

Grand Canyon University has been working diligently to make the fall semester not only the safest environment that we can but also the most robust on-campus experience academically, spiritually and socially for our students.

To that end, we have decided to adjust our plans for the fall semester in light of the recent surge of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Arizona. The modifications spelled out below reflect input from students, parents, faculty, staff and alumni with a goal to create the best GCU campus experience possible for students under Arizona's public health guidelines.

They include adjusted start/end dates for the semester, reduced housing costs, more CARES Act money for students, additional outdoor dining/gathering areas on campus, more outdoor activities and additional academic student support services.

### **Semester timeline**

Rather than start classes in-person on Aug. 24 and switch to an online modality after Thanksgiving as originally planned, the University has decided to reverse that approach.

- **Sept. 8 start date:** Classes will now begin for students on Sept. 8 in an online environment, from their homes, for the first three weeks of the semester.
- **Move-In dates:** Residential Move-In will take place the week of Sept. 21
- **In-person classes begin Sept. 28:** Students will return to campus for the same in-person, physically distant blended model of instruction beginning Sept. 28 through the end of the semester.
- **Dec. 18 end date:** Classes will be held Monday through Wednesday during the week of Thanksgiving, after which the semester will continue with in-person blended instruction through the end of the semester on Dec. 18 (one week later than originally scheduled).

Exceptions to this modified academic calendar will be students in programs such as nursing and athletic training who have clinical placements already scheduled. Students who are in these programs will receive further information from their college dean as their start date may be earlier.

Students in most academic programs also still have the option to take classes 100% online for the first semester or even the entire 2020-21 academic year if that best suits their individual circumstances.

GCU was already contemplating a switch to this more traditional academic calendar for the 2021-22 school year (many universities wait to begin the semester until after Labor Day). Implementing that for the current academic year amidst the coronavirus pandemic accomplishes several things:

- 1) First and foremost, it gives Arizona a chance to make progress in reducing COVID-19 cases under the new initiatives put forth by Gov. Doug Ducey to combat the recent surge. When GCU first announced its fall plans about a month ago, Arizona was still considered among the safer states relative to the coronavirus. Today, the number of coronavirus cases per capita in Arizona is among the highest, especially among younger people. This has resulted in more hospitalizations and longer wait times for test results, which causes complications for detection, contact tracing and slowing the spread of the virus.  
By delaying the start of in-person instruction at GCU, we anticipate that the COVID-19 curve will flatten in Arizona and provide for a safer environment for students, faculty and staff.
- 2) Starting in-person instruction on Sept. 28 puts the worst of the Arizona heat behind us. According to [U.S. Climate Data](#), the average high temperature in Phoenix on Aug. 31 is 104 degrees, with spikes routinely approaching 110. By Sept. 28, that average drops to 96 degrees. And just two

weeks later, on Oct. 14, it is 89 degrees (with lows in the mid-60s). The fall and winter months in Arizona are the perfect time to be outdoors, where research shows that the risk of coronavirus infection is drastically reduced. This allows for ideal outdoor dining conditions on campus, intramural activities that can take place outdoors and spiritual/social events that can incorporate outdoor settings. In addition, the University is exploring the potential to hold some classes outside in open-sided tents.

The delayed start better enables us to create a more robust campus experience for students through the month of December when weather conditions are ideal. We know from student and parent panel discussions just how important the social aspect is to our student body and know this modification will make it more possible for us to live up to that expectation.

- 3) Starting the semester online will help students get off to a positive start academically as they can devote their complete focus to their studies during those three weeks before getting acclimated to life on a college campus. New GCU students will also build confidence in the LoudCloud learning management system that will help them with blended instructional activities that will continue through the end of the semester. Finishing the semester with in-person instruction will also be beneficial for students preparing for finals and completing capstone projects.
- 4) The later start date for on-campus instruction also provides more time for our international students who are having difficulty obtaining a visa before the start of the school year and still serve a 14-day quarantine period.

Starting the fall semester in an online modality is NOT a planned precursor to moving classes fully online for the entire semester. All efforts are being put forth to return to campus for in-person classes on Sept. 28, when conditions are expected to be more favorable. Switching completely to an online modality is of course a consideration at any point if COVID-19 takes a catastrophic turn for the worse, but we anticipate the opposite will occur as Arizona gets a better handle on the coronavirus and testing procedures become more efficient.

Student-athletes are still reporting to campus in the next month to begin workouts for the upcoming athletic seasons. And the vast majority of student leaders will start arriving Sept. 4 in order to undergo training and more planning as it relates to the social calendar before the full campus population arrives for classes on Sept. 28. Student leaders will receive more information about arrival dates from the staff that oversees their programs.

### **Move-In and Welcome Weekend**

The Move-In process will take place during the week of Sept. 21. Students will receive an email by Aug. 5 instructing them how to select or alter a Move-In appointment that best fits their schedule. No action is required at this time.

Several Welcome Week-type activities are being planned for Friday, Sept. 25, and Saturday, Sept. 26, to welcome students back to campus. More information on those will be forthcoming.

Virtual new student orientation sessions originally planned to begin on Aug. 3 will now have a targeted launch date of Aug. 17. A Welcome Session will also take place at the end of Move-In week.

### **Chapel services**

The first in-person Chapel will take place on Monday, Sept. 28. To adhere to all health and safety guidelines, Chapel will be spread out among GCU Arena, Antelope Gym, Canyon Activities Center and the church. Live band performances will occur in the Arena and CAC and the Chapel message will be shared in all venues.

