

WSU COVID-19 Town Hall – July 31

PHIL WEILER: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to our eighth WSU COVID-19 town hall session. My name is Phil Weiler.

I'm going to be the host today. I'm vice president for marketing and communications. I want to welcome you. Thank you for joining us from across the state of Washington and from around the country.

We're just a couple of weeks away from the start of the semester and things are starting to definitely fall in place for fall. And so this is a great opportunity for us to talk with you all.

I wanted to say one thing though. We're going to do things a little bit differently this time around. In the past, these have been systemwide conversations for parents, students, faculty, staff, members of the community as well.

This time around, we're going to focus this primarily on faculty and staff. And we're going to be talking specifically about what the financial implications of the pandemic might be for WSU and how it's going to impact our budget. So keep that in mind.

The other thing I wanted to say is we received comments from a couple of folks last week regarding the chat function. It was really busy last week, which is great. I'm looking at the chat function now. And I'm happy to see folks connecting in from all over the country. I see Austin, Texas, Southern California, and the like.

I'd encourage you as we get started-- feel free to make your comments to folks. But once we start with the panelists, the requests we've had from a couple of different viewers last week was there was so much activity in the chat they weren't able to get their questions answered.

So as we've done in the past, we have subject matter experts who are monitoring the chat. And they're going to try and answer your questions live there.

The other thing I noted personally was there was a lot of chat going on between folks. And they weren't necessarily able to follow along with the panelists. And there were questions that the panelists had addressed that people missed, I think in part because they may have been on the chat feature.

So if you've got a specific question that you need to get answered right away, feel free to use the chat. Our subject matter experts will answer those as quickly as possible. But otherwise, I'd encourage you to tune into what our panelists have to say. And I think we'll go ahead and get started.

So let me introduce our panelists today. First, of course, we have WSU President Kirk Schulz. Thank you for joining us.

We have Elizabeth Chilton, our provost and executive vice president. And Elizabeth, tell me, is it day 12? I think somewhere in that neighborhood, less than two weeks in.

ELIZABETH CHILTON: In the second week, yeah.

PHIL WEILER: All right. Well, welcome. We're glad to have you with us. And we have Stacy Pearson. She's our vice president for finance and administration. And finally, Theresa Elliot-Cheslek, she's our vice president for human resource services.

So thank you, panelists, for joining us. I'll kick it off by asking President Schulz if he has any opening comments for us.

KIRK SCHULZ: Well, hello, Cougs. President Schulz here. And thank you once again for joining us. We appreciate our faculty and staff that are with us today, as well as everybody else that's joining in.

Phil mentioned about the comments last week. I heard quite a few things sent our direction about the tone of the comments last week. And so we would just continue to ask we want to keep that as open as possible. But keep your comments civil. And let's make sure that we get all those questions answered that we can and give our Cougs that are offline answering those question really an opportunity to get out in front of you.

We appreciate too that our decision as a university to go to an online instructional format is difficult for some families, for some folks. But I've also heard from Cougs this week that said, hey, that wasn't what I hoped for. I wanted to be in Pullman. I wanted to be on my campus.

But if I can't be there-- I saw some really cool pictures where families decided to take bedrooms and turned them into dorm rooms and put up Cougar gear and memorabilia. And I just think it talks a little bit about the Cougar spirit that what people are doing is, they may be disappointed, but what they're doing is figuring out good creative ways to make that fall experience everything that it could be.

I also want to remind everybody that we learned a lot in the spring term when we had to switch at such a short time frame. A lot of our faculty and staff have been working most of the summer to get us ready to go. And everybody else now has got about a month to pivot and kind of work to making sure that the course that they deliver, the course and the interaction they have with you all as students-- and our faculty do this-- is that it's a high-quality experience, that it's the best that it can possibly be.

And I think last semester, sometimes we've heard that students and others didn't feel people were flexible enough or they had challenges with the internet or there was some particular issue. We're going to have to put a hotline together for the fall semester that'll be both a web-based and phone-based tool where, if somebody has got some issues, you don't have to look around where to find information.

There will be one place that you can go. It'll be up to us to distribute and get back to you with whatever support you need to be successful. So while it'll be different, we want it to be a great, high-quality Coug experience. And we're going to do everything we can to make sure that that comes to pass.

So I look forward to interacting with everybody today. And before I sort of turn it back over to Phil, let me express my appreciation to our faculty and staff who this is a really uncertain time for them. As our students and our families are trying to deal with what's going to happen next and what's the impact of COVID-19, our faculty and staff are doing the same thing.

And they're worried about can they do the job that they want to interacting with students online. And I think the answer to that is it'll be different. But yes, they're going to be ready to do that.

But they also want to be in a safe environment as well. And I think that's-- we've got to look out for our students. We also are looking out for faculty and staff.

And I appreciate your flexibility. I appreciate your willingness to pivot and turn and keep working really, really hard. We've got a world class faculty and staff at WSU. And I think that will come out and be shown once again in the fall term just how great our people are across all of our campuses.

