

Transcription for

**THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED**

EP. 8: CAL STATE'S DECISION ABOUT AN ONLINE FALL

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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 8: CAL STATE'S DECISION ABOUT AN ONLINE FALL

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VOICE: This episode is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant making focus areas of college success and career readiness.

PAUL FAIN: Welcome to The Key with IHE, the podcast on the uncertainties the pandemic is bringing to colleges and college students. I'm Paul Fain, news editor at Inside Higher Ed and the host of this podcast. Big episode this week, I interview Tim White, chancellor of the Cal State University System, who made a lot of news with the May 12th announcement that the 23-campus system remain largely online this fall. Joining me for the discussion was Lilah Burke, a reporter at IHE who's been covering this. We asked White about his decision was, why and how the system made it, and whether the move has been mischaracterized.

TIM WHITE: And everybody's going to have to make decisions that make sense to them. I would just implore people to not be in denial about the seriousness of this issue and to not be planning sort of a

few months in advance or one term in advance, but really put sort of a two-year horizon on this thing.

PAUL FAIN: White talked about how the system is trying to balance its priorities of maintaining academic progress and protecting the health and safety of its roughly 480,000 students and 50,000 faculty and staff members. Let's get right to the conversation.

We're here with Chancellor White. I really appreciate your time. I can only imagine how in demand it is right now. Thanks so much.

TIM WHITE: Happy to be with you, Paul and Lilah.

PAUL FAIN: So on May 12th, you gave a bit of a presentation that got some attention around the country about your planning framework for a virtual fall, a largely virtual fall. Can you give us the brief version of what you announced there?

TIM WHITE: I announced to our trustees and actually to our students and faculty and staff that we would proceed into the fall with idea of trying to deliver as much of the curriculum as we possibly could in the virtual space, and that we were going to be planning in that direction, and we were doing this really being driven by the health and safety of our students, but also of our faculty and staff, and the communities in which our 23 campuses are embedded in. I mean, when you think of it, Cal State Universities, the northernmost is in Arcata, then you come down into Chico and Sonoma, and there's several in the San Francisco Bay Area. There's several in the San Joaquin Valley, along the coast, and then you get down to the LA Basin, and there's five or six of them, and then down through Long Beach into San Diego. I mean, that's 530,000 people, include 480,000 students plus over 50,000 employees that normally would come together in a vibrant, close, interactive expression of the university life that we knew in the past. And sadly, in the COVID-19 era, it's just not in the cards.

And so our question to ourselves was, how do we maximize the number of opportunities for students to access courses in the fall, in light of what I just said, and also in light of what in California appears to be the course of this disease progression? So we're going through the first big wave now, and in many regions of California, we're on the back side of it, but not all. LA County, where Long Beach is located, quite frankly is still going up slightly, but it will tail off. And then in the summer there may be another little bump based on how people behave today. You know, we can't change the biology of the disease, but we can change or try and influence the human behavior that propagates the disease. And that's

what is the driving factor for us.

We do anticipate, based on conversations with our local and state public health officials, with infectious disease practitioners, the epidemiologists, that there will be another significant wave in the late fall, early winter. So that may be around November, and it could be a little earlier. It could be, you know, into December, but around the time you're getting ready to do the final push into the finals, right, and end of the academic term. And that this one in the fall has all the promise of being even a bigger health issue than the one we've just gone through, because it will be on top of the influenza that'll be prevalent at that time.

And so that is a very sobering forecast. And it would be silly for us not to prepare for that likelihood, if not great probability. And then in the spring academic year of 2021, there promises to be another wave as well.

So if you think about this going forward, we asked ourselves, should we just wait and hope, or should we use science and data and expert advice, and be prepared for the most difficult health scenario, and therefore the safest way to deliver our curriculum is in a virtual space. And so that's the decision we made.

Now even in a difficult health environment, we will be doing some things in person that cannot be done currently virtually. Take some of the laboratories in the physical sciences or life sciences. But instead 20 or 30 people in the lab facility, there's going to be five or eight, and they're going to be distanced, and they're going to be, you know, all of the PPE gear on, and there will be cleaning of instrumentation and lab benches in between uses.

