

Tommy Thompson: UW System planning to maximize in-person instruction for Fall 2021 semester

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In a traditional university setting, students learn and grow through their interactions with peers and faculty. This sort of engagement – in and out of the classroom – builds sharper thinking, contributes to social development, and enriches communities.

As University of Wisconsin System campuses plan for the fall semester, we will be seeking to maximize this engagement through in-person teaching and learning while building on our successful embrace of remote instruction. In fact, I have directed our universities to ensure that students attending a UW campus in Fall 2021 will have as classic a UW campus experience as possible – including a goal of at least 75 percent of all classes being in person.

This school year, our universities pivoted to more remote and hybrid class offerings to afford UW students a path to a degree while ensuring the health and safety of our university and surrounding communities. An aggressive testing program, in combination with our masking, distancing, and cleaning protocols, made welcoming back students possible. We have been making improvements to our testing efforts ever since. And because of the culture of responsibility we have built at all of our universities, we now see COVID infection rates below 1 percent. It has been a remarkable success story during perilous times.

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As we look to the fall, we're not naïve. We know the pandemic still hovers over all of our lives. Yet, we also have hope that the vaccine supply will increase and know that our efforts to maintain a safe and healthy environment for students, faculty, and staff will persist.

We have taken enormous steps to help students during this challenging time, including enhancing our behavioral health services and distributing millions of federal dollars to help pay the bills. We have also made it easier for prospective students to apply.

But we haven't stopped at our campus borders. Over the last several months, the University of Wisconsin System has taken extraordinary steps to help Wisconsin combat the coronavirus pandemic.

We have administered about 250,000 free COVID-19 tests in our university communities. We have deployed nursing, pharmacy, and other health care students to hospitals, clinics, and vaccination sites. We have worked with state and local health officials to establish vaccination sites on our campuses.

We have done all of this because when Wisconsin faces a problem, the University of Wisconsin System will step up to help solve it.

Our online education efforts have been tremendous, and we're working on ways to make them even better for those who prefer that way of learning. Moreover, our faculty have learned how to better incorporate technology into instruction – even classes taught in person.

But now it is time for us to plan to resume as much of an in-person campus experience as possible this fall. That means small-group classroom discussions about politics, history, and literature. It means hands-on lab research and internships. It means cheering on athletic teams, attending live performances, and socializing in the dining halls. Rest assured, we'll keep in mind the safety of everyone on campus and continue to consult with local, state, and federal health experts.

– Thompson is president of the University of Wisconsin System. He previously served as Wisconsin's 42nd governor and as Health and Human Services secretary under President George W. Bush.