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US EDUCATION

US universities move classes outdoors to continue teaching amid coronavirus

Studies suggest that being outside helps students learn better.

Tracey Birdwell, The Conversation & Tripp Harris, The Conversation

Aug 25, 2020 · 11:30 pm



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A student in California takes an online class outdoors. | Robyn Beck / AFP

When it comes to conducting classes this autumn, most US colleges seem to be stuck between holding in-person or remote classes, or some combination of the two. As a [researcher](#) who focuses on the design of educational spaces, I believe there's a fourth option that's not being given its due – outdoor spaces, such as open-air tents.

From a learning space design perspective, this could be an effective way of maintaining in-person instruction, even when temperatures drop later in the fall.

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For instance, [Rice University](#) in Houston, Texas, [Amherst College](#) a small liberal arts college in Amherst, Massachusetts, and [Eckerd College](#) in St Petersburg, Florida, are among those who have committed to using outdoor classroom spaces to [mitigate the risk](#) of viral spread.

These institutions are not looking to merely hold classes outside on nice days, but to find solutions to support regular class meetings outside even in cooler weather. These innovative outdoor learning options might have a future on the other side of the current pandemic.

A closer look

Rice University has constructed [five open-air tents](#) that will each accommodate classes of 25 to 30 students. Each tent is large enough to allow students and instructors to stay six feet away from each other during class.

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In addition to the five tents, Rice is building four temporary buildings that will each support classes of up to 50 students at a time, allowing more people to learn on campus than existing buildings can support. The temporary buildings will have sturdy floors [and walls](#) and may be used to hold classes beyond this coming school year.

These structures will be connected to electricity to enable cooling, heating and lighting – like the tents – allowing students and faculty to plug in any educational technology they may need or want, such as Wi-Fi or laptops.



Rice University will hold some classes in outdoor tents this fall. Brandon Martin/Rice University

Kevin Kirby, vice president for administration at Rice, [detailed](#) how these structures will lessen the risk of the spread Covid-19 this fall.

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The open-air design aligns with research that suggests the virus spreads less efficiently [outdoors](#) than indoors. Kirby says the open-air tents also help [reduce](#) the number of people inside campus buildings.

In other words, the more class sections that are held in these outdoor structures, the fewer students and faculty there will be inside buildings at one time.

“They’re designed to withstand hurricane-force winds,” Kirby wrote. “They can be used not only for instruction but also for academic lectures in the late afternoon and student meeting and study spaces in the evenings.”

The University of California, Davis is also [constructing tents to hold classes outside](#).

Enduring the elements

Outdoor learning is not just the provenance of the Southern or West Coast institutions with milder winters.

[Amherst College](#) in Massachusetts is making similar investments in the infrastructure required to support outdoor learning that officials there hope will allow for a near-normal fall semester for its students.

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The liberal arts college with fewer than 2,000 undergraduates purchased [20 tents](#) to hold classes outside. Most classes held in the tents will be small, seminar-style meetings that remain at the heart of the Amherst undergraduate experience.

The tents will be equipped with electricity to support learning technology and heating mechanisms when the need arises.

Amherst, like many schools across the country, will pivot entirely to remote instruction [after the Thanksgiving break](#).

Schools are avoiding bringing students back to campus after the November holiday to reduce the chance of coronavirus case spikes in concert with large influxes of students who will undoubtedly have spent time in close contact with friends and family over the break.

For Amherst and other institutions that experience cold winter climates, keeping students off campus after Thanksgiving cuts down on the need to depend on outdoor learning spaces into December.