So it will be a much more laborious and expensive way to deliver in-person instruction in those laboratory sciences-- so healthcare, nursing training, for examples, on manikins and simulators; in our maritime academy, where they have a simulator, the deep blue water simulator that these folks who go into the merchant marine and in homeland security have to have sea practice on; architecture, art, thinking of a student who's a creative artist, who needs to come and throw something on the wheel and get it in the kiln-- all of these sorts of things will be done. If they can't be done virtually, they'll be done safely in person.

That's the scenario of what will be done, and it's been generally well received, except by the

disappointment of, oh my gosh, I thought I was going off to college, or oh my gosh, I've been a student at Cal State University, whichever, and I'm having a wonderful time. I was looking forward to getting back in the residence halls or, you know, the fraternity or sorority, and hanging out with my pals, and now you've taken that away.

Also, some of the early headlines in the various media platforms expressed that the CSU was closed, and we're not. We never have closed. We have stayed open the entire time and will stay open the entire time. Now there's a report in the headlines that courses are cancelled, and that's a mischaracterization. They're not cancelled at all, in fact, they're just moved from a physical space to a virtual space. And so I think if I had any comments about how this been treated across the country or really across the world in the media, is occasionally a mischaracterization in the headline, but the stories have actually been fairly balanced.

And then the disappointment for students and their families, which I understand and acknowledge and respect, they were hoping to go back to campus in the fall. I pointed out to students and to families that indeed this is going to be different next year, the academic year, but it's going to be very, very good, that even if a student can't be on campus as they had hoped for, that's only going to amount to 20 percent of their college career, if you will, if you're on a five-year plane, or 25 percent if you're on a four-year plan as student. And so, you know, that's a sacrifice, that's a difference, that's something that they don't want to do, but in the big picture of the thing it's much more to stay with learning activities and make progress to degree, which will create a lifetime of social mobility and economic success that otherwise wouldn't be there.

PAUL FAIN: Well, may I ask, I mean, you've got...

TIM WHITE: Go ahead, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: ...an enormously difficult decision, so many variables, super-high stakes... You're one of the first large institutions, if not the first, to go this far. You've talked about the reaction on campus, in the media. How's it been, faculty and staff members and the California state government, how's it gone over?

TIM WHITE: The faculty and staff have been actually very appreciative I think for a couple of reasons. One is, instead of sort of thinking about the whole plethora of possibilities for the fall, we've now

narrowed them down to say play in this direction. So that has taken some of the clutter away and allowed people to think more clearly about what they have to do between now and the fall.

The second reason for announcing now is, you know, we are towards the end of the academic year, the current academic year, and many of the faculty who are on academic year appointments, nine-month appointments come off contract in about a week and a half's time. So if we waited till middle of June to make any sort of announcement, you know, I don't have a technically legal way to get to my employees and say, hey, I want you to think about doing this in a different way in the fall.

So by announcing when we did, almost every campus now has set up an institute by whatever name and asked for volunteer faculty who are willing in the summertime to do some intensive immersive training on the use of technology-assisted education. In other words, they may be brilliant in their academic discipline but they've not used technology in the way it exists today to deliver that curriculum to virtual space, and to engage and interact with students, which is going to be so vitally important. And those things have subscribed, just like that one campus, 300 people in the first eight hours signed up to do something in the middle of July that they otherwise wouldn't do. And so that was another reason for announcing early, is so that faculty and the staff can plan for the fall rather than waiting till we get there and go, oh my gosh, we need to do virtual again. What are we going to do?

And again, the driving thing of us, when we started this, there were two north stars, health and safety, and academic progress. And as this thing has continued, we've necessarily had to put health and safety slightly ahead of academic progress, but not very far. And I wanted to keep as many options for as many students open as possible.

Not talked about a lot is, you know, we have a lot of employees who are over the age of 60, some of our very best faculty, are the elders of the tribe, if you will. They've been at it for a while, they're wise and safe, wonderful, wonderful faculty members, but they're in the population that's at risk based on age, and we don't know, but can assume, that many have underlying medical vulnerabilities. So how do we keep those employees engaged to do their trade in a way that doesn't put their health at risk? And so I think that's another reason why this has been well received internally as well is recognizing we want all of our very best people, regardless of age or medical condition, to continue to participate in the CSU in the year ahead.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, that's a piece of it I feel like we haven't heard as much about as we could have. I was wondering also, now that I'm talking about the reaction, and it's been quite a flurry of interest in your

decision here. You know, have you heard from any of your peers at other institutions either way? What would your advice be as they look to make their own tough decisions now that you've kind of gone ahead and taken the heat and the attention on this for them?

