remotely. Spring term will resume on campus in early January and end mid-April. There will be no off-campus Spring Recess in 2021 to avoid having students traveling back and forth to campus. Our first summer term will begin in May, shortly after Commencement and extend through mid-August.

**How will our classrooms be different?** We learned a tremendous amount from our remote learning experience last semester, but we also know students missed being on campus, in class and practicing their instruments with others. We will hold classes this year in a manner consistent with social distancing, meaning students will sit 6 feet

away from one another. This will mean that their on-campus experience will likely include on-campus classes, some hybrid classes, and some remote classes. For example, one could imagine a large class that might conduct lecture portions of the course remotely via Zoom allowing students to participate from their single dorm room but be in person for the studio or laboratory portions of the course. We also will extend the class day as well as conduct some classes on Saturdays.

**Student housing.** By spreading out our student body across three semesters, we will be able to provide every student their own private bedroom in the student residences. We are planning this approach to reduce the potential spread of COVID-19 and provide a private place for students to study or practice their instruments. We will restrict common areas in residence halls such as kitchens and provide extra cleaning supplies for restrooms.

With respect to issues of liability, and the layers of health and safety requirements, the Oberlin Student Cooperative Association or OSCA is temporarily suspending its housing and dining operations. This was a difficult decision for OSCA's leaders, and we appreciate and value their good judgment. The College will operate the residence halls OSCA typically occupies, with each student getting single bedrooms. We will continue during this time, while OSCA is pausing, to work with OSCA leadership to develop a long-term plan for OSCA to thrive. Please visit [this page](#) to read our joint statement on this topic.

**Student dining.** Just as we are changing our housing, we will alter dining services to accommodate extended grab-and-go dining or socially distant seating. The dining program may need to use multiple kitchens and dining rooms to achieve best practices for commercial dining operations. The key is to limit extended interactions between large groups of people and to ensure social distancing.

**Student life.** Although we must modify our behavior, we will offer the types of programs that are typical on a college campus. We will still have student organizations, and small events, speakers, and opportunities to build community. But, we should also talk about some of the things that will likely not be a part of our typical experience. Adhering to the goal of creating as safe a campus as possible, we will likely not have large scale events and performances or concerts with large audiences. In terms of athletics, we are still working with our conference to determine the nature and scope of the athletic experience on each of our campuses. Our goal is to find a way to have athletics, but as I said, this is yet another area where no conclusions have been reached as it is a collective conference matter. I am hopeful that we will know by mid-July.

**Layered health strategy.** We are all aware by now that COVID-19 is a consistent threat. Our goal on campus is to provide a health care strategy that slows and limits the spread of the virus. After extensive consultation with public health and infectious disease professionals, we have devised a layered approach to health care that follows the guidelines of the Center for Disease Control and uses many of the principles identified by the American College Health Association. As thorough an approach as we are taking, the success of this strategy depends upon student, faculty and staff involvement as well as the latest in testing and public health techniques.

**Campus culture and our behavior on campus.** We are committed to the safety of our campus and will expect all faculty, staff and students to adhere to a social compact as we collectively recognize that safety is a shared responsibility. Elements of the compact will include testing, wearing masks, social distancing, handwashing, and daily

symptom monitoring via an app. We will ask you to bring your own thermometer to campus, and to use it before beginning each day. We have acquired cloth masks for all students, faculty, and staff and we will distribute these when you arrive on campus and remind you when you should wear them. We will explain how to use the daily online screening tool app to help detect symptoms of COVID-19. We also will ask you to be particularly careful during the two weeks prior to coming to Oberlin, and to take great care when traveling here.

We know this a new way of being on our campus, but the health of our community is another way that we can demonstrate care. In several weeks, you will receive information in your email to help provide guidance on these best practices.

