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Students are seen on the campus of Georgetown University in Washington March 20, 2019. (C

Students are seen on the campus of Georgetown University in Washington March 20, 2019. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)



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In response to the current spike in COVID-19 cases across the United States due to the omicron variant, many colleges and universities have changed plans for the spring semester — making much of January, or even just a few weeks of it, a back-to-virtual learning experience.

Some Catholic colleges and universities are among those shifting plans for the academic year that begins after a winter break.

In a Dec. 29, 2021, letter to Georgetown University's campus community, the school's president, John DeGioia, said the spring semester would begin Jan. 12 as

planned but would be in a virtual format through Jan. 30, something that was not planned.

"As we continue to monitor the trajectory of the pandemic, we will share any further updates to our plans as soon as they become available," he wrote, adding that he appreciates the engagement of community members as they "continue to navigate this challenging moment, together, as a university."

DePaul University in Chicago made a similar announcement in early December, noting that the university's first two weeks of winter classes from Jan. 3-15 would be held online with exceptions made on individual basis for some classes.

The announcement from school officials said the university is "fully committed to in-person learning" and was taking this measure to "help us cautiously start winter quarter so we can sustain a robust college experience the remainder of the academic year."

Seattle University initially announced that classes would be online for the first week of January but then updated these plans, announcing Jan. 4 that classes would remain virtual until Jan. 31.

School officials said the extended time of an online format "will give us time to gather additional information as it becomes available. As we have done throughout the pandemic, we will respond to that information with the safety of our community members and the quality of our students educational experience" as top priorities.

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Although the experience sounds familiar to March 2020 classes, it really isn't the same.

At Seattle University and other colleges, some classes will not be virtual. In its announcement, Seattle leaders for example said that labs will be in person and clinical placements and practicums will also be in person "provided they are allowed at site locations."

Like other colleges, the university is also keeping open residence halls, dining services, the library and other school operations during the time of online classes.

Several California universities took the lead in postponing January's in-person classes, announcing plans to do so Dec. 21. Several other large universities made similar announcements after that.

Not all colleges that are postponing in-person classes are large schools either. Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, which has fewer than 4,000 students, recently announced its plans to be remote for the first two weeks of its January schedule in an effort to stem "any potential spread of the omicron variant on campus," its president said.

Across the country, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to reopening campuses for the new term. Many private and public colleges and universities have varied plans for the spring semester and many are opening for business as usual.

What is standard is that most schools are emphasizing COVID-19 protocols of proof of vaccination or boosters and required face masks and social distancing.