

Back to normal not likely for Pitt in the fall, chancellor says

The real question is how to bring students, employees back safely amid pandemic

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By Bill Schackner / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

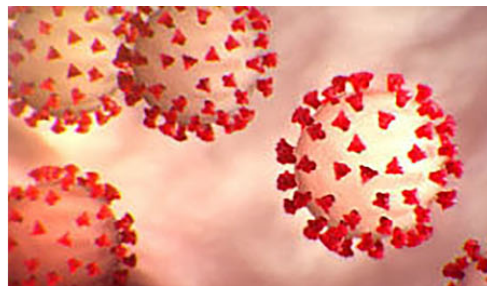
University of Pittsburgh chancellor Patrick Gallagher told campus leaders Thursday that "back to normal probably is not likely" for Pitt this fall with no COVID-19 vaccine or general population immunity and with potential for continued outbreaks remaining.

He said the question for the main and branch campuses is, "What kind of normal should we be planning for?"

Mr. Gallagher briefed faculty, staff and student representatives to Pitt's Senate Council regarding the pandemic's impact on the 34,000-student university and on planning underway to chart a course through what he termed an extraordinary crisis. It already has cost Pitt \$30 million to \$40 million and is simultaneously threatening virtually all income streams, from academics to athletics to the endowment.

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The campus, like others nationally, largely has been shuttered since classes went online in March to curb spread of the virus that has claimed nearly 33,000 lives in the U.S. in a matter of weeks.

He said if strict virus mitigation measures remain in effect this fall — and if the school simply has an all-or-nothing, in-person or remote instruction option — then online classes might be the only path.

However, he said he hopes that groups including one being formed by Provost Ann Cudd can develop hybrid options, with more flexibility. For instance, students could return to campus to take classes in somewhat reduced numbers, and some or all residence halls could reopen, after being “de-densified,” perhaps with fewer students per unit.

He said perhaps there could be something like “Red flag” or “Yellow flag” days during which university operations are modified to reflect changing risk levels. In recent weeks, while much of the focus nationally has been on salvaging spring semester and commencement remotely, higher education officials have begun asking if fall can begin normally.

Mr. Gallagher said he is not alone in raising it publicly, pointing to comments made by officials elsewhere including Boston University and in South Carolina.

He said he hopes by sometime in May that campus planners can offer faculty a set of potential scenarios to prepare for, and that by the latter half of summer, a final decision can be made.

“One side of me wants to give answers as quickly as possible. People want to make plans. They are looking at housing deposits,” the chancellor said. “The faculty absolutely want to know what they are planning for.”

At the same time, Mr. Gallagher added, “We just don’t know what the fall will look like.”

He said it’s hard to imagine there will be an uptick in tuition prices for the fall when so many families are stressed, with many parents out of work. At the same time, the university does not envision a price reduction for courses delivered on line because Pitt is not an online institution, he said, but rather a university that went online in a national emergency.

Pitt, like other universities, already is absorbing huge expenses, from housing refunds and canceled programs to emergency travel costs to bring students home from overseas. If class action suits in parts of the nation or other moves prevent schools from charging regular tuition price, the effects would be devastating, Mr. Gallagher warned.

“You will see universities fail,” he said. “There simply is no capacity to support this.”

“We are operating in this mode because of a national emergency, not bait and switch,” he added.

He said virtually every form of revenue is threatened by the crisis, from tuition and room and board income to research and ticket sales and the stock market volatility that has hit the school’s \$4.3 billion endowment. Meanwhile, with the state potentially facing a \$3 billion to \$4 billion budget shortfall, there is concern about whether Pitt can count on its regular appropriation, Mr. Gallagher said.

He praised the university's students and employees for their adaptability and said admissions numbers remain strong. But he "if enrollment changes in fall or spring either by demand or people can't come ... [and] if the family need is much worse and we have to expand our financial aid, then our revenue would be severely affected."

He said a large part of the planning will be how to go about restarting a sprawling campus whose vast research labs, and classroom and other buildings have scaled down activity, with 80-percent of the structures closed.

"Whenever you stand down, the much harder question is 'how do you stand up?'"

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