

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



The Waiting Game Inside one college town's fragile, high-stakes fall

MIKE BELLEME FOR THE CHRONICLE

Students gather in groups near the student union at Appalachian State U.

REOPENING

By *Sarah Brown and Emma Pettit*

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Boone, N.C.

On a Friday afternoon outside the student union at Appalachian State University, college students did what college students do. They loafed. They carried Frisbees to toss. They mostly ignored a maskless preacher shouting about sinners and salvation.

It was August 21, the end of the first week of classes, and the atmosphere seemed almost normal. Almost.

Signs implored people to wash hands, socially distance, and wear a mask. Most students on campus did so, though some weren't doing it quite right. A team of wellness ambassadors under a tent handed out university-branded face coverings and directed passersby to "pull your mask over your nose!"

For the university's leaders, this had been the plan all along. Since April, Appalachian State, like every institution in the University of North Carolina system, had been planning for students to return to campus — which, according to App State, was what students and parents wanted. Fulfilling that goal safely would mean building what was essentially a new Appalachian, Sheri N. Everts, the chancellor, told the Board of Trustees in June.

By that Friday in August, Everts could claim a small victory. There were [55 active Covid-19 cases](#) among students, and a cluster linked to the football team had halted practice for a few days. But unlike the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University, App State hadn't been forced to switch to online learning. Everts told the campus community that she had heard from many people "commending our university's response to Covid-19 and highlighting the tremendous efforts of our staff, faculty, and leaders."

For many, though, life here felt fragile. Professors were doing their best to weather the first week of classes, all the while waiting for the online-only shoe to drop. Some stewed over why the university had to reactivate campus in the first place. Many students were happy to be back, but others felt uneasy. With limited campus activities, some students holed up in their rooms. They had packed light, as the university had told them to. A few had already decided it was easier, and safer, to flee.

Local residents tried to plan for what would happen if students left and what might happen if they stayed. Those with businesses in town always counted on students to keep them in the black. But some locals also feared a bad-enough outbreak would overwhelm the rural county's hospital.

The fall semester was afoot in the Blue Ridge Mountains, as it is in college towns across the country. If they're anything like Boone, the coming weeks may offer an object lesson in what it's like — and what it costs — to teach, learn, and live wondering what lurks around the corner.



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Clark Maddux, professor and director of Watauga Residential College at Appalachian State U.

Before Clark Maddux fielded questions from students who populated his Zoom screen, he wanted them to know a simple truth: He cared. “I’m not being dishonest when I say I love each and every one of you,” Maddux said, his voice low and slow.

It was Thursday of the first week of classes, and he was holding court inside his office, painted burnt orange and filled with books on early America. A mug with the slogan “Redneck Liberal” held pens on his desk. His audience was about a dozen quiet students,

who seemed anxious as they joined the Zoom call from their dorm rooms. Maddux leaned forward in his chair to assure them: As long as they were here on campus, he'd be here, too.

Now in his seventh year as director of Watauga Residential College at Appalachian State, Maddux, a professor of interdisciplinary studies, is in charge of the hundreds of students who've made the college their home. Normally, the building is abuzz with activity. But these are not normal times. During the first week of classes, lounges were mostly dark. Hallways were quiet as students who had just arrived stayed in their rooms to avoid unnecessary contact. Seeing the college this empty broke his heart.

But Maddux, like many of his colleagues, hadn't wanted to see the hallways populated at all.

All summer, members of the Faculty Senate questioned the administration's plans for the fall semester. In May the Senate passed a resolution urging the university to seek alternatives to in-person instruction. Already, it seemed unsafe to welcome back thousands of students to their small mountain town.

Though they sounded that alarm early, some faculty members doubted the college would heed it. Some, like Martha McCaughey, a sociology professor and vice chair of the Senate, thought [shared governance](#) had already broken down and decisions were being communicated after the fact. Merit raises that Everts announced in 2019 were walked back in March because of Covid-19, the *Watauga Democrat* [reported](#). Other faculty members had questioned Everts's enrollment goals, worrying that they would jeopardize the hands-on, intimate learning environment the university is known for, *The Chronicle* previously [reported](#).