So Phil, thank you. I look forward to interacting today. And thank you, everybody, for joining in.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Kirk. You mentioned the dad who shared some photos with us. In case the dad, Patrick, is watching, his son is a freshman-- his son, Casey, is-- was really looking forward to joining us on the Pullman campus, isn't going to be able to do that. And so I think they did an awesome job of outfitting Casey's room to make it a virtual WSU dorm room.

So Casey and Patrick, if you're watching, we're looking forward to the day that Casey can come join us in person. So that was pretty cool.

Kirk, you talked about the fact that we are making the switch from face-to-face instruction to remote learning. And I know there's been some anxiety, both among parents and students, about is that going to be an inferior experience. Can you touch a little bit on what the difference is, in your mind, between remote learning and face to face?

KIRK SCHULZ: Well, there's certainly going to be some key differences. And I think as a president, as a chemical engineering faculty member, I've had to adjust to doing a lot more of my interactions with peers, with colleagues, with presidents and chancellors around the country all the same way.

And we learned how to do it a little better and learned how to do it a little bit more effectively. But it's not like when I meet with somebody now it's a horrible meeting or it's not an effective meeting.

And I just want to remind folks it's the same thing. This is not an inferior product. I want to remind folks we are not going back to lectures done 10 years ago on a videotape and putting them up there. There is a world class faculty at all of our campuses that are doing live classes, updated materials, and interacting with students on a very regular basis.

And so I think people want to conflate inferior and different and yes it'll be a different experience now I mentioned before that we learned some things. I mentioned the hotline to make sure that we're really meeting students' needs.

Some of the other things that Provost Chilton will talk a little bit about is some of the great stuff that we're doing to prepare first-year students to make sure that that online experience is really good. Our student affairs folks have really worked to make sure we're going to have a fantastic experience with clubs and other types of things for our students.

And so when people talk about they're going to be lacking some part of their educational enterprise, it won't be the same as in person. But we're doing everything we can to bring forward a virtual experience that we think is not just conveying a material. But it's an educational experience that we think, I believe, is high quality with world class faculty, live, and in real time. We think it'll be a great experience for our students.

PHIL WEILER: I agree. Thank you, Kirk. Elizabeth, if I could, I'd love to turn it to you and just sort of talk a little bit more about this.

One of the things that I've seen over the last week since we made our decision to look at distance learning was a perception that WSU was going to be saving money because we were teaching via distance learning versus face-to-face instruction. Is that the case?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Well, thanks for the question, Phil, and for the people who sent in that question. Certainly, it's not less expensive. And more specifically, as someone who has taught courses in both remote environment and face to face, it's actually much more challenging the many more hours in the case of the faculty who had been planning all summer to offer instruction and kind of hybrid environment even with planning for the pandemic and, now in the past week I've had to imagine, will continue to work with us to move their classes remotely.

So faculty are still providing live instruction, most of them at the appointed time. And they're making themselves available to faculty as President Schulz said. We're still interacting with them one on one and in groups. And we are investing heavily in training and supplementary technology to provide the best possible remote learning experience.

I do want to sort of add to what President Schulz was saying. I tend to not use the word "online." I use the word "remote" because online teaching is a whole form of pedagogy that's developed over the past couple of decades where classes are developed from the start to be intended to be really instructorless in the sense that all the work happens upfront front.

And then, you push the go button, so to speak. And it's sort of an automated format. And in that case, once you design the course, it doesn't take much touch to keep it going.

That is not what we're offering. We're offering remote instruction, which needs constant care and attention to make sure that students are still getting the same high-quality learning outcomes out of their experience.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Liz. I agree. And this is something we talked about at some of our earlier town halls is the fact that WSU actually has a pretty deep set of experiences around delivering education, both in that online environment as you just described but also using distance learning techniques.

So I think we're fortunate to be well positioned to have made that switch back in March when we needed to. And now, I know that we've been having groups of faculty members working all summer long looking at best practices and ways to take face-to-face curriculum and really delivered it in a very high-quality manner in an online or in a remote environment. So I think that's good.

As I mentioned at the start, the intent of this particular town hall is really going to be geared to faculty and staff in talking about budget implications. And so with that, Stacy, if I could turn the question over to you, can you tell us what kind of financial impact has WSU experienced so far due to the pandemic? And do we have any guesses about what the future might look like?

STACY PEARSON: Sure. Sorry about that. My computer kind of went out for a minute. Yeah, so basically, what we have received so far that is more certain news, if you will, is the state of Washington has asked for WSU to have a \$37 million reduction. And so that is what we have been planning on.

We, at this point in time, are not expecting to see additional reductions from the state unless there was to be a special session. That certainly could change although we know of none planned at this current time. And so we are working off of that particular number.

In addition, obviously we've had impacts from COVID, both when classes went remote in the spring and we also refunded some housing funds and all of that. The good news is we did receive federal funding through the CARES Act as well as recently also from some state emergency funding to help us get through fiscal year 2020.

For fiscal year '21 though, it's a little less certain just because we don't know the status of some of those federal funds related to COVID. But we are keeping track of those expenses and

monitoring them. They are focused on things like online delivery as well as some of the impacts on our auxiliary operations.