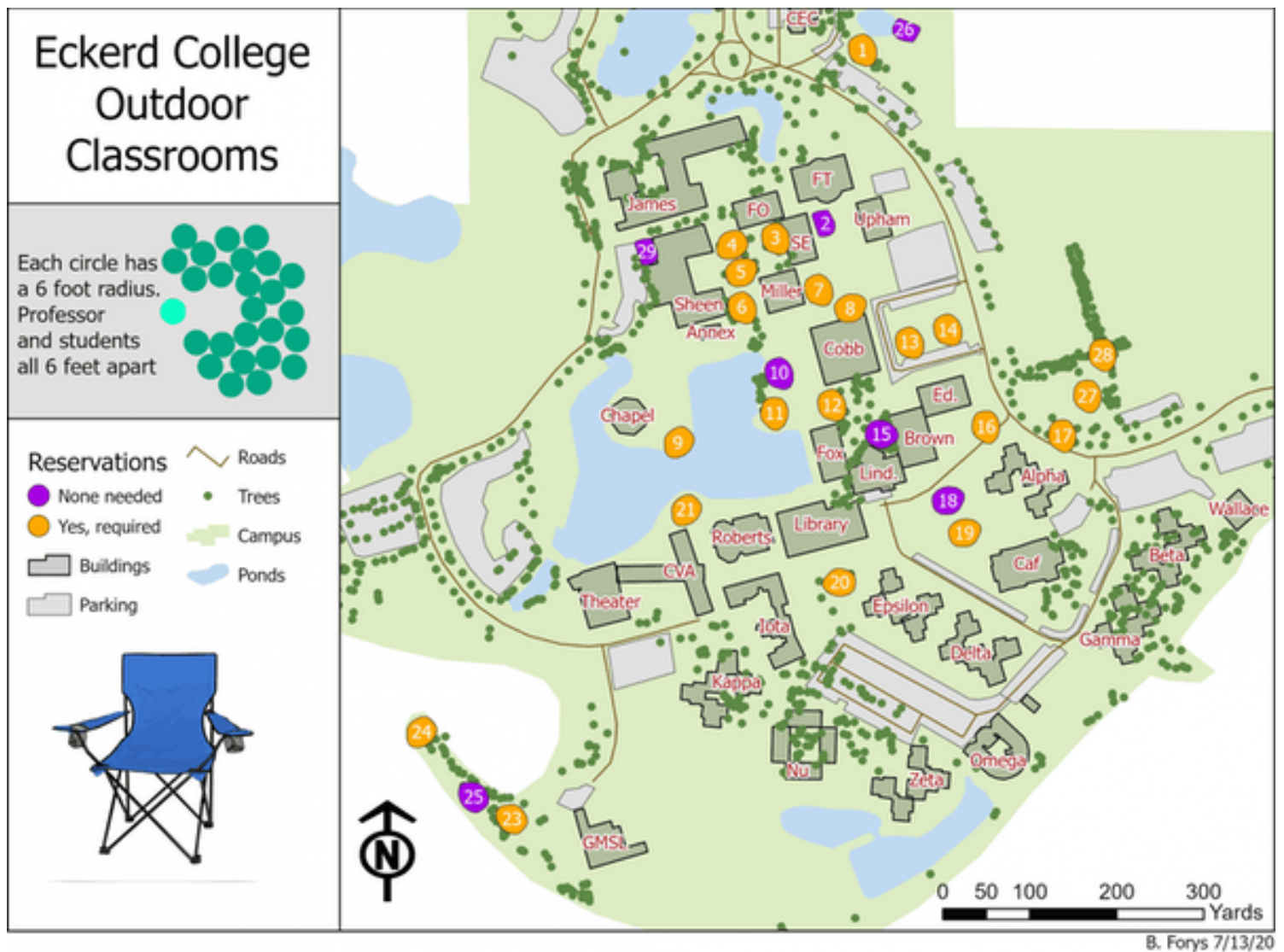
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teach classes outside to do so. A professor of environmental studies and experienced outdoor instructor, Elisabeth A Forsys, proposed the idea of using geographic information systems [technology](#) to map and visualise all viable outdoor spaces on the 188-acre campus where classes could be held.



Faculty at Eckerd College can see available outdoor space through GIS mapping visualisation. Elisabeth Forsys/Eckerd College

Forsys and faculty colleague Noëlle Boucquey worked together to take inventory of available outdoor spaces, evaluating each location for shade and wind conditions and designing a system for reserving space for classes. Almost all of the locations in the geographic information systems mapping inventory have suitable Wi-Fi access.

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support open-air meeting spaces around campus. Arizona State University [plans to do the same.](#)

While these schools will not formally schedule classes to meet in outdoor venues, they are adding infrastructure to make outdoor spaces more conducive to holding group meetings.

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Campus after Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic has inspired the world of higher education to reconsider the ways physical campus spaces are used to support student learning.

[Several studies](#) support the idea that being outside helps students learn. Studies also suggest that there are [positive associations](#) between memory function and the types of emotions students experience while outside. In other words, there is evidence that students remember more information when they learn in an outdoor setting.

[Students' mental health](#) also may benefit from spending time outdoors, a finding that is especially relevant for students who attend college amid the stress of Covid-19.