Then, over the summer months, faculty senators pressed administrators for answers about how much autonomy they would have to teach in the way they wanted, and got responses that felt "unforthcoming," said Michael C. Behrent, the Senate's president. It wasn't an entirely black box, he granted. Faculty members were involved in decisions on syllabus statements and tenure-clock extensions. But in general, Behrent said, the faculty's input was confined to narrowly focused issues of teaching, not making big decisions. It also felt as if

the administration was at times not willing to make decisions until it had received “guidance” from the system, he said.

A spokesperson for Appalachian State pointed out that Everts, Heather Hulburt Norris, the interim provost, and Paul D. Forte, the vice chancellor for business affairs, had met with Senate committees and with the full Senate regularly throughout the summer. Everts and Norris also invited the members of every academic department and many staff departments to meet with them multiple times in open Q&A sessions.

In early July, Everts and Norris acknowledged faculty members’ many concerns and attempted to answer their questions as best they could in a [long letter to the professoriate](#). They recognized that faculty members might want to give more input, and they had begun meeting with all 43 academic departments to hear directly from instructors. They explained that moving to all-online instruction would take an economic toll on employees and Boone residents, and it’d be irresponsible to ignore that reality.

This is “a messy process,” they wrote, “complicated by many factors beyond our control.”

The letter did little to quell the concerns of worried faculty members. Dozens of instructors signed [an open letter](#) to App State students, telling them to stay away. The university’s plans for contact tracing, testing, and quarantine were “good policies,” they wrote, but “they are not enough.”

Then *NC Policy Watch* [reported](#) that the UNC Board of Governors’ chairman had ordered Appalachian State, along with the system’s 15 other colleges, to submit plans to reduce their budgets by 25 to 50 percent. Chancellors would not be able to decide whether to close their campuses due to Covid-19. That call would be made by the system’s incoming president and the board itself.

Faculty leaders wrestled with what to do. Some felt the blame lay with the Board of Governors and the state legislature, which elects board members, not Everts. Others thought the buck stopped with the chancellor, that she’d isolated herself from valuable insight and was not advocating for the best interests of the university.

With the fall semester upon them, the stakes were too high, they felt, to back down. On the same day classes began, the Senate voted no confidence in Everts. The vote wasn't unanimous, Behrent said, but it wasn't a nail-biter. (In July, App State's Board of Trustees passed a resolution of confidence in Everts.)

For Maddux, voting no confidence was a difficult decision. His department wasn't unanimously against Everts.

But he said students who felt as if the chancellor had ignored their concerns about safety and racism on campus had made it clear they wanted the faculty to speak for them. As an "old soldier" who served in the U.S. Army for 12 years, mostly in Germany, Maddux believes that authority flows down the chain of command, but responsibility flows up. Out of a sense of duty to the students, he voted no confidence.

The pandemic has forced Maddux to make more than one difficult choice. His 92-year-old father — once a circuit-riding missionary who now has Parkinson's disease and lung problems caused by years spent in the Dust Bowl — lives in town. Maddux knows what could happen if he picked up the virus. But ultimately, he chose to teach in person. He'd be around for his students if and when they needed him.



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Plastic-wrapped furniture in a classroom at Appalachian State U. is meant to keep students socially distant.

He also chose to be a plaintiff in a [lawsuit](#) against the entire UNC system that attempted to postpone the start of classes, claiming that bringing students back to the campuses put employees at heightened risk of contracting Covid-19.

On the afternoon Zoom call in his office, a student thanked Maddux for going public. If there's a lesson to learn, he replied, it's that it might be scary to speak out, but sometimes it's what you need to do.

Other professors performed their own sort of ethical calculus in deciding whether to come back in person. That morning, Joseph J. Gonzalez gave a pad of paper to the freshmen in his class "Democracy: An Owner's Manual," telling them to draw what they wanted their undergraduate experience to look like. One student drew Covid-19 as a hurdle to get over on

her path of self-improvement. Another student plastered his sheet with question marks and squiggly lines of confusion.

Gonzalez, an associate professor of interdisciplinary studies, respects the choices of high-risk colleagues to teach online. But he explained, his voice slightly muffled by a face mask, that he had decided to try to teach in person. He knew that if students' fees weren't paid, housing and dining employees' jobs would be on the line.