The other impact is we are just entering fall term. And with all of the uncertainties and the announcement of remote, we're watching our enrollments very carefully to see how they go.

We are currently averaging about the same enrollment that we have on average over the last three or four years, down slightly from last year. The last couple of years we did have quite a bit of enrollment growth. That plays a huge impact on our budget. So we will be monitoring those also.

And then, we also-- so related to that \$37 million, the university announced budget hearings in which we assigned a target for each area of 10% of their operating budget and went through three days of budget hearings where everybody gave their proposals on those budgets. And then, we have since reviewed those.

I should also note that WSU's fiscal year end is June 30. It takes us a good month to close out our books, which that would be today. What we were able to tell though that, due to our fiscal recovery, we made enough progress that we felt we could allow areas to use 5% of their carry-forward funds to help offset fiscal year '21 budget reductions. And so areas are looking into that right now as we finalize that information.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Stacy. I know we'll talk some more about fiscal impact. So I appreciate you getting that conversation for us started.

Theresa, I'm going to ask the next question of you. This was something that I saw. We had about 300 questions that were submitted in advance. And this was one of the questions that I saw from quite a few staff members. And the question was, now that we've made the decision to use distance learning, what does that mean for WSU staff? Are they going to be asked to return to their campuses or should they be continuing to work remotely?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Great. Hello, everybody Yeah, employees should still continue to work from a remote location or teleworking whenever possible. And those employees who can't telework without hampering essential work operations should be allowed to do so.

Any employee who's directed to come to a WSU work location should-- if they have concerns, there's a process to raise those concerns. But we're still in the mode of what we are now. Most employees are working at an alternative location or teleworking.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Theresa. Kirk, I'm going to address this next question to you. I'm looking at the chat here. And I do see a lot of questions and comments it looks like from parents and students, a lot of questions about housing on the Pullman campus. Because this particular town hall is geared toward faculty and staff, do we have any upcoming town halls that are going to be geared more toward students and parents?

KIRK SCHULZ: Yeah, absolutely. And in these hour-long sessions, it is hard to get to all the different topics and all the different audiences that we want. So on August 12 at 5:30 PM, student affairs is going to have another one of these type of town halls to specifically address things around student fees and housing and some of those types of things.

And we're going to continue to make sure that, as we get more information, we update our COVID-19 web pages and things like that. So Phil, yeah, we will have additional opportunities for people to ask questions moving forward on some of the topics that we're just not really addressing today in depth.

And part of the reason, I think people can say, well, what's taken so long? How long does it take to make these decisions? When we look at any kind of fee or any type of financial issue, Stacy and her team, Mary Jo Gonzales, our vice president for student affairs, and her team, do a lot of modeling work to make sure that we understand, if we do something, what impact does that have on students, what does that have on faculty, what is the impact on operations.

And so we want to make sure that we're careful, that we spend the time to understand what those repercussions are. And as a quick example, there's some of the dollars that come in through things like fees and others that support a lot of employees. And so you can say, well, that's an easy decision, Kirk. Just don't do this when we have to look and make sure that we understand what all the repercussions are on any of these types of decisions.

So I know people get frustrated saying, how come we don't have this stuff today? We just want to take our time, make sure that we understand it. We typically have very clear processes for how we have to evaluate this. And we want to go through those and be very, very careful.

So we're going to continue to do these town halls. And there'll be specialties in special areas. And we want to make sure we answer as many questions as we can in a timely fashion.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Kirk. And I'll just sort of piggy back on something you talked about with regard to fees. A lot of times, if fees are supporting programming, those are student employees who are benefiting from those.

And so I think the point you made is a really good one that any decision has ripples. And we want to make sure that there aren't unintended consequences that might disadvantage students, for example. So if we weren't to run a program, does that mean that a student who is relying on either work study or student employment would be negatively impacted. So that's a good point.

The other thing I'll say too about some of our other town halls, each of our campuses has been running town halls over the summer. I know that Vancouver, I think, has one scheduled for next week. I believe that Everett has one on August 11 if I remember correctly.

So if you are a student or a parent connected with a particular campus, I strongly encourage you to pay close attention to your email and also take a look on a regular basis at the websites for each individual campus that you or your student might be going to. Because chances are there is going to be a town hall over the next couple of weeks that are going to address some really specific issues to your particular campus.

So Elizabeth, if I could move on to you, this is actually an academic kind of question. I know we had talked about making the fall 2020 schedule available soon. Can you tell us what the status of that is and when students might get a sense of what classes are going to be offered remotely?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Yeah, absolutely. So we had said that the full fall schedule for undergraduate and graduate students would be available by August 1. And we are on track to do that. It was just a week ago yesterday that we announced the move to mostly remote instruction. So our faculty and department chairs and deans have been working very closely with me.

I did mention last week at the town hall that we were already planning to offer most of our courses in a remote environment because we were planning on a kind of hybrid course delivery. So it was just really looking at that remaining 20% or so that had still been planned to be face to face.

