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Enrollment, furloughs and classrooms – inside the Covid-19 rebuilding process at Canisius College

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John Hurley, like the leaders of many private colleges and universities, has a lot to be concerned with lately.

First, the college had to convert to a distance-learning format as the Covid-19 pandemic spread. Then there were the many disappointments Hurley was forced to deliver including

postponing graduation, canceling the entire sports season and sending some employees home temporarily.

Those disappointments may not end soon. The president of Canisius College said the coronavirus has had some impact on next year's enrollment, but there's no way yet to say how much. There's also the potential effect on how instruction is delivered. Plans are to resume normal classwork in the fall, but there have to be contingencies in place in case online work continues.

But Hurley maintains that Canisius' mission will persevere in as traditional a format as possible. Following is an edited conversation with him.

What has the process of getting through the spring semester been like? We started in early March looking at this, figuring out what might happen. We were warned by health experts in our health center that we were looking at the possibility of a substantial outbreak on campus. At the very beginning, we were making decisions with very little information and doing the very best we could. It transitioned to a point where the government began making decisions for us, that week of March 9. By that time we'd made the decision to move to online instruction. The week of



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John Hurley, president of Canisius College, said he hopes for a return to traditional instruction in the fall but has to plan in case remote learning has to continue due to coronavirus. (file photo)

March 16 was our spring break, so we told students to go home and take your important things with you at least until Easter. Since then, it's been a series of incremental decisions we've been trying to make with what information we had on hand.

What are you thinking in terms of the fall semester? Talks have started about fall being (fully) online, but we don't know what that would look like yet. It's a distinct possibility that we're going to have to plan for. At the undergrad level, we had very few online and hybrid courses (prior to the pandemic). Faculty had to suddenly convert what they were doing to the online environment. Twelve of our graduate programs are wholly or partly online, so we have a degree of online expertise in course design. People understand that these are unique circumstances.

How has the admissions process been altered? We extended the deadline for deposits to June 1. With the undergrad admissions, you can throw out all the comparables. We continue to get deposits. We continue to have positive experiences. The real disappointment was the cancellation of recruitment events. We usually get a couple hundred to come to our new-student open house, which we had to cancel. Overnight visits, individual campus tours — all of that had to cease and move online. Staff are coming up with creative ways to stay connected, but I don't think anyone has a clear idea of what's going to happen over the summer.

Are breaks on tuition being considered for this semester or if the fall semester has to go online? No tuition rollback is under consideration. We have to look at what would the experience be like if we were offering an online experience in the fall. What's

appropriate? It's hard to charge students a parking fee if we're doing online courses. That's obvious. And room and board is easy. We'd have to look at activity fees, also. We are looking at all of those things as part of the scenario.

Has this semester sparked any talks of going to a fully online or partially online teaching format? I think that isn't our brand. The Canisius experience is close interaction with faculty, small class sizes, the building of a community. Whenever we've looked at online education, we've said we will explore where it makes sense. It makes sense in graduate programs. For the most part, the market for those is working adults. On the undergrad side, will this mean the end of the fact-to-face experience? I don't see that. What it means is greater integration of online education as part of overall experience, but not replace it. For example, technology should make the notion of a snow day obsolete. Just do the work online.

What has happened to the college's bottom line? There's a significant revenue loss. We're refunding unused room and board. We also lost much auxiliary income, including athletics. It's one of those things we try to deal with as best we can. Looking at the extent to which **the CARES Act could help the situation**. We have more than 500 employees, so we don't qualify for a small-business loan. We're looking at other avenues with the federal stimulus package. It's been somewhat difficult getting crystal-clear guidance.

Did you have to enact layoffs or furloughs? There have been some temporary staffing reductions. Whether it works into permanent ones depends on enrollment. Up until the end of March, we were

tracking to goal on enrollment. We fell off at end of March because the admitted student day didn't happen, and we would normally get 40 to 50 deposits that day. Most people are so distracted by what's going on that they don't feel a real need to get that deposit in today. We had some in our facilities staff who were concerned about health risk. A second wave of furloughs across campus was processed first week of April. That's all related to the fact that these positions depend upon the college being open and operating and having a full range of activities.

What about the future is keeping you up at night? The retention of existing students. I'm worried for our existing students, what's gone on for their families, job losses that would affect their ability to keep them coming back. We're staying in touch with existing families. Students are disoriented, back in their old bedrooms but trying to do college work and trying to stay in touch with friends. To be thrown out of the residence halls and sent back home, that's an issue that is very concerning. Also, our graduating seniors who were looking forward to long list of last times doing X-Y-Z. Now they can't. We rescheduled commencement for October. I feel the pain of the seniors and their families. I have a daughter who's graduating. I can't hand her a degree. While our faculty are still teaching, they're doing something that's forced a lot of them out of their comfort zones. I feel responsible for 700 or so employees who have a lot invested in this great enterprise. Right now, it's on hold.

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