

July 15, 2020

Dear Faculty, Staff, and Students:

Today, on the Slippery Rock University website, [you'll find our University's comprehensive fall reopening plan](#). The planning for this document came with extensive input from faculty, staff, and students. I am grateful for their great work.

It is important to note that this is a living document, and, as such, it will be updated regularly as information and situations change. If, after reading it carefully, you have questions that remain unanswered, please email them to fall_2020_plan_comments@sru.edu. We will use those questions as a guide for future additions to the document. We have also scheduled open forums via Zoom at 11 a.m., July 23 and 1 p.m., July 29 to address any lingering questions community members may have. Additional details for those wanting to participate will be forthcoming.

One important takeaway from our reopening plan is that the University will not look the same this fall as it did in 2019. This point may seem like stating the obvious, but it is worth emphasizing.

All of us at The Rock have been working to preserve the essence of our extraordinary community during this difficult time. This work has led us to create multiple ways for students to engage, through various modalities. Still, we must face an uncomfortable reality that on-campus life as we knew it will look different – we will have a limited number of residential students, intercollegiate athletics will be suspended, and more and more student activities will occur in a virtual environment. More importantly, our classes will take on a new look.

On June 5, I wrote to you about our preliminary face-to-face plans. At the time of that writing, I expected that up to 75% of our classes would have face-to-face components for the fall semester. Since then, we have faithfully adapted our classrooms to fully comply with CDC guidelines. This move has reduced capacity in most rooms by up to 80%. We have also been carefully monitoring the current pattern of the pandemic in our region and are growing increasingly concerned by rising infection rates. As a result, the plan that we have shared today is for a very low-density in-person model. In this model, the only courses that will contain in-person elements are those where faculty believe that there are compelling reasons to attempt to preserve some live, in-person, interaction.

While we are still adjusting our classes within this model, currently, fewer than half of our courses will be offered with in-person components. The number of fully online courses will continue to grow as we balance limitations of our physical space and the regional pandemic context with our pedagogical goals. If the current disease trajectory in our region continues, our campus experience will closely resemble those of State

System institutions in the eastern part of the commonwealth that have already announced that they are moving to a predominantly online delivery model. I realize that this situation is yet another unwelcomed disruption during a terrible time, but, as we have continued to emphasize, our community's health and safety must remain our focus.

When we moved to distance education in the spring, our emphasis was on creating simple, accessible courses so that students who lacked substantial computer technology at home could complete their semesters. Our dedicated email address, connectivity@sruc.edu, remains active for those students who still face course accessibility issues.

For the fall, we are focusing on bridging this digital divide. As a result, faculty are preparing more sophisticated distance and multimodal courses. Multimodal courses are hybrid in nature and offer both synchronous (live, in-person) and asynchronous (on-demand) components. With multimodal courses, students may opt to attend fully online through distance modalities.

To prepare for distance and multimodal education, and by the start of the semester, the University will have outfitted 188 classrooms with distance-learning technologies. Twenty of these classrooms will be equipped with enhanced audio and video capabilities. These upgrades will allow in-person course components to be accessible to students who must learn from a distance. It will also allow faculty to produce high-quality video for use in fully distance classes.

We have invested substantially in faculty training to make distance learning more engaging for students. During the summer for example, faculty enrolled in the Center for Teaching and Learning's distance learning certification program. Another group of faculty soon will begin a national "Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Online Learning Environment" minicourse offered by the Association of College and University Educators.

In addition, we are developing a resource page to help students navigate and excel in this new learning environment. This resource page will include SRU-produced videos and other assets on topics such as the different learning environments that students can expect, as well as how to take notes and study across different learning modalities. We are also designing an infrastructure that will provide students with live support if they have questions about how to best navigate the online or multimodal learning environment.

While it may not seem this way today, in a few years, COVID-19 will likely be an uncomfortable memory. SRU has been here for more than 130 years. We have weathered world wars, the 1918 flu pandemic, the Great Depression and a fire in 1937

that ravaged North Hall and displaced most of the residential students. More recently, the tragedies of 9/11 and the Great Recession shook our world.

During each of these crises, our community took seriously whatever challenges emerged and came together in mutual support. We cared for each other. Today, I ask you to do the same:

- Wear your mask. Research suggests that mask wearing substantially reduces the risk of transmission. And remember, your mask protects your neighbors and their masks protect you. Taking this simple precaution is a strong act of kindness and caring for those around you.
- Avoid large groups, both on and off campus, whether you are at the store, in a bar or restaurant, and, yes, at off-campus parties. If we are to be successful in our attempts to return to campus, we must acknowledge that our behaviors off campus will shape our experience on campus. A single large-scale event, like an off-campus party or weekend trip, may cause widespread viral exposure and force us to again to fully shut down our campus.
- Monitor your own health and err on the side of caution. If there is a chance you are sick or have become exposed, stay home and seek appropriate medical attention.
- If your schedule includes many online classes and you were considering living on or near campus in a more densely populated environment, commute from home if your situation allows it.

I know that this semester is not what we are used to or might have hoped for. Still, it is the reality that we must face. And, face it we will. As we push ourselves to get through today's challenges, we must remember that despite our temporary modality shift, we remain the extraordinary community that only The Rock can be. We transform students' lives and this work must continue despite the current pandemic. As a University, we remain committed to doing whatever we must to help our students succeed, whether they are studying across the Quad or across the commonwealth.

I look forward to the day that we can all come together for a more typical fall semester. In the meantime, please know that everyone at SRU remains committed to the success of our students.

Best regards,

William J. Behre, Ph.D.
President