

## **OPENING STATEMENT**

### *COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely*

The question for administrators of 6,000 colleges and universities is not whether to reopen in August, but how to do it safely.

Most are working overtime to get ready for one of the surest signs that American life is regaining its rhythm: 20 million students going back to college

Our witnesses today are here to tell us their strategies for reopening safely:

- Mitch Daniels, President of Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
- Christina Paxson, President of Brown University, Providence, RI
- Logan Hampton, President of Lane College, Jackson, TN
- Georges Benjamin, MD, Executive Director of American Public Health Association, Washington, DC

Purdue University, the University of South Carolina, Rice University, Creighton University, and The University of Notre Dame will finish in-person classes before Thanksgiving to avoid further spread of COVID-19 during flu season

Vanderbilt will require face masks in classrooms.

To make social distancing easier, colleges are rescheduling classrooms usually empty in early mornings, evenings, weekends and summer. Concerts and parties are out. Grab and go meal options, flu shots and temperature checks are in. Campuses will offer more online courses.

I recently was on a phone call with about 90 presidents of Tennessee's 127 institutions of higher education, and almost all of them are planning to resume in-person classes in the Fall, but they want governments to create liability protection against being sued if a student becomes sick.

Bucking the trend, California's state university system will offer most of its courses only online.

All roads back to college lead through testing.

The availability of widespread testing will allow colleges to track and isolate students who have the virus or have been exposed to it, so the rest of the student body doesn't have to be quarantined. Campuses are exploring using mobile phone apps for tracking and creating isolation dormitories to isolate students who have the virus or have been exposed, as UT-Knoxville is doing.

Widespread testing not only helps contain the disease; it builds confidence that the campus is safe. Fortunately, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Health Admiral Brett Giroir says there will be 40-50 million tests available per month by September. That is 4-5 times today's number—and today's number is twice as many as any other country.

Dr. Francis Collins, who led the Human Genome Project, now leads a competitive "shark tank" enterprise at the National Institutes of Health to discover new ways to conduct tens of millions of additional accurate tests with quick results.

Should everyone on campus be tested? On a webinar for institutes of higher education on Friday, May 29, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials said that they are not recommending that at this time and encouraged campuses to work with their state and local health officials.

However, that does not take into account testing for peace of mind. Some schools may want test everyone before they come back to campus.

Schools may want to think about testing randomly to detect asymptomatic cases and have the ability to test everyone in certain categories: health care, food service, and cleaning workers; older faculty; students with medical conditions or who are arriving from virus hot spots; all students in a class or dormitory where a person tests positive for the virus.

Administrators ask: Where will I find tests? The answer is, consult your local health department and your governor. Each state submits a monthly plan to the federal government outlining testing supplies and needs. Admiral Giroir's team then helps fill the gaps.

My recommendation: you want your school's testing needs to be in your state plan. A school can also contract directly with laboratories who conduct tests, review the Food and Drug Administration list of authorized tests, or ask for help from a nearby large university or hospital that has created its own test.

COVID-19 plans should last for at least the full school year. The government is pursuing vaccines at warp speed, but no one expects one by August. In the second semester there should be more tests, more treatments, better contact tracing and vaccines—amidst the flu season and the return of COVID-19. It will be the Fall of 2021 before school life approaches normal.

But students returning in the Fall and their families will want and need to have peace of mind that they, and their loved ones, are heading back into a safe environment. Testing is the key to providing this peace of mind.

There are several reasons colleges have an advantage in providing a safe environment for students and faculty:

The first reason is that younger people have been less hurt by COVID-19.

For example: In Tennessee, nursing homes account for around 5 percent of cases of COVID-19 infections but 36 percent of COVID-19 deaths.

Compare that with Tennesseans under the age of 30, who have accounted for around 30 percent of cases of infection, but less than 1 percent of deaths.

Still, there is much we are still learning about the virus, and Dr. Anthony Fauci has warned against "cavalierly" assuming that young people are not at risk.

Second: Colleges are notorious wasters of space. As I wrote for Newsweek in 2009 to encourage colleges to embrace 3-year degrees: *Former George Washington University president Stephen J. Trachtenberg estimates that a typical college uses its facilities for academic purposes a little more than half the calendar year. "While college facilities sit idle, they continue to generate maintenance, energy, and debt-service expenses that contribute to the high cost of running a college," he has written.*

Keeping students six feet apart will be a lot easier if colleges embrace a new efficiency and use more of their classrooms and spaces throughout the day and throughout the year.

Maybe that's a lesson that will last beyond this virus crisis.

Third, tracking and tracing the virus will be easier to do at colleges – we know what classes students attend, and what dorms they live in. If colleges take it a step further and, for example, assign seats in class, infections will be even easier to track.

Fourth, a college can require students to wear masks. Campuses can make mask-wearing part of the student culture.

But college environments pose a couple of challenges as well.

First, we know that 19 and 20-year-olds don't always choose to do what's healthiest. For example, the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that a third of college students admitted to binge drinking in the past month. So a social-distanced, mask-wearing culture in class may not always extend into the evenings and weekends.

And second, 86 percent of undergraduate students are not living on campus, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That statistic includes big variations: 40 percent of students at private 4-year colleges live on campus; 26 percent at public 4-year institutions, 2 percent live on campus at community colleges. Nearly half of undergraduates live within 10 miles of campus. That means many students will leave and return, potentially exposing themselves and others to the virus—making social distancing and CDC-recommended health status checks all the more important.

What should the federal government's role be in helping colleges and universities safely reopen?

Providing advice from the CDC about best practices

Funding for innovation, such as the shark tank I mentioned, so there's an ample supply of rapid tests for colleges

Encouraging colleges and universities to work with states and get included in their testing plans, and then help states get supplies they need for testing

Funding, such as the nearly \$14 billion in CARES Act to address lost revenue due to COVID-19 and help students disrupted by the crisis

Federal government can provide liability protections

Beyond that, decisions should be left to the individual campuses. From small technical institutes like Lincoln College of Technology to research institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. From community colleges to tuition-free, four-year institutions like Berea College in Kentucky.

When I became a university president in 1988, I asked the president of the University of California System, David Gardner, what made that university so good. His first answer was autonomy – that

the government provides students with funds that follow them to the school of their choice and then allows the institutions to run themselves.

The United States is home to 6,000 colleges and universities – arguably the best system of higher education in the world because institutions have maximum autonomy and minimum direction from Washington on everything from their curriculum, tuition, admission policies, health care plans for students, and compensation for faculty. They determine what their policies will be for student behavior and conduct, housing, safety, and a host of other things.

So I would suggest we honor that same tradition now: President Trump and Congress should not be telling the California State University System that it has to open its classes in person, or telling Notre Dame it cannot—or telling UT that it must test everyone on the campus or telling Brown University that it cannot. Colleges themselves, not Washington DC, should make those decisions.

We know that a single lost year of college can lead to a student not graduating from college and set back career goals.

Already, disruption of university research projects has erased much of the progress that was being made with the record levels of research funding Congress has provided over the past five years. Many American colleges—overall considered the best in the world—will be permanently damaged or even closed if they remain, in witness Christina Paxson’s words, “ghost towns.”

Two thirds of college students want to return to campus, according to an Axios survey. At Purdue, tuition deposits by incoming freshmen broke last year’s record. Colleges and universities are microcities. College presidents and administrators can make them among the safest small communities in which to live and work during this next year. In doing so, they will help our country take its surest step toward normalcy.