And so I ran an exception process where faculty would contact my office. And my staff and I would take a look if they felt that it was a kind of course that would be required for seniors, that would be impossible to deliver remotely because of the specialized equipment or facilities. We would also take a look at the plan that they had to maintain social distancing and other kinds of protections for the health of the staff and faculty and students.

We've only denied requests for a few of these courses where we just felt that it was something that either we could accommodate safely remotely or that we weren't going to be able to accommodate in person. And we've worked with those faculty to make sure that those courses are available in another form or at a future date for students. So we don't want to slow down anyone's graduation or prevent them from making progress in their degree.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you, Elizabeth. Stacy, next question I want to turn over to you. You had mentioned a second ago that, in the May and June time frame, each college, each campus, each unit was charged with coming up with plans for how they would take a 10% reduction in their state appropriation so that we could cover that \$37.2 million that the state is asking back.

Can you just share with us some examples of what approaches the campuses and colleges are taking to be able to recognize that savings that they need to make?

STACY PEARSON: Certainly. All of the areas, campuses and colleges and administrative units, were given both a target and a template to complete. And what we saw in the budget hearings,

our areas are considering a number of options which includes vacant positions. In other words, their savings will come because they have a budgeted position that's vacant and they won't fill it.

Lots of operational reductions. Obviously, we're saving on travel and those types of things, utilities. And then, also FTE reductions and furloughs. So there was a variety of options that came through.

Ultimately, when we give the final target numbers, which, again, includes the ability to use 5% of that carry-forward amount that they carried forward from the last fiscal year, each area's leadership will determine how to absorb the final reduction as they prepare for budgets, not only for fiscal year '21. Our message from the state when we received our reduction was that this-- they anticipated, based on the economic indicators, that we would probably be looking at these types of reductions for the next two fiscal years also, or the next biennium I should say.

PHIL WEILER: That's a good point. This is not something that is going to be over anytime soon for us. Theresa, I know that there is anxiety among faculty and staff about what this means for their employment. And Stacy mentioned the term "furlough."

As I looked at the questions, I've seen people use the term "furlough" and "layoff" pretty interchangeably. And my understanding is that they have different definitions. Can you share with us what is the difference between a furlough and a layoff?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Yeah. Thanks. That's a good question, Phil. Furloughs are, in general, time off without pay for employees. And at the end of that temporary furlough, an employee would come back to their regular job and FTE.

And layoff would be some sort of reduction in force. It may trigger bumping. And if a person goes through a layoff, then they would be separated from the university. And they would not be reappointed back to their job. So that's more of a permanent solution as to the furloughs being temporary.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. And I know that furloughs were one option that was looked at. Do we know what the status of furloughs are at this point in time?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: Do you want me to answer that for you? Excuse me. At this time, some areas may be looking at furloughs as a means to address their budget reductions. But my understanding is an overall furlough program for the entire university has been put on hold, that areas may as needed implement them. One thing to note is there is a maximum of a 30-day furlough per calendar year for WSU employees.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Stacy, was there anything you wanted to add to that? I think Theresa probably covered it.

STACY PEARSON: Just a couple of things. When it comes to a furlough, obviously, our self-support auxiliary operations, who basically operate based on the revenues that they receive, those are programs that may have to look at those actions in order to meet their budget. So they're not funded by state appropriations. And so that might be important to note.

And when the time is right, I was going to say, there are also other things that we're doing looking at programs that we can discontinue but also how we might set aside some additional reserves centrally to kind of hedge against some of these future budget reductions as well as looking at our outstanding bonds and debt.

Interest rates are very low. So a lot of the institutions are looking at how to restructure their debt so they can lower those operating payments each year. So many additional activities are going on in addition to those budget reductions.

PHIL WEILER: And Stacy you made an important distinction there between positions that are funded through state appropriation versus what we would refer to as an auxiliary service. And just for the benefit of viewers if they're not familiar with what an auxiliary is, an auxiliary is a service that is completely funded by the fees they charge. So for example, housing and dining doesn't receive any financial support from WSU.

It's completely funded through the rental rates to use on campus, housing, apartments, and residence halls. And dining is funded through people who paid to eat in those dining halls. So that's a difference. It's an important nuance when we look at how different positions are paid for.

President Schulz, if I could go back to you, I know that we've made an important decision last week to move to distance learning. Now, the question that a lot of people have on their minds is what will we do in the spring and when will we know whether we're going to be face to face or virtual?

KIRK SCHULZ: Yeah, Phil, thank you. Before I move to answer that question, I just-- we've got our faculty and staff with us today. I think we've talked about some details.

Stacy has laid out where we are with the budget. And I realize people always have this impending sense of maybe doom when it deals with budget issues. And how come we can't have a more firm set of numbers on exactly what people are going to do?

We're going to pledge to keep the campuses as informed as possible about where things are. But we're just as uncertain as many people are. Until we know what our actual enrollment is, we don't know what our tuition revenues are. We're not sure exactly what some of those budget things are going to look like.

So it's not just what's happening at the state. It's also some of internally what's happening. And there's just some uncertainty in that. We'll know a lot more in September about where those things are.

