



MINNESOTA STATE
HealthForce Center of Excellence

TABLETOP PLANNING EXERCISE
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

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Tabletop Planning Exercise for Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

This tabletop exercise is for college and university teams to use as a tool to plan for a fall re-opening of campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The exercise unfolds in five stages, moving from a re-opening plan through case identification and eventual campus closure.

Purpose

The purpose of this tabletop exercise is to provide a low stress environment for higher education members to work through pandemic plans and associated actions. The focus is on prioritizing planning needs for potential upcoming situations. This involves identifying policies, communication plans, key leadership positions, and support services. This includes identifying workflows and decision-makers for in the moment flexibility. The team should not focus on the minutia of the exercise. Rather, focus on how to critically think through situations as they arise.

Overall Goals

- Assess current pandemic plans in the context of an unfolding outbreak of COVID-19.
- Identify key roles and responsibilities, helpful policies, and opportunities for improved planning.
- Assess college/university operational capabilities during the pandemic event.
- Identify actions and opportunities to respond to on-campus identification of positive COVID-19 cases.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Group Facilitator: Present the exercise. Pose questions and clarification questions to the group. Maintain exercise pace and focus on critical thinking. Conduct a debrief to identify future plans.
- Participants: Prepare by reviewing current roles, responsibilities, and procedures in place. Respond to exercise situations using their knowledge, background, and skills. Critically think through new situations. Identify opportunities for improvement of pandemic plans.



Background

In December 2019, a pneumonia of unknown origin was identified in China. Through January 2020, multiple cases were identified in China, Japan, Thailand, South Korea, and the United States and several deaths occurred in China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In February 2020 the first deaths began occurring outside of China and growing numbers of cases were found in South Korea, Iran, Italy, the United States, Latin America, and onboard cruise ships. In March 2020 cases rose dramatically, personal protective equipment (PPE) was in short supply globally, and the WHO classified the outbreak as a pandemic. Elementary, secondary, and institutes of higher education around the world closed their doors and turned to distance learning as much of the global population moved into quarantine to slow the transmission of COVID-19. Through the spring and summer of 2020, the global PPE supply began recovering, testing for COVID-19 became more accessible, and communities began reopening. By late summer of 2020, COVID-19 is rising across the majority of the United States with predictions that a surge will occur in fall 2020. Testing is available for symptomatic people, but lack of testing supplies means that testing is not currently available for asymptomatic people. Nationwide sentiment is mixed regarding having students return to schools and institutions of higher education. The current plan is for college/university campuses to open in fall 2020, while keeping much of the learning in a distance format, and remaining flexible in the event of a pandemic surge.



Modules

Module 1: Fall Semester starting with minimal to moderate community spread of COVID-19 and no known cases on campus.

- Objectives
 - Identify processes in place
 - Identify processes needing development
 - Develop a plan for process development
 - Develop a decision-making plan for implementation of action plans based on changing situations
- Questions:
 - What screening processes are in place?
 - What happens if someone does not pass screening?
 - What is the process when a positive case is identified?
 - Who are the decision-makers who have authority to act on procedures to restrict on-campus activities? What are those procedures?
 - What will you do if a student, staff, faculty, or visitor refuses to wear a face covering in an area where the EO mandates the face covering?
 - What are the cleaning and disinfection procedures in place?
 - Do you have 1-2 contact tracers identified for your campus? Do you have another 2-3 potential contract tracers available in the event of a surge or an absence of a tracer?
 - How will you know if a person is claiming a legitimate medical reason for not wearing a face mask? How will you approach this issue?
 - A group of students gather, without social distancing and without masks, for a party off college premises and after class hours. Media outlets are reporting on the party and community members are expressing concern. What do you do about this situation?
 - An at-risk student is very concerned about coming to in-person class components. How will you mitigate risk for this student and reassure them?
 - Have you identified a space to set up an external agency coming to campus with a mobile testing clinic in the event of a cluster of positive cases on campus?
 - What are your plans for activating an emergency operations center in the event a positive case is suspected or identified?



Module 2: A student tests positive on campus. The student leads the student union/club and has been hosting in-person meetings of up to 10 individuals at each meeting. The last meeting was 3 days ago. The student is also an athlete on the intra-mural soccer team and last played a game 2 days ago.

