

**NORMAL,
CONTINUED**

"A handful of employees have contacted HR and based on other health-related criteria, may be allowed remote work status," A-State Chief Communications Officer Dr. Bill Smith said. "However, it is a case-by-case basis."

A-State's mask mandate is something still not decided on for the summer and fall.

"I can't predict it right now," Damphousse said. "There's a lot of factors that weigh into it. Our intention is to move back this summer to be in person and have fewer restrictions regarding COVID but we will

take that one step at a time."

The university has always monitored what is happening locally when it comes to the spread of COVID-19 and the number of positive cases in the area along with hospitalizations.

"I don't know where we'll be with masks on our campus for now," Damphousse said. "There are things that influence that. There are of course legislative processes that might change how masks can be mandated on campus. There also will be our assessment about the health risks on campus versus having masks and not having

a mask mandate. I just won't know until we get there."

Different options exist when it comes to masks on campus but nothing is set in stone.

"We may have people wearing masks in the classroom, but not have the distancing we had before," Damphousse said. "We may require people to wear masks as they're entering and leaving buildings but not while they're in a meeting."

Around campus, more food service locations could be available in the future as Sodexo, facilities and student affairs divisions

have been working together to improve food services.

Since last spring, students, faculty and staff have had to adapt to an unpredictable pandemic.

Damphousse praised all of campus for its work over the past three semesters.

"I also want to thank the faculty who I think went above and beyond my expectations for making sure that the students had great experiences in the classroom," Damphousse said. "When we transitioned to online instruction after Spring Break in spring of 2020, nobody was very prepared for

that. Very few of our faculty members were prepared to teach virtually. They performed I think heroically to transition and do such a good job at the end of the spring semester."

The changes forced by the pandemic didn't stop there as during the summer faculty then had to prepare for a full fall semester of online, hybrid and flipped classes.

"They changed everything about what to do with teaching," Damphousse said. "It was emotionally draining, physically and psychologically draining as well. They performed really

incredibly well this past year." Damphousse praised A-State's staff for getting the campus ready and noted contributions from students to the cause.

"Finally our students who really bought into the Return to Learn Plan," Damphousse said. "If they had not been so good about wearing their masks and distancing as much as possible, it would have a very different year. Faculty, staff, students played a remarkable role in getting us to be so successful. We're hopeful for a brighter tomorrow for sure."

**SPEIGHTS,
CONTINUED**

For those who have already had coronavirus, although it does offer some protection against being infected again, Speights said it wasn't nearly as much protection as what the vaccine gives.

With that being said, the COVID-19 vaccine does not offer 100% protection from infection. Speights explained the vaccine offers around 90-95% protection against infection.

With a mild case of

COVID-19, the body's immune response may not produce enough antibodies to protect from future infection, so it's important to still get vaccinated. The vaccine, however, injects a large dose of mRNA into the body in order to allow the body to respond by making plenty of antibodies. This is why some people may experience side effects such as fever after receiving the vaccine.

Although Speights had



Dr. Shane Speights

concerns, as long as precautions – hand washing and wearing masks in large groups – are taken, he said he was extremely confident it was safe to return to in-person activities.

"I have no doubt that the administration at Arkansas State would take whatever measure they need to (in order) to keep faculty, staff and students safe," Speights said.

Damphousse revealed the plan for A-State if

anything needed to change to keep everyone safe in his announcement about fall 2021.

"One of the most important lessons from COVID-19 has been the importance of being ready to pivot to online course delivery if our ability to offer courses in person is interrupted for any reason (including weather)," Damphousse said. "I do not anticipate that need changing in the years to come."

SGA President Ellie Mayberry looks ahead to fall semester

SAM SCOTT
NEWS WRITER

With A-State starting to bring back in-person classes in the fall semester, the Student Government Association is cautiously ready to return back to normal.

COVID-19 has brought a lot of challenges, difficulties, and changes at A-State. Even though progress is being made and life is slowly moving toward normalcy, there is still uncertainty regarding where the future might lie.

"We really want to make SGA as engaging as possible for the student body. I think there has been a lot of disconnect this year in all aspects of campus life because of the situation we were handed," said Ellie Mayberry, president of the Student Government Association. "I want to really focus on connecting SGA with the student body and having a strong presence in the minds of A-State students. We want to be an organization that the student body feels connected to, knows about, and trusts, and we want to help them feel connected with the rest of campus too."

It is that mission of connection a lot of students are yearning for, seeing how the pandemic radically changed interactions between each other. Mayberry is looking to bring back the close connection the students lacked from the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This school should feel comfortable and like home during our time here. We know COVID has hurt that," Mayberry said.

Fall plans for SGA

There are plans for SGA to return back to the in-person meetings they had prior to the

pandemic. This is something Mayberry is excited to bring back, especially with the hybrid model SGA had to work with during this school year.

