

Everywhere I go these days people ask me if and how Sandhills will be open in the fall. Folks want to know if we'll be offering "real" classes, and if the Flyers will be in action trying to repeat as basketball national champions!

Well, of course, we will be open – with Registration Day on August 13 from 9 am – 4 pm in Stone Hall – and you can work with our enrollment folks virtually via phone and email. If you haven't filled out your admissions application yet, be sure to do it today so that we can get you taken care of by the first day of classes. If you still need to register, don't delay, our classes are filling up fast! The Flyers – both volleyball and basketball – won't be in action until after Christmas (though we are attempting cross county with social distancing), but the start of classes will be Monday, August 17. We couldn't be more excited to welcome our students back.

The first day of classes is usually my favorite day of the year, when I go from classroom to classroom meeting new students, welcoming them to Sandhills and to the extraordinary experience that a good college education can provide. It is always a day filled with promise and expectation, and I've always said that if the first day of school doesn't excite you, you're in the wrong business.

This year will be very different. The COVID-19 virus has affected us all and has created for us challenges that we've never encountered before. Like the public schools and the state's residential colleges, community colleges have had to work hard to come up with a plan that provides a first-quality education in an environment that is as safe as we can make it. Luckily, Sandhills students are flexible and creative and are quite accustomed to the use of technology in education.

Sandhills will open on time and in a way to meet the educational needs of all our students. But we will open in a way that is as safe, healthy, and responsible as we can make it. We will open in a way that provides different learning options for students with different needs. Let me explain.

As a community college, Sandhills has a number of programs (we generally call them Applied Science programs) that must be delivered face to face. These include most of our medical programs, including Nursing, as well as programs in Auto Systems Tech, Culinary Arts, Cosmetology, Advanced Manufacturing, Construction, Fire Academy, Law Enforcement and the like. These are programs in which careful social distancing can mitigate the risk of COVID-19, and we intend to wear masks and to practice social distancing scrupulously. Other Sandhills programs can be delivered using technology to supplement, and in some cases even replace, face-to-face teaching. For example, I teach a course in American Government at Sandhills. I've always taught it in a classroom full of students, but that is neither prudent nor responsible this year. Instead, I'll teach it using the ZOOM platform, with me at my desk and my students who knows where. I'm more than a little scared by this prospect, but it's a strange new world and I better get used to it.

Other faculty will teach using other platforms that combine online learning with face-to-face interactions of various sorts. Our academic team has worked incredibly hard to provide our students and our faculty with options that make them feel effective as well as safe. Some students will take online classes, some will take “hybrid courses” that combine in-person lectures with online assignments, and some will take classes where the professor teaches from another room and is connected to the students by television. This broad range of options is designed not only to offer students an array of choices but to give faculty the opportunity to teach in a mode with which they are comfortable.

Putting all of this together has been a Herculean task in a college of some 4,000 students, but our gang has pulled it off.

So Sandhills is open for business, getting ready to welcome one of the largest classes in our history. We can't wait to see our students and to explore with them this extraordinary world in which we now live.

So, come to Registration Day on August 13 and start your classes with us on August 17. Wear your mask, prepare to socially distance, and get ready for what I'm sure will be a learning experience for us all.

Thank you.
John Dempsey