TIM WHITE: Yeah, so I have heard from a lot of people across the country who are in positions of either campus leaders or system leaders, or colleagues out of my academic discipline, not a single one of them has been critical of the decision. And every one of them has said they are proud of my courage, they are proud of having the values in place that drive the decisions you have to make, rather than succumbing to political pressures or other pressures that come to bear in difficult decisions. It has given them the opportunity to think more deeply about what they want to go forward. It also has given them some cover if they have decided to now to maybe change course and plan differently than just a hope and a prayer for a regular academic term in the fall. So I think overall it's been really kind of gratifying.

I've also received some emails from people who, you know, when you've been a chancellor for eight years, you know, not everybody likes the decisions you've made. And I certainly have had my fair share of critics who've thought I should have made a decision over the time in a different direction. I received an email from one of these individuals who's been a very difficult member of the Cal State University, very prominent, very visible, and he said, in 27 years I have never been more proud of the California State University than I was on May 12th when you made this announcement. I know that's a one-off story, and I'm not going to disclose the person, but to me it was a really interesting point of calibration, that it took some guts to do this, but that's okay. That's what leadership is about, and I've always thought with my team, if we had a set of values that we're trying to drive every decision. So before the pandemic, it was, you know, our graduation initiative was our key value and more students to a high quality degree sooner. And so every decision we made, how's it going to help that goal, that value? And now we're saying, that's still there, but let's put health and safety slightly ahead of it. And this those two kind of headlights, it didn't take long to get to here. It's going to take a while to implement it. It's very complex.

PAUL FAIN: We're going to take a quick break. Stick with us.

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LILAH BURKE: So after reporting on a couple of colleges and universities that have recently announced that they are planning to start the semester in person, and then either go online or end their term around Thanksgiving. And I was wondering if that was something that came up in your decision-making process, it was something you considered, or that was something that wasn't on the table for you. You know, officials at those colleges have emphasized that that would help them avoid the second late-fall outbreak that I know you've mentioned. But they've sort of taken a different approach.

TIM WHITE: Exactly. I think they're trying to take this window of contact time and move it around to sort of hit the sweet spot, if you will. We just didn't think we could create a policy would work that way for the 23 campuses who already have slightly different starting and stopping dates, so there is no uniform first day of school and last day of school. Campuses looked at that. We looked at that as a system, and decided that that was much more complicated. Because it also interfaced with...

The other reality here is our of our 52,000 employees, many of them have kids in public school. So, you know, what are public schools going to be doing? So when we move our work time around, you know, there's a real life for those who have children, and many of our employees do, and we want to be family friendly, there's a real life impact on that. As well as the community colleges where some students are actually dual-enrolled and taking different courses to different places at one time and so forth.

So we abandoned that idea. Also because we just didn't think we had the clairvoyance to know precisely when that second wave is going to come. It came earlier, and we shifted our semester and it still screwed things up... We thought that was a poorer outcome than preparing the way we are.

And everybody's going to have to make decisions that make sense to them. I would just implore people to not be in denial about the seriousness of this issue and to not be planning sort of a few months in advance or one term in advance, but really put sort of a two-year horizon on this thing.

In California today the immunity in the general population is somewhere around 2 or 3 percent, and in the absence of a vaccine, it's likely going to take to 2022 to get that immunity up in the 60 percent range, which is thought by all the experts to be the absolute floor in any sort of quote, so-called "herd immunity." Immunity through exposure to the disease is at least a two-year process. And a vaccine, there's a lot of stuff in the public press about I hope and a wish, but the truth is, there won't be a scalable vaccine available at all during the next academic year.



So if you start putting all of those real hard facts together, it drove us to the decision that we made and we're going to stand by it, and we'll do more in person if the situation allows it when we get there, but we wanted to be prepared if it wasn't.

