

From: Senior Vice President for Student Affairs Marc Wais marc.wais@nyu.edu
Subject: COVID-related Letter to Students from Marc Wais, VP, Student Affairs
Date: March 17, 2020 at 12:25 PM
To:



Dear Students,

We hear you. We know our letter of yesterday upset some of you, and some parents as well.

I'd like to share with you the thinking behind our decision-making, and provide some clarification based on feedback we have gotten as well as new developments, namely 1) that **we are now offering a choice between having your possessions shipped or left locked in your room** and 2) that **we only want students who are in day-trip range to return to campus to pack up their possessions**. Those who are further away or who have medical concerns should consider staying away and following the instructions below concerning their effects.

Every day, the University is checking in with public health authorities for guidance, and scrutinizing COVID-19-related events locally and around the world. In the last handful of days, a lot has changed: the New Rochelle coronavirus case has continued to spread, **including within our own community**; Broadway plays, restaurants, and bars were ordered to shut down; the Governor asked for the assistance of the military; Italy had 400 coronavirus deaths in a single day; large gatherings have been prohibited; new travel restrictions have been imposed, and the possibility of domestic travel restrictions has surfaced; grocery stores are having trouble stocking items; and the New York City school system, which the Mayor had planned to close only as a last resort because of its potential for disruption to so many New Yorkers lives (including health workers and emergency responders), was shut, with the Mayor saying, "This is not something in a million years I could have imagined having to do."

Moreover, city life itself has changed: streets are empty, newsstands and other businesses that rely on commuters and foot-traffic are closed, ridership on mass transit is way down. And the reality is, New York is only at the beginning of its struggle with this virus. We can look to Europe to get a sense of what yet may come. And today there are reports that there may be a directive from the City to shelter in place coming soon.

I tell you this not to scare you with an apocalyptic view of New York, but to give you a sense of the signs and indicators University leadership was looking at as we made yesterday's decision. Frankly, we had held out the hope that we would be able to reconvene and resume in-person classes later this semester, but developments portended otherwise.

The short version is: for reasons of your safety and health, and the need to restrict the spread of the virus, we needed as many of our students as possible to leave the city. There is a growing health issue in New York, and the possibility of travel restrictions looms.

So, why ask you to empty your rooms? Why raise the possibility of your returning to New York for that purpose? And why not just have you leave your possessions in your room?

Let me break that down for you.

First, a lot of students—more than is customary—remained in the residence halls during spring break. We had counted on students departing as usual. In addition, we had indications that many students planned to return to campus following spring break, notwithstanding the fact that we anticipated—and wanted—students to carry on their coursework from home. Altogether, this was the opposite of what we were needed.

We want students to go home and stay at home for their own safety and the safety of others. And for those who are here and those who are nearby, spring break week seems like a better, less disruptive time to pack up and head home than a week when classes are being held. And there is a reason for asking students to do it quickly, too (within 48 hours, if possible): in the near future, things are going to get worse rather than better as time goes on.

And, let me remind you, we have offered to pack up students' belongings if they cannot or don't wish to return to

And, let me remind you, we have offered to pack up students' belongings if they cannot or don't wish to return to New York.

The reasons we want the rooms clear are based on both short-term and long-term rationales.

First, in the short term, we believe students should return home. We believe that in most cases this course of action is safer for you.

Second, there are significant indications that the State, as part of its contingency planning, is looking at university dormitories as settings for overflow beds from hospitals grappling with a potentially overwhelming numbers of sick patients, and there are other medically-related contingencies for which they are also being eyed.

NYU has an institutional responsibility to help if things come to that here in the city. It will go a lot less well if student possessions remain in the rooms. Let me put it this way: for those of you still here (or within a day-trip) and in a position to pack up your room, your willingness to do so is potentially an important contribution to health measures that may come later. And however distasteful, imperfect, and complicated it may seem to have the University arrange to have your belongings packed up and shipped to you, I can assure you that it will go a lot better now than if we have to respond hastily to an emergency situation.

