

Frequently Asked Questions — COVID-19 Policy on Student Social Gatherings

August 31, 2020

On August 21, 2020, Iowa State University implemented a new policy stating that all on- or off-campus social gatherings involving university students must comply with all public health orders then in place (federal, state, county, city and university). Students attending on- or off-campus social gatherings must wear appropriate face coverings, and comply with physical distancing guidelines of the CDC. The full policy is [here](#).

Q: How can ISU impose this new policy for off-campus activities? What guidance are you using?

A: We've provided and implemented a broad set of guidance and expectations to students related to many health and safety behaviors to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The new policy provides a direct link to the ISU Student Code of Conduct for students who choose to participate in risky behaviors associated with large student social gatherings. Now, if a student chooses to ignore the practices that mitigate the transmission of the virus, the consequences are on par with other university student conduct issues.

ISU's Student Code of Conduct speaks directly to instances in which the university has the ability to cite students for off-campus violations. Section 3.7 of the Code of Conduct states how the university — at its discretion and on a case-by-case basis — can assess student misconduct occurring off campus, in incidents that affect a clear, distinct interest of the university. The misconduct process ensures students' due process rights are protected. Like all other student conduct issues, incidents will be objectively assessed and addressed on a case-by-case basis.

For guidance on the practices themselves, we continue to rely on the science and medical expertise of the Centers for Disease Control and Iowa Department of Public Health.

Q: Why was this policy needed right now, and why wasn't it part of the university's fall planning?

A: The policy was implemented as a preventative measure to mitigate the transmission of the virus and prevent high numbers of positive cases that could overwhelm our local health care system. Our concern is when large numbers of students gather together, intentionally and blatantly disregarding the health and safety measures they are expected to follow. This is what we saw with large off-campus parties occurring the weekend before classes began.

We spent over four months planning to make the fall semester healthy, safe and successful. We believe our students strongly desire and value an on-campus educational and social experience. In the early days of the semester, we have witnessed good compliance with mitigation efforts in classrooms and around our campus — we thank our students, faculty and staff for this.

Unfortunately, as we saw the weekend before classes started, activities outside of the classroom, both on and off campus, can greatly increase the risk of exposure to COVID-19 to our campus community — as well as members of the Ames community. The unsafe, unhealthy weekend parties and gatherings were unacceptable and must stop. If students continue to decide not to comply with health and safety policies and practices, it is likely we will need to transition to fully virtual operations. We want to do everything in our power to prevent this from happening. We are hopeful this new policy sends that message strongly to our students.

Q: When was the decision made to create and implement this policy?

A. While we continued to see good on-campus compliance on risk-reducing behaviors early in the semester, the behaviors off-campus and after-hours led us to take the next step on Aug. 21 and implement the new policy prior to another weekend of potentially concerning or risky behaviors. The large gatherings and parties that took place the weekend prior to the semester's opening is a side of the pandemic that we absolutely must avoid in the future if we are to be successful in mitigating the spread of infection and supporting the health and safety of our campus and community.

Q: How will the university enforce the new policy?

A: Actions may be taken under the new policy when, subsequently, (for example), students are cited for off-campus violations by City of Ames or Story County law enforcement.

Q. How should violations be reported?

A: Violations can be reported to the Dean of Students Office/Office of Student Conduct.

Q: How do you define a large social gathering? How many people is unacceptable?

A: Certainly, crowds similar to those seen at pre-semester weekend parties would receive particular scrutiny. Generally, if the location of the gathering combined with the number of participants make physically distancing impossible or unlikely, the policy is likely to apply. We are confident in the ability of our staff to use their expertise when assessing a situation and making a determination on whether a violation took place — and not to apply the policy in incidental encounters or situations. Each incident or complaint will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

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