

A message from President Daniels regarding fall semester

April 21, 2020

TO THE PEOPLE OF PURDUE:

The global pandemic which has altered every previous reality of daily life has, of course, inflicted great harm on the nation's colleges and universities. American higher education, often criticized for its antiquated ways and its slowness to change them, has improvised and responded with admirable, even amazing alacrity to enable students to finish this semester with the progress they anticipated.

The central question now, assuming governmental authorities permit reopening of our schools by the customary August start dates, is should schools do so, and with what new rules and practices. Purdue University, for its part, intends to accept students on campus in typical numbers this fall, sober about the certain problems that the COVID-19 virus represents, but determined not to surrender helplessly to those difficulties but to tackle and manage them aggressively and creatively.

Institutions committed to the on-campus educational experience face special difficulties in returning our operations to anything like their previous arrangements. At Purdue, we have pursued a conscious policy that promotes density of our population. Our campus master plan aims at bringing people more closely together. Our housing policies, with significant success, have been designed to encourage on-campus living. And there are far more of us; we have grown our entering classes, both undergraduate and graduate, by some 25%, while investing heavily in programs like learning communities that foster higher retention and graduation.

There were sound reasons for these steps. Serving more students is our most worthy social mission. Making the campus more convenient and walkable likewise has obvious merits. Most important, all the evidence reveals that students who live and spend more of their time on campus succeed academically at higher rates. The learning experience is enhanced not only by being closer to faculty, labs, and classrooms, but also by being closer to other students, especially those from different backgrounds.

Now, sadly and ironically, the very density we have consciously fostered is, at least for the moment, our enemy. Distance between people, that is, less density, is now the overriding societal imperative. It could be argued that a college campus will be

among the most difficult places to reopen for previously regular activities.

But in other respects, a place like Purdue may be in better position to resume its mission. Our campus community, a “city” of 50,000+ people, is highly unusual in its makeup. At least 80% of our population is made up of young people, say, 35 and under. All data to date tell us that the COVID-19 virus, while it transmits rapidly in this age group, poses close to zero lethal threat to them.

Meanwhile, the virus has proven to be a serious danger to other, older demographic groups, especially those with underlying health problems. The roughly 20% of our Purdue community who are over 35 years old contains a significant number of people with diabetes, asthma, hypertension, and other ailments which together comprise a very high percentage of the fatal and most severe COVID-19 cases.

We will consider new policies and practices that keep these groups separate, or minimize contact between them. Literally, our students pose a far greater danger to others than the virus poses to them. We all have a role, and a responsibility, in ensuring the health of the Purdue community.

The approaches below are preliminary, meant to be illustrative of the objectives we will pursue. View them as examples, likely to be replaced by better ideas as we identify and validate them.

They could include spreading out classes across days and times to reduce their size, more use of online instruction for on-campus students, virtualizing laboratory work, and similar steps.

We will look to protect the more vulnerable members of our community by allowing (or requiring, if necessary) them to work remotely. Like the rest of society, we are learning a lot right now about which jobs are most amenable to remote work, and about new and better ways to do such work.

We intend to know as much as possible about the viral health status of our community. This could include pre-testing of students and staff before arrival in August, for both infection and post-infection immunity through antibodies. It will include a robust testing system during the school year, using Purdue’s own BSL-2 level laboratory for fast results. Anyone showing symptoms will be tested promptly, and quarantined if positive, in space we will set aside for that purpose.

We expect to be able to trace proximate and/or frequent contacts of those who test positive. Contacts in the vulnerable categories will be asked to self-quarantine for the recommended period, currently 14 days. Those in the young, least vulnerable group will be tested, quarantined if positive, or checked regularly for symptoms if negative for both antibodies and the virus.

Again, these concepts are preliminary, intended mainly to illustrate an overall, data-driven and research-based strategy, and to invite suggestions for their modification or exclusion in favor of better actions. They will be augmented by a host of other changes, such as an indefinite prohibition on gatherings above a specified size, continued limitations on visitors to and travel away from campus, required use of face coverings and other protective equipment, frequent if not daily deep cleaning of facilities, and so forth.

Whatever its eventual components, a return-to-operations strategy is undergirded by a fundamental conviction that even a phenomenon as menacing as COVID-19 is one of the inevitable risks of life. Like most sudden and alarming developments, its dangers are graphic, expressed in tragic individual cases, and immediate; the costs of addressing it are less visible, more diffuse, and longer-term. It is a huge and daunting problem, but the Purdue way has always been to tackle problems, not hide from them.

Closing down our entire society, including our university, was a correct and necessary step. It has had invaluable results. But like any action so drastic, it has come at extraordinary costs, as much human as economic, and at some point, clearly before next fall, those will begin to vastly outweigh the benefits of its continuance. Interrupting and postponing the education of tomorrow's leaders for another entire semester or year, is one of many such costs. So is permanently damaging the careers and lives of those who have made teaching and research their life's work, and those who support them in that endeavor.

The COVID-19 virus will remain a fact of life this autumn. Natural immunity, which has been slowed by the shutdown, will not yet have fully developed. No vaccine can be counted on until 2021 at the soonest. It is unclear what course other schools will choose, but Purdue will employ every measure we can adopt or devise to manage this challenge with maximum safety for every member of the Boilermaker family, while proceeding with the noble and essential mission for which our institution stands.

Sincerely,
Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.
President