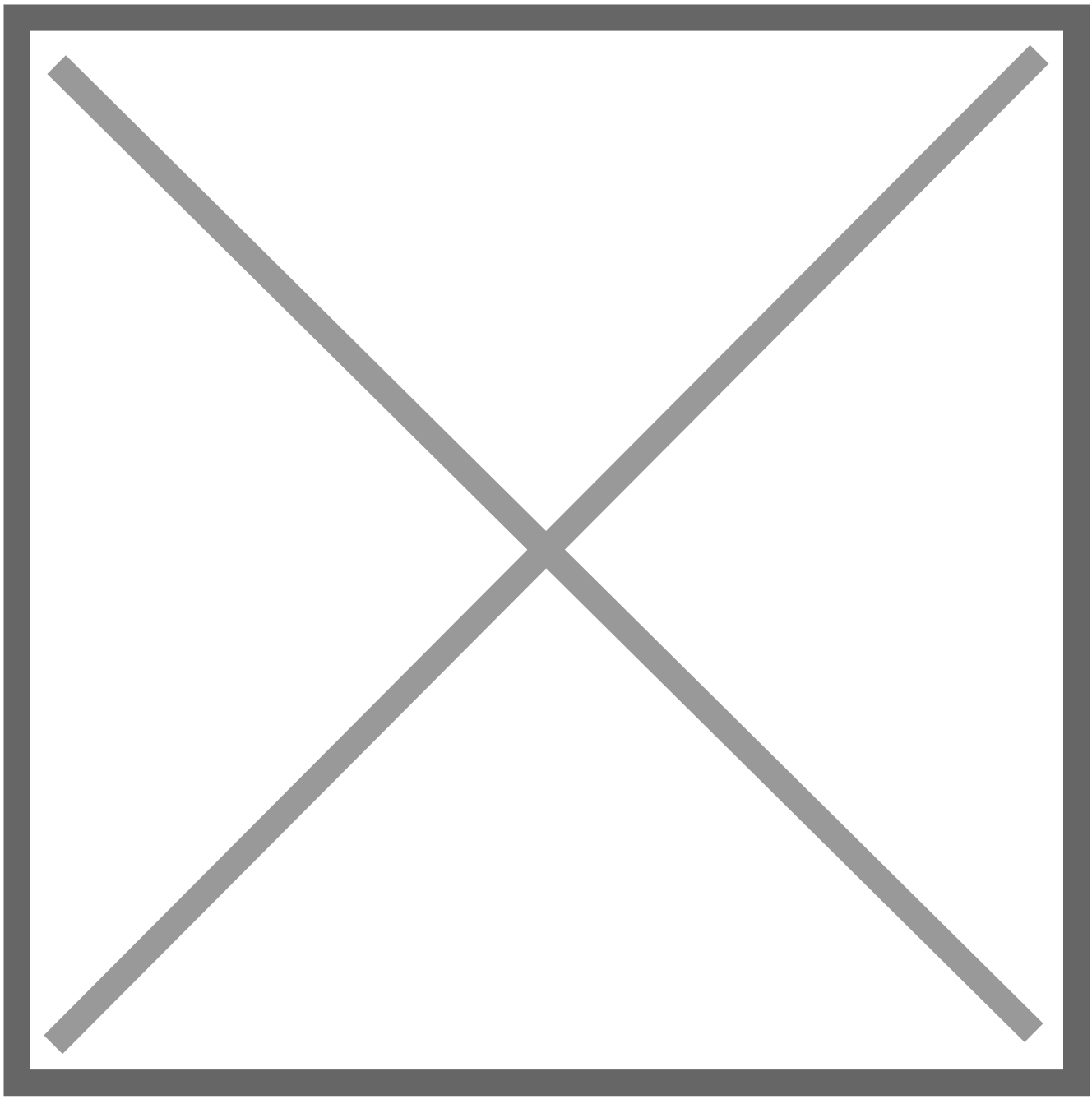
News



The University of Notre Dame in Indiana is seen in this 2019 file photo. The university announced Aug. 18, 2020, that in-person classes will be replaced by remote instruction because positive rates for the coronavirus continue to climb. (CNS photo/Reuters/Matt Cashore, USA Today Network)



Carol Zimmermann

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — August 19, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The University of Notre Dame announced Aug. 18 that it is suspending its in-person classes for undergraduates for two weeks after a rise in COVID-19 cases on its campus in South Bend, Indiana.

