

THE DECREE

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NORTH CAROLINA WESLEYAN COLLEGE, ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA 27804

Wesleyan Sees Uptick in Covid Cases among Student Body

NC Wesleyan has reported 33 cases of Covid-19 among members of the college community since the beginning of fall semester.

The total includes several new cases among a group of friends who contracted the virus off campus, according to Jessica Brys-Wilson, a licensed physician's assistant and the college's Health Center Director. She said that many of the 33 total positive cases involved students who were not wearing masks at the time they contracted the virus.

The recent uptick led the college to suspend on-campus group activities, including sports practices, but it is continuing to offer face-to-face classes.

The Decree interviewed Brys-Wilson about the pandemic in September and October.

Q. Does Wesleyan perform Covid-19 testing on campus? If not, what's done when a test is needed?

A. We don't do Covid tests on campus. If one is needed, students and employees must leave campus to get that done. There are multiple options in the Rocky Mount area. Most often we're seeing students use HaloHands, a Rocky Mount medical group that cares for underserved communities. It provides free walk-in testing Monday through Thursday. We have performed limited surveillance testing, but have decided against campus-wide surveillance at this point.

Q. What is surveillance testing?

A. It's testing of individuals who don't have symptoms and aren't known to have been in direct contact with someone that's infected. Surveillance testing is a possibility in the future. We do have a couple of

different companies who can perform bulk testing for us with 24-hour notice.

Q. When it comes to testing, how does Wesleyan compare with colleges its size?

A. To the best of my knowledge, our testing approach is in line with similar schools.

Q. What does a test cost?

A. Depending on the company, the type, the turnaround time, and your insurance, a test can cost between \$0 and \$130 each.

Q. How many tests have been done on members of the Wesleyan community?

A. There have been 179 as of October 19.

Q. How many cases of Covid-19 have been diagnosed since school resumed?

A. We've had 33 cases among Wesleyan community members, including four employees.

Q. Were any of the cases connected? Did the Covid-19 cases fit a pattern?

A. Early in the semester, there was one set of roommates but, otherwise, they were all individual cases who were thought to have contacted it off campus.

More recently, we've had one "cluster" among a group of friends. Most of the infected were members of an athletics team, but their infections were not tied to athletic participation. Their contact tracing indicates it was spread among them in non-athletic interactions. Among students, most positive cases had contact (off campus) without a mask with an individual who later tested positive.

Q. How are the students doing?

A. So far, all have experienced an unremarkable disease course with mostly mild symptoms.

Q. What happened with the staff members?

A. They generally felt worse and took

longer to recover, but none experienced serious complications.

Q. Describe what happens when you suspect a case of Covid-19.

A. Every case is a little different. In general, a student will report symptoms on Campus Clear (before 10 a.m., as required). Occasionally I'll just ask them to quarantine in place for 24 hours and then reassess them the next morning. This is the case if I have a very low index of suspicion that they have Covid. If their symptoms haven't resolved the next morning, they're placed in formal quarantine and sent for a test.

If my index of suspicion is higher based on the Campus Clear screening and a follow-up with the student, I'll send them for a test that day and place them in strict quarantine until their results are back. Their teachers are contacted and their meals are delivered to their room. They're asked to disclose direct contacts and those individuals are also quarantined until the results come back for the PUI (person under investigation for Covid-19). If that result is positive, the symptomatic patient is moved into strict isolation at the Wesleyan Inn. All direct contacts are also moved to isolation rooms at the Wesleyan Inn for 14 days.

Q. Describe the typical symptoms presented by the patients who have contracted Covid.

A. Most commonly, I'm seeing body aches, congestion, and headache. We have had about 10 percent of patients lose their sense of taste or smell. We have not had any students or staff require hospitalization.

Q. What are pros and cons of the "Campus Clear" based on your experiences so far?

A. When used properly, Campus Clear

allows me to check on every campus member every day and catch anyone with any possible Covid symptoms immediately. It's imperative that everyone do their screening every day and that they do it on time every day (10 a.m. on week days and noon on weekends.) It's important that symptoms are reported as soon as they develop. I've had a few students wait two or three days to report symptoms, which makes it difficult to contain a potential infection.

Q. Does it concern you that Campus Clear depends on self-reporting?

A. I do have some concerns. But it's the best tool we have at this point. Anyone can be untruthful in any screening, but I have

confidence that the majority of our community members are honest and generally want to do the right thing, both for themselves and to protect the rest of the campus.

