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Subject: Planning Process Check-in



University of
Pittsburgh

Office of the Chancellor

Dear Colleagues:

In a prior update, I committed to sharing details of our ongoing planning activities by early June. With this milestone just around the corner, I'd like to step back and check in—even before the efforts of the various task forces and working groups are complete. This letter outlines what our planning process aims to accomplish and what we can expect in the coming weeks as the details of this process begin to emerge.

The University's long-standing pandemic emergency plan—which outlines our response to the threat of a new infectious disease—has served us very well over the last few months. We have used this plan to guide our crisis response as the COVID-19 outbreak started to spread across the globe and around our campus communities.

Most emergency plans are impermanent. Typically, an organization works to maximize safety and contain threats—a phase called crisis management—and only returns to normal operations once the threat is removed. The crisis created by the novel coronavirus is different. Since COVID-19 will be part of our lives for the foreseeable future, the end of the crisis phase isn't defined by the end of the virus, but rather by our ability to adapt to its ongoing presence in our operations. This means that we are not currently developing an emergency plan, but rather a plan to integrate a risk management program for the pandemic into all of our activities. This reality shapes our approach in several ways:

- **We can't wait this out.** Pitt's mission is essential and time critical. Our students can't put their education and lives on hold, and our researchers and scholars can't sit on the sidelines until the threat dissipates. Instead, we must adapt. We must figure out how to forge ahead while also fulfilling a new responsibility to help control the spread of the virus and manage the risks it poses to our community and society. Come fall, we will be open—but we will have to change how we carry out our activities in the presence of the novel coronavirus.

- **We're aiming to excel—not just get by.** A great university solves great challenges. It also prepares students to succeed in life, including when their playing field tips uphill. To this end, we must move beyond just accommodating requirements. Instead, we must look to evolve and thrive while embracing these requirements and be open to discovering better modes of teaching, research and community service along the way.
- **We must manage the risk of infection.** Without effective treatments for COVID-19 or an effective vaccine to induce immunity, our best tool is to control the spread of infection of the virus. Not everyone gets sick to the same degree from this virus, so our health risks are highly variable. Our strategy must systematically lower the risk of infection, not only to protect ourselves but everyone around us, and we must take special precautions for those who face a greater health risk from the virus.

The complexity of these planning efforts is rooted in the fact that we need to build a risk management program and integrate it into all University operations. Key factors covered in our plan will include:

- **Infection prevention and control efforts:** Managing the risk of infection may be a familiar part of running a hospital, but it is new to us. At Pitt, we have a unique advantage: a deep reservoir of world-class health sciences expertise. We are harnessing this talent to establish an infectious disease prevention and control program and to promote the safety and well-being of our campus communities in the presence of the virus. We will be integrating these efforts into all of our programs and activities.
- **Operating postures and standardized responses:** The threat posed by the virus depends on many external factors, so our planning will have to adjust. Are there new outbreaks? New public health restrictions? Is testing widely available? Are hospitals at capacity? Our Emergency Operations Center, aided by health officials and University leadership, will set the University's operating posture based on the level of risk. Each discrete posture will enact a specific set of actions, expectations and restrictions designed to support the continued success of our community and our mission. These shared standards will outline how we will generally reduce risks of spreading the virus and how we will pinpoint a specific risk and prevent it from threatening others. This approach—utilizing a standardized response for each operating posture—will enable us to quickly and effectively manage risks across an array of different individuals, activities and environments.

- **Universal approach to infection prevention and control:** To the greatest extent possible, the features of our infection prevention and control program will apply to all activity areas. Examples of this include:
 - Modifying building use.
 - Creating targeted training, communication and educational materials.
 - Expanding our environmental, health and safety program.
 - Acquiring the technology needed to conduct remote and on-campus work.
 - Adjusting work responsibilities, schedules and academic calendars.
 - Supporting supervisors and other leaders in navigating any new responsibilities.
 - Developing approaches for recognizing risks (e.g., testing, symptom tracking, temperature monitoring, etc.) and performing contact tracing.
 - Maximizing access to the medical care and support services needed to maintain health and well-being.
- **Tailored approaches in each activity area:** While our plan will utilize universal standards and guidelines, the University’s mission also demands flexibility. This means that much of the control over specific areas of activities—including instruction, research, housing, food services, conferences, travel, administration and more—must be managed locally, at the level of the activity. Accordingly, our plan will give supervisors and other leaders the authority to properly evaluate and approve activities in their area.
- **Individual accommodations:** The risk of falling seriously ill from the novel coronavirus varies significantly according to both known factors (such as age and medical history) and unknown factors. As a result, our plan will aim to offer each member of our community some control over the risks they assume on behalf of the University. This will require us to understand the risks involved, make informed decisions and remain flexible so that individuals can perform their work while managing their individual risks accordingly.
- **Posture-independent options:** While our plan will leverage agility, agency and localized decision-making, it will also utilize approaches that *don’t require changes* when the institution’s operating posture changes. Doing so minimizes disruptions as we shift to a different operating posture. One example: Our housing and residence life teams are actively pursuing approaches that would allow students to safely remain in University-owned housing under all operating postures—even throughout a “stay-at-home” order.

- **Separate planning by activity areas:** A university is a large collection of separate activity areas. When one activity area doesn't assume too much from other areas, our plan is more resilient. For example, our teaching task force is prioritizing instruction approaches that work regardless of who is physically present in the classroom. This flexibility allows our teaching activities to be planned and carried out regardless of access to classrooms, restrictions on gathering size, or an individual's need to remain in isolation or under stay-at-home orders.
- **Flexibility and innovation:** We all want more certainty during these uncertain times, and it is tempting to ask our plan to stipulate every possibility. However, we are in uncharted waters, and we are learning more every day. Adaptation requires the freedom to be creative, and this will result in some levels of uncertainty. This is OK. With clear standards and enough flexibility, we will not only adapt but also evolve to excel within this new environment.

At a time when there is much public debate over the extreme and false choice between being “locked down” or “back to normal,” we are seeking to adapt to a new reality: performing our vital mission and protecting our community in the midst of a pandemic.

This approach of replacing a “crisis” with a “modified normal” will be complex. Each of us will be asked to learn some new skills and practice new behaviors. But we can be a safe place—and a responsible player in the global public health effort—while advancing teaching, research and service. And, while many once-familiar features of working or studying at Pitt will change, the most important parts will remain. In fact, I am confident that our plan will allow us to be the very best university we can be, even in the presence of the novel coronavirus.

It's a strange new world. But I remain extremely proud to be your colleague and incredibly optimistic as we set out to tackle this next transition together.

Stay well,

Pat