

WSU COVID-19 Town Hall - March 27

PHIL WEILER: Good morning, everyone. My name is Phil Weiler. I'm vice president for marketing and communications for Washington State University. I want to welcome you all to our first COVID-19 town hall meeting for Washington State University. We'll be joined by President Schulz and several members of his leadership team. I'll introduce those folks here in a moment, but wanted to spend a second to give you an idea of what today's event's going to look like.

The intent to this is to really be a question and answer session. We're scheduled to go for an hour. We have been soliciting questions for about a week. As of this morning, we had more than 180 questions that have been posted online. In addition, there's a chance for you all to ask questions live today as you're watching. You can simply go to the comments section of YouTube, post your questions there.

I'll be watching for those. And for the last probably 20 minutes or so, we'll be addressing those live questions. Obviously, as you can see, all of us are working from home in concert with Governor Inslee's request that we stay home and stay healthy, so this is going to be a casual conversation with you all. But with that, let me introduce Kirk Schultz, president of Washington State University.

KIRK SCHULZ: Well, Phil, thank you and good morning, Cougs. Appreciate the opportunity to spend a little time visiting with you via Zoom, and I hope all of you are doing well and coping with the change in work environment that we all are experiencing right now. I put out a announcement earlier to the campus community via email, and just thanking you all for your extraordinary efforts.

It really is hard to put into words my appreciation for what you all are doing. Many of you are-- have done a great job of seamlessly moving your course content to online. You're also dealing with aging parents, children who may be at home, pets, not interacting with your colleagues the way that most of us normally do as part of what we do in our normal work lives.

So I think this week has been an extraordinary week for WSU as a system. It's been extraordinary week for our students. It's been an extraordinary week for faculty and staff. And I just want to express my appreciation to all of you for what you're doing to make this as seamless an experience for our student learning as possible in really, really difficult circumstances.

I've never really been prouder to lead a group of folks, and I have been this last week, so thank you for your efforts. I have a few points that I want to make, and I don't want to talk for too long. The first thing is we are really trying to balance the number of communications that we send out. We want to make sure that we're communicating frequently, that we're answering

your questions, that we're doing the things that you feel that we should be doing as your leadership team.

But we want to balance that out by not doing too much. I get in my inbox every day all kinds of allegedly help emails from vendors and things like that around COVID-19. And at some particular point, I don't want to read them anymore. And I don't want to reach the point that you all, as our faculty, staff, and students, feel, hey, it's just another COVID-19 email from the administration.

So we want to balance out doing that effectively, providing those updates, providing encouraging notes to all of you every now and then without overcommunicating. So we'll probably decrease the frequency of some of the communications over the last couple of weeks just because you all are busy. You're working with your students, your faculty, staff, and we just want to be careful.

The other thing is some people have expressed some frustration. How come we're not making decisions quicker or sooner? I have a son who is at another university, and where he goes to school, they had a couple of days where they actually contradicted themselves multiple times administratively in communications. We have worked really hard to make sure that we put out communications and we don't have to go back a day later and explain what we said.

That sometimes means that that coordination takes longer, so I ask everybody to continue to be patient as we put out those communications. And you may be frustrated. How come we don't know more sooner? That's the reason why. I also want to encourage our communities to take a COVID-19 break every now and then. Every morning, I get up, I look at the newspapers. And what happens is now that's all that's out there is number of deaths. What's happening with COVID-19? What's happened to the economy?

I urge you to have an evening or two, or time where you step away from some of that, do something that is fun and feels good to you and whomever you're spending your time with. But I think it's important to discipline yourself to take a break from some of that all-encompassing type of COVID-19 news that we all get.

We're going to do these informal Zoom chats with the university community at least every two weeks. We don't want to come too frequently, but what we want to do is be able to take the questions. We're going to be able to get to a bunch of them today. And ones that we don't get to, we want to make sure that we're getting those answers back out through a frequently asked questions page and some things like this.

My expectation is, in a couple weeks, a lot of the questions that you have we will have gotten to. We also have one of our colleague institutions in the State of Washington, Central Washington, that has declared financial exigency. We had several people ask me about this at WSU, and I want to make this as clear as I possibly can.

That is not under consideration at this time. The leadership team has not talked about that. They had their own particular reasons at Central for doing that. We are not considering that. I don't want anybody worried that we're going to make some announcement in two weeks. We will put out an announcement in a letter from me next week-- actually, from me, from Bryan, from Mary Jo, and from Stacy-- around some of the actions we feel we need to take just to make sure that we're being responsible with our budget moving forward.

Some people will ask, well, what about the stay? Is there going to be a special session? What's the federal stimulus going to do for WSU? Folks, there's just a lot of stuff we don't know right now, so we will always make sure that we do timely fiscal information. We're going to be careful with what we say. And if you get frustrated and say, well, how come I don't know more-- my colleague at this university seems to know more what's going on at their place.

We want to be deliberative, careful, and keep those communication channels open. Folks, thank you for all that you've done over the last few weeks-- the number of people that went to training, all the work that people put into making a bad experience really a positive opportunity for WSU. So thank you. I look forward to answering your questions and look forward to working together through this really difficult and challenging time, and coming out of it a better institution. Go Cougs.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Kirk. It looks like we can now see all of our colleagues that are on the screen. Let me introduce them now. And I've got a series of questions that I'll be asking each of them. First, we're being joined by Bryan Slinker, our provost. We have Theresa Elliot-Cheslek, our vice president and chief human resources officer, and then Mary Jo Gonzales, vice president for student affairs.