"The virus is a formidable foe," said the university's president, Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, in announcing the change to students in a video message. "For the past week, it has been winning. Let us as the Fighting Irish join together to contain it."

Since classes resumed Aug. 10, Notre Dame's campus has seen a steady increase in positive coronavirus cases among students, primarily seniors living off-campus. As of midday Aug. 18, 146 students and one staff member tested positive among the 927 who have been tested since Aug. 3. Also, on Aug. 18, the university had its highest number — 80 positive cases — of coronavirus.

During the school's second week of in-person classes, the university reported that some of its coronavirus cases could be traced to an off-campus party.

Notre Dame is the second university to switch to an online format after students were on campus, making its decision a day after the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill announced it was going virtual. Just after Notre Dame's announcement, Michigan State University said it also was moving to an online format.

Unlike the other two schools, Notre Dame has said this plan is not for the rest of the semester, but is more temporary, suspending in-person classes for undergraduates until Sept. 2 and for graduate and professional school students until Aug. 24.

"We believe we can take steps short of sending students home for remote instruction, at least for the time being, while still protecting the health and safety of the campus community," Jenkins told students at the virtual town hall meeting.

A local health officer, Dr. Mark Fox, who also spoke in the teleconference, said he knew the school's case numbers would go up, with people coming from all over the country. "We were prepared for some of that, not at this magnitude or this quickly," he added.

He assured Jenkins this spread can be contained if students comply with the university's efforts.

The priest said the university's contact-tracing analysis indicates that "most infections are coming from off-campus gatherings" and that "students infected at those gatherings passed it on to others, who in turn have passed the virus on to others, resulting in the positive cases we have seen."

He asked students to help in identifying others who have been flagrantly violating safety protocols. "For your sake and the sake of our community and for continuing our semester on campus, please observe health protocols and avoid behavior that puts yourself or others at risk."

The university also has placed other measures in effect saying that until further notice off-campus students should not visit campus and on-campus students should stay on the grounds except for emergency circumstances.

Student gatherings off or on campus are restricted to 10 people or fewer.

Advertisement

An Aug. 18 message from university officials likewise urged students and faculty members to "report unsafe behavior with specific addresses, names and details" stressing that students who are hosting unsafe gatherings "will face severe disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal from the university."

Prior to return of in-person classes at colleges across the country, many have questioned how to control the spread of COVID-19 when so many students attend parties or large gatherings at bars and restaurants.

Some schools have asked their students to sign a pledge promising to wear a mask and keep safe distances even at off-campus events. In the pledge from St. Mary's University of Minnesota, a Lasallian school in Winona, signers promise to protect themselves and others by following basic protocols and keeping personal and shared spaces clean as well as "observing protocols for group gatherings."

Providence College in Rhode Island includes a section in its conduct code that students are required to sign saying they have read and understand the expectations and potential sanctions for not adhering to social distancing or wearing face masks.

After a disrupted spring semester earlier this year due to the coronavirus, Notre Dame was one of the first Catholic colleges in the U.S. to announce its in-person reopening for the fall with a modified schedule of classes from Aug. 10, without a fall break, and ending the semester before Thanksgiving.

Jenkins explained the university's decision in a May 26 opinion piece in The New York Times where he noted the risks involved in opening the campus and said school officials "believe the good of educating students and continuing vital research is very much worth the remaining risk."

Like other schools, he said, Notre Dame had relied on "the best medical advice and scientific information available and are assiduously planning a reopening that will make the campus community as safe as possible."

On Aug. 18, the World Health Organization warned that young people are becoming the primary drivers of the spread of the novel coronavirus in many countries.

Students at several U.S. universities have recently staged "die-in" demonstrations in outdoor campus areas to protest their schools' in-person reopening amid concerns

about potential rapid spread of the coronavirus on campuses.

The Chronicle of Higher Education, which had been tracking reopening plans of 1,250 colleges, reported July 26 that 50% of colleges and universities were planning in-person classes this fall and 35% were planning a hybrid model. Only 12% of institutions will start the semester with just online programs; 2.7% are considering a range of scenarios and less than 1% were still undecided.

That picture has since changed and continues to change. The publication has now joined efforts to track reopening plans with researchers from North Carolina's Davidson College, and by Aug. 18 it found that of nearly 3,000 colleges and universities in the U.S., 2.5% plan to be fully in person, 20% primarily in person, 15% hybrid, 27% primarily online, 6% fully online 6% other and 24% are still figuring this out, falling under the to-be-determined category.

Related: Catholic colleges face financial strain, campus life changes for fall semester