"I think SGA will be able to go pretty much back to normal," Mayberry said. "It is weird to me to think that everybody who was new to SGA in this last year has never seen a meeting run in a normal, pre-COVID way. I am excited to get back to fully in-person meetings and transition away from hybrid next semester."

Of course, there has to be a backup plan should there be upticks in COVID-19 cases. There is the idea of utilizing the online or hybrid meetings used during this school year. Mayberry seems to be aware this could happen, based on some circumstances.

"Lots of that will depend on what the school's response is. If there is a major surge of COVID cases next school year and we are forced to make the transition back to online classes, even just to the degree it is this semester, we will likely return to meetings on Zoom or hybrid meetings where senators have the option to meet in-person or on Zoom," Mayberry said. "Obviously, we hope that doesn't happen and we hope to be able to return to something as close to 'normal' as possible and stay that way. But as we all learned last year, you really never know what is going to happen. Whether we are able to return to normal or for some reason see a surge in cases and have to continue as we are now, we want to make SGA as engaging with the student body as possible."

A tough past year

At this point in time, it is important to remember and reflect on how A-State responded and changed throughout the past year.

Everything from how classes were conducted to student activities were drastically changed, to the point of unrecognition. This can take a toll on students and faculty, and Mayberry is no exception.

"I definitely think this school year has been one of the most mentally challenging for many students. Not that the content being covered is so much harder, but that we are having to learn and be taught in ways so different than what we have been used to," Mayberry said. "I think many of us have gained a whole new appreciation for being able to receive help in-person from a professor or just being in class and seeing who our classmates really are. This school year, at least for me personally, has been tougher in keeping focus, making efforts, and plugging in."

It is not just the challenges students faced this school year, but also how A-State has made sweeping changes after the spring semester in 2020.

"This school year has definitely been better than last spring when we had to make the frantic switching, seemingly overnight, to all online instruction," Mayberry said. "I think this fall and spring we at least had a little better idea of what we were getting ourselves into and our school was able to spend the summer coming up with the really strong Return to Learn Plan so we could get back to campus."

Procedures to keep

COVID-19 did leave an impressionable mark on how A-State functioned throughout the school year. So, moving forward, there are some ideas Mayberry said she believes could be beneficial in the future.

"I think we definitely learned some important lessons during this time, the most important



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLIE MAYBERRY

SGA President Ellie Mayberry and her staff look for a return to in-person SGA meetings in the fall. Mayberry said, "While there have been many downsides to this past year, there have been some positives too."

One of those positives includes the use of Zoom meetings during class time. Mayberry got firsthand knowledge of the impact of this option, especially for providing accommodations to students.

"Recently, I had the opportunity to sit on an accessibility panel. In that panel, one student mentioned how having the Zoom option for classes has helped her tremendously this past year," Mayberry said. "In the past, she has had medical issues that have prevented her from making it to every class. On the occasion she was unable to go, she would email the professor and ask if she could receive notes, a summary or something to catch her up on what she had missed. While some professors are great and very accommodating, others are not quite as flexible. With many classes having a Zoom option now, she no longer has to miss out just because she physically cannot make it to class that day."

Mayberry expresses how

having classes on Zoom can be beneficial for students who need accommodations.

"This was a thought that had never crossed my mind, but I think this is definitely something we can keep around for accommodations," Mayberry said. "If we can accommodate those who are in quarantine like this, we should be able to provide this same opportunity to others who need these accommodations as well."

Staying safe

It is important to remember that even though COVID-19 is starting to loosen its grip, it doesn't mean students should be lax on maintaining awareness and participating in the proper precautions.

"I think it is also important that we keep in mind that while things are better, it doesn't mean COVID is gone," Mayberry said. "While I don't think we need to keep all of the rules and regulations we have in place this semester for next semester, I do think it is still important to be conscious of what we are doing and who we are around."

Mayberry, similar to many other students, expressed disappointment and

despondency when the pandemic first arrived last spring. The sudden, almost instantaneous changes made on campus at the time truly rocked students into confusion and apathy.

"The biggest thing is that it has just taught me not to take things for granted. I will never take in-person classes or big events or even just walking through the Union without a mask for granted again," Mayberry said. "The pandemic was definitely really hard for me at first. I missed my friends, I found it hard to pay attention to or care about my classes, and I was honestly just mad that the end of my sophomore year had been taken away from me like that."

In regards to A-State's decision to return to in-person classes fully next school year, Mayberry exhibits some satisfaction with the plan.

"I do think A-State is making the right call for next school year," Mayberry said. "I think students need things to go back to normal as much as possible, and as long as things continue in the right direction they are going right now, I think we can do that and still be safe."