But to our faculty and staff, if I look back-- and I've been a president since the last recession. And so often, you all hear from your leadership, hey, we're just going to do more with less. We are just going to roll up our sleeves. And we're just going to make it all happen.

And I appreciate the fact that we've got a dedicated set of employees that want to do that. But we have got to temper our expectations for what people are going to do. You can't cut out several people who will no longer open positions that we're not filling and expect that we can do the same sort of things.

And so faculty and staff are typically overachievers. They work really hard. They want to make sure we have the least impact to our students and the least impact to their colleagues. And I appreciate that. That's great.

But at the same time, we have to make sure that we just don't get out there and say, well, we're going to expect to do 100% what we did before with 90% of the budget. And I just want to-- I will continue to reiterate this all year. And I think it's just important that we remember that.

And again, in the last recession, for those of you who were around, when you wind up cutting a colleague who you don't fill their position when they leave or something like that, you feel a little bit that first year. But man, about three years out is when you really, really feel that. And so I appreciate the fact that a lot of people kept open positions, were keeping as much of our workforce as we can. But it's really a couple of years from now we're going to feel the real impacts of not filling some of these positions.

And as your leadership team, we want to do the best we can to provide the support you need. But at the same time, I think we have to also acknowledge that there are going to be some things we're just not going to be able to do in the same form or fashion as we did before.

In terms of next spring, we had several groups. And we talked to them right now, said, why don't you just make a decision for spring 2021 right away. Why wait? That way, everybody would know. We still value and want to find a way to do more of our in-person experiences.

We just need to make sure we do it in a safe way where if we bring students to any of our campus environments, in a residential environment, we need to make sure that we've got everything in place that we have a high probability that everybody's going to be able to stay there for the entire length of that term. And that we wouldn't have a midterm sort of interruption like we had in spring of '20.

So I think in the next couple months, we're going to be looking at where is our testing program for COVID-19 look like? What's vaccine development going to look like on a national, international scale? And we'll make those kind-- we'll take all that into account. And we won't be making a decision in mid-December, we'll make it earlier than that.

But I will tell you that we want to make sure that we push that envelope as much as possible, because we want to return to that in-person part of our academic environment if we can do it in a way that's safe for our faculty, for our staff, and for our students. And that's our paramount concern. And that's going to continue to drive our decisions.

PHIL WEILER: Thanks, Kirk. That was kind of an unfair question to ask you to look into your crystal ball and let us know what was going to happen in the spring. But obviously, that's something that's on all of our minds. And so I appreciate the fact that we're going to be transparent.

We're going to keep people up to date. When we know something, we'll share with them. And I also appreciate that we really do want to get people back into classrooms so they can have the experience that they were expecting to have this academic year. Elizabeth, I'm going to turn to you now if I could.

Last week, we announced that undergraduate students would be using distance learning. Can you remind us what the plans are for our graduate students?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Certainly. So I worked closely with our Dean of the graduate school and with our academic deans and coordinated with the other campuses. And we made a decision to do the same as we have done for our undergraduate education in that where it is possible and practical to move instruction remotely, we have done so.

This is for a few reasons some of our even introductory graduate classes have sometimes as many as 25 students. And we don't have them scheduled in a classroom where we can have them appropriately socially distanced. And also, some of our classes-- upper-level undergraduate classes or even sometimes smaller than are our entry-level graduate classes.

So we based it partly on what curriculum. We had the same exception process in place. And we're still working through that. It'll all be finalized by tomorrow. But the same guiding principles were in play, which is does the class require specialized facility, specialized equipment? Is this a class that's needed for students to keep moving on their degree progress?

Which most classes are, but can we do this safely in a more safe manner by doing it remotely? Is it something they could take next semester? So we've worked with faculty. And as I said, we've only denied a couple of requests for exceptions. And even in those cases, we've worked with faculty to make sure it does not-- we mitigate the impacts on the students.

As I said at the beginning, though, nothing replaces being face to face with students. I personally really enjoy teaching graduate classes, especially small seminars. And I do still have graduate advises that I'm advising by Zoom and reading their dissertation chapters.

And I wish I could be there in person with them. But our faculty are really dedicated to making the best of this situation and staying as in close contact as they can.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Elizabeth. I appreciate that. Stacy, I'm going to turn to you. Last week, we announced that we will not be reducing tuition rates due to the move to distance learning. But as I look at the chat here, I did see a question that I had on my list. And that had to do with, what's the status of student fees?

I know that we received questions, as I said in the chat, as well as questions in advance. Can you tell us what efforts are underway to examine student fees?

STACY PEARSON: Certainly. In addition to tuition that the students pay to cover instruction and academic activities, our students pay both mandatory and voluntary fees for such things as for student activities, recreation centers, athletic sports passes, parking transit, and health services. And these fees are levied the same for resident and nonresident students and also vary by campus across the WSU system.

So all of these fees are currently under evaluation to determine if adjustments can be made. I think it's important to understand that mandatory fees are actually set by student referendum. And in many cases, if not most, covered the debt service is for new facilities such as the Chinook on the Pullman campus and the Student Recreation Center, in addition, transit services with the city of Pullman goes into that.