What I'd like to do maybe is to kick off with the first question for Bryan. In your role as provost, I know that you're talking with each of the deans every day. You've got a daily meeting with them, and have had that in place for quite a while now. I'm just curious. We're about a week into this idea of moving everybody to online.

Based on your conversations with deans and with faculty members, how are things going? Has this transition worked, and what kinds of things can we expect in the future?

BRYAN SLINKER: Thanks, Phil, for that question. We're a week into it, as you said. I am so proud of the faculty and students for how they've adapted to this totally unforeseen circumstance. None of us are living the lives we thought we would three weeks ago, and the work that our Office of AOI has done to train up faculty and students, and provide resources and toolkits has just been tremendous.

Well over 700 faculty over the last two weeks attend multiple training sessions, and it's been very gratifying to see the effort. And for the most part, it seems to be working. Now, there's a few glitches here and there, and we're trying to be responsive to those glitches, learning where

we could have communicated maybe a little more crisply or clearly, trying to go back in and clean up some of those things.

But I must say that overall, things have been going really well. That's not to say they're going perfectly, but given the transition that we had to make here, on the part of both the students and the faculty, it has gone really quite well. Again, because it's not going perfectly, we want to keep hearing where we can do better.

And everybody's learning together. And I just really want to, again, congratulate everybody-- students and faculty-- for their efforts here, but also just remind you that we're all in this together. And if something's not working, we want to know about it, but just remember to treat each other with a bit of compassion and grace as we try to get through this. But overall, it's going really well.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Bryan. It's interesting. That word grace has been coming up in a lot of conversations I've been having recently. I think people understand this is an-- these are uncharted waters for everybody, and we need to really support one another. So Theresa, I think the next question I want to point toward you. Bryan talked about-- a little bit about the faculty.

I'm curious from a staff perspective-- I know things changed. When we first started talking about this idea of reducing operations on the campuses, we were going to try and keep things open and it was going to be as much business as usual as it could be, but then the governor announced-- I think it was earlier this week-- his stay home, stay healthy order. So how does that impact staff people, people who either are able to work from home or typically work in-- out in the field, for example?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESEK: Great question. Governor Inslee's stay home, stay healthy order is to help ensure social distancing and decrease the spread of COVID-19. If a WSU employee can telework or work from an alternative location without hampering its central operations, they are to do so. All employees are to comply with the stay home, stay healthy order.

Employees who live outside of the state of Washington will also need to comply with that state's orders. I just wanted to talk about two questions we're frequently getting. The first is, do I need a letter from WSU for travel to and from work? The answer's no. They stay home, stay healthy order does not require essential employees to have documentation on them.

The second common question we're getting is, do I need a doctor's note for my use of sick leave? And we are currently not requiring documentation from most situations. However, WSU needs to comply with federal and state law. The HRS website will have the most up-to-date information and employees with questions can contact our HRS Disability Services Unit.

And I just wanted to add I appreciate our faculty and staff's efforts during this very challenging time. And if you do have questions, feel free to call us. We are working. I am in my office. And

right behind me, Butch is holding our website, so be sure to check there daily. It's updated daily. And give us a call. Thank you.

PHIL WEILER: All right, I love the plug for the website. nice job. Mary Jo, I'd like to direct the next question to you. As I looked at the questions that people had submitted, there were a lot of questions, particularly from students who are based on the Pullman campuses. As people probably know, we have five physical campuses across the state, plus our Global Campus, which is an online campus.

All those students are always online. But one thing that is unique about the Pullman campus is the fact that that is our residential campus, so we have both undergraduate and graduate students who are living in apartments and residence halls. I know that, based on news stories I've read, some universities simply said, hey, we're closing the residence halls. You've got 40 hours, 24 hours, whatever it is to clear out. WSU didn't choose to do that, so could you maybe talk a little bit about why we didn't just simply close things and make everybody go home?

MARY JO GONZALES: Well, Phil, and all of those out there, you know that's not who we are. WSU is home to so many students, and particularly those students who can't travel home, our international students, our first-gen students, many students who are actually working here on the WSU Pullman campus right now to maintain operations. So we truly are home.

And I want to make sure that, as we talk about that, that we also have essential staff, like Theresa, like our custodial staff, our Cougar Health Services, our dining staff, and our housing and residential life staff, who are actually making sure that all of those services are delivered here. So I think it's really important that we remember that we are a small town-- and in ourselves-- not just in Pullman, but within the work that we do to support students, and frankly, to support our faculty and staff as well.

That includes our IT units, who are making sure that all of our wireless is working seamlessly for the students who are streaming, as well as faculty and staff, who are doing that work as well. So I also want to add my comments about thank you for your resilience for showing up. You all should be very proud of yourselves. This isn't us telling you this, but you all have stepped up and stood up in ways that we could not imagine.

I just want to say thank you. Also want to remind folks-- the other questions that I saw, Phil, were really about housing and dining. People said, why did it take so long for you to make decisions? We have students who are in such different situations, in such different circumstances. We really wanted to take our time.

We actually took one of the suggestions from a parent who said, I really want to contribute our RDA money to Cougs Feeding Cougs to help those students who couldn't survive, and so that was like, oh my goodness, what a great idea. And so we took time. We had students who said, I need a credit. I'd like to apply it to next fall, because I'm OK right now.

We had students who said, we need refunds right now. And so we took our time to make sure that we were helping our Cougs get-- stay on the wait to graduation. And I want to remind people that our goal truly is to help you get onto graduation and to stay on that pathway. I do know that there are concerns about the stuff in the halls. Please don't worry about that.

