

PUBLIC HEALTH, PUBLIC EDUCATION

# It's not yet clear if COVID-positive UVA students from out of area will count as local cases



RUTH SERVEN SMITH

10 MIN READ

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University of Virginia students congregate at the Rotunda on an August day.

Credit: Mike Kropf/Charlottesville Tomorrow

Twenty thousand University of Virginia students have been shipped COVID-19 tests. [An unknown number](#) will live on Grounds and in the Charlottesville area this fall.

There are still many unknowns about the start of a college school year during a pandemic. But what is known is that COVID-19 cases will occur in Charlottesville, a reality confirmed Monday as UVA reported 36 positive test results so far out of the at-home test kits distributed to students. The university did not disclose the current location of those students. Roughly 8,000 test results must still be reported to the university, according to spokesman Brian Coy.

University administrators had already acknowledged the likelihood of positive test results in an email to the university community Thursday, shortly after a School of Law student reported a positive test result — the first known positive result of the semester.

“So we just got this email a few minutes ago,” said Hannah Adams, who is in her final year of a dual master’s of public policy and public health program. “But I just think UVA could still be more clear about — and all colleges could be more clear about — what is their list of triggers that will send people back online. Is it one case? One thousand cases? Like, what’s the actual plan? I’m not sure why that’s being kept under wraps.”

Adams plans to take her classes online and be a teaching assistant for an undergraduate class via Zoom this year. Despite her trust in public health officials and a contact tracing system, she said, she still has too many unanswered questions about how UVA might handle an outbreak. She has an autoimmune condition. It is not known to cause COVID-19 complications, but she doesn’t want to take any chances — especially after photos surfaced of UVA students partying during [Midsummers weekend](#), she said.

Even though she won’t be on Grounds this fall, as someone who is still “living and learning” in Charlottesville, Adams was asked to take a COVID-19 test. According to a contract [first obtained by The Daily Progress](#), UVA contracted with vendor Let’s Get Checked to buy 27,000 tests for \$3.2 million; many will be used to test students ahead of the start of school, but UVA hopes to use the remainder to conduct tests as needed throughout the fall.





In advance of the beginning of the academic year, the Corner has begun to show signs of life.

Credit: Mike Kropf/Charlottesville Tomorrow

UVA's semester starts Tuesday. Students planning to live on Grounds and take in-person classes, though, will move in the first week of September and start class Sept. 8. [Students who submit negative test results](#) will be cleared to return to Grounds; students who test positive will be asked to self-isolate at home.

What happens to students' result data — and the students submitting them ahead of the start of school and throughout the semester — will depend on the path each student selected for their fall education.

If a test processed by the third-party vendor, UVA Student Health & Wellness or the UVA Health System comes back positive, the result will be reported to the Virginia Department of Health, according to university spokesman Brian Coy. Students who are tested somewhere else, like a doctor's office or pharmacy, will have to submit results to UVA.

If a student has a Virginia address, VDH will notify the relevant health district so public health officials can follow up with appropriate contact tracing and safety measures.

To save time — and hopefully cut down on potential confusion due to potential discrepancies between a student's listed "directory" address and current address — UVA says it will "rapid report" test results with Charlottesville-area addresses to the Thomas Jefferson Health District, Coy said.

"UVA has a very close working relationship with TJHD and we will continue to partner with them and assist them in contact tracing," Coy said. "There are times when TJHD may need access to UVA data, such as class rosters or building occupancy. In order to support TJHD and expedite investigations, UVA has defined processes for these requests to be processed seven days a week."

After school starts, on-Grounds students will presumably be tested by student health or the medical center, which will continue to report any positive results to VDH for follow up by TJHD.

"And if they test negative, that's great," said Kathryn Goodman, a spokeswoman for the district. "If they test positive, we will work with student health and with the students to do the contact tracing. We're working on a formal process and policy to put in place and have been working on this relationship with student health so that we can notify each other, because there is a concern that students might use their permanent address rather than where they're currently living."

There is no statewide estimate of how many Virginia college students may have addresses that don't match their listed addresses.

Schools in some other states have created or helped train cohorts of contact tracers; Virginia requires colleges and universities to rely on VDH contact tracers and discourages them from hiring or developing their own contact tracers, case investigators or tracking software.

Contact tracers will reach out to on-Grounds students, typically by telephone, and make recommendations for housing, testing, care and resources, according to a VDH document about coordination between the department and state colleges and universities. VDH staff will explain that the campus needs to be aware of the situation to meet needs that they

are responsible for and solicit permission to discuss the situation with designated campus officials.

