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N.J. colleges cut students some slack as they head back to campus

For college students, getting back to normal after Hurricane Sandy means returning to classes, mid-term exams and the pressures of campus life. But several area colleges are giving storm-impacted students a break as they try to resume their studies.

At Rutgers University, students can apply to take all of their classes as pass/fail this semester, instead of receiving a letter grade. At Monmouth University, officials are offering psychological counseling and helping replace textbooks and computers for students who lost possessions in the flooding. At **Montclair State University**, hundreds of commuter students are living on campus for free while their houses and apartments are repaired and cleaned up.

Even the state Higher Education Student Assistance Authority is cutting students some slack, extending financial aid deadlines and offering anyone impacted by the storm additional time to make their student loan payments.

College officials say the goal is to keep students in class, even if the storm left their personal lives in tatters.

"We're trying to make it a little easier for them to get back to school and get back to a sense of normal," said Karen Pennington, Montclair State's vice president for student development and campus life.

Freshman Jaclyn Untisz is one of more than 360 commuter students who took Montclair State up on its offer for a free dorm room after the storm. After a week with no power and flooding from a frozen pipe in her family's Lincoln Park house, the psychology major was grateful for a dorm room and a chance to think about schoolwork again.

"It was warm and quiet and it had a hot shower," said Untisz, who plans to move back home Friday.

Like many of her classmates, Untisz said she is finding it hard to concentrate in the aftermath of the storm.

"We're just trying to get our schoolwork done. It is mid-terms," said Untisz, shortly after finishing an exam in her psychology class.

Most New Jersey colleges were closed for a week or more during and after the storm. Some professors have been making up missed classes at night or on weekends. But most are asking students to make up the work on their own.

Rutgers junior Adam Rainear said he and his classmates on the New Brunswick campus are racing to catch up on work they missed during the storm and the power outages.

"It's difficult to study by candlelight," said Rainear, a meteorology and journalism major.

But Rainear and a group of fellow Rutgers meteorology students took time over the weekend to volunteer with storm clean-up in Ocean County. The students were assigned the task of helping a Stafford Township woman clear out a waterfront house flooded by the storm surge.

"You don't understand it, until you see it," Rainear, 19, said of the devastation.

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