- Objectives
 - Create workflows for measures to be taken when a positive COVID-19 case is identified
 - Identify contact tracing processes
 - Plan for positive case reporting
 - Identify policies and workflows to use in varied situations
- Questions:
 - Where do you refer students, staff, and faculty for healthcare needs?
 - Where do you refer students, staff, and faculty for testing?
 - Will you shut down the campus, classroom, wing, residence hall, or other physical spaces?
 - What plans are in place for parents/significant caregivers to care for the student, or take them home, during isolation?
 - Will the student isolate in place in campus housing? How do you support this student?
 - If the student is in off-campus housing, how do you continue to support them?
 - What student information is private in this case?
 - How do you identify which students are contacts (within 6 feet for 15 minutes or longer) to assist MDH in contact tracing?
 - Several students are considered to be contacts (within 6 feet for 15 minutes or longer). How will you support these students during their 14-day quarantine?
 - Four times over the past day, a student has been within 6 feet of the student who tested positive for approximately 5 minutes each encounter. Is this student considered to be a contact due to repeated proximity to the student who had the positive test? How do you handle this situation?
 - An identified contact continues to attend classes instead of self-isolating. What steps do you take?
 - What sort of cleaning and disinfection procedures are in place for this situation?
 - A student has a need for an emotional support animal or service animal, but the student is in isolation with a positive test. How do you handle this situation when the service animal needs outdoor time?



Module 3: A faculty on campus tests positive. The faculty has been holding in-person classes for the past month. There are no other currently employed faculty who teach the same courses as this faculty teaches.

- Objectives
 - Create plans for faculty and class support when a faculty tests positive
 - Plan for substitute faculty
 - Identify communication plans with students
- Questions:
 - How will you support the faculty during this time?
 - How will you notify the students and provide support to them, while also protecting the health privacy of the faculty?
 - How will you do contact tracing to identify students, faculty, and staff who may have been exposed to assist MDH in contact tracing?
 - What faculty information is considered private information in this case?
 - How will you keep the faculty member's personal information private while also doing contact tracing?
 - Do you have a list of back-up faculty who can continue teaching the course?
 - Where and how is the ill faculty storing their course materials, and are they willing to share these?
 - Do you have a plan to quickly onboard a substitute faculty member who may not currently be an employee?
 - What is your plan for reintegration of the faculty member after recovery?
 - How will you reassure students that the faculty no longer has an active case of COVID-19, while also protecting the faculty's health privacy?



Module 4: Community spread heightens, hospitals are nearing capacity, increased social restrictions, and there is a cluster of twelve positive cases on your campus. Four cases are in one class. The other cases are more spread out, involving two members of the intra-mural soccer team, one member of the student union/club, and five more cases with no known contacts nor similarities.

- Objectives:
 - Identify plans for surge response
 - Identify MDH liaisons
 - Identify key positions and back-ups for those positions
 - Plan for strategic off-campus work to reduce disease transmission
- Questions:
 - Do you have plans for increasing health safety measures on your campus?
 - Will you decrease or eliminate classes on campus?
 - Will you decrease or eliminate students or visitors attending on-campus services?
 - What are the plans for on-campus testing for COVID-19?
 - Who is/are the designee(s) to work with the Minnesota Department of Health regarding the cluster of positive cases (suggest 1-2 designees)? Who are the back-ups (suggest 2-3 back-ups)?
 - Do you have a communication plan to students, faculty & staff, and the community?
 - Do you have 1-2 back-up people identified for every key college/university position in the event of widespread illness? How will you keep those people healthy?
 - Do you have a plan for alternating who works on campus to minimize who may become ill? (Suggest stretches of 14 days off campus to allow for self-quarantine and higher probability of remaining healthy to ensure ongoing campus operations.)
 - How will you support students who live on campus and have no other housing option?
 - Local healthcare agencies are calling and asking if any faculty, staff or students are able to work or volunteer their time at the healthcare agency due to an overwhelming surge of COVID-19 positive cases at the agency. How do you answer these requests?



Module 5: Community spread is high. Positivity rates are high. Resources are beyond their safe limits. The Governor issues a mandatory stay at home order.

- Objectives:
 - Identify action plans for closing campus.
 - Identify required policies to have in place in the event of a campus closure.
 - Identify faculty and student support mechanisms during a campus closure.
 - Discover gaps in procedures and policy for campus closure.
- Questions:
 - What are your campus closure plans?
 - Will you close your on-campus residences? How do you go about this in a safe way? What happens to students who have no other place to go? How will you serve those students?
 - Will you close your campus in stages? If so, what services will remain open and how will you staff those services?
 - What is your communication plan to students, staff, faculty, and the community?
 - Do all faculty have a plan for how to quickly move courses online?
 - What supports are available to faculty if they need to move courses online?
 - What supports are available to enhance student learning if courses must move online?
 - How will you address services for those who have limited to no digital access?
 - What are your policies for students who believe they should have a refund?
 - What are your policies for cases where students cannot graduate without an in-person component?
 - Do you continue to allow students to attend off-campus placements? What policies are in place for this?

Exercise Debriefing

- Identify planning gaps.
- Identify action plans to mitigate gaps.
- Identify timelines for actions.
- Set up a follow-up meeting to evaluate work on closing gaps.

References

- Tuscany Strategy Consulting, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health – Center for Health Security, Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group. (2020). *Self-Assessment Calculator for Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <https://www.opensmartedu.org/covid-19-self-assessment-calculator-for-higher-education/>
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