

# JMU classes move online as COVID-19 cases spike

- Hannah Parker / Fairfax County Times

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Photo by Becky Sullivan / Fairfax County Times

James Madison University moved classes online and sent residential students home on Monday, Sept. 7, as COVID-19 cases spiked to a new high. Classes began in-person and online on Aug. 26.

As of Sept. 10, JMU has reported a total of 1,144 positive cases since July. Of those cases, 1,136 have been students and eight have been staff or faculty members. There are 519 active cases.

In a letter to students and faculty on Sept. 1, JMU President Jonathan Alger announced the university will “monitor health trends” and will announce on Sept. 25 whether students will return for in-person classes by Oct. 5.

Residential students were given six days to move out of their dormitories. One residential student, freshman Jacob Seefried, said he quickly signed a year-long lease with his roommates following Alger’s announcement.

“We are not very confident that we will be able to come back on campus anytime soon,” Seefried said.

Seefried said that moving forward, the university needs to focus on how they’re going to handle money used towards room and board.

“They’ve been unclear as to what they’re doing so far, and I know lots of families are concerned about what’s going to happen with their money,” Seefried said.

Doe Polanz, president of JMU’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors, said students should be questioning what their tuition is paying for.

“Look where [the money] goes,” Polanz said. “And then you have to ask yourself: what do we need for the academics?”

JMU Communications Director Caitlyn Read said residential students who are moving off campus for the next four weeks will receive a \$1000 refund for dining and living expenses.

“Beyond that, it’s too early to say what any kind of refund could potentially look like,” Read said.

Since April, JMU AAUP has asked for more transparency from the JMU administration, and to be included in the decision making. In a letter to President Alger on April 30, JMU's AAUP wrote that out of the 122 positions on the eight JMU Contingency Task Forces, only seven percent of those positions were filled by full-time instructional faculty.

"Part of this concern stems from the fact that we didn't feel included in the decision making and we are the ones facing and working with the students every day," Polanz said.

Student journalists from JMU's student newspaper 'The Breeze' also expressed difficulty obtaining information from the university. Investigations editor Jake Conley said that the paper requested a breakdown of COVID-19 cases by residence hall, but the university declined their request, citing privacy concerns for patients.

In response, Read said:, "The university has been entirely transparent as we're allowed to be under privacy law with our case data with every reporter that has inquired."

According to Conley, 'The Breeze' only wanted the numbers of cases per residence hall, not specific information about individual student cases. He said that there are between 100 and 500 students per residence hall, so obtaining these numbers would not give away individual health information.

"The Privacy Act really only applies to healthcare providers, which a public university with no affiliated hospital system does not count," Conley said. "The University Health Center is not counted as a hospital. It's counted as a health clinic, which is filed differently under HIPAA."

Read said that moving forward the university plans to acquire more quarantine space and review its old procedures to make better adjustments.