Right now, we need you to worry about being successful in your coursework. We need you to be successful in focusing on engaging with your peers. It's OK to do TikTok right now, as long as you are doing the homework that goes along with it. And I want to make sure that you're engaging with the faculty and staff who are reaching out to you, who are asking to connect with you. Please do that, because more now than ever, we need each other, and I want to remind us of that.

I also want to say we don't have some answers, and I think it's really important that we're transparent with you about that. I wish I could give you an answer on every single fee, but it is very complex. And let me explain why it's complex. We have rules to follow. That's one part of it. But we also have students who are, for example, still providing resources for UREC. They're doing online classes.

There's a yoga class that I think I need to join to relieve some of the stress that I am experiencing. But we're also doing things like, if you go to parking and you want a reimbursement for parking, there's also a-- there's already a process where, as long as you give back your parking permit, you get refunded that. And so we will be providing more information in the next couple of days, but again, we're working through this just like all of you are-- and just want to thank you for your patience, your grace, and your understanding as we make these decisions that impact a lot of people.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Mary Jo. I too saw lot of questions, both from students and from parents, about those people who had left their gear in their residence halls during spring break. And people are justifiably anxious about, gosh, I want to make sure that I don't lose track of that. So thanks for addressing that. Kirk, another big question that we've saw a lot of concern about, a lot of questions about, and something that was addressed a little bit earlier this week that probably is worth repeating is, what's going to happen with commencement?

Again, looking at news reports, we've seen that other universities across country have simply said, we can't do a live commencement, or we're just going to go to an online-- you chose to do something a little bit different. Can you tell us a little bit about what your thoughts are?

KIRK SCHULZ: Commencement ceremonies are so important for so many of our Cougs and our families-- taking that culminating step, that opportunity to walk across the stage, to be recognized for finishing a baccalaureate, master's, PhD professional degree. One of the reasons that we waited is we really wanted to make sure that we gave ourselves every opportunity to stick with an in-person commencement ceremony in May.

And I know people were frustrated and said, how come you didn't make this decision quicker? The bottom line was we just didn't want to make a quick decision that really was impactful to so many Cougs across all of our campuses. So after watching some of our other Pac 12 schools maybe make decisions on-- a little more quickly and seeing some of the backlash that came from that, we put our heads together and said, what can we do?

And so what we came up with is we're going to do in May a virtual commencement celebration. And we're soliciting ideas from students and families right now. Mary Jo, and her team, and your team are taking all those ideas. There have been some really great ones that have come in about what types of things we can do to make that feel like at least day a nice acknowledgment of the hard work that people have put in.

That being said, though, there's still a lot of interest on my part, on our families' part, about having that opportunity to walk across the stage formally, go through commencement, and celebrate with family and friends. And so in Pullman, in August, we're going to have-- assuming that we're able to do so, we're going to have that in-person commencement ceremony, or ceremonies, depending on how many people are there.

We're going to hood graduates, recognize master's students, recognized baccalaureate students as they come across that stage, and shake their hand. So some people have sent in notes. Well, the August date is not really that good, or what about the other campuses? More details will be coming out, but I wanted people to know that we heard you. We heard you loud and clear that commencement is an important part of your WSU experience.

And folks, I hope everybody participates and both. Participate in the virtual celebration with all of us about you finishing your degree, and then we really want to see you come back if you can in August to participate there as well. So I think we've tried to hit a middle ground, and sometimes when you hit a middle ground, nobody's happy. But largely, I think most of the feedback that we've gotten has been positive-- and lots of creative ideas about what we can do. So thank you.

PHIL WEILER: And Kirk, just to make sure that I'm clear, my understanding is that we'll do a live commencement both on the Pullman campus, but all the other campuses in that August frame as well. Is that correct?

KIRK SCHULZ: Absolutely. And the chancellors of those other campuses, as well as some of our professional programs, like pharmacy, medicine, nursing, veterinary medicine, also will have their own in-person commencement ceremonies. So we're going to have more of that stuff out in the next few weeks, but we're going to try and do it all in those first couple weeks in August.

PHIL WEILER: Great, thank you. Bryan, another question, again, that I saw show up repeatedly in our online request for questions had to do with grading policies. Here's one question in particular. It says, nationwide, many other universities are changing their grading process to

pass/fail for this term. Is this something that can be implemented at Washington State University? Do you want to cover that?

BRYAN SLINKER: Yes-- glad to. So first, I'll say that, again, echoing some of the other comments, we know there's some frustration with the deliberative process in coming to these decisions. But yes, we are liberalizing pass/fail rules. And part of the deliberation is, whatever we do with changing grading, we don't want to inadvertently put students in a position of harming their interests for the next steps they want to take or putting them crosswise with federal financial aid rules.

And so we've been very careful that we have a package of things that will support our students without likely causing them harm. And so within the next couple of days, the official communication will come out about withdrawals and pass/fail grading. And what we've done is we are-- we made the decision we will not go to blanket pass/fail grading, because there's too many individual circumstances, as Mary Jo alluded to in her response.

And so the liberalized rules are that pass/fail grading can be used for more things than usual, like UCORE and honors courses. The deadline for requesting a switch to pass/fail grade by petition has been extended to June 1, so past the time of finals, so that students have the opportunity to make that switch if they think it's in their best interest to do so. Actually, extending the deadline that far was at the request of students. So that idea came in from the students.

And some departments will still have grade requirements that won't be shifted to pass/fail, but for the most part, there's much more liberalized pass/fail grading, if students request it, for a given course. And it's up to the student to make that decision of whether they want to request. And that deadline's been extended to June 1.

