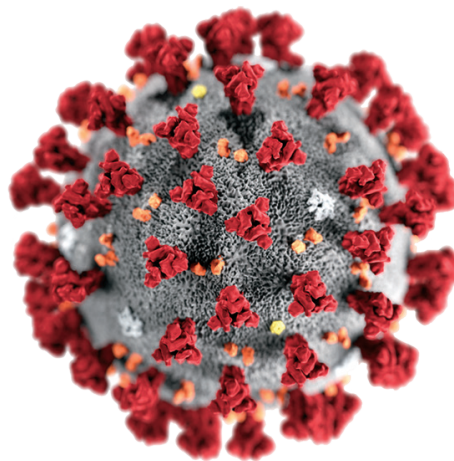# A Pandemic Disrupts
'**BUSINESS AS USUAL**'

OU's Price College and the Center for Intelligence and National Security host international leaders to explore global risks of COVID-19.

BY APRIL WILKERSON

As the Earth continues to adjust its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, one reality has been made clear: humans live in a deeply connected, intertwined world. Globalization not only delivered the virus across continents swiftly and efficiently, it also shone a bright light on the risks of COVID-19 that extend far beyond human health.

Across the globe people are having conversations and making decisions to address a pandemic that has rattled supply chains, economies, education and cybersecurity. The University of Oklahoma is a leader in those discussions through the creation of the OU Global Risks and Threats Series (GRTS), a virtual convergence of experts, industry leaders and visionaries from a variety of international sectors.

The series, organized by the OU Center for Intelligence and National Security – an Intelligence Community Center

of Academic Excellence – and the Michael F. Price College of Business, began in June with an online event featuring speakers from the intelligence, finance, law enforcement, corporate and cyber sectors. People from 15 countries joined to hear guidance and insight about how to respond to a crisis whose impact is still evolving.

"Simply put, the pandemic offers dramatic evidence that health security and economic security are interconnected and vital elements of national security," says James L. Regens, Regents Professor and Director of the OU Center for Intelligence and National Security.

"As a result, understanding SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is critical for developing effective and safe evidence-based strategies for coping with the ongoing pandemic. That's where science comes into play. Unfortunately, a

An international expert in global threats and laws, OU senior fellow Adriana Sanford created the GRTS to bring together leading voices in finance, law enforcement, intelligence and those from the corporate and cyber sectors.
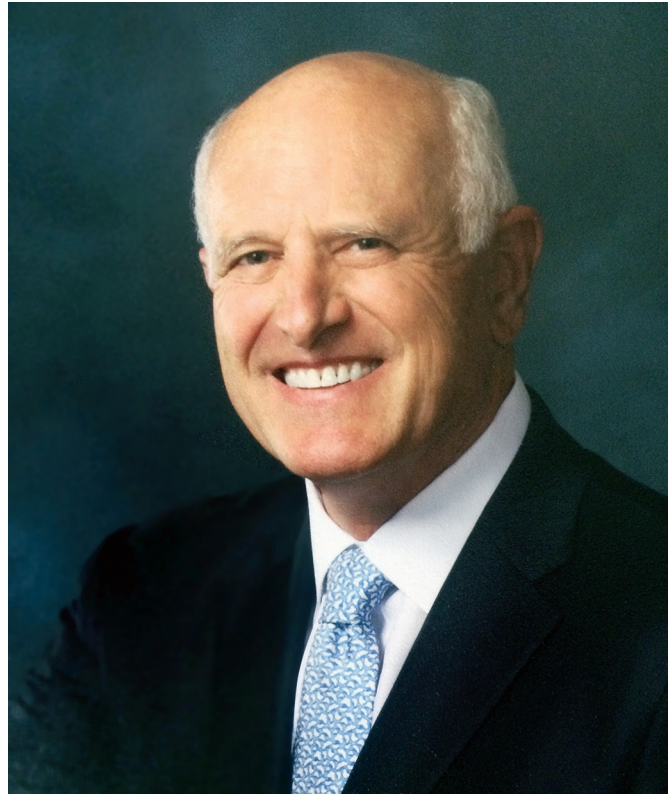
The COVID-19 pandemic poses "a systemic stress test" to global economics, says James L. Regens, Regents Professor and director of the OU Center for Intelligence and National Security, which organized the GRTS series.

lot of the conversation has been grounded in inadequate understanding and misinformation. That's why the Center for Intelligence and National Security is excited to be part of this OU effort to contribute to that understanding by sharing the insights of a diverse, talented group of international experts with a global audience."

Creation of the series has been spearheaded by Adriana Sanford, an attorney and senior fellow at the Center for Intelligence and National Security and the Dean's Visiting Scholar of Cybersecurity and Global Privacy Laws at the Price College of Business. Her career in global threats and international law, combined with her expertise in bringing together leaders from across the world, are well suited for coordinating conversations about the vast impact of the pandemic.

The OU GRTS developed organically, she says, and the purpose of the series drove the planning. The university, because of its assets in national security and business, as well as its location in the heartland of America, is a perfect fit for these conversations and for the pandemic response going forward, Sanford says.