Not all instructors saw the stakes so starkly. B.J. Yoblinski, an associate professor of chemistry, said he's the "polar opposite" of colleagues who wanted the fall semester to be online. Immunocompromised students and those who were uncomfortable should stay home, he said. But life, he continued, is not free of risks.

To many Appalachian State faculty members concerned about their health, though, or at least the health of their community, it felt as if the university's best-laid plans wouldn't be adequate to keep everyone safe.



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Professor Laura Gambrel picks up two of her children from the day-care center near her office on campus.

In early August, nine people tested positive for Covid-19 after an outbreak at an on-campus day-care center. Families and employees of the center were notified immediately, and the center was temporarily closed, the university said. But App State didn't send out a broader communication about the incident, which troubled Laura Gambrel, an associate professor in the marriage- and family-therapy program.

Gambrel's three children attend the campus's other child-care facility. Her office is nearby. She's teaching in person. So when an outbreak occurred, there wasn't "this boundary" between it and the rest of campus, she said. "I don't trust that the administration will give me the information I need to keep my kids safe."

Megan E. Hayes, chief communication officer, said in an emailed statement that the university works with the regional health department to provide updates on active and

cumulative cases. The outbreak at the center was reported by that department to the community using its standard reporting process, she said.

Hayes also answered questions about the outbreak at a Faculty Senate meeting, and later discussed with a senator suggestions for changes in the reporting procedure, she said. Many of those changes have since been carried out, Hayes said.

On the first Friday of the semester, Gambrel was anxious. She was trying to get ahead as much as possible on her work, so that when the day-care center closed or the university flipped online, she'd be at least somewhat prepared.

A storm seemed imminent. But there was no telling when it would strike, or how bad it would be.



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Nicholas Daly, a senior, says his three in-person classes have been “one long panic attack.”

Nicholas Daly didn't have high hopes going into the fall semester. "I've been expecting wrong for a while," said Daly, a senior history major. On the first day of classes, he walked into a windowless room and found himself surrounded by more than 20 of his peers. He'd have to sit there, in the basement of an old academic building, for three hours. The thought was overwhelming.

While many chairs were wrapped in plastic so that only two students could sit at each four-person table, someone was right behind him. When they pushed their chairs back to stand up, the other student was "a foot from my face," Daly said.

In that class, on African American history, participation and attendance were 20 percent of his grade, he said. So every Monday, he'd have to be there. His other in-person class met upstairs twice a week. (At the first meeting, Daly said, that professor told the class that three students were out because they were experiencing potential Covid-19 symptoms.)

According to the university, 22 percent of courses were being taught in person, 47 percent were being taught remotely, and 31 percent were a hybrid of face to face and online.

Daly felt that students had been brought back under false pretenses — because App State needed their tuition dollars and because preserving the football season would satisfy fans and donors. He didn't think students should be on campus at all. So as he sat in the student union, he couldn't help but see what was lacking. This table, he noted, was the only one that seemed six feet away from the others in that seating area.

And he wasn't seeing much enforcement of Covid-19 rules. For instance, students were supposed to complete a health questionnaire before coming to campus each day. That morning, out of curiosity, he hadn't filled it out before his class. Nothing happened, he said.

Fliers on the walls of classroom buildings warned against congregating in the hallways, but Daly had seen plenty of it already. But that wasn't the students' fault, he said. If they showed up a few minutes early for class, where else were they supposed to go? Hayes, the university spokesperson, wrote in an email that "there are a lot of new policies and procedures for students to be aware of" and that for most people, "a friendly reminder" would do the trick.

Daly wasn't worried about just his own risk. He's from Boone, and his mom drives him to campus. She frequently visits his dad in a nearby nursing home. Daly could easily imagine the worst-case scenario.

"All three of my classes have been one long panic attack," he said. Did he learn anything? He shrugged. He said he couldn't focus.

Not all students felt that nervous. Sean Riordan, a freshman sitting at a picnic table outside Watauga Residential College, said he was trying to spend as much time away from his room as possible, exercising and hanging out at the pool tables in the union. Sure, he said, there were risks on campus. But he believed students could keep themselves safe by making the right choices.