Q. What advice do you have for students, not to mention employees, who leave campus on the weekends, to stay with family and/or take trips?

A. VIRT (Viral Illness Response Team) has asked students not to leave campus unless absolutely necessary. Our county continues to do very poorly, and risk of infection is considerably greater once they leave Wesleyan's campus. So far, most infections are the result of students leaving for the weekend. If they

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Students review the presidential and congressional election forecasts for the Balloting Bishops website, a class project for Political Science 495, Campaigns and Elections, an honors course taught by Dr. Jarrod Kelly. Photo by J. Kelly.

President Duff Optimistic about College's Finances, Fall Graduation

President Evan Duff said he's been pleased with the response of the Wesleyan community to the pandemic crisis, adding that the college is in a strong financial position and that it plans to proceed with a fall graduation ceremony.

He was interviewed by the Decree in late September.

Q. We're at the end of September, almost halfway through the semester. In general, how has the college responded to life in the pandemic since fall semester began?

A. Our college has done extremely well. We have students, faculty, and staff following guidelines. Air purifiers were installed in all classrooms and main areas throughout campus. We've offered staggered start and stop times for our classes, which has reduced density in the halls. And we're adhering to all of the Wesleyan Wise protocols. I'm proud of our community.

Q. What's an area where the Wesleyan community can improve?

A. We can all do a better job of being vigilant and providing friendly reminders to others who are not following our Wesleyan Wise guidelines. We should all refrain from large gatherings (on and off campus) and maintain our Wesleyan Wise standards when we're not on campus.

Q. Did the college ever consider adopting a regular Covid-19 test regimen? What factors went into the process the college is now following?

A. The Viral Infection Response Team (VIRT) explored all possible avenues based on Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization recommendations as well as what peer institutions were doing. The path we ultimately took was to test those who are symptomatic, in contact with someone who tested positive, or who attended an event where people were not socially distanced and who may not have worn masks. The approach has been working well for us. In all cases, students are quarantined until their test results are received. If they're positive, they are isolated off campus. Wesleyan was one of the few schools in the state (maybe 1 of 2) that required a negative test within seven days of arriving back to campus. We feel this was a major contributor as to why we have seen fewer cases on campus this fall so far.

Q. How is the college doing with respect to its budget? What most pleases you and what most concerns you?

A. Based on our generous donors and CARES Act funding, the college ended the 2020 fiscal year very well. We have made a significant turnaround over the 2019 fiscal year. We're already starting to see promising donations come through this year as well, and we expect to see a surplus in operations again for the 2021 fiscal year. I'm always concerned by things I can't control. My hope is that the economy fully recovers, and medications or vaccines are developed to control Covid, allowing us to continue to invest in our students, faculty, staff, and operations.

A Self-Described 'Data Junkie,' Dr. Kelly Provides Election Insights

Editor's Note: The Decree talked to Dr. Jarrod Kelly, a specialist in American politics at Wesleyan, about the presidential election. Interviews took place in late September and early October.

Q. As a professor of American politics, what is a presidential election year like for you?

A. Between the conventions and election day, I'd say I'm a data junkie. I look at dozens of polls per day and can almost always tell you the latest polling averages between the two candidates. Politics has always replaced sports for me (I don't watch many sports; I somewhat follow the Steelers, though less so now that I'm not in Pittsburgh), and I think I get the same sort of satisfaction from it. So presidential elections are like the Super Bowl, though perhaps the World Cup is a more appropriate metaphor. You might also say that I'm insufferable to anyone who doesn't want to constantly hear about the election, and my wife is certainly in that camp.

Q. What's been most surprising to you about the presidential campaign so far?

A. From my perspective, the biggest surprise has been how willing certain political actors have been to undermine confidence in the election and, to some extent, to deliberately sabotage the process. I don't want to sound like an alarmist, but our republic is in serious peril if the results of the election aren't perceived to be clear and valid. President Trump has done everything he can to prepare a rationale for invalidating the results, should he lose to Joe Biden.

Q. What advice do you have for members of the Wesleyan community who may be having trouble sorting through the claims made on social media about both President Trump and former Vice President Biden?

