Western Carolina University and the Jackson County Department of Public Health have identified a cluster of 17 active COVID-19 cases involving WCU students residing in Harrill Hall. A cluster is defined by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services as a minimum of five cases with illness onsets or initial positive results within a 14-day period and plausible epidemiologic linkage between cases. Please read this message in its entirety for important information.

Western Carolina University and public health authorities will not identify any individual patients, and we will not provide information that may compromise their confidentiality. While these steps are outlined in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), it is also a matter of personal safety because individuals can become targeted, threatened or harassed should this information be shared.

“We expected there to be cases related to our campus as more than 9,000 students returned for residential in-person instruction this fall,” said Kelli R. Brown, WCU chancellor. “We have extensive protocols in place and will continue to execute our quarantine and isolation procedures.”

University personnel are working in conjunction with the Jackson County Department of Public Health to identify individuals who may be close contacts. Persons who have been in close contact have been instructed to quarantine and will be provided with testing during their time of isolation. A close contact is defined as someone who has been within six feet of an infected person for more than 15 minutes.

“Public health is a shared responsibility – and it is one that we take seriously,” Brown said. “We’ve implemented a series of standards including a mask mandate, lowering classroom density, extensive PPE and cleaning procedures and many other protocols through our [Catamounts Care](https://www.wcu.edu/operations-procedures/community-standards.aspx) initiative. Additionally, we have erected outdoor tents throughout campus for student, faculty and staff use. We continue to evaluate conditions that may influence our ability to deliver residential operations.”

WCU is prepared for many possible scenarios if local conditions warrant, including a change of instructional modalities, and is strongly encouraging the WCU campus community to continue embracing the Catamounts Care prevention strategies – avoiding mass gatherings, wearing face coverings, practice physical distancing, etc. – for a successful semester.

WCU is reporting COVID-19 cases on campus at [info.wcu.edu/COVIDreporting](http://info.wcu.edu/COVIDreporting).

After today, the university will share information about COVID-19 clusters exclusively on the [WCU Coronavirus](https://www.wcu.edu/coronavirus/index.aspx) website and on the university social media handles. Today’s message will be our only use of the Emergency Notification system to report clusters. This communications strategy in no way diminishes the university’s sense of urgency in ensuring that this information is shared in a timely, transparent and accessible fashion. The Emergency Notification system is meant to communicate the most critical and urgent information for the safety of the campus, and the university is following best practices in its use.

WCU Public Safety