



Postscript

Even before “interim” was dropped from his title, University of Oklahoma President Joe Harroz had already made two of the toughest decisions a college president can make: when to close a campus during a pandemic and when to call for the safe return of students, faculty and staff.

Closing university doors to an unwelcome virus was a historic first for OU, yet the philosophy behind the decision has guided presidents since David Ross Boyd.

“From the beginning,” writes OU Professor Emeritus David Levy in *The University of Oklahoma: A History, Vol. 2*, “the University had proclaimed its concern for the students’ health. Parents who sent their children to Norman expected and were entitled to no less.”

While the university has changed dramatically over the past 100 years, parental concerns have not. To fulfill its obligation – not only to students, but also to faculty and staff – the university has invested more than \$5.5 million in procedures to bolster a safe return to classrooms, offices and residential housing when school begins Aug. 24.

OU’s Clean and Green Initiative has had custodial staff and outside contractors working around the clock to disinfect campus buildings. Electrostatic sprayers are at work in clinics and high-use areas at the Health Sciences Center campus and OU-Tulsa. As the Norman campus reopens, common areas will also receive weekly electrostatic cleaning. Every room in the residential towers on the Norman campus will have a device that releases dry hydrogen peroxide to combat viruses while air filters across all campuses are being upgraded to hospital standards.

“We are fortunate to have teams working on this every single day,” says Harroz. “It’s a daily enterprise.”

Harroz also has the entire OUHSC campus at his disposal with experts in public health, immunology, biostatistics, virology and epidemiology. He tapped Dr. Dale Bratzler, professor and chair in the Hudson College of Public Health, to serve as OU’s chief COVID officer. The former senior policy adviser for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn’t mince words when it comes to dealing with the pandemic.

“Reopening doesn’t mean back to normal,” Bratzler says, pointing to a campus-wide policy of mandatory mask-wearing and social distancing in classrooms and other common areas. “Mask-wearing alone is shown to reduce the spread of the virus by 85 percent.”

More than half a million masks are ready for distribution and 750 hand-sanitizer stations have been installed near building entrances, elevators and public restrooms. Class size will be limited, more take-out foods will be offered in dining areas and intensive cleaning will continue.

“We are trying to maximize the in-person experience while also being safe,” says Harroz. “Classes with 40 students or less will be held in large rooms where there is space to dis-

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tance, with 50 to 70 percent occupancy.

“We’re putting classes of more than 40 online and designing breakout sessions for some of the larger classes, where students will have an in-person component.”

With new cases of COVID-19 setting records in Norman in mid-July, the university will fine-tune safety measures as problems arise.

“Obviously, we know that we don’t control the virus, it controls us,” says Harroz. “But we’re going to do our best to mitigate where we can.”

Dealing with a pandemic has not prevented Harroz from advancing the other goals of his administration, chief among them establishing a long-term, strategic plan for each campus, advancing research and keeping OU affordable and accessible.

“I believe we can take steps forward during this crisis,” says Harroz. “Our strategic plan, the first long-term plan in the past 30 years, is in the final stages. We are looking at everything through the lens of what we want for our institution and how we get there. What I’m most excited about is that we can plan for more than one year at a time. We have an incredible opportunity in front of us.”

Even while battling a virus, there are positive markers going into fall. Despite budget cuts, tuition remains flat for the third year in a row and researchers on the OU campus earned a record-high \$255.6 million in grants and external funding for fiscal year 2020. While regional and state institutions are reporting a 15 to 30 percent decrease in number of students, OU enrollment is down only slightly, says Harroz.

Another priority for the president is to address systemic racism at the university that will include exposing students to different points of view as part of their OU education.

“When I came to OU at 18, I had a narrow set of experiences and that was my entire perspective,” he recalls. “To come to a comprehensive research university and have the chance to take a class where you get to know people who are different from you and explore views other than your own is how we get to true understanding. We need to teach students how to think, not what to think.”

With a fresh basket of Gordian knots waiting on his desk each day one might think Harroz longs for an easier assignment. Not so, he says.

“I hear comments that imply somehow I am burdened by it,” says Harroz. “But the truth of the matter is, we take on these roles because we want to make a difference.

“How do you give back to a place that fundamentally changed your life?” he asks. “And how do you give back to a place that has a purpose that you find sacred? If you come from that perspective, when asked, ‘What’s it like to deal with a pandemic?’ It’s a part of what you do, especially if you have a Health Sciences Center campus. We truly have a chance to impact lives.”

—Lynette Lobban