

Butler Eagle

Higher ed questions in wake of COVID-19 **By Dr. Nicholas C. Neupauer** **President, Butler County Community College** **May 7, 2020**

Its human toll is nearing 70,000 deaths in the United States. Its infection rate, 17 times more. It has confined the way we live and work and play. It has left up to 30 million jobless in its wake.

COVID-19 also is ushering decision-makers in higher education nationwide into a future encumbered by more questions than answers, and one with more challenges than solutions, as colleges and universities try to find their way back to where they once were:

Competing in athletics. Crowding field houses. Hosting events. Sitting elbow-to-elbow in lecture halls. And for college and university employees, working from campus.

When should we? How should we? Should we?

Only four months ago, higher education chief executives could not have imagined such pressing questions would govern their institutions' futures. Four months later, those questions also include:

- Should capacity within classrooms decrease to maintain social distancing? Should classroom usage be alternated to allow for cleanings between classes?
- Should colleges and universities redeploy their workforce to accommodate increased remote instruction and to align with strategic enrollment goals? Will they need to add staffing for educational or instructional technology, or to design online courses?
- Should new facilities be designed with only larger classrooms in mind to accommodate social distancing?
- Should conference calls and video conferencing permanently replace many face-to-face meetings? Must employees travel to benefit from professional development opportunities? Should budgets reflect technological alternatives?
- Should the flexibility of a work-from-home model continue for employees?

These are some of the questions about our future we are considering at Butler County Community College, where I have served as president since 2007.

Midway through the spring semester and in regard to COVID-19, we decided to transition face-to-face courses to remote instruction and to institute work-from-home for our employees.

More recently, we announced our summer sessions will also be delivered through remote instruction. These decisions reflect our alignment with a statewide directive, and our commitment to the safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors to our BC3 locations.

They are also decisions benefiting from BC3's move 20 years ago to offer distance education, foresight realized amid prevailing thoughts of "You can't do that online" and "You need to be face-to-face."

In those two decades we have refined our technology and, in the past four months, possibly defined its leading role in our future.

That experience enabled a nimble and quick transition midway through March, for students, faculty and staff.

Our students, from high schoolers in an entrepreneurship program to a nearly 37-year-old mother of five about to enter our registered nursing program, completed required presentations. All through video conferencing.

Our faculty abruptly and adroitly transitioned face-to-face spring semester courses to remote instruction.

Our staff had to reimagine spring open houses. The first BC3 virtual open house is set for Monday.

Along the way, we've realized we may not have to travel out of state for conferences. We may not need to spend time driving to our additional locations throughout northwestern Pennsylvania. We will implement social distancing and mitigation strategies at our physical locations. And we may continue our work-from-home model.

While I so firmly believe in the sense of place that a campus provides, and in that sense of community, decision-makers in higher education face a future encumbered by questions about competing in athletics. Crowding field houses. Sitting elbow-to-elbow in lecture halls. And working from campus.

The human toll of COVID-19 is great. So are the challenges. There is no road map for the future. But one thing is certain. It will look quite different from where we once were.