Students taking online classes but still living in the Charlottesville and Albemarle County area will be contacted by TJHD officials.

Goodman said the district has up-staffed with about 40 contact tracers and investigators, including several who are experts in helping students.

Goodman said that some aspects — like when to disclose an outbreak in a dormitory or within an athletic team, or if it's time to shut down in-person classes — are within the institution's purview. Unlike nursing homes, the state has no requirement for an education institution to report a COVID-19 outbreak within a specific residence hall or class. The health district would step in and publicize the site of an outbreak, Goodman said, only if a COVID-positive person had recently interacted with so many people that it was impossible to identify and contact each person.

Other than that, she said — contact tracing is contact tracing, regardless of whether a person lives on Grounds, and if tracers realize a student is currently living with family elsewhere, they can simply hand off the investigation to the appropriate health district.

"The actual investigation and working with them on contacts reaching and contacting their contacts and following up with revenue, doesn't really change whether they're in-person or online, it's still gonna be the same process, the same information," Goodman said.

Other schools across the country and state, including Virginia Tech and Radford and Virginia Commonwealth universities, have unveiled dashboards that show, with varying levels of specificity, campus case counts. But university officials, including at UVA, have generally declined to elaborate on precise thresholds that would cause universities to shut down their campuses.

"What we're looking at is a whole group of metrics, including how many cases we're seeing, what the rate of viral positivity of the tests are, how we're using our isolation and quarantine space and at what pace that's occurring. So it's not one single threshold measure," said Dr. Mitchell Rosner, who helped develop UVA's testing strategy. "There's a whole group of those; there's probably about 10 different things that we look at on a



pretty daily basis to get a better sense of what the landscape looks like and how we're doing."

UVA is testing wastewater from residence halls to try to determine any prevalence of COVID-19 and has said it hopes to do regular surveillance testing, but many students and employees interviewed said they wanted more specific details about a testing plan.



University of Virginia students congregate on the Lawn on an August day.

Credit: Mike Kropf/Charlottesville Tomorrow

A university employee who was deemed essential in April has continued working on-site throughout the pandemic. After some pushing, the university began notifying about potential exposures and test results among his coworkers in June, and notifications have been fairly constant since, he said. He has never tried to get a test; UVA is not requiring staff to get tested before working on Grounds.

The employee, who asked to remain anonymous to protect his job, said he hasn't been

worried about his own exposure yet but fears an influx of students could quickly tip the balance to an unmanageable situation.

“Assuming for the sake of argument that students have to come back — and I’m not sure that’s true — I would just want them to be very open if an outbreak happens,” he said. “I live and work in Charlottesville, and I’m very concerned about the impact on an outbreak on our town. I’m just not sure there’s a situation that is solvable.”

University officials say that there are many ways a college could try to keep a level of in-person living and working this fall — and that a shift in any one factor might tip the balance.

“What keeps me up at night is that despite everybody’s best plans, and really a lot of vigilance and thoughtfulness about this, is that, you know, we may see an outbreak associated with some event, and, you know, somebody may get really sick because of that,” Rosner said. “But, as much as we can, we’re trying to create an educational experience for students and support the community in terms of having people back and working. We’re just making sure that we’re mitigating risk as much as we can.”

Rosner and other health officials stressed the need for returning students and community members to abide by social distancing and face covering measures. UVA Dean of Students Allen Groves [told students in a video message](#) that students who gathered in groups of larger than 15 people or neglected to wear a face mask in public would face immediate suspension for the full semester.

Students and staff said, though, that such messages continue to put the burden of an in-person semester on them, rather than on public health systems that should be equipped to test and trace infected people.

“There’s still a lot of unanswered questions, which has been really frustrating,” Adams, the graduate student, said. “There just hasn’t been a lot of clear communication about, like, what’s the reporting process [for a professor if a student is sick]. Once we found out that, really, there was no plan for any of that or they weren’t telling us what the plan is for things like that, that kind of made my decision [to teach and take classes online] easier, as well.”

In-person classes at UVA are set to begin Sept. 8.



