

## **Is it safe to go to college?**

### **Success depends on testing, transparency, and faculty, staff and students stepping up**

By Ora Hirsch Pescovitz

In the short time that universities across the country have reopened, we have learned this: There is no model or proven way to keep college campuses safe and untouched from the spread of Covid-19.

In North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Texas, Iowa, and most recently, at Michigan State University, we've seen the consequences when students fail to uphold the minimum health precautions of wearing a mask and practicing social distancing. Already, 51,000 cases have been reported on college campus nationwide, and it's more than likely that the number of cases could continue to increase.

The federal government is actively pushing for universities to open and remain open no matter what. In Michigan, there has been a spectrum of responses from MSU, which is completely on-line (remote) to most of the universities, which are hybrid (partly remote, part hybrid and part face-to-face), to Adrian College, which is entirely in person.

The current health situation creates a high-wire balancing act for university presidents and leaders, and profound ambiguity for faculty, staff and students at a time when clarity is desperately needed for universities to navigate one of the greatest public health challenges in our nation's history.

So, in the days ahead, what will determine a university's effective response to the threat of the COVID-19 spread and what will ensure that the academic year will be safe and productive?

The answer is different for every university.

For those universities with large resident populations, Greek communities, bars and active social activities, frequent and regular COVID-19 testing, ample isolation and quarantine facilities and a plan to keep all students on campus, even after a diagnosis of positive infections is critical. On such campuses, most of the classes and extracurricular activities should probably be offered in a remote or hybrid setting to protect not only the students, but, importantly, also staff and faculty.

For universities like Oakland University, where nearly 85 percent of the student body commutes to campus, a higher percent of the classes can be offered in person. But, only with rigorous attention to social distancing, 100% compliance with wearing of masks and personal hygiene. At Oakland, we also require that all students, faculty and staff take a daily honor pledge and a daily health assessment.

Cases are tracked regularly on a dashboard and we have uncompromising vigilance to our "Grizzlies Protect Grizzlies: Healthy Together," a five-point plan that offers a response to the possible range of COVID-19 scenarios on and off campus. The OU Emergency Preparedness Team constantly reviews conditions on campus.

However, at all of our universities, whether we stay open until Thanksgiving or not will clearly depend on our students.

For most students, attending college is a long-awaited, life-defining time – a period of curiosity, discovery and a newfound freedom. The stark reality, however, is that the college experience has been fundamentally altered because of restrictions imposed by the threat from the pandemic. Whether they want to acknowledge it or not, students are on the frontline of defense against the spread of the virus.

Enforcing the rules on campus can only go so far. Punishing a student for not wearing a mask is more of a reflection of a campus' ineffective health education campaign than it is of a defiant or oppositional student.

At Oakland University, it wasn't enough to get students' buy-in to the five-point "Grizzlies Protect Grizzlies: Healthy Together" plan. We've made them a part of the plan, literally.

Each day, students take a health pledge. In a few minutes daily, students respond to questions regarding the status of their vital signs, and their commitment to adhering to wearing a mask, social distancing, and practicing a rigorous hygiene protocol.

And then, there's positive peer pressure.

When asked how best to gain student compliance regarding taking precautionary measures, the OU Dean of Students came up with a simple, effective response: Students must educate students. Subsequently, we established the Grizzlies Health Squad, a team of 10 students that promotes wellness, school spirit and engagement in university issues and events.

The Grizzlies Health Squad reaches out to students through social media, and works closely with faculty and student organizations to push positive messaging about the importance of wearing a mask, social distancing and self-monitoring.

They stroll around campus, modeling proper compliance behavior, and are stocked with extra masks. If and when there is a student who doesn't comply with the prevention rules on campus, they find a personal, informal way to get the student to follow the health recommendations.

While it's unrealistic to expect 18-23-year-olds to behave like monks, it must be realistic to expect them to take up the challenge to be safe. Frankly, it is time students realize there are serious expectations for how they behave during a pandemic.

Nothing less than their health and the health of the campus community is at stake.

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