

## Community on the Commons: A Proposal for Haggard Avenue Fall 2021

### Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged college campuses like Elon to build community in settings that require physical distancing and other strategies that allow for in-person gatherings in a safe manner. At the same time, many of the large indoor community spaces on campus have been converted to temporary classrooms for the year. Activities that are a part of their deep identities have been cancelled or significantly altered. They crave some sense of normalcy, but none of the normal things are happening right now.

Guidance from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) pertaining to Considerations for Events and Gatherings is described [on their website](#). They report that “smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings” presents the lowest risk after virtual only activities:

- **Lowest risk:** Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings.
- **More risk:** Smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings in which individuals from different households remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, wear masks, do not share objects, and come from the same local area (e.g., community, town, city, or county).
- **Higher risk:** Medium-sized in-person gatherings that are adapted to allow individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and with attendees coming from outside the local area.
- **Highest risk:** Large in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and attendees travel from outside the local area.

Additional information on gatherings and events during the pandemic is provided in an *Insider Higher Education* article entitled “Colleges look for lower-risk ways for students to socialize” included at the end of this proposal. Some campuses have taken advantage of these outdoor spaces on their campus to use such commons spaces as a place for socially distant gathering. The attached describes such efforts at Notre Dame, Virginia Tech, Wesleyan University, Middlebury, and Wake Forest. ***A key conclusion is that as college administrators help students socialize in lower-risk ways, colleges are creating new outdoor gathering and performance spaces.***

### Proposal

We seek to emulate these environments and create lower-risk community building opportunities by closing Haggard Avenue from the intersection at Williamson Avenue to N. O’Kelley Avenue from Friday afternoon through Sunday evening for the remaining seven weekends of the semester, all five weekends in October and the first two weekends in November. Closure of the street would enable the space to be used to extend the commons and create a safe space to bring in amenities like fire pits, food trucks, seating and tables, lawn games, etc. Each weekend would include special events—a large screen set on Haggard Avenue that support a weekly outdoor movie with students spaced out on the lawn, or perhaps a large stage suitable for student performances. The streetscape would be set for casual use during the day and programmed in the evenings.

There are many details to be worked out, but an initial budget has been established and the respective university offices have begun to plan for how such an effort could be implemented. The first step, of course, is to seek the support of the Town of Elon leadership to temporarily close Haggard Ave. to traffic for this experimental use.



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## Colleges look for lower-risk ways for students to socialize

Submitted by Elizabeth Redden on September 18, 2020 - 3:00am

One hallmark of the fall semester so far has been the recurrent theme of college administrators pleading with students to stop partying -- and threatening and imposing punishments on those who do -- to try to tamp down the spread of COVID-19. But as college administrators try their hardest to stop students from attending crowded indoor parties and bar hopping, the question arises of what they can or should do to help students socialize in lower-risk ways.

To this end, some colleges are creating new outdoor gathering and performance spaces, erecting tents that limited-sized student groups can reserve, and holding film screenings and other student life events in oversize venues like the football stadium.

The University of Notre Dame, which currently reports 51 active COVID-19 cases on campus <sup>[1]</sup>, has transformed the space between the library and the football stadium into “Library Lawn <sup>[2]</sup>,” featuring an outdoor lounge area with Adirondack chairs spaced around fire pits and inviting white lights, a stage for student performances and concerts, and lawn games that can be checked out. Students can also borrow lawn blankets, which are washed between uses. Mask use and social distancing are required, and gathering in groups larger than 10 is prohibited.

“The Library Lawn provides a welcoming setting for students to be able to gather safely outdoors, which is what we were hearing from them, that they wanted to get to know students from other residence halls and they wanted a place on campus where it was safe to do that,” said Karen Kennedy, Notre Dame’s director of student centers, activities and events.

The lawn opened earlier this month after Notre Dame emerged from a two-week suspension <sup>[3]</sup> of in-person classes and activities in response to a surge of COVID cases. As it gets colder, the university plans to install outside heaters on the lawn. Notre Dame's fall semester is scheduled to end before Thanksgiving.

"We plan on doing outdoor programming as long as we can with the weather here in northern Indiana," Kennedy said. In addition to offering formal event programming on the lawn, the university is using large outdoor venues including the baseball and football stadiums for events including film screenings and yoga classes.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <sup>[4]</sup> says that all-virtual events pose the lowest risk, outdoor gatherings with physical distancing and mask wearing are lower risk than indoor ones.

Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, said there's a lot of emphasis in the student affairs field on creative outdoor programming and recreation.