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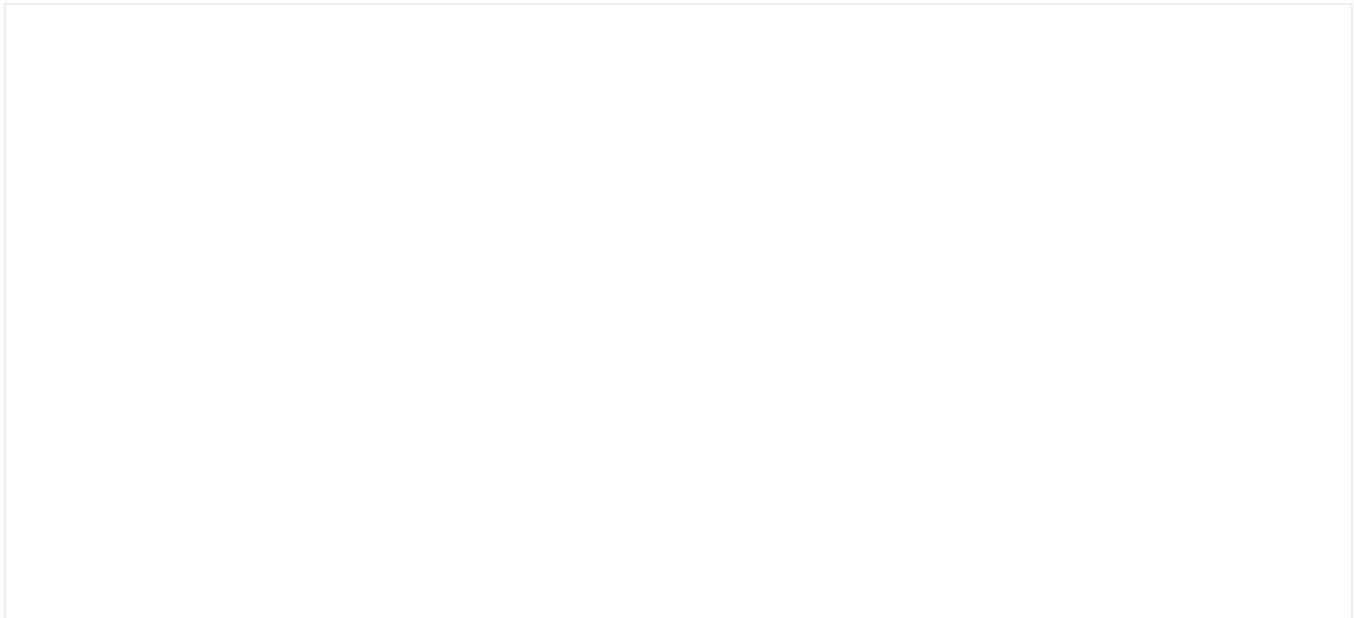
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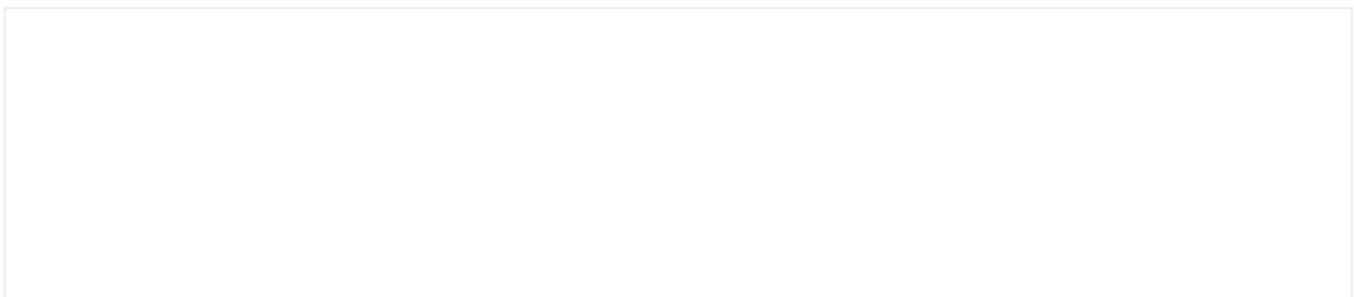
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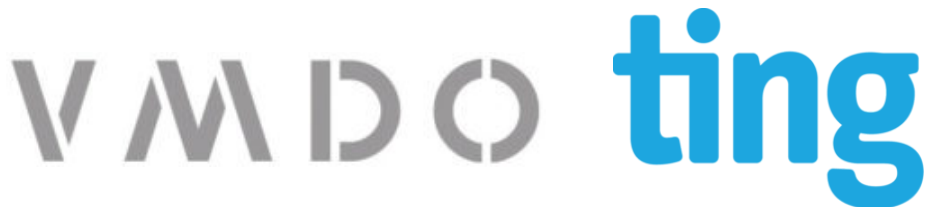
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