We've also changed the limit on the number of withdrawals allowable and extended that deadline. The deadline has been extended until May 1, the last day of instruction, to consider withdrawal. And the number of withdrawals has been increased to six from the regular four, so we're trying to get more flexibility, but again, leave those decisions in the hand of the students.

And our only caution to students, as they think about utilizing, for many reasons, this increased flexibility, is they just make sure they consult with their advisors in their programs to determine that it's the best-- it really is in their best interest to switch a graded course to pass/fail for whatever they intend to use those courses for-- for application to grad school, or professional schools, or other things that a pass/fail might not be the best decision-- so again, lots more flexibility, but because there's so many individual circumstances, we didn't do blanket switch to pass/fail-- and really encourage students to understand their increased options, but consult with their advisor before making a decision.

PHIL WEILER: That sounds like good advice. Make options available, but really encourage students to talk with their advisors so they understand the consequences of whatever decision

they make. Theresa, I'm going to ask this next question of you, but other folks may want to chime in as well. I thought this was a very thoughtful question.

This person wrote, this is a stressful time for everyone, and an unprecedented situation. As everyone does their best to step up and meet the needs of the university, their campus, the students, and their colleagues during this public health crisis, what message do you have for faculty and staff who might be struggling with the need to be as productive as possible, but also understanding that this is a time where folks may have their own sort of personal challenges that are being exacerbated by circumstances? Do you have any advice or thoughts on people who are wanting to continue to be able to be productive, but having to deal with a really unknown situation?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Yeah. I'm going to say take care of yourself and your family first. Always put yourself first. Utilize the resources we have for faculty and staff. We have the 24/7 Employee Assistance Program with counselors readily available to help you with not only well-being, anxiety, and stress, but other challenges some of our faculty and staff are dealing with-- financial challenges that may be coming, if one member of their family is being impacted, how to deal with not being able to see your mom, or your dad, or your family member in a nursing home.

So we recognize all of us are going through this very difficult time, and everyone has different things are dealing with. And so we're going to be adding, hopefully as soon as next week, little 10-minute Zoom topics on mental well-being, anxiety, little exercise snippets-- all types of things to give people a break from just COVID-19 and working. So the key thing I'll just say is take care of yourself. Take care of your family first. Use of the wealth of resources we have available for you.

PHIL WEILER: So Bryan, looks like you might have a comment on this as well.

BRYAN SLINKER: I think all of us probably want to address this from our own perspectives, but what I've seen that's really been heartening is how much information people are sharing with each other, and learning from each other, and supporting each other in very creative ways. And just would encourage everybody, in addition to all the formal services that are available, we have so much to offer each other in tips and what we're learning and in how we do this.

Have a quarantini, as it's become called-- a virtual cocktail-- or get together with friends virtually. I learned yesterday-- this sounds corny, and may sound unserious, but it's the kind of example of I think of how we share with each other. A lot of people have expressed that they've missed their standing desks, for example, when they went home. And it turns out ironing boards made great standing desks, and so you learn these tips from each other. And I think it's just important that we really share, even if they seem corny like that.

PHIL WEILER: Mary Jo, did you have something you wanted to add?

MARY JO GONZALES: Yeah. I sit here, having been homebound for about eight months recovering from a pretty serious illness, and I also want-- think it's important to acknowledge that people are grieving, and that it's a time where we all had plans for spring. I think about those graduates who wanted to walk down the-- walk and shake Kirk and Bryan's hand for graduation.

I think about those students whose study abroad plans were canceled or aren't going to be able to happen. I think about our faculty who've rightly-- should be celebrating promotion and tenure right now at our Excellence Awards, our student leaders and their leadership awards. And I also think it's what it means to live in this new space, where nobody has the answers.

I also want to-- as we're acknowledging and recognizing a lot of that grief, to also recognize the humanity and the tenderness that we should be providing to one another during this time. It's very hard. It's very difficult. My staff working at home and working in the office are worried about having childcare, worried about paying the bills. And so I just want to make sure that we acknowledge that and we recognize that we just need to treat each other with a little bit of care and tenderness in ways that we might not have had to before.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you. Kirk, it looks like you had something you wanted to share as well.

KIRK SCHULZ: Yeah, Phil. I think part of your question was really around tempering expectations, working from home and doing what we are. As you look at social media, look at other universities, I think it's really important for our faculty, staff, and students to acknowledge that it's a different work environment, and you may not, and probably won't, be able to do exactly everything that you could before.

And this has been an adjustment for me this week, because I thought, I'm at home. I'm on my computer. I do that a lot anyway. I'm sure I'm actually going to be able to get lots of stuff done. I find myself on Friday feeling further behind than almost any time during the term because I've been on Zoom meetings all the time and haven't done any what I would call work-- any of the writing or thinking types of activities that I'd normally do as part of my day.

So I've talked with folks at the universities, and we're all urging faculty, staff, and students the same thing. You need to temper their expectations for what you're going to be able to do-- the three research proposals, six papers, graduate student mentoring, and teaching online that you are all going to get done in this week. Don't get to Friday or Saturday and feel, wow, I'm crushed because I didn't get all this done.

It reminds me-- when I was a brand new junior faculty member, what I was going to do during my three months of summer was amazing. I was going to publish all these papers and do all this stuff. I would get to August and look back, and I'd gotten done 20% of what I thought I could. And it wasn't that I was not focused. It was I had unrealistic expectations for what I could do.

So I just want our faculty, staff, and students to go ahead-- and it's OK to say, I'm not going to get everything done that I would like to. That's got to be acceptable. Otherwise, that adds to the stress.

