ADVERTISEMENT
Creativity from women
inspires creativity
in women.
Creativity for all.
Adobe
Explore their work
Malika FAVRE
Jordan MOSS
Rose Marie CROMWELL

The New College Drop-Off

A bittersweet family tradition has become an exercise in risk assessment, logistics and trying to understand ever-changing rules.

Matthew and Audrey Lorence outside their home in Needham, Mass. Their parents, Jean and Mark, are struggling to best get the college students — Matthew, a junior at New York University, and Audrey, a first-year at the University of Pittsburgh — to school. Younger siblings Meredith and Luke usually take part in this family tradition. No dice this year. Katherine Taylor for The New York Times

By Julie Weed

Published July 29, 2020 Updated July 31, 2020

6

CORONAVIRUS SCHOOLS BRIEFING: *The pandemic is upending education. Get the latest news and tips as students go back to school.*

Sign Up

Maureen Rayhill of Seattle sounds like a public health official as she describes the current process for coronavirus testing, rattling off research she's done on in-person testing centers versus mail-order companies and how their turnaround times for results compare. But she's not. She's a mother, just trying to get her oldest child to college.

The poignant annual tradition of college drop-off — parents driving the new, nervous college student to school, bringing along brothers and sisters to see their sibling's new home, setting up the tiny dorm room together, sharing one last meal with the entire family, then waving goodbye as the almost-adult runs off with a big pack of possible new best friends — has become the latest family milestone rendered almost unrecognizable by the coronavirus pandemic.

Ms. Rayhill, 49, has already canceled the family vacation in Maine that she had dreamed of taking before bringing Corrigan to Colby College in Waterville next month. Instead, the retired nurse and homemaker is frantically caught up with how to get a virus test done within 72 hours of departure to meet the Maine state requirements, when current test results are taking up to five days to be returned.

"It's nothing like what we thought it would be," she says.

The drop-off has always been a momentous trip, fraught with strong emotions felt by parents and children alike. Now pile on the additional stress of Covid-19. Families need to navigate how to best get to campus while minimizing their exposure to the virus, all while trying to adhere to changing and often confusing school and state health, safety and travel rules.

ADVERTISEMENT

“When we dropped off my son three years ago, the whole family went and it was this bittersweet fun event for us all,” said Mark Lorence of Needham, Mass., as he recalled the first trip to leave his oldest son, Matthew, at New York University. This fall will likely see Mr. Lorence, 58, driving down to New York, with masks and food from home, and back again in one day. “Now we have Plan A, B and C, depending on what’s going on.”

Randy Dunbar, a father trying to coordinate the cross-country trip for his daughter, Alex, from Colorado to North Carolina, echoed the sentiment.

Give the gift they'll open every day.
Subscriptions to The Times. Starting at €20.

“It’s supposed to be a time to contemplate this great goodbye,” he said. “But I’m thinking, ‘Where am I allowed to park?’”

Corrigan Rayhill in Seattle, packing for Colby College.
Reeny Rayhill

Logistics at the state, college and personal level

Complications and confusion come way before those campus gates. Nearly half of the country’s states currently have statewide travel restrictions, with various degrees of self-quarantines orders — encouraged, strongly encouraged, mandatory — not to mention suggested or required testing. Some counties, metro areas or municipalities have issued their own rules for travelers.

ADVERTISEMENT

New York is one of many states with extremely strict travel policies, requiring anyone traveling from Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C., and 34 other states — those with high infection rates — to self-quarantine for 14 days.

Jennifer Overholt of Menlo Park, Calif., 56, said she paged through screen after screen of quarantine-related comments and questions on a Facebook page for parents of students attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., where her son, Cole Mediratta, will go for his sophomore year.

“There’s worry and concern,” said Ms. Overholt, a nonprofit executive. First-year parents, who already had questions, like whether rice cookers are allowed in dorm rooms, are now wondering where their child will be quarantined if they test positive for the virus.

Two questions about travel bubbled up again and again. Does a 14-day quarantine mean that if you arrive in New York, you have to stay for 14 days? (No, you can leave anytime, but must quarantine the whole time you are in the state.) Do you have to quarantine if your home state is not on the restricted list, but you drive through a hot zone state on the way to New York? (Not as long as you spent fewer than 24 hours in hot zone states.)

“It was kind of overwhelming, so I stopped looking,” she said.

Parents are discovering that, regardless of what guidelines are posted, policies are changing with new data and little notice almost daily. Washington, D.C., home to around 20 colleges and universities, announced last Friday that beginning this Monday, travelers coming into the city from a high-risk area need to self-quarantine for 14 days. This group includes students. The only silver lining: Travel that brings people into the area for less than 24 hours is allowed, so parents can drop-off students. No lingering.

The area's schools are now determining how to comply. The order is so new and has such broad implications that colleges did not immediately specify how they would respond. A spokeswoman at Georgetown University, Ruth McBain, wrote in an email that officials were reviewing the new order and would ensure that the schools reopening plan would comply with the district's guidance.

But families across the country are waiting for details to be finalized.

Mr. Dunbar, a management consultant who will be taking his daughter from their home in Boulder, Colo., to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, said he's already had to change their flights three times as Alex's move-in dates shifted. His wife, Shawna, he said, spends about an hour a day scanning the school's website for new information and comparing plans with friends who are also sending offspring to college.

ADVERTISEMENT

They are laser-focused on the latest updates from other schools, Mr. Dunbar, 57, said, "because it seems like when one rolls out a new policy, others follow it."

Other parents may have their offspring around the house a bit longer.

Mr. Lorence, the management consultant from Needham, Mass., expected to drop off Matthew at New York University in August. But just last week Matthew decided to stay home until October. His classes are all online, and his musical performance was canceled. He thinks a later move-in would perhaps help him snag an apartment with reduced rent.