**Testing.** Oberlin is finalizing a contract with Tempus, a private testing firm that guarantees capacity for initial and regularized diagnostic (PCR) COVID-19 testing for students, faculty, and staff who will be on campus. PCR testing provides an indication of the presence of the coronavirus by looking directly for its genetic material. Such tests can determine if someone is carrying the virus, whether or not symptoms are present. We are working with public health experts to determine the parameters and frequency of testing, but our goal is to do surveillance testing for up to 25% of our population each and every week to get a snapshot of our campus.

Tempus works with 80 of the 100 largest hospitals in the United States, including many teaching hospitals affiliated with colleges and universities. The company also is working with academic medical centers and regulatory agencies on a variety of COVID-19 research initiatives to help understand the clinical and molecular drivers of the virus.

We are fortunate to have a local hospital almost literally on our campus, Mercy Health-Allen Hospital. We are currently in negotiations with Mercy-Allen to administer a test to our students, faculty and staff, during the move-in period and to support our weekly testing strategy. This means we will test 3,500 or more people in August and then similar numbers each month.

This won't be easy, as it will require significant logistics and coordination, as well as a substantial financial investment. The College will be fully funding our faculty and staff, and we will be asking for some family support in the form of a testing fee for students. We did not come to this decision lightly, but public health experts say this is the best way to help ensure viral spread does not catch us by surprise.

**Symptoms Monitoring.** We will have an app this fall that will require daily updating by our community members. This app will ensure that we are encouraged to check our temperatures daily and to check for symptoms of COVID-19 and to act on this self-evaluation by staying home or seeking treatment.

**Enhanced cleaning for the prevention of the spread of disease.** In alignment with public health recommendations, we will undertake an enhanced approach by increasing the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of areas such as residential halls, public restrooms, exercise rooms, common area tables, handrails doorknobs, and other high-touch surfaces.

**Immune compromised individuals.** For members of our community who are immune compromised, our goal is to support and accommodate the needs of our community. We are working with faculty and staff who have compromised immune systems to determine the appropriate accommodations.

I appreciate that for students you might want to limit your exposure to this virus for your safety or the safety of family members. Therefore, it may not be the right moment for your return to our on-campus community. However, there may be ways for you to continue your academic experience remotely. We ask you to reach out to disability services as soon as possible at 440-775-5588 to begin these conversations.

**Arrival to campus.** Once you arrive on campus, part of your orientation will be the explanation of different campus traffic patterns, the etiquette of in-person classes, and how to limit travel off campus. You will see reconfigured foot traffic, including new signage, plexiglass barriers and other protections which are now being installed in many of our buildings. We have acquired cloth masks for all students, faculty, and staff and we will distribute these when you arrive on campus.

**Contact tracing.** One of the important aspects of our strategy involves coordination with our local health department. If anyone tests positive for the virus, Lorain County Public Health will activate its contact tracing team to determine who came into contact with the patient and could therefore be infected. Those individuals will be tested and everyone testing positive will be quarantined.

**Quarantine.** None of our efforts would matter without an effective quarantine strategy. We are earmarking rooms for our student body for quarantine. These are rooms with their own private bathroom that can be easily used for individuals who become ill. We do not plan to open our hotel this year so that this 65-room facility can be set aside for this purpose.

**Conclusion.** We believe we have devised an innovative and responsible approach for students, faculty and staff that allows us to remain true to the Oberlin campus experience and keeps our community safe. We will monitor the latest research and best public health practices and adjust our plans when needed.

I want to thank our faculty and staff for all of the hard work that they have done and will continue to do as we prepare for our new three-term semesters. Our ongoing investments in safety and our commitment to the academic experience gives me confidence that we will be able to host students this fall.

I know that during times of uncertainty and challenges we all need ways to be renewed. For me it's my faith, my family, my friends and my colleagues here at Oberlin who are consistent sources of enthusiasm, innovation, wise council, and good humor. These colleagues are hardworking and carry a deep commitment to the mission we hold dear.

And of course, I am also always hopeful and I look forward to seeing many of you in the fall. We will continue to update you as we have more information.

Be well.

Carmen Twillie Ambar  
President