"It's based on the premise if you offer interesting and engaging activities that have social distancing as a component then you can create some competing activities that maybe would lessen students' likelihood to gather in party settings," Kruger said. "That concept's not new. For decades we've been doing alcohol-free programming, for example, in the student union -- the idea if you give students something interesting to do, they may choose to do that versus something that is higher risk."

Kruger said there's division in the student affairs field about whether campuses should be open to students at all.

"Not everybody thinks we should be doing any of this," Kruger said. "However, for the campuses that have decided to do some kind of in-person experience, once you make that decision, then you start thinking about how do you ensure that students have the best possible experience. And that best possible experience means thinking about their overall wellness, their ability to manage stress and anxiety. You need support services and you need ways to allow

students to connect to each other. That's a basic human need, so creating those spaces and opportunities is important."

Julia Marcus, an infectious disease epidemiologist and assistant professor in the department of population medicine at Harvard Medical School, echoed that sentiment.

"I'd like to see colleges supporting students in safe socializing rather than taking an abstinence-only approach that we know is doomed to fail," she said. "Asking college students to basically lock themselves in their dorm rooms is not going to be feasible, but what might actually stand a chance of working is giving students an opportunity to stay socially connected and have fun that are lower risk -- not necessarily zero risk -- but lower risk than crowded indoor house parties."

"I'm not saying if you provide students with Adirondack chairs and fire pits, it's going to solve the issue around partying," Marcus said. "But I think it will be more effective than just telling students to stay six feet apart and wear masks and yelling at them when they don't."

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, which reported 183 positive COVID-19 test results over the past week <sup>[5]</sup>, has been heavily promoting the concept of pods <sup>[6]</sup>, encouraging students to create groups of five to 10 students whom they can trust. The idea is that the pods will in effect function as a family unit -- meaning pod mates can relax some pandemic-related precautions when in private.

"It's analogous to your family," said Frank Shushok Jr., vice president of student affairs at Virginia Tech. "When I go home to my family and my home, I take my mask off, we sit on the couch together, we have what looks like pre-pandemic interactions. Our guidance is if you do the pod right, you can do that."

There are limitations and risks to the pod model: the concept only works if all members are equally committed to adhering to public health guidelines, if students stick to a single pod, and if roommates or apartment mates join the same pod. But Shushok said he has been frustrated by some of the skepticism

he's encountered, an attitude he characterizes as "'well, what student is going to have a pod and seriously follow public health guidelines and not go to fraternity parties?' It's kind of a low expectation, and at least one of the things that I'm going to keep emphasizing is we need to raise our expectations and see our students rise to them."

"I think one of the highest risks we have these days in the college and university environment is loneliness, the lack of well-being, anxiety, poor mental health, feeling isolated -- all things that the pandemic has amplified," Shushok said. "So when I think about balancing the risk, helping students have a sense of community and well-being is a really valuable calculation."

Other colleges have also emphasized the need to help students find ways to socialize and participate in student organizations in responsible ways. Michael S. Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, has emphasized this, [writing on Twitter](#) [7], "In order to be safe enough spaces for learning, colleges must have access to rapid testing, basic contact tracing & provide guided, supportive isolation. We must also provide (masked) opportunities to socialize without large crowds. #HarmReduction #SafeEnoughSpaces."

New outdoor performance space at Wesleyan University. Photo courtesy of Wesleyan University

Wesleyan, which currently reports four active cases on campus <sup>[8]</sup>, has created a new outdoor performance space with capacity for up to 100 people, with boxes painted on the grass to promote social distancing. Wesleyan's athletics center opened on Monday <sup>[9]</sup> with new restrictions in place, and -- while intercollegiate competition isn't happening this fall -- athletics teams are able to practice under the supervision of their coach.

"We are expecting our students to be safe and to wear face coverings and to practice distancing and to limit the size of the groups, but it has never been our expectation that our student groups would just cease activity," said Michael Whaley, Wesleyan's vice president for student affairs.

Middlebury College, in Vermont, which currently reports zero active cases on campus <sup>[10]</sup>, entered phase two of its campus reopening plans <sup>[11]</sup> on Thursday, after two rounds of testing and a quarantine period where students were restricted to the campus. Starting on Thursday, students were able to patronize local businesses and shops in the surrounding county, gather informally in groups of 10 people or fewer, and attend formal university-sanctioned events of 50 people or fewer, or 75 people or fewer if held outside. Students had to complete a required training course on the phase two rules.

Tim Wilkinson, associate dean for student engagement at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, said the university required student organization leaders to undergo training on the university's rules for in-person events <sup>[12]</sup>, which for example limit group size to 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors. Wake Forest, which reports <sup>[13]</sup> 73 confirmed COVID cases over the past 14 days, is also making tents reservable for student groups.

