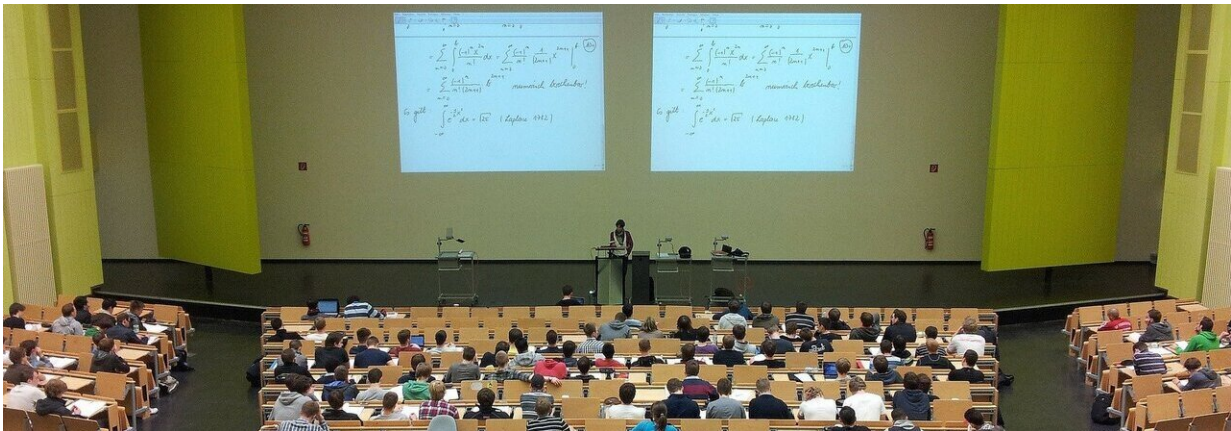


How U.S. universities responded to the COVID-19 pandemic

November 12 2020, by Danielle Hawkins



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As the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States, universities were forced to make difficult operational decisions to help slow the spread of the disease and protect their students, faculty, staff, and community members. Guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other agencies informed these decisions about non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI)—the only interventions available at the early stages of the pandemic.

A new George Mason University College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) study found that most university announcements coincided with

the WHO pandemic declaration on March 11, 2020. The study, published in *PLOS ONE*, was led by Master of Public Health student Kevin Cevasco, with collaboration from fellow Mason students, CHHS global and community health faculty Drs. Michael von Fricken and Amira Roess, and Mason's Executive Director for Safety and Emergency Management David Farris.

"When the pandemic began, we realized how important it could be to track university decisions on NPIs," explains von Fricken, assistant professor of epidemiology.

For the study, the researchers created an original database of COVID-19-related NPI university policies. They included data from 575 universities that were four-year degree-granting institutions with more than 5,000 students. The researchers included universities from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, using the Department of Education Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to select the data so they would have additional variables available for the study such as census information and private/public university status.

Cevasco and colleagues examined when and if universities made four types of decisions between February 25 and March 31, 2020: Moving courses online, discouraging campus housing, canceling travel, closing campus, and remote working.

About 75% of universities implemented all five of these recommendations, 93% implemented four, and 98% implemented at least three.

Announcements about canceling university-sponsored international travel (including study abroad) were made earliest, with these announcements beginning February 25 and more than half canceling international travel by March 11. Of those universities who made

international travel announcements, all had canceled international travel by March 26.

Announcements to move to remote learning also came quickly, with all universities making announcements between March 4 and March 20. Seventy-three percent of these announcements were made between the day of the WHO pandemic declaration (March 11), and the U.S. national emergency declaration (March 13). Announcements discouraging on-campus housing came soon after and were made by 82% of universities between March 9 and March 20.

"The timing of NPI decisions may have avoided the movement of millions of students back onto campus and ensuing instances of community spread," explains Cevasco. "We can also expect that university return-to-campus plans and management of on-campus cases may vary widely given university differences in spring 2020 closure decisions. Both could be important areas to study in future work."

The data collected for this study have been published by the authors under the article's supporting information and are available for future study purposes. The authors call for researchers to provide feedback to state and federal leaders for more clear and concise guidance that assists universities in making decisions.

More information: Kevin E. Cevasco et al, COVID-19 observations and accompanying dataset of non-pharmaceutical interventions across U.S. universities, March 2020, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0240786](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240786)

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