A. It takes a balanced media diet to sort through all of the misinformation. First, try to tune out politics on social media. A lot of what is shared is patently false. Even trusted friends/family get it wrong (I love them, but most are not a reliable source of information). Instead, you can follow credible news outlets on social media to get more accurate information directly within social media feeds. Second, stick to reputable media outlets. I recommend newspapers, such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Decree. They typically offer amazing student deals, as low as a couple of dollars a month. I only pay around five dollars for my Washington Post subscription. The value is fantastic and you are supporting great journalism. And, you can't beat the price of The Decree.

Q. There was talk after the last election about eliminating the electoral college. Candidates Hillary Clinton (in 2016) and Al Gore (2000) both won the popular vote in their respective elections. Do opponents of the

electoral college express serious concerns, or are they just bitter? In brief, what are the arguments for and against the electoral college?

A. Discrepancies exist between the Electoral College and nationwide popular vote that have favored Republicans, spurring calls by some Democrats to eliminate the Electoral College in favor of a nationwide popular vote. But I wouldn't say that they're just being bitter. There are serious differences between states for the number of Electoral College votes per citizen. This benefits rural states and, as a result, the Republican Party. Consider this: in the past 30 years, a Republican presidential candidate has won the popular vote a single time (Bush in 2004). Yet, we've had Republican presidents for nearly half of that time.

What's more, the Electoral College "math" results in candidates only having to pay attention to about 10-15 states (luckily North Carolina is included). Yet, there are a few benefits. First and foremost, can you imagine how difficult it would be to resolve a close election with a nationwide recount? Most of our students were either not alive, or were too young to remember, the 2000 election. Imagine that event, but times 50. Federalism is enshrined in the Electoral College, with states rather than individual citizens, playing a crucial role. Overall, though, you'll find few fans of the Electoral College among political scientists.

Q. President Trump has cast doubt on the security of mail-in balloting. Has he got a point?

A. No, he doesn't. There's no evidence to suggest that mail-in voting is less secure than in-person voting. All states have some form of absentee voting and others have all voting by mail (Oregon, for example). It does get a little tricky when states are forced to offer both types of voting on a large scale, and with little time to prepare. And there are concerns about the U.S. Postal Service being able to handle the capacity of mail-in ballots. But my sense is that the Trump Administration is just seeking to cast doubt on the outcome of the election, should he lose.

Q. What concerns, if any, do you have about the voting process in 2020?

A. What keeps me up at night is the confusion about the voting process, including its security. I fear that many people will not vote because of the conflicting advice being offered. I also fear that the election will not be called in a timely manner, which will create doubts about the outcome. The longer it takes to determine the outcome after Election Day, the more people with distrust the result.

Q. What do you expect turnout to be like?

A. This is difficult to predict, simply because there are so many (unprecedented) factors: the pandemic, changes to rules regarding mail-in ballots, Trump's rhetoric about mail-in voting, etc. My gut prediction would be that turnout increases slightly compared to 2016, to perhaps 57-58 percent of the voting-age population. By comparison, in modern elections, the highest turnout was in 2008, at about 58 percent of the voting age population, and in 2016 it was about 55.5 percent. I expect turnout in 2020 to look more like 2008 than 2016.

Q. In 2016, pundits felt that many votes for President Trump were really "anti-Hillary" votes. To what extent do you see that happening this year, in the opposite direction, with voters picking former Vice President Biden as a way of repudiating the Trump presidency?

A. There's a great term for this in political science: negative partisanship. Partisans aren't so much motivated by warm feelings toward their own party and candidates, but are motivated by disdain for the other party. Democrats have consistently reported that they're more motivated to cast a ballot against Trump than for Biden.

Q. A related question: How strong is support for Biden among Democrats, particularly Sanders supporters and other more progressive members of the party?

A. Biden seems to have lukewarm support among Sanders' voters and progressives, though they appear to be more favorable about casting a vote for Biden than they were for Clinton. But a few will almost certainly sit out this election. I think they're wanting to get Trump out of office, first and foremost, and then once Biden is president they'll put a lot of pressure on him to support a progressive agenda. For the most part, progressives see Biden as too moderate and, with the benefits of hindsight, consider some of his past positions and legislative accomplishments problematic. Biden was known as a bipartisan deal-maker during his decades in the Senate, which means he has a long track record of passing compromise legislation.

Q. Do you think, in general, most voters this year will cast a vote based on the issues or the candidate? Explain.

A. I think it depends on how you look at it. Many Americans will vote against President Trump, but probably more so based on personality and character, particularly the ethical questions that arise from his actions. This relates more to his temperament, than his actual policy views. But a large group will be voting based

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