

December 22, 2020

CECU Readout of White House Briefing Call for Higher Education Leaders on COVID-19

CECU's Senior Vice President of Policy and Research, Nicholas Kent, was invited to yesterday's briefing call hosted by the Office of Vice President Mike Pence. The call's purpose was to update higher education leaders – notably college and university presidents and chancellors – on COVID-19 considerations and best practices into the spring semester. In addition to Vice President Pence, the call included White House Coronavirus Task Force Coordinator Ambassador Deborah Birx, Deputy Secretary of Education Mitchell Zais, Clemson University President James Clements, University of Wisconsin System President Tommy Thompson, and University of New Hampshire Senior Vice Provost Marian McCord. The call was off the record and closed to the press.

CECU is highlighting several pieces of valuable information from yesterday's briefing call below.

- Vice President Pence opened the call with an overview of steps the Trump administration has taken to support higher education institutions and their students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include CDC issuing guidance to help institutions prepare for and respond to the pandemic, issuing a host of regulatory waivers and flexibilities, and providing federal student loan borrowers relief.
- The Vice President stated \$14 billion in stabilization funds was made available to institutions through the CARES Act's Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). He also acknowledged additional relief funds are being considered by Congress. (This legislation passed the House and Senate late last night with \$22.7 billion in additional relief funds for higher education institutions, including \$908 million for proprietary institutions to provide financial aid grants to students.)
- The Vice President acknowledged the FDA's recent approval of a second COVID-19 vaccine and indicated between the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, 20 million initial vaccinations will be administered by the end of 2020.
- The Vice President stressed getting and keeping students back on campuses while keeping their immediate and surrounding communities safe is a priority for the administration.
- Deputy Secretary Zais revealed \$13.6 billion in CARES Act funds had been distributed to higher education institutions so far. He explained how instrumental the HEERF was in supporting institutions transitioning to online learning and helping students meet basic needs like food.
- Deputy Secretary Zais also expanded on the actions the U.S. Department of Education has taken to help institutions and students, including suspending federal student loan payments, setting student loan interest rates to 0%, allowing non-payments to count toward the number of payments required under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, stopping wage garnishments, providing Federal Work-Study flexibilities for students unable to work because of COVID-19 disruptions, and promulgating new rules on distance education and innovation that offer long-term regulatory flexibilities.
- Ambassador Birx briefly recapped her findings after traveling to more than 30 campuses this year. She stated the federal government learned from higher education institutions the importance of regular testing, including of asymptomatic students, faculty, and staff.

- Ambassador Birx hinted that the CDC may soon release updated guidance to reduce social distancing in classrooms from at least 6 feet to at least 3 feet. (CECU recommends following current CDC [guidance](#) until updated written guidance is officially released.)
- Ambassador Birx thanked institutions for being adaptable and communicative through engaging student leaders and their local off-campus communities.
- Dr. Clements provided an overview of Clemson University's (26,000 students) response to the pandemic, including implementing a hybrid instructional delivery model, delaying the start date of in-person instruction this fall until the campus was adequately prepared, testing students routinely (e.g., when they return to campus), dedicating areas for quarantine and isolation, requiring face coverings while on campus, and using wastewater to test coronavirus levels.
- Clemson University's proactive approach to testing over 130,000 students and employees since summer has resulted in a COVID-19 positivity rate of 2 percent or less over the last 2 months.
- Mr. Thompson, who served as Health and Human Services Secretary under President George W. Bush, described the measures the University of Wisconsin System (165,000 students) established at 13 universities across its 26 campuses. He attributed success based in part on creating a culture of responsibility whereby students hold each other accountable.
- The UW System tests students living on campus weekly and students living off campus biweekly, which has resulted in over 350,000 tests administered since August. Routine testing has helped drive down the positivity rate across the 26 campuses to 2 percent.
- The University of New Hampshire (18,000 students) has the most aggressive testing approach seen by Ambassador Birx. Dr. McCord revealed that because the University of New Hampshire lacks both medical and veterinary schools, it did not have labs for testing. Instead, the institution built a lab dedicated to COVID-19 testing.
- Dr. McCord pointed out the University of New Hampshire planned its health campaign around anticipating asymptomatic spread. Students at the University of New Hampshire are tested twice weekly and faculty and staff are tested once weekly, which has resulted in approximately 4,000 tests administered per day and 350,000 tests administered since July.
- To accommodate the high volume of testing at the University of New Hampshire, students receive home collection kits and are responsible for testing themselves and depositing samples at times monitored and tracked by the institution.

Ambassador Birx closed out the briefing call emphasizing the need for institutions to start or continue regular testing into the spring semester to help prevent or reduce COVID-19 since it is unlikely most students will receive a vaccine before summer 2021.

The White House Coronavirus Task Force intends to publish best practices informed by Ambassador Birx's campus visits in the next couple of days. Once received, CECU will publish this document in the CECU Daily Update.

For questions or concerns related to the White House briefing call, please do not hesitate to contact Nicholas Kent, Senior Vice President of Policy and Research, at Nicholas.Kent@career.org.