So when they're supported by referendum then they are mandatory so that those bonds can be paid. What we're looking at is if there's reductions in operations in some of those centers, what can happen with that portion of the fee. So those are being looked at very closely. In addition, the largest mandatory fee is our service and activities fees.

And those are actually set by the students themselves. So the students set these fees as well as allocate the fees in an annual process. So they support non-academic student activities, programs, and projects. Things like student government, entertainment, student organizations, speakers. So these fees for the current coming fiscal year, none of them at any of the campuses were increased-- the SNA fees. Those particular activity fees.

The only fees that were increased for the coming fiscal year was the health fee. And certainly, that's an activity that is ongoing to support the health center. And then in our Tri-Cities, a safety and transportation fee. So we have been mindful of those impacts. And students wisely decided for the SNA fees not to raise those this year. But again, we're taking a very close look at those fees.

PHIL WEILER: Thanks, Stacey. I think you made a good point there that students do vote to construct buildings on campus, whether it's a student union or a student recreation center. And they bind future students to pay off the debt, essentially that's taken on for those. And then as you mentioned, the services and activity fees or fees that are set by the students themselves.

So students do have control over those-- many of those fees. I'm going to move on. Teresa, this was a question-- this is probably one of the largest-- the questions are received the largest number of comments in advance of our session today. And that is a question that faculty and staff have-- staff, I should say-- had regarding tuition waivers for staff.

Can you talk about what is the status of tuition waivers for staff? Will the program be available even though we are moving to distance learning? I know that this isn't something that human resource services controls, but you certainly have a role to play in it. So could you just share what the update is on tuition waivers for staff?

STACY PEARSON: Yeah. I certainly will. The office of the register provide oversight to the tuition waiver program. And HRS verifies employee eligibility. The register recently posted on their website information regarding the employee tuition waiver for fall of 2020.

Specifically, classes that are 100% web-based and blended with global campus are not eligible for the employee tuition waiver. Employees who have questions on that should feel free to contact the registrar's office.

PHIL WEILER: Great thank you. Kirk, I'm going to come back to you for a second. We announced last week that we were going to move from a hybrid model of instruction to distance learning. And I know you've been in contact with your fellow presidents across the country. How does our decision to make that move to distance learning compare with what you're hearing at other universities across the country?

KIRK SCHULZ: Phil, thanks. Great question. And I think what we're sort of seeing is even in the last week, more institutions are electing to move from maybe a more intensive in-person experience to using online tools much, much more so. I think Western Washington university announced earlier this week that they were going to be largely online.

Central Washington University has also made an announcement. Eastern Washington made an announcement that they were going to use this format several months ago. And were there as well. So to be honest, it depends a little bit on the political environment in some states.

In the state of Washington, we've got a governor and other elected officials that have really, really emphasized safety and making sure that we're really taking care of faculty, staff, and students. And doing it in a very reasonable and safe way. Other states have different perspectives on that. And I'm not trying to argue whether it's appropriate or not, but there is some differences on states based on the political environment.

On the east coast, Clemson University announced a day before we did that they were starting online and would delay the implementation of in-person. And several people have asked me, why didn't we do that? I mean, we could have gone for weeks online, and then tried to move in and things like that.

It was so disruptive I felt to our students and to our faculty and staff in the spring to kind of switch midway, that I think we really felt that it was important that whatever we decide to start with, we have every intention of finishing the term that particular way. So I think around the country, more places are doing it.

I will say in some institutions, there's one in particular I know of on the east coast that the faculty are actually using legal grounds in an attempt to kind of move to more less in-person instructional content. So I think you're also seeing faculty and staff at a lot of places that are concerned about the work environment and will they be safe and things like that. So I think we worked really, really hard to get to that safe in-person environment.

I think we made the decision when we did after really using every tool we felt we had in our tool box to make it safe. I think we're going to see other places around the country. And then finally I would add, a lot of our other schools, even in the state of Washington, are on quarters. And so they start a month later. So we've already got some of those schools that are looking at what we did and others did and saying that's probably direction they need to go as well.

So every president I've talked to expresses disappointment, like Provost Chilton did. I'm used to spending the evenings on campus with students, with faculty and staff on different events celebrating success. Learning about what our students are thinking about. Spending time with graduate students and postdocs and people that elect to come to WSU to pursue that part of their academic career.

We miss it just as much as everybody else does. But the end of the day, we really have to make sure that safety is of paramount thing. And if we have any reservations about putting any faculty or staff member in a challenging, unhealthy environment, we've got to make the tough call. And I think that's what we did.

PHIL WEILER: I agree. Thank you. Elizabeth, the President talked about the tools we had that we were using to try and make sure that if we were to do a face to face that we would be doing that in as a safe manner as possible. I know the tools are very important for the move to remote instruction as well. Can you talk a little bit about the services and the tools that are being provided to faculty to help them prepare for remote instruction?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Absolutely. So there are sort of two categories of support services that we've been-- have been in place already, but we've really been beefing up this week in anticipation of the start of the semester. One for a set of services and training for faculty. And one for students.