PHIL WEILER: Good point. Thank you. Theresa, did you have something you want to wrap up this question with?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Yeah. I was just going to say, we also need to try to have fun as we're all adjusting to these changes. And one of the things we'll be doing is a lot of us have been doing these Zoom kind of Brady Bunch type of meetings, and so we're developing a Cougar-specific bingo card that you can use as you're working to answer the question. We'll have that posted soon, so it'll help and make these Zoom meetings a little more fun.

PHIL WEILER: All right, Zoom bingo-- I haven't heard about that one before. I look forward to it. This might be a good time to bring up another question that's sort of in the same vein. This was from a parent. I thought this was a really sweet question. This parent asked, what can parents do to help? Specifically, how can we contribute funds to students who are dependent on Washington State University for their food, or for their housing, or for their medical needs? Can you open a general Cougar cash account for these students that the parents could contribute to? Are there other things that parents and friends of WSU could do during this period?

MARY JO GONZALES: One of the things I want to remind folks is that we have two very specific initiatives. One is Cougs Feeding Cougs, and that is something that helps those students who are currently on our WSU Pullman campus-- and frankly, on every single campus that we have-- to make sure that students have the food that they need. The numbers around food security are really high normally, but I can imagine during this time, when students have lost employment even from their restaurant jobs and local communities, that that's such a great way to tap into that.

We also have food pantries on nearly all of our campuses. In fact, we do have food pantry pantries on all of our campuses. Our WSU Global Program has a grocery reimbursement program, and so there are ways, if you are hungry, to get those resources. And parents and community members, if you have funds available currently, that's a great opportunity to do that. We also offered those students who want to contribute their RDA to give to that.

The other place I think is really important is going to the WSU Foundation page, and there is a Cougs Helping Cougs fund. These are funds on every single one of our campuses that are known as emergency funds that are designed to help for a variety of reasons. We know that families are facing eviction. We know that families have lost-- members have lost their jobs.

We know that, because of the orders around closure of businesses, that people are worried about making the next paycheck. And so these funds are designated specifically to students for a variety of needs, that they can get the help that they need. So if you want to donate, feel free

to go to the WSU Foundation page, and find the Cougs Helping Cougs fund, and contribute to that.

I know Kirk, and Pat, Coach Rolo, and variety of others have really contributed to it. And again, it's a great way and a great opportunity to help each other in a time of great need.

PHIL WEILER: Kirk, did you have something to add?

KIRK SCHULZ: Yeah, I think, to parents-- give your students some space. This is going to be difficult, and it just as a quick reminder that you asking your student every evening if they completed their coursework, if they did their homework for the day-- maybe some of the behavior in high school and other things that you felt you needed to intervene in as a parent-- just remember you have a young adult that's back at home.

And after a week or two of you constantly asking and you wonder why they're upset, I just think it's hard. Having had two college age children, when they would come back home, there was always a little bit of an adjustment period, and we had to remember that they were used to being fairly independent with those type of things. So this isn't a financial thing, and I understand not every family has lots of space and room, but give them a little bit of freedom and flexibility, and I think it will help the family dynamics and it'll help lessen the tension.

PHIL WEILER: That sounds like good advice. I think, at some point, there's going to be maybe a little bit too much togetherness. First, I want to stop here and say thank you to everybody who's been posting on the YouTube comments. There's comments flowing like crazy. That's wonderful. I appreciate everybody talking with each other as we're having these conversations.

There was a question that I've seen a couple times on the comments, and then also was a question that we received virtually earlier in the week. And maybe I'll point this to Theresa, but others might want to weigh in. There was a rumor that I saw on social media claiming that we had laid off 30 facility staff, and I wonder if you could address that. And a lot of people in the comment section today look like they're concerned about that, so Theresa, can you let us know about what-- if there was truth to that rumor or not?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Yeah, that was not a true rumor. That we did not layoff 30 custodial staff, so that's not true. And so far, no employees have been impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least at this time.

PHIL WEILER: Yeah. My understanding is we actually have been pressing those folks into service to do extended cleaning-- deep cleanings. We've had window washers who are saying the windows can stay. Let's make sure we're cleaning classrooms and other spaces. So thanks for that clarification.

KIRK SCHULZ: Phil, I might add here, I think everybody's going to hear stuff. And campuses and universities are-- always have these sort of informal communications networks. Let me just put

it that way. And people will hear a lot of different things. They're going to hear things about finances. They're going to hear this is going on, that's what's going on.

I would just simply ask folks that, before posting something on any sort of platform, at least just reach out to your supervisor, to the dean, to somebody, and just say, hey I heard this. We can't control, nor should we control what anybody posts, but on the other hand you know when stuff like this comes out there, we all spend a lot of time dealing with an angst-ridden situation that turned out didn't have a lot of basis in fact.

And so I'm not faulting anybody as much as please, before putting out those kind of announcements by anybody, just ask and find out the truth of those kinds of things, if at all possible. And we want to make sure we're responding to things like that as quickly as we can. Stacy Pearson almost immediately went and talked to a lot of people about this particular one to find out, is it true?

Rather than us just putting something back and saying it's not true, we went and did our homework and made sure that we verified that. And it's going to be really important moving ahead that we don't get caught up with these different rumors and things that we informally would have heard at the water cooler, or the water fountain, or the coffee pot, and now we'll hear online from different folks. So we're going to continue to push information as much as we can, and just ask everybody to be kind, to verify, and go from there.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Mary Jo, I'm going to direct this one to you. I'm looking on the feed right now, and this person's asking, please answer a few questions related to student dorm fees, rental house these, contracts. Are people going to be having to pay penalties if they end their rental contracts?