Whatever their view on how the semester was going so far, most students expected it to be weird. And it was. Some had moved to Boone only to learn that all of their classes would be online. One described a feeling among some students that, when they came home from classes, they had to strip down and "wash" the campus off before doing anything else.



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A student studies in the campus library near chairs stacked to limit the number of people in the room.

Most students interviewed by *The Chronicle* thought their professors were trying their best at a chaotic time. But the uncertainty about how classes were supposed to work frustrated some of them. “You don’t know when they’re meeting. You don’t know when assignments are due. Who is supposed to be on Zoom today?” one student said of her only hybrid class. She dropped it the first week.

An online training session required by the university told students that indoor gatherings were limited to 10. So why, some wondered, were they sitting in classrooms of 20 or 30? (Hayes said the state’s executive order on mass gatherings didn’t apply to educational institutions.)

Amid the unusual, there was also the predictable. By midnight one Friday, a house party could be easily seen and heard from the edge of campus. Familiar sounds came from inside: voices talking over loud music and bouncing Ping-Pong balls. At around 12:30 a.m., two cars

pulled up, and 10 more people spilled out. One guy rolled out of the trunk holding a pack of beer.

The scene was a reminder of one of the biggest challenges of the fall semester in every college community: persuading students not to party off campus. An official with the Boone police department said it was working with the university to discourage large gatherings and using a three-strikes rule — education, written warning, then criminal charges.

A lot of students, though, needed no convincing. Like Sianna Gutschick, a sophomore. “I know frat guys. They’re like, Hey, come to our party,” she said. “I’m like, Uh, no. I don’t think that would be very smart of me.” Gutschick, one of the university’s wellness ambassadors, walked around campus one Friday handing out Appalachian State face coverings and rewarding students who were properly socially distancing with \$5 gift cards. So far, she felt safe on campus. At night, she said, she and her roommate “watch a lot of *Criminal Minds*.”

With in-person extracurricular options so limited, Colbie Lofton, a junior, said her organizations were trying to get creative. The Black Student Association, for instance, was about to host a drive-in movie screening. Lofton is also part of an activist collective called [Black at App State](#), which is using social-media and email campaigns to push administrators to adopt a list of [demands](#), including mandatory anti-bias training for all faculty and staff members and new hires who were more diverse.

For the past two years, such campus involvement had been Lofton’s stress relief. This semester, with nearly all her meetings happening virtually, she has worried about how her mental health would fare. And she’s worried about her peers. On Zoom calls, she kept telling them: *Your mental health matters. Take care of yourselves. Tell me if you need anything.* While Lofton felt as if she was taking a risk every time she rode the bus to campus, she also wondered what would happen to her two campus jobs if the university moved all classes online.

The uncertainty and stress of the spring, when the pandemic hit, was palpable again. Students wondered: Is it safe here? Will we be sent home? Izzy Stoneback decided not to

wait and see. The freshman left campus after one week of classes.

Most of the other freshmen she knew were committed to sticking it out, she said. *We're in college! Let's enjoy it while we can.* But Stoneback wasn't enjoying any minute of it. Living in a dorm with a communal bathroom and watching her peers go to parties, she said, "I just got super-nervous, and I was like, I don't feel super-safe here." Why prolong the risk if she was going to be sent home anyway?

Yet it was also easy to imagine Appalachian State's costs of shuttering the campus. Covid-19-related expenses in the spring semester amounted to \$13.6 million. In June, 106 employees were furloughed. A custodian, who did not want to be named, told *The Chronicle* that she and her colleagues wanted to keep the students here so that everyone's job was safe. They were "tense," she said, not knowing what was going to happen.



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Downtown Boone, N.C., bustles with students newly returned to campus.

Students' return to campus has amplified town-gown tensions that have been building for decades, as the university has doubled in size, said Andrew Koricich, an associate professor of higher education. Between tourism, football, and 20,000 students, he said, the three main intersections in Boone were typically snarled with traffic every fall weekend. In July the local schools [decided to go virtual for the first nine weeks](#) of the term, citing as one factor the return of App State students and the risks they might bring.