Those who don't feel comfortable attending in person can choose to view the live stream online on the GCU YouTube channel. Future Chapel services could also incorporate outdoor venues.

### **Reduced housing costs**

Students living on campus will have their fall semester housing costs reduced pro-rata for the modifications in move-in dates. Scholarship amounts will stay the same except for those that are tied to on-campus housing. Those calculations will also reflect pro-rata amounts.

Students will also be able to reduce their meal plan allotments since they will be on campus for a shorter period of time.

### **CARES Act funds for students**

GCU expects to be able to provide every eligible fall semester ground traditional student approximately \$500 in CARES Act stimulus funds after the semester begins.

GCU was allotted \$22.3 million in CARES Act funds as part of an economic stimulus bill passed by Congress in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. GCU has distributed the student portion, which represented 50% of the \$22.3 million allotment to those students who were eligible per the stipulations outlined by the Department of Education to reimburse students for financial hardships incurred due to COVID. Universities are permitted to use the remaining 50% (in our case \$11.175 million) to cover their own expenses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. GCU expects to incur in excess of \$11.175 million in COVID-related losses, but the University will use the institutional portion of the CARES Act funds it has been allocated for the benefit of students as well. That includes the direct grant of approximately \$500 as mentioned above for all eligible fall semester ground traditional students to help them absorb costs incurred related to the change in the fall semester calendar. More information on this will be provided in the next few weeks.

### **Outdoor activities**

Campus life can thrive more fully in the cooler Arizona weather during the months of October/November/December, when students can more safely congregate at our many outdoor venues for events, club activities and sports. Chapel services can be streamed outdoors, where we can worship and sing and lift our voices together more safely. Students can eat together in outdoor settings instead of taking food back to their dorms (additional shaded outdoor seating areas are in the process of being added to support this change). Mask-wearing, if still required by health and city officials in October in certain scenarios, is more comfortable in cooler conditions.

And... Thunder can roam freely in more favorable weather conditions.

Because GCU is a private enclosed campus (vs. one in a public setting), we can provide a more robust experience than most universities in the country. These modifications to the academic calendar allow us to keep building it in a way that everyone can be healthier and happier.

### **Student support**

For incoming students who have not previously taken a class in an online modality and are not yet familiar with GCU's state-of-the-art online learning management system, LoudCloud, the Student Success team has you covered.

Walk to Class student-led webinars will introduce all incoming students to LoudCloud. Students will learn how to access their classes, submit assignments, post Discussion Question responses and explore different areas of LoudCloud so they are comfortable using the system when classes begin Sept. 8. Students will be able to ask questions in real time during the webinar and build connections and support right away.

We will also do extensive outreach to students during their first few weeks of the semester to ensure they are supported and know how to access the resources. The Student Success team did this last spring when GCU classes moved online after spring break, making sure students felt comfortable with the transition.

GCU's extensive academic support centers will be available Day 1 of classes (Sept. 8), including the Academic & Career Excellence Centers, Math Center, Writing Center, English Language Learners Center, Science Center, Theology Commons and Library. Support areas will provide virtual academic and career support, by appointment, through Career Connections. If face-to-face appointments are required, personal protective equipment, physical distancing, sanitation guidelines and capacity limits will be incorporated.

Faculty will also have virtual office hours to assist students and should be the starting point for any academic/college/career question.

Virtual college kickoff events will be held during the third week of the semester to help students connect to their respective colleges and better understand the academic clubs, activities and engagement opportunities available to them.

### **Family Weekend**

This event, traditionally scheduled in October, will be moved to the spring semester.

### **Thanksgiving week**

In order to complete the semester by Dec. 18, classes will be held on Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday of Thanksgiving week. Students are highly encouraged to remain on campus during the ensuing four-day break and avoid travel to other parts of the country, which can lead to spread of the coronavirus. Holiday meals and activities will be planned on campus during the break. GCU is encouraging all students to understand their home state's strict travel rules, as students may have to serve a 14-day quarantine, impacting your ability to return to campus.

### **Veterans Day**

In order to complete the semester by Dec. 18, classes will be held on Veterans Day, which falls on Wednesday, Nov. 11.

### **Flu season**

In-person classes in the fall will overlap with the beginning of flu season in Arizona. Flu vaccines will be readily available for students, and GCU's detailed health and safety precautions being utilized to combat COVID-19 will also help to minimize the spread of the flu.

### **Financial aid**

Students should see very little impact by the change of start date. Loan periods will be adjusted to the new start date and disbursement dates will be adjusted accordingly.

### **In closing**

Academically, GCU is recognized nationally as a leader in advanced learning technologies and has the flexibility to adapt quickly to both online and on-campus classroom modalities. We are confident the modified academic calendar will be a seamless transition as we blend these two learning environments within the shared LoudCloud system.

Spiritually and socially, the Christian community is the heart of GCU. We understand that students are excited to get back to campus with their friends or embark on their college journey as new GCU students. We believe these modifications to the academic calendar will better enable us to create the safest environment we can while also better replicating the on-campus community atmosphere that GCU is known for.

We are very excited about the on-campus environment our students will experience this semester and continue to work very hard to maximize the beautiful campus, facilities and Arizona's ideal climate in October, November and December.

We look forward to seeing everyone on campus soon!