"We look like a circus on campus right now, because we have tents everywhere," said Meredith Davis, associate vice president of student engagement at Syracuse University, which currently reports 23 active cases involving students and employees on or near campus <sup>[14]</sup>. "We have tents that are being utilized by academic affairs during the day, and in the evening they become space for programming. We put up fire pits, we've had s'mores, we have Jumbotron screens, we have circles to make sure people are social

distancing <sup>[15]</sup>. We're also thinking about how we're going to create a fall festival."

The state of New York limits the size of gatherings to 50 people or less.

"New York has been really, really clear and precise on expectations for this state. We are adhering to those guidelines, but we also realize that students want things to look similar to what it would look like in the past," Davis said.

"If we were going to bring students to campus, we wanted to make sure that we were going to provide a meaningful and engaging experience for them; otherwise we could have just done everything virtually," added Robert Hradsky, vice president for the student experience at Syracuse. "Because we made the commitment to bringing the students to campus, we wanted to make sure we were replicating as much as possible that true residential experience that Syracuse is known for."

Of course any time students gather, even outside, masked and physically distanced, there is more risk than if they don't gather at all. The city of Philadelphia recommends <sup>[16]</sup> that college students avoid any gatherings other than with members of their own households after finding that cases of COVID transmission were associated even with small gatherings of students.

"Given the current outbreak that we're seeing with some of the colleges, we are advising against social gatherings," said Angelico Razon, a physician in the COVID containment division at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. He added, however, that doesn't mean colleges shouldn't provide ways of supporting students by, for example, providing opportunities for outdoor recreation.

The University of Southern California -- which is conducting almost all of its fall coursework online and is not holding any in-person events -- also has reported that many of the cases it saw involving students were traceable to small group gatherings as opposed to large parties.

"For people to be able to get together, there has to be a very low amount of disease in the community. And that's not something we see at many of our universities," said Sarah Van Orman, USC's associate vice provost for student

affairs and chief health officer. "Some universities have been able to get to that point because they're a relatively closed campus, they're going to test like crazy and they're in a community where the prevalence is low. That's not true of most universities.

"The other way you get around this is you assume maybe there's a higher prevalence ... but we're only going to encourage activities where transmission likelihood is low, and that's where you're in the situation of outdoor, physically distant, face coverings on, not eating or drinking."

Van Orman, a clinical professor of family medicine and member of the American College Health Association's COVID-19 task force, said the difficulty colleges are encountering is one of the reasons many colleges chose to stay online this fall, or were advised by public health officials to do so.

"This is one of the things we're struggling with," she said. "We know that our students in many ways are hurting. We've seen unprecedented levels <sup>[17]</sup> of depression and anxiety and loneliness, so this desire for personal connections, whether our students are here or not, is huge. It has value, people are craving it, but it's working opposite of what we need to do from a public health standpoint."

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/18/colleges-look-lower-risk-ways-students-socialize>

#### **Links**

- [1] <https://here.nd.edu/our-approach/dashboard/>
- [2] <https://here.nd.edu/facilities-environment/student-gathering-spaces/library-lawn/>
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/19/michigan-state-scraps-person-undergraduate-classes-fall-notre-dame-suspends-2-weeks>
- [4] <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>
- [5] <https://ready.vt.edu/dashboard.html>
- [6] <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2020/08/unirel-pod-safety.htm>
- [7] <https://twitter.com/mroth78/status/1302604282999590912>
- [8] <https://www.wesleyan.edu/healthservices/reactivating/health/dashboard.html>
- [9] <https://athletics.wesleyan.edu/news/2020/9/7/general-freeman-athletic-center-guidelines-for-fall-2020.aspx>
- [10] <https://www.middlebury.edu/office/midd2021/covid-reporting-dashboard>
- [11] <https://www.middlebury.edu/office/midd2021/announcements/phase-2-begin-thursday>



- [12] <https://ourwayforward.wfu.edu/policies/understanding-the-health-and-safety-policy-for-student-activities/#:~:text=Events%20and%20gatherings%20held%20in,least%20six%20feet%20of%20distance>.
- [13] <https://ourwayforward.wfu.edu/covid-19-dashboard/>
- [14] <https://www.syracuse.edu/covid-dashboard/>
- [15] <https://www.whed.com/back-to-school-rochester/syracuse-university-creating-social-distancing-circles-ahead-of-students-return/5826465/>
- [16] <https://www.phila.gov/2020-08-29-health-department-issues-new-guidance-on-social-gatherings-at-colleges-and-universities/>
- [17] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/11/students-great-need-mental-health-support-during-pandemic>