Their arrival was good news for Seth Sullivan. Tall and bearded, like a lot of folks around here, Sullivan co-owns Lily's Snack Bar, a no-frills venue just across the street from campus where students gather for beer and food. But he wasn't about to host a bunch of drunken people on his premises all night, even though that was how the bar made its money.

Service and seating at Lily's, for now, were all outdoors. Another Boone bar, which served people indoors, had an outbreak earlier this month. And no congregating or spilling out of the patio, either; if there wasn't a seat or a table open, you had to leave. In the past, Lily's was open from midday until 2 a.m. When the bar reopened, in June, Sullivan cut the hours in half, and then some.

"The longer they're here drinking," he said, "the harder that social-distancing stuff gets."



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Seth Sullivan, co-owner of Lily's Snack Bar, which offers outside dining only

Sullivan has a family, including a new baby, at home. Many of his staff members do, too. None of them wanted to spend eight hours in a crowded indoor environment.

The pandemic had made it impossible to plan ahead much, Sullivan said, but he knew one thing: He would have to figure out what to do when the weather got cold. And, probably, he'd have to contend with Appalachian State's sending students home. "Every business owner I know assumes it'll happen at some point," he said.

Around town, opinions about students' return zigzag across the political spectrum. Off campus, the county leans red. For some, coronavirus wasn't a top concern. "I'd rather have freedom than safety," said one seller at the Saturday farmers' market who believed mask-wearing requirements had gone too far. RKie Clark, a retired accountant who described himself as a "damn independent," thought Appalachian State should be open. Shutting

things down didn't strike him as a good use of time, he said, as he balanced on the porch of the Hickory Ridge History Museum's gift shop, near the market.

But others thought it was irresponsible for Appalachian State to bring its students back. Deborah Tallarico, a licensed counselor who was selling her art at the market, stood behind a transparent barrier and wore a non-medical-grade N95 mask.

Tallarico saw a potential bright side. The virus had become such a deeply politicized issue, she said. Maybe, once more locals saw Covid-19 outbreaks among students, they'd come around to the idea that the pandemic was a real thing. "We're having this experiment where we're bringing everyone together, and it's happening," she said.

Of course, it was a pretty high-stakes experiment. Tallarico used to work as a nurse at Watauga Medical Center, which has the county's lone emergency room. The hospital, which normally has 10 intensive-care beds, [added](#) some isolation space last spring. But she could easily see how a Covid-19 outbreak on campus would overwhelm the small staff there.



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Deborah Tallarico, an artist, works at her stand at the Saturday farmers' market in Boone.

Some local workers also worried about what they'd do if students' return led to a wider outbreak in the community. Outside of campus, Watauga County is [a relatively low-income area](#), and most people can't just take two weeks off with no consequences, said Markus Prescott, a hot-bar cook at Earth Fare, the closest grocery store to campus.

Prescott, who'd just gotten off a Saturday shift, ran through a possible scenario: If he started showing symptoms, he'd have to call out of work, get a test, and wait four to five days at home for its results. If he tested positive, that could be 20 days of missed work. He wouldn't be able to pay his rent and other bills.

There were many unknowns. App State could make it through an unprecedented semester without a major incident, perhaps beginning to restore the trust of some faculty members and students. Or more clusters could emerge, and the university could send students home,

as three other UNC campuses have done already. If that happened, tourism could dry up. Local businesses could fold. Other dominoes could fall.

That Saturday, one thing seemed certain, at least to Shane Watson: Students would continue to act like students. They would socialize, and the virus would spread.

Watson, an Appalachian State alum, is from Boone. He spent his Saturday in Revolutionary War-era garb as he and fellow actors role-played what life was like in 18th-century America.

When he's not re-enacting, Watson works at Lowes Foods, a grocery store. He thinks Covid-19 cases will continue to rise.

Why?

He'd sold five kegs already.

If you have questions or concerns about this article, please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

FACULTY LIFE

LEADERSHIP

STUDENT LIFE



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Sarah Brown joined *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2015, where as a daily reporter her field of coverage includes student life, campus racial tensions, sexual assault and harassment, and state higher-education policy. Her bylines have been in *The New York Times* and other newspapers, and she makes regular broadcast media appearances for *The Chronicle*.



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