"COVID-19 touched every aspect of our lives – our individual lives and liberty, the ability of our health systems to obtain necessary equipment, our ability to work, the food supply, the destruction of working capital, the threat of cyber criminals, and so much more," she says. "Six months ago, we were

not thinking about these types of risks and threats, and the decisions we make today will have repercussions on a large scale. In addition, in terms of the supply chain, I believe more and more companies will turn back to the United States, which puts Oklahoma in a strategic position to help."

The first GRTS event centered largely on the ramifications of what Sanford calls "the great lockdown." Vast numbers of people suddenly started working remotely, yet many companies did not have the tools or policies for their employees to safely access data from home. Cyber criminals were at the ready to take advantage of lapses in security.

"Studies have shown that about 70 percent of employees were accessing their working files from unprotected devices," Sanford says. "Many companies did not have enough protected computers, and some of them adjusted by using off-the-shelf products instead of the custom configurations they

> "WE NEED TO BUILD MORE ROBUST CYBER RISK CULTURES AND TRAIN EMPLOYEES TO BE AWARE OF THE FACT THAT THERE MAY BE MORE CYBER ATTACKS."

needed. This created threats to their privacy and data. Cyber criminals started targeting the whole environment because there were many vulnerabilities to exploit."

The companies that responded most nimbly have fared better, she says, but many still need to establish policies and train their employees. More than 60 percent of cyber incidents are occurring because of employee errors, she notes. Policies and training should focus on how to safely gather and access company data, as well as physical data protection procedures like guarding laptops and USB drives and what to do if they're stolen. In addition, employers need official work-from-home policies so that their employees know what is expected of them.

"We need to build more robust cyber risk cultures and train employees to be aware of the fact that there may be more cyber attacks," Sanford says. "To me, it's about expectations. If you can explain to your employees what is expected of them, you will have better results and happier employees."

Just as companies and employees face challenges working from home, so are there hurdles when returning to work. In some sectors, perhaps especially academia, there is pressure to bring employees back to their physical workplaces, Sanford says. Parents of university students are asking questions about education that is delivered virtually. Yet faculty and staff who face a higher risk of complications from COVID-19 are hesitant about returning to an environment where their health may be at risk and social distancing is difficult.

In other scenarios, business leaders have been forced to cut salaries, but have sometimes asked employees to let them know if the cuts have created a financial hardship – and why, Sanford says.

"That kind of questioning concerns me," she says. "People are not used to dealing with this issue, and as a result, they are making mistakes that may end up creating a liability in the long run. Class-action lawsuits of all kinds have been filed related to COVID-19, dealing with everything from airlines to education to being forced to go to work, and being forced not to work. Many law firms have created COVID-19 departments to address all the issues. I believe we're going to see a lot of liability concerns come up for companies that didn't take a step back before establishing new policies."

Much like the human body had never encountered this novel coronavirus, the world had no experience with a pandemic in a global society. The necessity of quick actions has been challenging, and what might have been appropriate during past pandemics doesn't necessarily apply to today's world.

"The reality of globalization, modern transportation networks and mass urbanization has literally shrunk the timeline for localized outbreaks to morph into truly global pandemics," Regens says. "To place in context the disparity between the disease's spread and the time for governments to react, SARS-CoV-2 reached Lombardy in northern Italy within a few months of the initial outbreak in China's Hubei province. On the other hand, the 14th-century bubonic plague pandemic, commonly called the Black Death, which also originated in China in the early to mid-1300s, took years to reach northern Italy in 1347 via Crimea. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of just-in-time supply chains when the whole world is impacted simultaneously.

"Occurring simultaneously globally, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a systemic stress test," he adds. "It is generating the perfect storm of adverse health, economic, social and political impacts domestically and internationally. Public health, national and global economies, social stability, and confidence in governments have been undermined by the staggering rate of infections and deaths and severe downturn in economic performance linked to the pandemic."

Although the final impact of COVID-19 will remain unknown for years, it's not too soon to place the pandemic in perspective, Regens says.

"One of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency," he says. "Then take responsibility to act coherently and transparently. Decisions being made today definitely are impacting our options going forward in real time. It's not like SARS-CoV-2 was a black swan event, so hopefully we will start proactively going forward to build effective leadership and make coherent investments in resiliency because it's a question of when, not if, we experience another pandemic.

"I'm optimistic that we'll get to the finish line successfully, drawing on our talent to innovate and adapt, but we need to be careful about overpromising quick results or we'll erode the public's trust."

Responding to those challenges is not just an opportunity for OU to share its expertise, but to contribute to a foundation of knowledge about pandemic responses, says Wayne B. Thomas, W.K. Newton Chair of Accounting and a George Lynn Cross Research Professor in OU's Price College.

"We think it is important to share our work and our vision with the global community and to help shape the next generation of world leaders, decision makers, senior executives and skilled students," Thomas says. "By bringing world experts together, we can better understand the threats that have political, economic and social implications on all of us, and we can advance real-world solutions and work together on a multilateral basis."

For more information about future events in the OU Global Risks and Threats Series, visit *http://www.ou.edu/price/grts*. 🍷

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