Pennsylvania Asks Higher Education to Go Virtual

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Pennsylvania government is urging the state's colleges and universities either to start their second semesters online, or push the start date of second semester back. Ultimately, the decision regarding return to campus remains in the hands of the colleges and universities themselves.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health and Department of Education released guidance late last week asking for the traditional post-winter break return to campus not be a physical return at all. Although not explicit, the guidance suggests colleges hold off allowing students back to campus until at least March.

However, we are not dealing with the same situation as in the spring of 2020, when the state shut down all higher education institutions statewide. There is no order from Gov. Tom Wolf, there is no state mandate, and the state has not announced potential penalties for schools that decide to bring their students physically back to campus at the normal time.

The guidance released by the departments warns colleges and universities about rising coronavirus hospitalizations and the exponential rise in the rate of positive COVID-19 cases in those aged 19 to 24, noting that cases among the group increased in one section of the state by more than 60% between last spring and the return to campus in the fall.

While colleges are not required to close, each school should be discussing its options with its administration, its faculty and its community. If deciding that having students return to campus is the best decision for the school, administration officials should be formulating a plan for effective preventive and reactive measures, including contact tracing, isolation and quarantine plans, COVID testing sites, and remote learning options. The departments have previously issued guidance on these measures.

If you have any questions on this latest guidance, please contact David Freedman, Katelyn Rohrbaugh or anyone in the Barley Snyder Education Practice Group.

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