

A Goal Worthy of Our Commitment

In-person instruction is more important than ever as our nation wrestles not only with a pandemic but also with myriad crises, write Viviana Geron, a student, and Marie Lynn Miranda, a provost.

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We write as mother and daughter, the former (Marie Lynn) the provost at the University of Notre Dame, and the latter (Viviana) a sophomore at Duke University with an interest in health sciences. As has been widely reported in the higher education press and general media, Notre Dame made the decision to reopen for in-person education in May, and Duke announced its decision to bring students back to campus in June.

We consider in-person instruction more important than ever as our nation wrestles not only with the pandemic but also with myriad crises, including systemic racial and social injustice, political divisiveness, economic inequality, and access to educational and economic opportunities for young people. The decision to reopen Notre Dame began with a belief in such in-person education, especially for students with limited resources at home, and the planning process dominated the lives of everyone at the institution this summer. We suspect the same is true for Duke. Professors restructured classes so that they could be offered in person, remotely or dually delivered in response to changes in the pandemic. University leaders rethought seemingly every dimension of the campus, from density of classrooms to rules for residence halls to purchasing thousands of gallons of hand sanitizer. Notre Dame developed a communications campaign designed to win the hearts and minds of our students. We established an on-site testing center, surveillance testing, contact tracing teams and a platform for daily health checks - no small feat for a university without a medical school or academic health center.

Notre Dame started bringing students back to campus in early August and began classes on Aug. 10, as did Duke a week later. We were hopeful that we were well prepared. Yet Notre Dame took what can only be described as a body blow from the scale and velocity of the challenges we faced with testing and contact tracing just one week into the start of the semester. From Aug. 17 to 19, 270 COVID-19 cases were diagnosed among our students. The question before us was whether we could recover from the setback and sufficiently regain our footing to continue with in-person instruction for the fall semester.

The Toxicity of Low Expectations

Much has been written about how higher education institutions are blaming students for behavior that some people suggest we should have expected. Contact tracing made it clear that Notre Dame's August surge derived from large social gatherings that were inconsistent with university policy. That's not blame -- that's a simple statement of the outcome of our contact tracing. To be clear: we are not blaming the students; we are blaming the virus.

We continue to believe students with the right knowledge and tools can rise to the level of expectations colleges set for them. We knew they would not all be perfect, but we refused then and continue to refuse to surrender to the toxicity of low expectations. That is unfair to the students who have been conscious and active in their advocacy for public health and safety, and it destines young people to be less

than they can be. We continue to feel we have an obligation to work with students to help them understand the virus and the role they can play in controlling it. When Viviana began treatment at 17 years old for an immunocancer, her immune system quickly weakened. A cold or virus would have affected her drastically. During that time, friends flooded her with love and support. One of the most important ways in which they supported her was through their health. They avoided situations where they could pick up infections and did not see her if they felt ill. Those young people made a conscious choice to protect someone who was vulnerable at personal inconvenience and cost. Compassion is not unrealistic in young people, nor is it rare.

We are asking our campus communities to embrace compassion. The distinct challenges that COVID-19 poses give each of us the opportunity to rise to this occasion, to be our best selves, to hold each other accountable, to strengthen our sense of community and to regain our footing and move on after we have stumbled. Our experiences convince us that young people on our campuses can and will choose to embrace compassion, despite the underdeveloped frontal lobes that are much referred to these days.

Yes, We Know We Made Mistakes

There's an old military saying that no battle plan survives its first contact with the enemy, and make no mistake, COVID-19 is a formidable foe. As a result, in the face of a dramatic surge, on Aug. 18, Notre Dame announced the suspension of in-person undergraduate instruction, the closing of some common spaces and new restrictions in residence halls. We discouraged off-campus students from coming to the campus or associating with those outside their home or apartment unit, and we set a limit on social gatherings.

