

Higher Education is Stepping up in the Face of a Pandemic

The coronavirus has upended the world in just a few weeks' time. Like all enterprises, higher education is being challenged in unanticipated ways that require rapid change.

Ensuring health and safety for Hoosiers is absolutely necessary in attacking this crisis – and so is addressing the jolt to our state's economic well-being and personal livelihoods. Individuals and employers are seeking a path forward, and higher education is uniquely positioned to play a key role in recovery. In multiple ways, Indiana's colleges are responding with the sense of urgency that is required to improve lives and communities.

Resources and research

Institutions are providing empty dorm rooms and medical facility space or equipment to area hospitals. Ball State University's new Health Professions building, for example, has 30,000 square feet of simulation space available to IU Ball Memorial Hospital. Indiana University Bloomington is making dorm rooms available to medical workers to rest or safely quarantine away from family.

Students at many institutions – including Indiana State University, Ivy Tech Community College, Purdue University Northwest and Purdue University Fort Wayne – are using campus 3D printers to make pieces for face shields or other protective equipment for local health care systems.

Faculty from Indiana University, Purdue University, the University of Southern Indiana and others are actively working in hospitals to support full-time hospital staff. Fourth-year students from the IU School of Medicine, along with pharmacy doctorate students from Purdue University, graduated early to begin practicing and are contributing to the state's health care response.

And Indiana's research universities are involved with scientists around the nation and the world, investigating various treatments for COVID-19, potential tools for testing, tracing and understanding the spread of the virus, as well as aspects of patient recovery. As always, Indiana's institutions are at the forefront of some of the most innovative and important scientific discoveries and breakthroughs.

Student support

All institutions are stepping up to help students who are unsure of their next steps and may be struggling through personal hardships and/or a lack of resources.

Online and virtual counseling resources have been made available to students. Purdue University called every student that hadn't logged into its online course platform after one week to find out how students needed support. Ivy Tech Community College's IvyAssist website connects students with organizations that provide food and housing assistance, transportation, financial resources and other support services. Indiana State University is providing graduate boxes to graduating seniors, filled with the appropriate tassels, cords and more to make sure the virtual commencement is a special experience.

Academic quality is crucial during this time of upheaval. Institutions are focused on ensuring academic rigor and quality online instruction so students are fully prepared to continue their education in the fall.

Backing businesses

Within their local communities, institutions are also reaching out to businesses to offer assistance on how to adapt to technological changes or by providing free services and resources. Ivy Tech Kokomo is assisting the local General Motors plant to recruit 1,800 full-and part-time staff to produce ventilators.

Vincennes University's director of career services has been providing advice for those seeking employment during the pandemic. Indiana State University's Career Center is offering a program for students who are entering the job market during the pandemic and for alumni who have become unemployed.

Our private colleges are also supporting their students, local communities and the state in similar and meaningful ways, providing everything from regular phone call check-ins and touchpoints with students, to offering resources for local hospitals, businesses and the broader community.

For our part, the Commission for Higher Education is working to provide common-sense and flexible policy changes to ensure the coronavirus poses no barrier to students entering or completing a postsecondary education. We're also partnering with state and federal leaders to advocate for regulatory flexibility and emergency relief to meet emerging needs.

While there is much we don't know about COVID-19, we do know this: The Hoosier spirit is strong enough to overcome the challenges we are facing. Higher education is prepared to play its part in a recovery that accelerates a stronger economy and personal opportunity for years to come.

Teresa Lubbers is the Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education. She chairs the Governor's Workforce Cabinet.