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Opinion: Oregon's small colleges, universities managing COVID-19 successfully - so far

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The Lewis & Clark College theater department holds a rehearsal for a production of Cabaret. (Photo by Teresa Lourenco de Almeida Lucas Serra)

By [Guest Columnist](#)

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Over the past six months, my colleagues at other small private colleges and universities in Oregon and I have managed what many thought was unlikely: the successful return to in-person learning in the time of COVID-19.

We share our experiences not to “tempt the fates” or to disparage institutions that have fared worse.

Rather, though each of our schools is unique, we share some common approaches and outcomes that are instructive as we help our students move forward.

We all have the good fortune of being located in Oregon, a state led by pragmatists. When the coronavirus crisis began, Oregon's leaders did not politicize the response, nor did they waste time downplaying the threat. Instead, as Oregon enacted strict quarantining measures, we immediately began collaborating with each other and with the state's Higher Education Coordinating Commission to find ways to adapt and continue serving our communities' educational needs.

We also share the good fortune of being fairly small, independent, private liberal arts colleges and universities. Our operating budgets rely heavily on tuition, room and board, and associated fees. But we also have the distinct advantage of close-knit communities and the ability to change quickly to meet the needs of our students, faculty, staff and alumni.

After sending most students home last March, scrambling to bring students studying overseas back to the U.S. and providing support to our international students studying on campus, we shifted into fall planning mode. What would it take to modify our classrooms, residence halls, dining halls and common spaces to keep faculty, staff and students safe? Would students want to return to campus or start college in such an environment? These and other difficult questions tested not only us as leaders but also our institutional cultures. Delivering on our missions in these new circumstances would require adaptability, patience and perseverance from all.

In short, how would we keep our promise to help young people become the citizens, healthcare professionals, teachers and business and community leaders of tomorrow, at a time when their creativity would be most needed?

Over the summer, with public health experts at the table, our colleges developed approaches to testing and policies for quarantining and self-isolating. We held virtual listening sessions and regularly updated students, parents, employees and alumni. Admissions officers figured out how to recruit students virtually, host remote tours and give realistic responses to questions from anxious families.

And we knew the physical experience on our campuses would look and feel different. Facilities teams surveyed needs, ordered plexiglass in bulk, and reconfigured dorm rooms to account for social distancing and the need for dedicated quarantining space. Classroom occupancy limits were reduced, and outdoor pavilions were erected to provide more instructional space. HVAC systems were set to pull air from outside.

Faculty members transformed curricula and incorporated the multifaceted aspects of a pandemic into our students' learning. IT departments expanded or rapidly developed virtual and distance-learning platforms so we could offer a mix of instruction along with our in-person experiences.

The results of our efforts have been better than expected. Each of us has managed, at most, a few positive COVID-19 cases at any time so far during the fall. Each has implemented a mix of tactics, including testing clinics, active monitoring, contact tracing -- even effluent testing, an emerging application of new technologies. Classrooms and common spaces are stocked with antimicrobial sanitizers. Instructors and students are well-versed in our health and safety expectations. We're always learning and continually evaluating tools to keep our communities safe.

No doubt campus life is very different. Residence halls have fewer students, and since many classes have an online component, our usually bustling campuses are strangely quiet. There is no game-day excitement, although athletes can practice. Social clubs have learned to connect through Zoom, and within each residence hall, students socialize in small groups.

The feedback we're getting is encouraging. Students have proven incredibly adaptive and resilient,

monitoring their own symptoms and reporting when necessary. Faculty recount deeply meaningful conversations in class as both they and their students -- masks donned and desks spaced six feet or more apart -- appreciate the in-person interactions we took for granted just months ago.

Now here's the reality check: it's still early in the academic year. We have no illusions about the rapidity with which an outbreak can occur. We are taking things one day at a time, constantly seeking to find a balance between institutional policies and the flexibility that faculty and students seek. Vigilance is key, and student compliance is a major contributor to our success. Every day we are thankful for the patience and cooperation of our students.

There are no guarantees. But we can say now what we only hoped we could say months ago: compelling, worthwhile, in-person learning can go on, even in the age of pandemic.

George Fox University President Robin Baker, Linfield University President Miles K. Davis, Pacific University President Lesley Hallick, Reed College President Audrey Bilger, and Willamette University President Stephen Thorsett contributed to this piece.