And there's also another interesting thing here, is what about the student who's so excited to go to one of the Cal States, and her parents say, you know, honey, it's just not safe. And so let's sit out a year versus, honey, it's not safe but let's do it online this first year, and then you go live in the residence hall in your sophomore year. So we wanted to make sure that those students could access their education even if they, for safety reasons or parental reasons, they weren't being comfortable to go to the campus.

And then there's a silver lining that hasn't gotten attention yet either. Twitter just announced that all employees can work remotely, and after the pandemic's over, it doesn't matter where you are as long as you do your job. There's going to be more and more and more companies that go into that remote workplace environment. And indeed, part of our job at the university is to prepare students for the workforce. And so here's an opportunity forced upon us by the COVID-19 era, but an opportunity that creates for a student how do they succeed in a virtual environment, which may very well become their work environment when they graduate. And so it's not all a dilemma. There actually is some silver lining to forcing ourselves to do this.

And finally, I would say, Lilah, that in addition to the faculty and the instructional side, is we're also deeply committed to equally robust academic support and student support in the virtual space. So, you know, students who normally would go to veterans' center, hang out with other veterans as a little sense of community, or one of our cultural centers around race or ethnicity, or the LGBTQ center where there are others from that community to hang out and support each other, we are going to create all of those support services in the virtual space as well. And they have to be rich, they have to be authentic, they have to engage students in that space. And quite, I think particularly in our 18-, 19-, 20-year-old students, you know, they've grown up with technology as a way that they communicate socially with friends and so forth. They're probably much more comfortable with it than some of us who did not grown up that technology. So it's the teaching and learning, but it's also the support that's going to be very, very vital.

PAUL FAIN: So we've already kept you longer than we said we would, which means I don't have to ask you about the budget going forward, but I did want to say one very quick thing. In your May 12th presentation, which I just realized was exactly a week ago, you mentioned...

TIM WHITE: It felt like a year ago...

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, no kidding...a speech in January or a presentation where you had referenced the challenges the system was facing in the future, and this wasn't exactly what you had in mind, I think you said. But I did want to say, I feel like when I've talked with folks in California, you all have been preparing for an economic downturn as much as any state, you've had natural disasters, you've had a lot to work on. You know, what's your kind of attitude going forward about how you're going to take this on, as you say, in a multi-year challenge?

TIM WHITE: Eyes wide open, but absolutely not deterred by it, but rather sort of emboldened by it and inspired by the moment. You're right. We have in different campuses with the fires faced this sort of thing. We've been socking away a reserve that we got criticized for last summer. Well guess what? [LAUGH] We're actually going to be able to use some of that reserve now to minimize the economic downturn.

I sense a much greater sense of community among the faculty, staff, students, and trustees today than I did even four months ago. And we worked hard on that culture, to be honest with you. But I think people say, you know, we're not only up to this, this is what we here built for. We were built for the ability to change and to adapt to the circumstances and to succeed because of the need in California for our students to earn their degree.

You know, it was very interesting when I was doing one of those TV shows and I stacked the phone up on a book. One of the books I purposely chose was called Plasticity of Muscle, and that's my academic area, is muscle regeneration and plasticity. Plasticity is the term that is adapting to change. So if you do strength training or endurance training, and you change the morphology and sort of biochemistry and cellular-molecular aspects of muscle.

Well, right now, it's university plasticity. What is our capacity to change to the new functional demands that are in front of us? And I love it. And we will succeed. And we do have a can-do attitude, and we are creating policies that change some of the things we've done in the past in order to get rid of unnecessary barriers for our students and our employees. But we have to be flexible and dynamic. And as the circumstances change, we will change. It's not changing our mind but rather it is adapting to the ever-changing landscape that's in front of us, which is intellectually exciting.

PAUL FAIN: We'll end on that note. Thank you so much for your time. I know it's short, so I'll let you go right now. Thanks so much, Chancellor White. I really appreciate it.

TIM WHITE: Thank you, Paul. Thank you, Lilah.

PAUL FAIN: Take care.

TIM WHITE: Yeah, you bet. Bye-bye.

[MUSIC]

PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode of The Key with IHE. Thanks for listening. Hope you join us next time when I speak with Cathy Sandeen, chancellor of the University of Alaska, Anchorage. She talks with me about how her university is dealing with a serious budget challenge while trying to preserve access for students who face the risk of living in education deserts. Catch you then.

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