Third, longer-term, we continue to hold out the hope that we will have summer session, and we are certainly planning at this point to resume classes as usual come fall. Rooms need to be cleared and cleaned for that to happen. Getting this accomplished now, when we have more time, is better than trying to figure out something later.

All of this is, I grant you, an imperfect situation; however, it is a difficult and extremely fast-changing set of circumstances that we are confronting.

Notwithstanding the fact that some of the most drastic steps—some of the measures that weighed most heavily on our decision-making about the future of the semester—have come in the last handful of days, I know that some of you may feel that the University should have anticipated this decision earlier.

Nonetheless, I can promise you that it is **not** the case that NYU knew all along that it was going to end up here. We communicated as quickly as we could after making the decision so you would have as much of spring break week as possible to make arrangements to pack up your room. Moreover, over the past six weeks we have done our best to provide the NYU community with timely information.

So, where do we go from here? As I said, we have heard your concerns. They mostly center around a few matters:

- Students having to fly or otherwise travel long distances back to campus to collect their belongings
- The possibility of leaving your possessions in your room
- Provisions for international students and any other students with extraordinary circumstances or nowhere to go

Given developments overnight and the feedback, here's how we would clarify how you should proceed:

- **Students currently in the residence halls (ie, those who did not leave for spring break) should pack up their rooms and leave by tomorrow, March 18:** For students who have remained in the residence halls during the break, you should leave by tomorrow, unless you receive an exemption. While we recognize it is a burden, we don't think it is an insurmountable one. The timetable is on a par with what has been asked of students at other universities. **DON'T WAIT.** We will be closing and locking residence halls as soon as possible, preferably by March 20, and no later than March 22.
- **Students who are not currently on campus but live relatively nearby—eg, who can pick up their belongings as a day-trip with a car—may return to pack up their rooms:** They should do so as quickly as possible, but not later than March 22. They should **NOT** make plans to stay overnight.
- **Students not currently on campus and who would have to come from a long distance should NOT return to campus, even to pack up their belongings in student housing.** We assume that, as we directed last week, those of you who left, took your valuables and all that was necessary to carry on your coursework with you. With regard to the remainder of your possessions, you can elect either:
 - **To have your possessions packed up and shipped to you:** Some students have expressed their reluctance to have strangers pack up their possessions for reasons of privacy and because of the complexities of identifying what belongs to whom. We understand. The alternative is:

- **To leave your possessions locked in your room and retrieve them at some later appropriate date:** We understand the appeal of this option. And there is no certainty that your room will have to be used for another purpose. **However**, we want you to understand the downside: if you choose this option, you must be prepared that, in the event of a State-mandated or other emergency condition that requires your room to be made available as part of a health response, your possessions will be swept up with everyone else's in the room. If it is at all possible at that time to arrange for storage, NYU will strive to do so. Students who wish to avail themselves of the option to have their belongings locked in their room to retrieve at a later date will be asked to sign a waiver; those not signing the waiver will have their possessions packed up and shipped to them, as proposed.
- **International students, students facing unanticipated financial challenges, and other students at risk:** I can assure you that we are deeply concerned about all the students who are particularly vulnerable to issues caused by these recent decisions, and we recognize that they present special circumstances on several levels. As we made clear in yesterday's communication, we will be granting exceptions for some students to remain in housing; international students should fill out the **exception form** and identify themselves and their concerns, and we will give those applications special attention. Students with other extraordinary circumstances should also fill out the form so that we may address your concerns. Those with unanticipated financial challenges should **complete this form to apply for emergency aid**.

I hope this gives you a fuller picture. Just as is true at so many other universities, no one at NYU either wanted or expected to find ourselves in this position. But, here we are, and we have to make the best decisions we can to keep you safe and well. As difficult and disruptive as this is, we know we can rely on you to rise to the challenge.

Take care and stay safe. For the most up-to-date information, look to the **NYU coronavirus information and resource page**. Those feeling ill should contact the **Student Health Center**. And for those who are feeling stressed by COVID-19 or responses to it, please don't hesitate to **contact the Wellness Exchange**.

Sincerely,

Marc Wais
Sr. Vice President for Student Affairs

