

From: [Office of the Chancellor](#)
Subject: A Message From the Interim Chancellor: Spartan Safe Start
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Spartan Safe Start: An Adaptable Approach for Fall 2020

Dear Campus Community,

After considerable deliberation among campus leaders, a review of the latest science and data available, and after many hours of thoughtful reflection, I am pleased to announce our plan for a return to campus this fall.

We are calling this comprehensive plan “Spartan Safe Start.” The plan is an adaptable approach to the upcoming semester that balances the need for a positive learning environment with the realities we all face during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is “safe” in that we have placed safety concerns at the forefront of our thinking. Safety will be our guiding principle in all we do to start the term. It is a “start” in the sense that classes will begin on time, August 20, with flexible course options and expanded online offerings.

On-campus coursework will begin in August, and we will follow an adaptable plan to increase or decrease our on-campus presence in response to various benchmarks. Those benchmarks will be developed over the summer by a COVID-19 Response Team led by Mary Bucher, APRN, our director of Health Services, and comprised of representatives from across campus. Director Bucher will also lead staff training on best health practices and protocols as our faculty and staff return to campus over the summer.

The approach we outline in “Spartan Safe Start” is akin to a “dimmer” switch that lets the room receive more or less light as circumstances warrant, instead of an on-off switch, and I think this draws a positive image of where we want to go. Students who prefer to continue to learn remotely will be encouraged to do so. Conversely, students who wish to return to campus will have options to consider.

Details of the plan follow, but I wanted to start by sharing a little bit about how we arrived at this point—the principles and data we have used, and will continue to employ, in making our decisions.

USC Upstate is a proud member of the University of South Carolina System. Each system institution is different in terms of size, programs and mission, and our decisions reflect qualities specific to USC Upstate's unique student population. I am particularly sensitive to students who may feel uncomfortable returning to campus until they feel it is completely safe to do so. Likewise, I am sensitive to the needs of faculty and staff who want to know that we are prioritizing their health as well as the health of their loved ones.

At USC Upstate, our strength lies in our diversity. We share a commitment to foster an inclusive environment that affirms identity and embraces our university's core values of wellness, equity, and civility. We know that COVID-19 is impacting some of our students and families deeply.

To the parents, grandparents, and families of our Upstate students, I want to share a special message: I hope these actions show we care deeply for your sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters. We pledge to implement best practices and training to keep our students safe. It is one thing to say that safety is a priority, but in our plan it is the **top** priority.

This "Spartan Safe Start" plan also means that we will ask you to help us begin and end the fall semester in the right way. Please encourage your loved ones to continue to practice safe social distancing, and to follow campus guidelines when they are here. Please help us to help them. We will do all we can to be proactive in this plan, and we will need your help to be successful.

Reduced Numbers of Students in Classrooms and Residence Halls

In August, the initial group on campus will include residential students who will largely occupy single rooms, and who can be accommodated in keeping with the applicable government, health, and safety directives and protocols. USC Upstate will provide in-person counseling, disability support, health services, career planning, dining services and leadership experience as social distancing allows. In addition, we will take advantage of technology in providing services crucial to students, both those on campus and those studying remotely. We will increase availability of "telehealth services" as well as "teleadvising," "telefitness," and even "teleleadership development."

In implementing Spartan Safe Start, we will rely heavily on our deans and department chairs to work with their students in a planned, coordinated fashion to help them stay safe during their studies. Our academic advisors will work closely with incoming freshmen and new transfer students, whether they live in the residence halls or travel to campus, to help ensure a successful transition as they join our university community.

Promotion of Social Distancing and Prevention Protocols

For everyone on campus in the fall, we will adhere to strict social distancing guidelines and other recommended precautionary measures in all classrooms, public areas and offices. In conjunction with our Health Services team, we will support COVID-19 testing, contact tracing measures, and those who may become ill. With assistance from our Student Affairs and Communications teams, we will develop campaigns that highlight federal and state guidelines for lowering the risk of infection.

A Cautious Walk Toward Normal

Our goal is to return to normal campus operations as soon as conditions permit. A return to full face-to-face teaching and all students returning to campus will be considered only after benchmarks set by our COVID-19 Response Team have been met.

We are announcing this plan now to provide as much time as possible for all of us to prepare. After what everyone has gone through this past spring and the tremendous efforts so many of you made as we moved quickly from a normal term to remote teaching, I recognize that everyone needs time to prepare for classes in the fall.

How We Will Prepare for a Spartan Safe Start

Our talented and dedicated faculty will prepare to offer courses in blended delivery modes when the term begins. These methods will be described in more detail in further communications and resources we will publish. Some faculty members will continue to work in their labs or studios. We recognize that some students may choose or need to spend the entire semester learning remotely. The move from blended learning to more hybrid delivery, and eventually face-to-face delivery, will come with time. We will commit additional resources, time and energy to making sure faculty and students will have the tools and support required to be successful.

Our dedicated staff have made this university their life's work, often behind the scenes, to support our students, faculty and the families we serve. Many of our team members have been working diligently from their home offices or kitchen tables. We are now executing a plan for their safe return to the workplace.

During the spring, we heard from many students who had a positive experience adjusting to the teaching and learning changes we had to make. Many students tell us they long for a return to normal as soon as possible. We think this adaptable approach gets us there, but does so in a way that keeps the safety and well-being of the campus community in mind.

We are working to build the technologies that will allow us to provide a positive and productive learning experience in the fall. We encourage you all to work with us and communicate what you need to be successful.

More details of our plan will follow as we roll out specifics in the coming weeks. We are underway on plans for a virtual Town Hall meeting, during which leaders from across campus will be available to address questions you may have about our “Spartan Safe Start” plan. An invitation with more details will be forthcoming.

Our primary goal is to provide the college experience that students and their families expect and deserve, while keeping the health and safety of students, faculty and staff as our highest priority. If we can do that in person, all the better. If we are unable to do that, however, we are prepared to simulate the traditional classroom as effectively as possible through virtual instruction, with faculty and students interacting as if they were physically together in the classroom. Not only does this maintain the feel of the typical learning experience, it also allows students who might not feel safe coming to campus to continue their learning from home, even if other students decide to return to campus when that is possible. It also enables faculty who are concerned about their health to continue to provide quality instruction from the safety of their home. So at Upstate, we are ready – for whatever circumstances await us in the fall – to provide educational excellence in the safest manner possible.

I look forward to the day we can all be together again on campus. In the meantime, thank you for doing your part to observe safety protocols for your own health as well as that of your family and the community at large. I am proud to be a member of the Spartan family.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Derham Cole, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

J. Derham Cole, Jr.
Interim Chancellor

University of South Carolina Upstate
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Up is where we live.