In terms of faculty, our academic outreach and innovation office has been working overtime. And if you go to the website they have a suite of trainings, and tools, everything-- I'm looking at it now-- everything from courses on preparing for distance delivery, introduction to Zoom or Panopto, different pedagogical strategies.

And then of course, that office will work with you as a faculty member one on one. We are also offering-- the President and Provost office are collaborating on a program to work with faculty. If there's something very specific they need, upgrade on a camera or microphone or materials for distance teaching that they can apply for small seed resources to be able to do that.

So we're doing everything we can to work with faculty and make sure that they are as supported as they can be in this in the switch. But as President Schulz said earlier, it's really quite a different thing in the spring where we switch mid semester. No one had planned for that. No one plans for a global pandemic until it's upon you.

And now, even though this is a quick switch, as I said, most of our classes we're already going to either be fully online or hybrid. And so we've already, as a university system, been really thinking through best practices, reaching out to our peers, and finding out different methods for delivering a high quality instruction.

I did also want to just make a plug for the resources available for students. Academic Outreach and Innovation is offering-- they're called Be Tech Ready workshops. They also offer a variety of trainings on remote learning environment. And as the President said earlier, we have set up a hotline specifically for academic questions for students about their classes-- is what I mean by academic questions.

And we will put that on the COVID website for the university. But there'll be a phone number as well as an email. A lot of times students have a question or a concern about either what's going on in the classroom or their connection to technology. And they're not really sure who to ask. They don't know whether to ask the dean of students, the faculty member, the department chair.

And so we set up this hotline so that students can have a sort of one stop concierge approach to getting their questions asked. And that office will be ready then to make sure that they get the answers to their questions.

PHIL WEILER: I like that idea of the concierge service, one stop shop for questions that people have. I think that's going to be really helpful. And I would also echo, Elizabeth, what you said about the Be Tech Ready workshops for students. I strongly encourage students to check that out or parents, if you are watching.

I had a chance to get a sneak peek at some of the tips and tricks and hints and recommendations. And I think it's going to be really helpful. I have heard through the questions that were posted online and in advance of this from parents who had particularly, I think,

students will be freshmen this year who are concerned about what kind of experience their students had at the end of their senior year where high school teachers had to quickly shift to online.

And that wasn't the best experience in some cases. And I want to let you know that I think that as we mentioned before, WSU has a long experience of providing distance learning. And I think with these workshops, students really will be well prepared to get the most out of the idea of distance learning. And one quick thing I'll just say, we mentioned this previous sessions as well.

Prior to COVID-19, virtually all of our students graduated with one online course-- at least one online course on their transcript. It is an effective way to learn. It was a very convenient way for students who needed to pick up a class or they were looking for some additional credits or they wanted to make good use of a winter break or summer break, for example.

So this idea of distance learning is not new to us. It's not a foreign concept. And hopefully, we're going to have great experience similar to the good experience that we had last year-- or last semester. So, Stacy, I'm going to move on to you if I could. This was another question and series of comments that we've seen in the last week when we did announce the intention to keep tuition at the rate that it's at.

We heard from some parents who wondered, why does Washington State University charge a different rate for in-state tuition versus out-of-state tuition?

STACY PEARSON: Sure. And that's actually a common question that comes up at state universities. But the reason is that Washington residents pay taxes that help support public higher education in the state of Washington. And that is the revenue that funds the state appropriations portion of the Washington State University budget.

And since nonresident students and families do not pay those Washington taxes, that is where that additional nonresident tuition comes in to cover more of the actual cost of the education. It should be noted, though, that currently the majority of our non-resident students do seem to receive some type of tuition waiver or discount to cover just that non-resident portion.

And so those programs are ones that we will continue to look at to determine if anything can be adjusted there. And they're actually funded from tuition revenue. So all of that is tied together, and we have to look at those impacts.

PHIL WEILER: Since we started talking about tuition and the like, can you share a little bit about financial aid?

STACY PEARSON: Yes. One of the things that we're doing-- I should say financial aid office always does this, but we are identifying-- working with them to identify additional scholarship programs and other aid programs to help alleviate the impact on students.

You will remember that we received over \$10 million in CARES Fund as emergency aid for students. That was the only purpose that it could be used for. And certainly, there is activity at the federal level to provide additional aid packages hopefully, for higher education. Also, the state of Washington provided some funding to help us deal with some of those costs and impacts.

I should mention the Washington College Grant Program is in effect and that should really help some of our students who have additional need. And again, we also are going back-- we're looking at our current programs to see what it is that we can do to help students this coming year.

We are also I should also say student-- financial aid, because they are hearing from students, they are forwarding to us those concerns that we're hearing about internet access, concerns about, will I be able to keep up in my classes if we go this way? So all of this information is getting communicated and some of the programs that Dr. Chilton address is the result of getting that feedback from students and parents.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. I might just jump to Elizabeth. You mentioned internet access for students. We know last year we had students who were concerned they didn't have laptops that would be able to keep up with a distance learning environment. Other folks had spotty Wi-Fi service. I know that the provost office last year, made Chrome Books available to students and also made portable hotspots or Wi-Fi hotspots available to students.

