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OPINION

It's time for a safe return to campus

Are there COVID-related risks to reopening colleges? Yes. While such risks cannot be completely eliminated, they can be intelligently managed in a science-supported way.

By **Members of The New England Board of Higher Education** Updated August 14, 2020, 5:06 p.m.



Modular dormitories on the Tufts University tennis courts will house students who might get sick. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

New England colleges and universities are admired for their ability to marshal smart minds to tackle complex problems. This capacity has been evident throughout the coronavirus pandemic, as their research, teaching, and commitment to public service

have demonstrated what they do best — chart new paths in the face of uncertainty.

Analysis by the New England Board of Higher Education, an organization supporting students and institutions in the region, indicates that 65 of New England's colleges and universities plan to provide on-campus and in-person instruction this fall. Ninety-eight will provide a hybrid of in-person and virtual learning, while 35 will support students all virtually. Each institution's decision was made in response to the risk factors it faces as leaders do their best to respond to this unprecedented health emergency. We recognize the importance of colleges and universities, both public and private, in the region that will reopen campuses in the coming weeks. These institutions have thoughtfully crafted plans for reopening that, while subject to some risks, will allow them to provide significant benefits to students, institutions, communities, and economies.

Are there COVID-related risks to reopening? Yes. While such risks cannot be completely eliminated, they can be intelligently managed in a science-supported way. Leaders of New England colleges and universities have done their COVID homework. They are well prepared to advance their missions of educating students and conducting research and to lead in demonstrating how institutions can begin to carefully move forward in a new environment.

Since March, higher education leaders in all six states have put the full weight of their institutions behind planning, preparation, and investment in reopening. This includes plans for robust virus testing, securing adequate personal protective equipment, obligatory mask-wearing, regular health monitoring, contact tracing, quarantine and isolation capacity, regular disinfection, changes to dorms and other campus facilities, limits on group gatherings, training for faculty, students, and staff, signed conduct codes, accommodations for those at risk, contingencies for closing campuses or increasing virtual learning — and much more. These plans have been developed in

close collaboration with state government and public health leaders based on science, expert-vetted guidelines, and best practices. Many institutions have remained open since the start of the pandemic to house and feed students unable to return home or without a safe place to call home. This experience, as well as lessons learned from phased summer reopenings that provided safe access to labs, equipment, and clinical experiences will guide the further repopulating of campuses in the coming weeks.

We also support New England institutions that have chosen to offer fully virtual programs this fall. And we support parents and students opting not to return to campus. No single answer is right for all, and no option is risk-free. Pursuing a variety of institutional responses in New England can pay important dividends for the region and the nation — providing valuable lessons to other institutions and as we reopen other parts of the economy.

The decision to reopen with only remote learning may mitigate some risks, but not all, including possible adverse impacts on individuals, local communities, and economies that higher education seeks to serve. We cannot afford a “lost generation” of learners, particularly underrepresented, low-income, and minority students — some of whom may not enroll or are at risk of dropping out if on-campus opportunities are reduced.

For some such students, the campus provides the only food and housing security they know, and staying home may both limit opportunity and increase risk of exposure to the coronavirus. Delaying or discouraging students’ educations could lead to clogs in the talent pipelines that drive growth for the region’s employers and our innovation-dependent economies.

Finally, local communities, already beset by the pandemic’s disruption, will be further deprived of the economic benefits of open institutions and their students. Each of these will have long-term economic and social effects.

We look forward to the time when life on and off campus returns to normal. To do all that is possible to move closer to that goal, we must support colleges and universities in doing what they do best: tackling complex problems with brainpower, innovation, and the application of science-based solutions to real-world challenges. Our colleges and universities are engines of innovation because of their ability to explore boundaries. New England institutions are prepared to lead in this time of significant challenge.

Michael K. Thomas is the president of the New England Board of Higher Education. Mark E. Ojakian is the president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. Jennifer Widness is the president of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges. Dannel P. Malloy is chancellor of the University of Maine System. Daniel Walker represents the Maine Independent Colleges Association. Richard Doherty is the president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts. Debby Scire is the president of the New Hampshire College and University Council. Daniel P. Egan is the president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Rhode Island. Suresh Garimella is the president of the University of Vermont. Susan Stitely is the president of the Association of Vermont Independent Colleges.