MARY JO GONZALES: So on Wednesday, which was-- boy, two days ago-- it feels like a week ago-- we sent out a note to all students directly who had a contract with our residence, and our halls, and our apartments. It stated very clearly, we are not going to charge cancellation fees. For those individuals who are not on the Pullman campus and not currently utilizing services, we are actually going to prorate that from March 13, which was the day that the university decided to go online.

That is the Friday before spring break. So if you look at that email-- and parents, please look at that email-- we're asking you both to consider your decision wisely. We've given you plenty of time to do that. We're asking people to fill out that form by April 10 so that we can process it, but again, we are not charging cancellation fees. I know that's been a huge concern.

There was rumors around that we were not going to give back RDA. Quite the contrary-- we have been signaling that we were going to do it. It's just that we needed the time to process it. I don't know if everyone knows this, but our financial folks and our human resources folks have been working nonstop trying to make sure that the system is still running, and so we asked her a little bit of time.

I repeatedly communicated, all you need to go to is, on the housing and dining-- resource housing and residential life web page, and you will see right on top, there is a survey form that we need every single student to fill out. Right now, about 30% of those students have filled it out. About 3/4 want to refund. 1/4 are choosing to get a credit. And there's actually a percentage who are saying, we want to donate our RDA-- which, again, that's what they asked us.

So please go look at that. If you have any questions, there's also an email inside of that account or on that web page that will say exactly who to reach out to if you have any questions. We know some students need that money. They've clearly indicated to us that we're going to work on refunds as soon as we can.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Bryan, this is one that I think definitely needs to go to you, and this is a concern I've heard from several different faculty members. I'll just read the question as it was submitted. It says, in light of Washington State University's move to adopt extreme social distancing policies, will there be the opportunity for tenure track faculty to add time to their tenure clocks?

BRYAN SLINKER: Absolutely. We've communicated about this, and we can remind people again that the approach we chose to take was that all pre-tenure faculty will have a year automatically added to their tenure clock. They can choose working with their leadership and their college to opt out of that if they wish, but it's there automatically, and they can choose to opt out.

The other thing that's important for faculty to know is that we took that approach of automatically adding a year, we know everybody's different. And even if they now agree to add that year to their clock, if three years down the road or whenever they're ready to go up on their original frame, we're not going to hold them to that extra year. So we're trying to protect the interests of the faculty by automatically adding it in, letting them opt out if they want to, and then knowing-- we want you to know, as faculty, we won't hold you to the extra year, if you're leadership, and you feel you're ready to go up.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Kirk, this is a question for you. I thought this was actually a very thoughtful question. This person says, I'm curious about all the ideas and work that have been going into the strategic planning process for Washington State University's system wide strategic plan. And did that work help in any way in preparing for dealing with COVID-19?

KIRK SCHULZ: I was actually hoping for a much simpler question, Phil, but I think what has happened during this time is I've been really pleased with the leadership across not just WSU Pullman, but our whole system working together to ensure that we had system responses to a lot of the COVID-19 issues-- whether it's providing an extra tenure year, whether it's the way we do refunds-- all of those kind of things coming together.

And I think the process of moving our strategic planning forward and trying to start addressing some of the real challenges associated with our system meant that that has really helped us, I think, respond more effectively than we might have previously. The other thing that it's doing for our Pullman community is a lot of our Pullman colleagues now are experiencing, using Zoom, what it's like often to have some of these meetings that we would hold in Pullman in person, and allow people in Vancouver, or Tri Cities, or Spokane to join via Zoom.

And I think what it's going to do is, moving ahead, it's going to help us be more integrated as a WSU system, because I think there is going to be some sympathy to the challenges of trying to operate in these different areas. So did it make a huge difference? I think it made a large difference, but as we move this strategic plan forward, I think it's probably reoriented some of our viewpoints about the WSU system in a positive way.

PHIL WEILER: I would have to echo that. From my perspective at least, speaking for myself, I know that the work that's been done over the last six or nine months-- trying to think of ourselves as a system has built bridges that allowed us to really address COVID-19 from a system perspective, and not from a individual campus by campus perspective. Mary Jo, it looked like you had something you wanted to share about this question as well.

KIRK SCHULZ: Yeah. So I've been engaged in the conversations early on, and then more recently about the strategic plan. I also think it's helping us understand what our mission critical issues are. And during crisis is typically when our values as an institution, as human beings, are tried and tested. And I've been really honestly just amazed by the fact that all of us are working towards one goal, and that is helping our students get across that stage at graduation, ensuring that our faculty and staff have what they need to be successful. It's not about the org chart right now. It's about supporting those who need our support. And I think that strategic planning process really helped us to get there.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Bryan, there was, I know, a lot of conversation this week about what COVID-19 means to our research enterprise. As a research-intensive university, that is one of the core pillars of who we are. This is, again, sort of uncharted territory. Can you talk a little bit about what the impact of COVID is on the research effort?

BRYAN SLINKER: Sure, Phil. Thanks. I was hoping that we'd get a question about research, because it really is-- we're a land grant institution and we exist to serve students in education and the public through our research and extension missions. And Governor Inslee's stay home, stay healthy order certainly has created challenges for research, particularly experimental research that's laboratory-based.

Much of our research, of course, is not laboratory-based, and the scholarship that we do lends itself more readily to telework. But experimental science in the lab-- that traditionally happens in a lab is a little bit harder, and we've taken the approach that we haven't stopped our research program. Some universities have. Most of us in the leadership-- or all of us in the

leadership-- really think that just putting a halt to research in the labs is not the right thing to do.

