



Chancellor announces intent to return to campus after Thanksgiving Break Many factors play into decision, decision could change if conditions worsen

KRISHNAN COLLINS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Arkansas State's chancellor announced the intent for students to return to campus after Thanksgiving Break and finish out the semester in-person, but that decision is subject to change.

Students, faculty, staff and everyone involved at A-State felt the unexpected blow of the coronavirus in March.

In late February, things seemed normal around campus. Within just a few weeks, students were scrambling to leave their dorms, people were learning the definition of social distancing and masks started to brace the faces of people in Arkansas in spread-limiting measures.

Fast forward to the fall semester at A-State and the masses who have returned to campus look somewhat adjusted to the new COVID-19 reality.

Students walk through the Union with colorful masks adorned over their noses and red tape sections-off socially distant classrooms while socially distant standing dots tell students where to stand in line while waiting for food.

So far, it seems to be working.

A-State Chancellor Dr. Kelly Damphousse announced in an email to students Oct. 12 that A-State intends to finish the semester on campus after Thanksgiving Break, but conditions can warrant otherwise. With the unpredictability of COVID-19, faculty have been preparing to go all online if needed since day one.

"All of our faculty have been encouraged to prepare as if we're going to be teaching online after Thanksgiving," Damphousse said. "We think it's easier to be prepared to teach online



Chief Communications Officer Dr. Bill Smith and Chancellor Dr. Kelly Damphousse discuss returning to campus after Thanksgiving break and what could change the decision of returning to campus.

Photo by: Hannah Risker | Photo Editor

but then end up teaching in person than prepare to teach in person then have to go online."

Student preparations

If a transition to online classes did happen after Thanksgiving Break, this would mean online finals too. "One of our concerns is that it's very challenging to take finals online," Damphousse said. "There's a potential for a negative impact on students, on their grades and their ability to take the class, if they don't have access to internet. That's why we're motivated to stay in person. But, we did it in the spring and faculty were accommodating

with their students and we would expect the same kind of response by our faculty again. This fall they are prepared."

Student Government Association President Rashad Kirksey said all online finals could pose a challenge for freshmen, but the possibility of all online finals does not make Kirksey excited nor stress him out. "It's nothing that we're not used to," Kirksey said. "We've experienced this with the spring semester. I don't think it's

nothing that we're not prepared for. For freshmen it may be a little bit different. I guess you could say I'm neutral about the issue."

"It's nothing that we're not used to."

-Kirksey

The SGA itself has been meeting online already throughout the semester, so a switch to all online classes would not affect SGA too much.

However, SGA members and all students alike would still miss out on other face-to-face aspects of campus life. "The positives (of going all online after Thanksgiving

would be) ensuring the safety of classmates and those at the university," Kirksey said. "Negatives, I mean you just miss out on a lot. There's a lot of things that happen toward the end of the semester. A lot of bonding experiences, being able to study for finals, end of the year gatherings, Christmas celebrations."

Decision-making committees

Two main committees stand in charge of the decision-making process to return to campus or go all online after Thanksgiving Break.

The first of those committees is the Emergency Operations Center. Typically, the EOC only acts in a very short amount of time like when a tornado hits, an explosion happens or there's an active shooter on campus.

However, due to the pandemic, the EOC has been in action since the chancellor activated it toward the end of March. This marks the longest that committee has ever served, Damphousse said. Damphousse, A-State's chief financial officer, human resources, chief safety officers, the provost and A-State's dean of students make up the committee.

The Medical Emergency Response Team, composed of medical advisers and safety officers, represents the other important committee in the decision-making process. The MERT advises the EOC. The decision ultimately rests in the hands of the EOC and Damphousse himself.

Current Cases

The total number of coronavirus cases stands as the main determining factor between going all online or returning to campus after Thanksgiving Break.

In terms of current active

cases at A-State on Tuesday, 11 students living on-campus have COVID-19 while 20 living off-campus have the disease; 11 employees and one vendor have COVID-19 as well. This totals 43 cases. A-State hit its peak between Sept. 11 and Sept. 14, registering 187 total cases.

Before his Oct. 12 announcement, Damphousse said, "If we stay where we are right now or oscillate where we are right now, I anticipate we'll have Thanksgiving Break, we'll come back and do the last couple weeks and finals back in person."

Damphousse looks at the number of students in A-State's isolation suites in the decision-making process.

The university set up 137 isolation suites for students with COVID-19, but Chief Communications Officer Dr. Bill Smith said many students can isolate in place in their current living situation, and some students even go home to quarantine. So, the university stands nowhere near its full capacity in isolation suites, with only four in use, and Smith said the ability to create more isolation suites exists if needed.

"The good news is that our numbers are looking good right now but we can't rest on our laurels right now," Damphousse said. "If we start letting our guard down by not wearing masks, by not physically distancing and holding large social gatherings again without people distancing and masking, we'll go back up to where we were again. Then I'll have to shut things down."

In terms of people connected to A-State's campus, no one has been hospitalized or sent to the ICU for COVID-19, Damphousse said.

CONTINUED: BREAK, 4A

Comfort with online classes could mean different looking snow days in the future

BRAD BREWER

SPORTS EDITOR

Snow days may never be the same again, and COVID-19 might be to thank.

Because of the meteoric rise of Zoom and its use in broadcasting live classes remotely, professors now have an avenue to hold class on days where the roads may be too slick with ice or packed with snow.

Zoom's rise is not the only progression in technology that turned the focus of inclement weather towards education rather than playing in the snow, as Chief Communications Officer Dr. Bill Smith alludes to how Blackboard changed

schooling in the snow.

"It really is more about providing another tool," Smith said. "It wasn't that long ago where if there was an inclement weather day, faculty didn't have an easy way to provide assignments. Two or three years ago I started seeing faculty using Blackboard, and faculty started putting reading in if they were out."

Smith emphasized that most of the decisions regarding what will happen with students and their to-do list on days when in-person class is cancelled will come down to individual professors.

CONTINUED: SNOW DAYS, 4A



Chief Communications Officer Dr. Bill Smith said there is really no such thing as a university closing. While in person classes might be canceled during a snow day, places like the Dean B. Ellis Library, and other places around campus could still be open. Dining services would definitely remain open.

Photo by: Krishnan Collins | Editor-in-Chief