As colleges continue to wrestle with whether to have students on campus in regular buildings or learning remotely at home, we believe outdoor learning spaces could prove to

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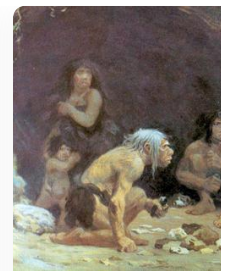
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FARMING CRISIS

India's new farm laws overlook the struggles of the women who grow 80% of the country's food

Female farmers, who have limited access to the legal system, would be disadvantaged if disputes with firms are not solved in the local courts as is done now.

Bansari Kamdar, *The Conversation* & Shreyasee Das, *The Conversation*

2 hours ago





India's new farm laws are likely to have different outcomes for women farmers than for men. | Sanjay Kanojia / AFP

Indian women are left behind on farms to make ends meet as [more men migrate from rural areas to cities](#), seeking higher incomes and better jobs.

Nearly [75% of the full-time workers on Indian farms are women](#), according to the international humanitarian group Oxfam. Female farmers produce 60% to 80% of the South Asian country's food.

So it is little surprise women are playing a visible role in the monthslong nationwide protests against [agricultural reforms](#) passed last September by the Indian government.

Small farmers are particularly vulnerable to three new laws, which deregulated the agricultural market and weakened the government-established minimum sale price for crops in ways that, demonstrators say, could pit small farmers against big agribusiness firms.

And women, as the most marginal of India's small farmers, may suffer the most if the laws go into effect.

asked why she was protesting....

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Online systems bring better prices for producers and consumers. But corporations and states could easily misappropriate the data produced in the process.

Natasha Susan Koshy

7 hours ago



Danish Siddiqui /Reuters

Pravin Venkatesh* has been running a modest kirana store in a corner of Bengaluru's Malleswaram for approximately two decades, but over the last two years, he's taken a technological leap.

through software provided by global wholesaler Metro Cash and Carry.

Rather than trudge to individual dealers across the city, Venkatesh compares prices of products across online suppliers such as NinjaCart, Jumbotail, Amazon and Udaan. He then orders different products from different companies, depending on who gives him the best deal.

These products are delivered directly to his store. This allows for tight store operations, minimum wastage and higher profits.

Venkatesh said that the software not only helps him to keep tabs on his inventory, but also allows him to remind customers of products they have purchased in the past and may have forgotten to buy on subsequent visits....

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BOOK EXCERPT

This 'memoir of infertility' tells us what it is like for a woman to keep trying to have a child

An excerpt from 'What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina', by Rohini S Rajagopal

Rohini S Rajagopal

7 hours ago



After the second IUI, I went through two more. But I went about these with a perfunctoriness that came from anger and dejection. Like a sulking child, I went through the motions resignedly, not with purpose or intention. I didn't even take time off to regroup.

Between December 2011 and February 2012 I had three back-to-back IUIs – all drawing blanks. My uterus did put up a good show each time, producing four to five ripe follicles and a thickened endometrium, but inside I harboured no conviction that it would work – because if the second IUI which had my maximum investment had not brought the desired result, how was anything less going to suffice?

I also went through a hysteroscopy, which is believed to be the gold standard in the evaluation of infertility. The doctor inserts a tube with a light and camera into your vagina to take a deep look at the uterus for any irregularities. Mercifully, this procedure is done under anaesthesia. After the test Dr Leela proudly handed over a CD with the images of my uterus captured during the hysteroscopy. Everything was perfect....

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CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

As Mumbai battles its third Covid-19 surge, could vaccination stop the wave?

Optimistically, we might hope that fatalities will be limited during this wave.

Murad Banaji

9 hours ago



Commuters walk on a railway platform after disembarking from a train amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease in Mumbai on February 9, 2021. | Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters

Mumbai's daily Covid-19 cases are climbing sharply. Over the past week, cases have averaged almost 1,600 per day – triple the number one month ago. Meanwhile, a small but increasing fraction of the city has had at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, probably [around 4% to date](#).

How bad is the city's third Covid-19 surge? And where is it likely to go next? Could vaccination halt the wave?

These are difficult questions, but we now understand a lot more about Mumbai's epidemic than one year ago. This added knowledge means that we can put the numbers into perspective.

How fast is disease spreading?

We know from serosurvey data that recorded cases represent only a fraction of total infections. These surveys involve sampling populations to estimate “seroprevalence”, that is, to find how many have antibodies to SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for Covid-19.

data, but we need, first, to look at testing...

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