But we have to be safe. We have to be cognizant of the public health emergency we're in. We want to keep each others safe and healthy, and we want to conduct ourselves safely in the laboratory when we're there. And so one person working in a laboratory alone may not be the best thing, but we're also trying to socially distance. So we've put some boundaries around research, and we hope people continue to do experimental science if it's really critical or if it can be shifted to address issues around COVID-19.

Of course, three weeks ago, we didn't know about COVID-19, so we're not doing COVID-19 research, but many of our faculty do things that could touch on either the current response or the recovery from the response-- behavioral and mental health, food supply chain-- all kinds of issues that are going to be challenged. And our public needs us more than ever right now to be that land grant institution serving them.

So research is going on. A lot of it lends itself to telework. Even those that are traditionally working in the lab, they've got two papers to write. They've got data collected. There's a lot of things they can keep doing to move ahead with telework. But where critical things need to be done in a lab, we have a system to approve that and allow that to happen within the social distancing and disinfection guidelines.

And if it can't be done within those guidelines, then it shouldn't be done. And we're also sensitive to that grad students who are pointing toward finishing up their work this year may need to do a few more experiments. And if it can be done safely, we're emphasizing that's allowable work under the exceptions to the governor's order to-- if it can be done safely, let's get our graduate students in a position to finish up their work.

But it's a combination of trying to keep doing what we were doing coupled with almost a call to action to think about how you can shift some of what you're doing to help right now, or a position to help our state, our region, our country come out of the aftermath of this pandemic, and thinking about it in those terms. So we're not shut down. We're very much teleworking when we can.

There are some limited circumstances where on-campus laboratory experiments can still be done. And we're counting on the creativity of all of our faculty and students who engage in research, and the staff that do so as well, that they will be really creative in keeping our research moving ahead, because it matters to them and it matters to our country right now.

PHIL WEILER: So Bryan, this is another question that I'm going to direct to you. I'm looking at some of the things that people are posting in the comment section live. And then there's sort of a similar question here that we received earlier. I'm going to I read the one from the question that was posted. It says, since we've already completed over half of the course, why can't we just take the grade we currently have and focus on the macro issues of our world?

So can you talk a little bit about why we just didn't stop the semester and give people the grades they had at that moment? And anything else you want to add about grading? The other thing I saw in the comments is people just really being concerned about-- it's a change. It's a stressful time. And if people end up getting sick, for example, how do they-- and they can't complete their course, what does that look like? So there are a lot of questions all together in that one.

BRYAN SLINKER: Yeah. That's a difficult question. Like Kirk, I was hoping you would ask me a simpler one. I'll remind everybody, we were actually 70% of the way through the semester, not just-- we were well through the semester. And we're advantaged in that respect by being an early start semester college so that we only have six weeks left to try to get through.

The main reason for not just calling it quits and assigning whatever grade has happened is that would not meet students needs, in terms of their progress-- their sufficient academic progress in relation to financial aid. And had we done that, many students would have had to refund financial aid. And although there's efforts to liberalize financial aid rules now to help us, those are still evolving, and they're not clear yet exactly what our landscape is around financial aid.

And Mary Jo may want to comment here as well. But that's the main reason that it was-- it's just not doing our students a good service. I understand it's stressful for everybody. And the faculty stepped up and got ready to do it, and they're learning as they go. The students are learning as they go. Some students have taken a Global Campus class before and were readier to make the switch than others perhaps.

But it's just not possible really to just stop and-- because we're you're expected to teach you for a certain number of weeks in a semester for-- to meet a lot of federal standards about progress toward degree and financial aid.

MARY JO GONZALES: Yeah. So Bryan, I think it's also really important for students to understand that these grades-- the pass/fail grades will impact beyond WSU. And we want to make sure that we're keeping you on track. If you're applying to medical school, if you're applying to pharmacy, if you're applying for a PhD in education, we want to make sure that you stay on track.

So we are not making this decision lightly. It's actually a pretty deliberative process for us to engage in that. I think more importantly is that, as we look at what happened this semester-- we had student teachers who were in their last semester of courses, and all of a sudden, when the schools were canceled, it changed their environment. We had students who were on rotations for the different colleges, including the health sciences, that were lost and impacted.

And so what I would ask you to do is lean into all of the resources that are available to you. The Academic Success and Career Center has academic coaches who can have private appointments with you and engage with you about that. All of the staff of the Division of Student Affairs,

whether it is-- and our Division of Academic Outreach and Engagement also have available resources to you.

Tutoring, talking with your professor mentoring and coaching are all available to you. And I want to make sure that you're utilizing those and deploying them as needed, because now more than ever, we have to help each other get through. And so saying those three words, I need help, are the hardest words for anyone to say, including our students. And we want to make sure that we get you connected to the right resources and engaged correctly.

And it's different. It's going to be different when we're Zooming. I had a telehealth appointment for the first time in my life talking with my medical director-- or my medical doctor. It was the strangest experience. It took us about five minutes to adjust, and then we actually went into a conversation talking about what I was experiencing.

And so it's going to take a transition for all of us, but please know that you have resources on all of our campuses. Every single one of our campuses, including Global, has the resources that you need to be successful. As Kirk said earlier, redefine what your definition of success is. For some days, it's just going to be finishing that math homework. For other days, you're going to be knocking it out of the park for a public speech that you have.