We believed then, and we continue to believe -- and this has been borne out to date by the data -- that our classrooms were safe and important to the personal and academic development of our students. We thought that a pause in some of our normal operations would allow us to deeply assess the situation and implement improvements where needed. Notre Dame used the two-week "cool down" to quickly and substantially pivot processes to better battle the virus at scale and serve the Notre Dame community. As is almost always the case, we learned a lot more from our critics than from our fans. Even though their feedback was sometimes brutally frank, we are grateful to them. They made us better.

This virus is tricky, and we still have a long fight before us. Notre Dame seems to have met the immediate challenges presented by the surge, and we were pleased to begin a phased return to in-person undergraduate classes starting Sept. 2. We know we'll see additional waves and surges, but our revised battle plan better positions us to detect and react quickly to new cases in ways that we think will allow us to contain the spread of the virus on campus.

Other Issues at Play

Some people have argued that we should simply send students home to learn remotely until we are "safe" from COVID-19. But we'll all be living with COVID-19 for the foreseeable future, vaccine promises notwithstanding.

And we should not underestimate the mental health impacts of COVID-19, especially so on the young. Stay-home orders work directly against the social interaction that young people crave and, in fact, need. A recent publication from the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports the results of a mental health survey conducted in June 2020. Nearly a quarter of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported suicidal ideation, and almost three-quarters reported at least one mental or behavioral health [symptom](#).

Since COVID-19 became part of our daily lives in March, our two university communities have lost three young people to mental health issues - while we have as yet to sustain a coronavirus-related death on either campus. Beyond the individual tragedies, the impact of these deaths on families, fellow students and our broader university communities is profound. While not a guarantee, we believe that bringing students back into community, with wraparound resources at the ready, will support their mental health and emotional well-being.

The health of students, faculty and the surrounding communities is not limited to concerns surrounding the virus, and circumstances require intense and multifaceted considerations. We see communities struggling with job losses. We see K-12 teachers struggling to engage and connect with students when they are not able to teach in person. Too frequently, we see individuals isolated, disengaged and struggling to stay afloat in a time when everyone is craving normalcy and connection. Decisions at our universities have to be made with regard for not only the physical but also the psychological health of everyone involved.

In addition, substantial evidence indicates that completing a college degree has a significant impact on both morbidity and mortality. For low-resource students, studying remotely is much more challenging, posing meaningful risk for dropping out of college. The challenges go well beyond having a laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot, both problems we could presumably solve. For some low-resource students, crowded households, residential instability, childcare responsibilities, food insecurity and working to support their families all interfered with their studies during the “digital pivot,” as we now refer to March 2020 in higher education circles.

Finally, we must not ignore long-standing race-based violence and injustices that have, in the words of Notre Dame president Father John Jenkins, “shaken the conscience of our nation.” The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and untold others, as well as the recent shooting of Jacob Blake, extend a long history of racially driven violence against Black people. Understanding and intervening to prevent these disproportionate impacts is crucial to the health of our nation and our democracy. Campuses are exactly the right place to engage broad cross-sections around these issues, and such engagement is essential to meaningful progress.

Growing and Struggling Together

We are both basketball fans, and we have taken to heart leadership advice from Mike Krzyzewski (“Coach K”): “Make the goal worthy of your team’s commitment.” In bringing students back to our campuses, our goal is to support the whole formation of students -- mind, body and spirit. We are asking a lot of students -- and students are asking a lot of each other -- ethically as well as academically, and rightfully so. We know not all students will meet the standard all the time, but we are all empowered to hold each other accountable, and we also have public health systems in place to catch problems early.

We are certainly providing an opportunity to learn academic material, but also, and perhaps more important, we are offering the chance to grow and struggle together.

To think and act out of care for one another. To weaponize our compassion -- against COVID-19 and against the suffering in these times of turmoil. To get through this together. Whether we will make it through to the end of the fall semester in-person is yet to be determined. But our goal of supporting young people -- as we all struggle through COVID-19, economic dislocation, racial injustices -- is surely worthy of our deepest commitment.

Bio

Viviana Geron is a sophomore at Duke University, majoring in biomedical engineering. Her mother, Marie Lynn Miranda, is provost of the University of Notre Dame and also a professor of applied and computational mathematics and statistics in Notre Dame's College of Science.