My understanding, Elizabeth, is that those programs have not been completely finalized yet for an extension. But can you give us an update kind of where those are and what the thinking is with regard to the loaners of computers and in Wi-Fi hotspots?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Yes, absolutely. So in the spring, when we made the quick pivot, the university purchased 300 Chrome Books and 640 hotspots. And there are still Chrome Books available. If you go to the Provost area, there's a way for students to submit a request. And we're working closely with IT on those.

We're also working on extending our contract on the hotspots. So we still own the hotspots, but we only signed up originally for through the end of the summer. And now, we're extending that contract so the hotspots will continue to be available as well.

So certainly, students can continue to request these. If we need to add more to that, we will work hard to do so. Right now, that the program is still running and they are still available.

PHIL WEILER: Great. Thank you. Thanks for that update. Teresa, if I could, this was a question that came from an employee. And this person was wondering if Washington State University will be offering a voluntary early retirement incentive program?

THERESA ELLIOT-CHESLEK: At this time, we won't be offering an early incentive program for retirement. However, if any employee is interested in looking at early retirement options, they should contact our benefits office on retirement.

So again, just to be clear, we're not offering an incentive program at this time, but all of the retirement programs that we offer to employees do have early retirement options. And that information is either on our website or you can contact benefits services.

PHIL WEILER: Greay. Thank you, Theresa. We're running short on time. But before we go, I have one more question for Elizabeth, if I could. I know that when we made the switch from a hybrid model, where we would have people on campus to distance learning, there was concern about what's going to happen with faculty office hours, academic advising, career counseling, tutoring, and the like. Will those still continue in this remote environment?

ELIZABETH CHILTON: Absolutely. So in some ways, the interactions with the faculty are going to become even more important because there won't be able to be those same casual hallway conversations. And so we're going to need to make sure that it's clear to students how they can reach out to faculty to speak with them via office hours.

We will also have-- excuse me. [CLEARS THROAT]-- academic advising, tutoring, and career counseling are all going to work in a majority remotely. And those will be announced on their respective websites how students can avail themselves of those resources. I did also want to mention, I was mentoring the assistance with technology that was available for students.

But we will also work with faculty who may need assistance for technology as well. So I did recently-- last week, we sent out an email to all faculty about any additional needs they may have so they can contact us through the provost office.

PHIL WEILER: Great. That's an important point. Thank you. We're at the top of the hour. President Schultz, let me turn it over to you. If you have any closing comments before we end this session.

KIRK SCHULZ: Well, once, again thank you, everybody, for being with us today. Thanks for the questions. And we're going to keep doing these forums as long as we need to make sure that we can answer the questions that you have. So look for us to schedule additional ones of these. The next one may have a different kind of focus, but we'll make sure that we do several that are focused around our employees across the WSU system.

I want to reiterate that we talk about technology issues with our students, as Elizabeth just mentioned. We want to make sure many of you may live in-- faculty and staff may live in rural areas with really challenges on broadband or technology. It's important that the students have what they need. But we also need to make sure our faculty and staff have the tools that they need to work remotely and to do so in a really seamless fashion. So we're committed to making sure to do that through Elizabeth's office.

And then finally, the retirement incentive thing comes up virtually at all of these things, right? And Teresa is telling you what our current policies are. But clearly, there's interest in working with the state of Washington on developing some alternatives. And I don't want people out there thinking, well, we're just blowing this off. If they keep asking, how come we're not doing something? This is not just an internal type of thing that we can decide at WSU.

So clearly, there's interest in this. And we'll work with Teresa and her staff, Colleen Kerr and others, on what types of things might get put in place by the state. That's no guarantee. But obviously, it's something people are interested in. And we want to make sure that we follow up on that. But I don't want anybody thinking that we make two phone calls and two weeks later, we've got a program in place.

This might be the type of thing that we could have ready for next fiscal year or something like that. But we're going to keep working at it. So we're all in this together. I appreciate the exceptional faculty and staff we have at WSU. And we want to do everything we can in this really uncertain time to provide good information, to answer questions, and make sure that you all feel appreciated for all that you do for WSU. Thanks. And go Cougs.

PHIL WEILER: Thank you, Kirk. And I want to thank the panelists. I appreciate you all making yourselves available for this. And also, our unsung heroes in the background, our subject matter experts who have been paying close attention to the chat. I've seen that there's been a lot of interaction-- excuse me-- a lot of interaction between the subject matter experts and folks asking questions. So thank you to them for doing that.

Just as a quick reminder to everybody. If you're a parent or a student, don't forget about the fact that we have our Tech Ready workshops. Also make sure you're watching your website for your particular campus and checking your email, because there will, in addition to the system wide town hall meetings, there will also be specific meetings for students, specific town halls for individual campuses.

So there'll be a lot of information coming your way over the next several weeks as we all gear up for the start of the academic year. So pay attention to those opportunities and please take advantage of them. With that, again, thank you. Have a wonderful weekend. And go Cougs.