

On March 9, the university presidents joined me at our Baton Rouge office, as they do a half dozen times or so each year, to discuss matters of systemic interest. This particular agenda consisted primarily of a debrief of our Board of Supervisors' annual retreat and a finalization of our legislative strategies for the session that began at noon that day. Each hour over the preceding weekend saw an elevation of the novel coronavirus in the public discourse, especially in the higher education community. By Monday morning, we had all become amateur epidemiologists, and the disease that would two days later be officially declared a pandemic became the topic of the conversation at our meeting. Few of us envisioned our new reality, a reality that could be the introduction to the next dystopian blockbuster, yet here we are. During the intervening two weeks, I have witnessed examples of leadership, innovation, creativity, and collective resolution that are nothing short of inspirational.

I sent a message to the Louisiana Legislature last week updating members on your work. Describing the arduous undertaking that was the wholesale transformation of our learning environment, I told them "... the resilience and fortitude of our faculty were on full display, and their demonstrated commitment to student learning is something I will carry in my memory long after we overcome this challenge." Similar sentiments could have been expressed about support staff, student services professionals, facilities staff, campus police, counselors, librarians, IT staff, and on and on.

Oh, I realize the disruption has been ... disruptive. Some of the disruption has even been self-inflicted: debatable decisions by administrators (this one included), technology that does not work as designed, technology that does work as designed by the maniac who designed it, entrenched bureaucracy, seemingly misplaced priorities. All of those, while frustrating, are natural occurrences in complex organizations. All provide opportunities for improvement when we reflect on this effort in the months ahead. All pale in comparison to the work you have accomplished in unworkable conditions.

Our students have been a source of inspiration as well. While the pictures of spring breakers on Florida beaches, enjoying life and employing minimal social distancing stole the headlines, the thoughtful eloquence of our student leaders and their remarkable examples of social consciousness, to me, better define our next great generation.

One thing of which I am certain: better days are ahead, and the university will be key to securing that brighter future. When science mitigates the impact of this novel virus, it will be because of the researchers at our universities. If it is nature that ultimately renders the virus more manageable, as it has with similar viruses, it will be our experts who help us understand why and help us apply that understanding to the next episode. When our economy roars back to life, it will be powered by the work of our graduates, and it will be those graduates who create whatever form that new economy takes. Most importantly, it will be our university communities who define what the post-pandemic society looks like; who document not just the biological aspects of the era but explore the sociological implications as well; who create and eventually interpret the historical artifacts; who help restore, reshape, and enrich the cultural

milieu; who help us be a better people, a better nation, a better world, while delighting in commentary, debate, and argument about what that should mean.

Right now, our focus is on the immediate. Your physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing and that of our students, families, and communities should be paramount. As long as we remember that, we will emerge from this smarter and stronger.

Thank you. Stay well. God bless.

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