

# Slippery Rock University

## Council of Trustees

### President Report

June 4, 2020

Universities across the country have begun to announce their plans for the fall 2020 semester. Many of these include extensive discussions of returning to modified face-to-face instruction. But in the midst of these forecasts, it is important to understand that with a disease as infectious as COVID-19, no one can guarantee that there will not be an outbreak at any school. Given the proximity of students to each other when they are on campus, an outbreak is likely no matter how well prepared an institution is. The best that campus leaders can do is work to minimize the chance of widespread illness and react responsibly when it occurs.

I understand the desire by other university leaders to lay out their most optimistic visions for the fall. All of them, myself included, try to be encouraging and put on a brave face during times of trouble. People want to know that someone with a steady hand is at the helm and everything is going to be all right. Unfortunately, higher education in the U.S. was in a precarious position even before the pandemic because of the declining number of college-aged students. The virus has added to this already challenging situation. As a result, I imagine that some schools feel great pressure to announce that they will allow face-to-face classes in order to attract students who desire a return to the “traditional college experience.” But right now, no one can guarantee that face-to-face classes will be viable.

The health and safety of our community remain my top priority. As such, University leadership is carefully monitoring the guidance from Harrisburg, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Departments of Education and Health, and is regularly in touch with officials from other schools across the region. I can assure you that if a safe method for reopening SRU to face-to-face instruction emerges, we will be together in the fall.

To that end, our administrative team has spent many hours developing a plan that would potentially allow students to return to campus in the fall, in a manner that best minimizes the chance of a substantial outbreak.

While all of our proposed plans would respect the collective bargaining agreements that we have with our employees, we would not have the same operating structure we experienced in the pre-pandemic environment.

Let me provide you with some insight into our current thinking:

- A hybrid on-campus fall semester, with adherence to guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, in which we provide instruction through a modified in-person semester. This modified model will mean that all regularly scheduled classes will have

synchronous in-person class meetings and an asynchronous online component. The face-to-face component will have less crowded meetings, which will be simulcast and recorded for students whose health status does not allow in-person attendance. In the event that the faculty member cannot attend class due to health concerns or if the semester is disrupted by a resurgence of the pandemic, the synchronous portion of the class will be moved to Zoom or a similar application.

- Modifying the academic calendar for the fall 2020 semester. To avoid greater risk of infection, classes would begin on Aug. 17 and conclude by Thanksgiving. Final exams would be in the days before Thanksgiving. There would be no fall break in October.
- If the pandemic conditions prevent us from starting the semester face-to-face, all classes will be in distance format and include both synchronous and asynchronous components.
- We are also working on various housing and dining plans that would involve fewer residential students on campus and in the dining halls at any given time.

These are but a few of the very important areas of consideration in bringing students back onto campus, while still adhering to social distancing guidelines. I know that our faculty and staff are committed to academic excellence and the success of our students in whatever format we deliver our courses and programs. I also know that they will continue to work diligently to create learning environments that maintain academic rigor and are accessible to our students.

This situation has been difficult in a variety of ways for everyone and I'd like to thank everyone involved for their patience, willingness and commitment to meeting our University's needs during this time.

Together we are stronger and it is together that we will navigate our way through these unprecedented circumstances.

Respectfully,

William J. Behre  
President