



News Release

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Most Ridgewater students shifting to distance learning

WILLMAR and HUTCHINSON, MN - Given the growing rate of COVID-19 cases in the region surrounding Ridgewater College and its campuses in Willmar and Hutchinson, Ridgewater is shifting nearly all current on-campus students to remote/online delivery beginning Monday, November 30.

Since the start of the semester on August 24, just 6% of students – nearly all in hands-on, technical programs, science labs or art experiences - have been attending courses in fully face-to-face classes or labs.

With the expanded Ridgewater remote/online curriculum delivery beginning November 30, even fewer current students will have any in-person classes or labs, with many coming to campus as minimally as just a few days to finish the semester. Only a small percent of students learning hands-on skills with specialized equipment will be the exception, including those who are near graduation or completing certifications.

Samples of on-campus experiences have included Veterinary Technology students working with animals, Machine Tool students programming manufacturing machines, and Nursing students practicing patient care with simulation equipment. Most general education courses have been online since March.

“We anticipate that the pandemic situation will worsen rather than improve heading into the end of the semester and following the Thanksgiving holiday break,” said Ridgewater College President Craig Johnson.

Since August, in addition to fully face-to-face instruction on campus, about 38% of Ridgewater students have been enrolled in a blended/hybrid course format involving both on-campus and online instruction.

The possibility of shifting to a very minimal number of students learning on campus was anticipated by Ridgewater leadership at the start of fall semester. This reality is becoming more widespread as many secondary Minnesota schools are pivoting to distance learning and Governor Tim Walz has added more restrictions on gatherings of people in bars, restaurants, gyms, entertainment centers, and more.

While the safety and health of students and employees is driving the Ridgewater decision, other factors include the growing community spread and the strain on the regional healthcare systems, said Tressa Lukes, Ridgewater Safety Administrator.

Ridgewater administration, with input from faculty, identified a small number of specific courses or labs that will have some face-to-face instruction beyond November 30, including courses in Agriculture, automotive programs, Electrician, Nondestructive Testing, Welding, and Machine Tool.

“By making this decision now, prior to Thanksgiving, we believe it provides the best opportunity for all of our students to complete the semester,” said Mike Kutzke, Vice President of Student Success. “It also gives faculty and students time to prepare for the transition.”

Ridgewater’s campuses will continue to be open for campus visits and tours by appointment, although strict safety protocols will continue to be followed. Essential services for students also remain accessible, including library and internet access. The campuses will remain open for essential services over the semester break, but the libraries will be closed during this time.

As of November 11, Ridgewater had reported having 44 student cases of COVID-19 and 7 employee cases since the semester started in late August. Throughout the entire Minnesota State system of 36 colleges and the system office, there have been 296 employee cases and 2424 student cases.

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Ridgewater College is a community and technical college with campuses in the central Minnesota communities of Willmar and Hutchinson. The college serves more than 5,000 students through its nearly 100 academic programs and more than 68,000 training hours for individuals and businesses through customized training and continuing education. The college is a member of Minnesota State and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Minnesota State includes 30 community and technical colleges and 7 state universities serving approximately 340,000 students. It is the third largest system of two-year colleges and four-year universities in the United States.

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