And for other days, it will be, I'm just going to sit somewhere in the middle. All we're asking you to do is to get through the semester as successfully as you can, and we're going to do everything that we can to help you get across that stage.

PHIL WEILER: Great. We're running close to the end of the hour, and there are two big topics that I'd like to throw out and let any of you comment on that you'd like. One is refunds. I know we talked a little bit about housing and dining refunds, but there's a lot of people who have questions about other sorts of refunds. The other question I'm going to throw out there quickly is summer session.

What does this current environment mean for summer session? So let's tackle refunds first, if there's anyone who wants to comment on those. I do know that we have a team of people who are looking at all the fees that we charge to see which ones we can provide refunds on, but I'll let someone else fill out [AUDIO OUT].

KIRK SCHULZ: Let me start with this, and Mary Jo can answer. Our communication next week will address some of the issues around refunds. I will tell people now, we will not be issuing tuition refunds. We will provide some clarification on some of these things in the next week or so. A lot of the fees and a lot of the very specific questions that people have, they're tied into lots of other things, and so it's going to take us some time to get that information out there and make all this available.

So we're going to ask for patience. We understand that people are hurting and some need the money, but we've got to make sure that we don't do something where we send money to

somebody on a refund and then have to ask for some of it back or something like that. Mary Jo, do you want to chime in here as well?

MARY JO GONZALES: Absolutely, Kirk. I was just going to re-emphasize the message that you indicated, that we are doing it at a value to process of all of those fees-- the mandatory fees, the optional fees-- to see where we can support students when they need it. I would also add the other piece, that in this process, many of those fees are about paying down the debt that we acquired in building those fees, as well as the salaries of staff and students who are still currently employed. So I want to make sure you know, and we will communicate that with you next week more broadly-- or generally-- and then more specifically as we can down the road.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Then maybe just a minute, if we can talk a little bit about summer session-- I know that that isn't a decision that's been completely made, but can we-- Bryan, maybe do you have a minute or two that you can talk about that?

BRYAN SLINKER: Yeah. That decision hasn't been made yet. What we are going to do is we will have summer session. We're not canceling summer session in any sense. The face-to-face summer session on the Pullman campus starts the week after-- the first two summer sessions start the week after commencement. And that's not very far away, so I would say that it's unlikely that we will be able to do face-to-face summer instruction.

Like many other things we've talked about today, this is also a very complicated decision, because there are so many things that happen over the summer that are linked to summer session. We're going to try to make the final decision within a week. That's kind of our internal frame. So know that, by the end of next week, we hope to have some clarity about this.

What I can say for sure is there will be summer session, but I can say with some confidence that we don't anticipate it being face-to-face. We've got some creative people thinking about alternate strategies for non-face-to-face that aren't just simple distance-- depending on the frame. Part of what's uncertain is, when do we get back to where we could do face-to-face?

The shorter summer sessions that start in late June, could they be face-to-face? Perhaps, but we don't know that, because we don't know how this disease course is going to go. And I know that's unsettling for people, but that's-- we're in totally uncharted territory here on how this disease is going to go and how our response to it's going to be, so we're just going to have to, again, have patients with each other as we roll these decisions, as we see what flexibility we have.

But the first two summer sessions are undoubtedly going to be some sort of distance. We just don't know what that looks like. And we're trying to be more creative than just let's just shift the distance without thinking about what that looks like, because obviously, some laboratory classes don't lend themselves to that.

With a little more time to prepare, can we have more creative alternative experiences to substitute for some labs, or can we do a hybrid thing where we-- if we can assume that we can get together later in the year, that we teach lectures-- distance over the summer, and then when students come back in the fall, they can make up some of the labs that would have been offered over the summer? So there's a lot of things like that we're thinking about, but we'll have a decision by the end of next week.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Bryan. Kirk, do you want to wrap this up? Do you have any last comments you'd like to share?

KIRK SCHULZ: I just appreciate everybody's, again, continued focus on our students' success. I want to express my appreciation once again to our faculty for the great job that they've done moving course material really, really quickly, and really doing it in a very quality way. And then finally, our staff-- they have been fantastic at supporting us, having advising times that people can get to.

And then to our students-- I've heard some student concerns, but I've heard from a lot of students that things are going pretty well, and better than they might have expected. So everybody's rolled up their sleeves and is really stepping into this space in a positive way. I'm not surprised. We have great awesome faculty, staff, and students, but it's been a pleasure to see. And just continue to be flexible, continue to be gracious, and continue to let us know your questions.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Well, I want to thank all of our town hall participants. I appreciate you all making yourselves available. As the president mentioned at the very beginning, this is something we'd like to do every two weeks or so. We don't have our next one on the calendar yet, but we'll be putting that up and making that available to everybody quickly as possible.

I want to thank all of the folks who have been contributing comments. I'm really thrilled at how engaged folks are. This is wonderful. I want to thank everybody for their grace and resilience. I think those are characteristics of Cougs. I think that we are rising to the occasion. And thank you for making the best of a difficult situation. I think people should be proud of the work that they are all doing, whether it be students, faculty members, staff members.

Just a couple items before we go-- we are trying to capture as many of these questions as we can. We have a very extensive frequently asked questions section on the WSU COVID-19 update web site. We'll try and put questions and answers up there. If you've not visited that site, I would really encourage you to do so. We have more than 50 pieces of communication that we've made going all the way back to January, when WSU started first preparing for COVID-19.

You can find that website by just going to the WSU homepage, wsu.edu. Click on the COVID-19 link, and you'll have a real plethora of information there. So I encourage you to do that. So with that, thank you to everybody, and as always, go Cougs.