



THE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

BAKERSFIELD

September 10, 2020

CHANNEL ISLANDS

CHICO

To the Faculty, Staff, and Students of The California State University:

DOMINGUEZ HILLS

The COVID-19 era presents significant and varied challenges to our health and welfare, to our economy, and to the way we sustain a vibrant university – one that embraces inclusive excellence while fulfilling the CSU core missions of teaching and learning; of discovery and innovative contribution; and of engagement with and service to the communities, state and nation we call home.

EAST BAY

FRESNO

FULLERTON

On May 12, 2020, I announced that our planning approach for the fall 2020 term would result in courses primarily being delivered virtually, with limited exceptions for in-person activities that cannot be delivered virtually, are indispensable to the university's core mission, and can be conducted within rigorous standards of safety and welfare.

HUMBOLDT

LONG BEACH

LOS ANGELES

After extensive consultation with campus presidents and other stakeholders, and careful consideration of a multitude of factors – regarding the pandemic and its consequences, as well as other matters impacting the university and its operations – I am announcing that the CSU will continue with this primarily virtual instructional approach for the academic term that begins in January 2021, and also will continue with reduced populations in campus housing.

MARITIME ACADEMY

MONTEREY BAY

NORTHRIDGE

POMONA

Allow me to share some observations from the past four months, and summarize the rationale for continuing this approach in the new year.

SACRAMENTO

SAN BERNARDINO

In retrospect, making this consequential decision approximately three and one-half months before the start of the new academic year provided valuable time for thousands of faculty and staff to participate in professional development to continue to provide an engaging, challenging and supportive virtual learning and discovery environment for our students. The value of this professional development takes on even greater significance when one considers that less than seven percent of CSU in-person course offerings from fall 2019 are being delivered in person in fall 2020.

SAN DIEGO

SAN FRANCISCO

SAN JOSÉ

SAN LUIS OBISPO

The early decision enabled students and their families to plan appropriately, and I am pleased to note that preliminary fall term enrollment numbers are strong across the system, with a few exceptions. This is quite gratifying, and it will be to the great benefit of our future alumni and the state of California in the years and decades ahead.

SAN MARCOS

SONOMA

STANISLAUS

So, as I have said before and will say again, I offer my heartfelt thanks to our faculty, staff, students and leadership across the 23 campuses and in the Chancellor's Office for their resilience, engagement, adaptability and unwavering commitment to our relentless pursuit of inclusive excellence.

This powerful demonstration of sheer grit by the CSU community is especially commendable, because it occurred – and continues to occur – as we all adapt to and cope with the many added stressors – health, social, economic – in our daily existence.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge those among us who themselves or whose loved ones have been or will be affected directly by this disease. To them, I offer my personal support, understanding and well wishes – along with those of the entire CSU family. And to those who have lost a loved one or friend, I offer heartfelt condolences.

As we turn our attention to 2021, there are practical operational reasons for making a decision now. I will outline just two. First, although we have just begun the fall term on most campuses, academic plans must soon be finalized for the term that begins in January 2021. Starting in a few weeks, campuses publish course offerings for the new year, students make their course selections, and campuses make appropriate adjustments to their course inventories to meet student demand.

A second reason for deciding now is that the CSU accrediting body – WASC – requires each campus to seek authorization for courses offered in the virtual space with online and distance-learning technology. This authorization requirement was waived by the U.S. Department of Education for fall 2020; however, that waiver expires at the end of December and will not be renewed. To meet this requirement, campuses need to commit to their January academic schedules in September and October 2020.

Put another way, there are compelling and compulsory administrative factors that require us to decide now how to best proceed in January 2021.

Another important aspect of the rationale for this decision comes from analyzing the facts about the pandemic itself. We know far more about it now than we did back in May. The virus continues to spread. There is no vaccine and there likely will not be one widely available any time soon. The summer increase in infections that was forecast in the spring happened as predicted, and it was larger than expected. While cases and hospitalizations are starting to stabilize in most of California's counties, it is plateauing at a number that is approximately 40 percent higher than what we experienced in the spring. A larger wave continues to be forecast for the period between October and December, coupled with seasonal influenza; this will undoubtedly be a daunting challenge for us. (I cannot stress strongly enough that each of us should get a flu shot soon, certainly before the end of October.) A subsequent wave of COVID-19 cases in or about March 2021 is also still projected.

Testing infrastructure is still a work in progress in California and at the CSU, and testing remains very expensive to conduct repeatedly and meaningfully with rapid results – both of which are necessary to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The governor has announced that California recently contracted with a third party to increase testing capacity. That program is anticipated to begin in November, but will not be at capacity until March 2021.

And there remain some seasonal dark clouds that could hamper or delay control of the pandemic. During the recent Labor Day weekend, there was widespread socialization that, sadly, often did not comport with public health directives. California has entered what has thus far been a horrific fire season, and the number of evacuations that will force people into congregate temporary housing could lead to another COVID-19 spike. And we are testing the willingness of a fatigued populace to continue with physical distancing, hand washing and face coverings for the long term until a vaccine is available and can be administered at scale.

To summarize, the disease continues to spread. While the current mitigation factors do make a difference, in the absence of a vaccine and of sufficient, cost-effective, timely testing and contact-tracing infrastructure, we are not able to return to a normal, principally in-person schedule in January 2021. And there are seasonal factors that threaten to accelerate the disease's progression, rather than slow it.

The combination of these compelling administrative factors – the need to publicize course offerings and enroll students now, and the required authorization process with our accrediting body – together with the state of COVID-19 prevalence, the absence of a vaccine, and an insufficient testing and contact-tracing infrastructure, lead us to the regrettable but necessary decision that the academic term that begins in January 2021 will be primarily virtual, similar to that of fall 2020.

Also like the fall term, there will be variability across campuses depending on their unique and particular circumstances. In some cases, it may be possible to slightly increase the amount of in-person instruction that we are doing currently, because we are learning to do it effectively and safely. In other cases, there may be fewer in-person opportunities.

A subsequent communication will come to campus presidents from the Chancellor's Office outlining a streamlined path forward. Our plans will comply with all state, federal and local public health directives.

We have learned from experience that announcing this decision now will allow faculty and staff to continue or start professional development to be even more effective in the virtual space. We also know that deciding now will allow our students and their families time to plan appropriately.

This decision is the only responsible one available to us at this time. And it is the only one that supports our twin North Stars of safeguarding the health, safety and well-being of our faculty, staff, students and communities, as well as enabling degree progression for the largest number of students.

Importantly and joyously, in the months ahead, campuses will be formulating plans for their commencement celebrations, and will be communicating those plans with graduating students in a timely manner.

Let me close by again thanking you and acknowledging that our resilience is being tested. But I see evidence every day that we are more than up to the challenges, now and in the journey ahead. And I see evidence that we are courageously doing the right thing – for the moment and for the short- and long-term future of our beloved university. Indeed, we have shown courage to do the right thing – even when it is unpopular.

Please continue to take good care, be safe and stay well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Timothy P. White". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "T".

Timothy P. White  
Chancellor