

Subject: Message from President Leebron regarding Fall Semester Plans

Date: Friday, July 17, 2020 at 4:06:24 PM Central Daylight Time

From: president@rice.edu

To the Rice Community:

Today I write to provide updated information about our decisions and plans for the fall semester. As previously announced, we intend to welcome students back to campus for classes, both online and in person. As I described at the online town hall on May 22, our strategy is to be “flexible, agile and adaptable,” recognizing both that the situation remains highly uncertain and that we will need to respond to individual circumstances.

One of the four fundamental principles that has guided our decision-making is assuring that we will continue to fulfill our mission as a premier institution of higher education and research. What we do at Rice matters and has profound impacts on our students and society more broadly. These times pose many challenges. When we look back we will want to be able to say that we continued to provide the best opportunities for our students and that we had an extraordinary impact on our world. This is especially so now, as we confront not only the painful difficulties posed by COVID-19, but also the critical challenge to become a more just and inclusive university and society. We can sustain our mission, and indeed achieve new heights, while taking steps necessary to protect the safety of our community. But we can do so only if we all commit to making the best contribution that we can. Working together, we intend to provide a robust intellectual and social environment for the semester that starts on August 23, fortified by a system of measures designed to make our campus community as safe as we believe possible from COVID-19. I am grateful to all the faculty, staff and students who have worked tirelessly to prepare for the fall.

I know the uncertainty is difficult for all of us, particularly as the situation across Texas and in Houston has significantly worsened over the past month. But the only way we could have a certain plan would be to decide that our campus won't be open at all, that we will not deliver any classes on campus or conduct vital research this fall. Some schools have chosen that path, but we have not. We believe we have effectively prepared and that we are capable of responding very quickly to changing circumstances in a way that remains tailored to individual situations and choice. Our faculty has been preparing throughout the summer to deliver a high quality educational experience consistent with our standards, as reflected in this [video](#). Many of our students have expressed a strong desire to return to Houston and to our campus, and we know that many students find our campus the most supportive environment for their educational engagement and achievement. We will accommodate those students, while closely monitoring the evolving circumstances. By adopting the strategy of being flexible, we can decide at a later time to adopt more measures if that proves necessary.

We are also deeply concerned about our international students. Although the government has withdrawn the terrible rules for international students it proposed eleven days ago, some very significant concerns remain that make it important to remain flexible with both in-person and online instruction. International students are an essential part of our community and contribute to every aspect of our mission and to the success of our city and nation.

In light of the increased prevalence of COVID-19, we have already adopted stronger actions than we contemplated two months ago. Over the past three weeks, we have increased planned testing for COVID-19 threefold. All undergraduate students will be tested upon arrival and throughout the semester. Tailored testing protocols, based on risk of transmission, are being developed for all other parts of our community and will also continue throughout the semester. We have contracted for 60,000 tests during the fall semester and have access to more if it becomes necessary. We have reduced the maximum in-person class size from 50 to 25. We have lowered the occupancy level for the colleges in the fall to about 75% of normal and reserved significant space for isolation and quarantine. We have given all staff an additional five days of sick leave to be sure they do not feel compelled to come to campus if they are ill.

These actions are in addition to the systems approach we have already implemented to help protect our community. We have developed measures for avoiding spread of the disease on our campus, including contact tracing protocols. Many of those details were contained in the July 1 letter Dean Gorman sent to undergraduates, which you can find

[here](#), and are also contained in weekly updates from the Crisis Management Team. We believe the protocols we have adopted make the campus safer for the level of operations we expect. Indeed, as previously communicated, a comparatively small number of members of our community – 51 out of over 11,000 -- have to our knowledge been confirmed to have COVID-19, and there is only one identified case of possible transmission that happened on campus.

We do want to emphasize that the rules we have adopted, such as wearing masks and physical distancing, are essential aspects of our safety plan. Those who violate our rules flagrantly, refuse to comply or engage in repeat violations will be excluded from the campus, and in extreme cases, separated from the university. Rules requiring masks and physical distancing will also be enforced against all visitors, who will be notified by signage around our campus. It is also vitally important that anyone in our community who feels sick not come to campus or, if living on campus, stay in their campus housing.

Some additional measures are now warranted. To the maximum extent possible, we have been using a principle of choice for both faculty and students, by offering the majority of our courses both online and in person. In light of the decisions of Houston, Fort Bend and other school districts to start the semester in online mode only, faculty with young children at home may, if they wish, choose to teach remotely. We encourage all those without health vulnerabilities or concerns for themselves or their families to teach their dual delivery courses in person on campus. Those choosing to teach only remotely must consult with their department chairs, as the vast majority have already done. Information from the survey of faculty suggests that more than half of the classes will be offered in person as part of dual delivery, although that number may change. Similarly, supervisors will try to accommodate staff members with children at home in their work plans for the fall. Supervisors will determine which staff may continue to work from home, whether partly or completely. We have already adopted a practice of encouraging those who are not fully occupied to contribute to other offices and tasks when their help is needed.

In terms of finances, we will provide a more complete update in about a month as we confirm endowment returns for the fiscal year ended June 30 and student enrollment for the fall. There are very significant costs both from the protective measures we are taking and lost revenues from expected vacant housing and some student deferrals. Across the entire university, we have adopted modest budget reductions for the coming year. In addition, these circumstances may necessitate some personnel-related reductions and other actions focused on making the best use of our resources. But our decisions will continue to be guided by our commitments as a community, and we will seek to protect jobs. Our ability to do so depends on the commitment of all of us to carrying out our missions of teaching, research, advising and mentoring at the highest possible level, and not imposing unnecessary costs.

We know there will be many questions. We welcome your questions and suggestions which you can submit at <https://www.rice.edu/covidsurvey> (requires login). We will announce early next week town halls to provide additional information and begin to post websites with FAQs. In addition, we will have weekly communications about the status of academic and administrative planning for the fall.

We must accept that we are living in a time of great uncertainty, but we cannot allow that to interfere with fulfilling our mission and our obligations to create opportunity for our students and discover knowledge that improves our world. We have done our best to formulate plans that best reflect the four priorities that from the outset have guided our decisions: the health and safety of our community, following recognized expert advice (namely the Centers for Disease Control and other scientific experts), carrying out our core missions and adhering to the RICE values of Responsibility, Integrity, Community and Excellence. Changing circumstances may require us to take new and different steps, but I have never been more confident in the ability of our community to come together to meet the extraordinary demands of our time with compassion for our community and with confidence in the importance of our work.

With gratitude,

David