Meanwhile, the Lorences' oldest daughter, Audrey, will be a first-year student at University of Pittsburgh. For her drop-off in mid-August, the entire family (Mark, his wife, Jean, and younger siblings Meredith and Luke) wanted to go along for the ride. Now it will only be the parents, and they struggled on whether to stay with family in town — grandparents or an uncle's family usually host them. This year, they decided to stay in a hotel.

"Uncertainty is the word to describe it," Mr. Lorence said.

To fly or drive

Other families are deciding to fly or drive. Sure, air circulation on planes is excellent, and the journey should be shorter, but it's hard to know how full the flight will be or if flight attendants will be enforcing mask-wearing. There are also fewer nonstop flights between smaller cities, fewer flights period, and airlines have been frequently changing times and dates of flights to optimize revenues. All these headaches from the air need to be weighed against a drive that might require hours in the car, food stops and a hotel stay.

The Feder-Johnson family of Madison, Wis., typically flies to New Orleans each school year, to drop off their daughter, Nora, at Tulane University. This year, mother, father and daughter are driving the 14 hours each way. At restroom and fuel stops, Nora's mother, Elizabeth Feder, a public health researcher, will be looking to see if the people around her are taking the necessary precautions.

"If we pull into a gas station and the people there aren't wearing masks, we'll go on by to the next one," Dr. Feder, 62, said.

Louisiana has had more than 100,000 Covid cases (including a significant increase in July), so when they arrive in New Orleans, instead of exploring the sights, hearing live music and eating at favorite restaurants as they did in years past, the family plans to eat takeout and make "essential trips only" to help Nora set up her home. Household items will be ordered online and picked up curbside.

ADVERTISEMENT

Finding a hotel for their short stay has been a worry. "The websites of the national chains make the cleaning sound so thorough you could do surgery in their rooms," Ms. Feder said, but it's hard to know what a particular property is doing.

Even packing for the college student is different this year. With concerns that the virus may flare on campus and cause the school to shut down, Gina Anstey, 48, is sending her daughter Elise from Seattle to her first year at Fordham University in New York City with just two large suitcases, eschewing everything but the essentials.

Schools Reopening ›

Back to School

Updated Aug. 17, 2020

The latest on how schools are navigating the pandemic.

- Universities are struggling with how to prevent tightly packed sorority and fraternity houses from turning into virus clusters.
- After just a week of classes, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is moving all undergraduate courses online after at least 177 students tested positive.
- Mayor Bill de Blasio is facing mounting pressure from New York City's teachers, principals and even members of his own administration to delay the start of in-person instruction by several weeks.
- In poor regions across the globe where internet access is scarce, schools are turning to television to reach students, a strategy that could also help in wealthy countries.

"They might decide on a dime, 'you gotta go' and she'll have to take it all home again," said Ms. Anstey, a philanthropic consultant.

For some students, that heartbreaking scenario became real before they even arrived. On July 20, Spelman College in Atlanta made the decision to move instruction online. Just three weeks earlier the school had announced a plan to welcome students back to campus, but in that short period, the health crisis worsened. Other schools, from Occidental College in California to Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, are following suit to help ensure the safety of their students and faculty.

Get in, get settled, get out

Once on campus, forget the once-common niceties like parent orientations and let's-get-to-know-you coffees. No more chitchat with your child's new roommate and their family, or meanderings around campus to check out the new science lab.

The 19-page move-in guide issued by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill this year asks families to "leave as soon as is possible once all student belongings have been brought to their rooms." Like many other schools, it also has limits on how many helpers can enter the dorm and asks families to share the elevator with their own move-in group only.

Stores and restaurants, used to welcoming the influx of back-to-school families, are under new rules as well. North Carolina restaurants are under orders to separate tables of diners by six feet and to operate at no more than 50 percent capacity. Mr. Dunbar and Alex have decided not to dine anywhere indoors, and were relieved to learn that their favorite fried chicken on biscuits from Time Out in Chapel Hill was available for takeout.

ADVERTISEMENT

The two are avoiding going inside stores as well by ordering dorm essentials to be shipped to a friend's house in town where they will pick them up. "There's an overwhelming focus on logistics," Mr. Dunbar said.

Get tested

Students who arrive on campus should expect a heightened focus on health. The University of Idaho will test all students returning to the Moscow campus in August. Colby College will test students a number of times during the first few weeks of school, and they will not be allowed to leave the state until the end of the academic term.

Cornell University, in upstate New York, is asking all students to quarantine at home for two weeks before departure and all will be tested when they arrive in Ithaca. In addition, students arriving from the many states under Governor Cuomo's executive travel order will need to quarantine in New York State, or another state that is not on the New York list before stepping onto campus. Students scheduled to live in dorms had been told they would be asked to quarantine in a Cornell-provided location, but now they are expected to quarantine themselves before arriving on campus, or take classes online until their state comes off the list. Parents are not allowed into the dorms during move-in or at any time during the fall semester.

Some parents ultimately are deciding to send their offspring to school by themselves, particularly if they are returning students. Ms. Overholt's son, Cole, will travel alone from California to begin his second year at Rensselaer. Ms. Overholt was planning to accompany him, but then the virus hit.

"I don't see any reason I should get on a plane right now," she said, assured that Cole is capable of moving himself in. "I don't need to add to the problem."

Indeed, college students are much less likely than their parents to get very sick from the coronavirus. You could say that part of growing up is learning to be safe. At least that hasn't changed.

***Follow New York Times Travel** on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. And sign up for our weekly Travel Dispatch newsletter to receive expert tips on traveling smarter and inspiration for your next vacation.*

ADVERTISEMENT