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FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

## *The challenges of leading during the COVID-19 era*

**T**he past 18 months have been challenging for all of us. The pandemic has challenged our resolve and stamina. It has challenged the strength of our relationships and our willingness to make personal sacrifices. It has challenged our acceptance of leaders and our understanding of leadership.

“As a microbiologist, I have knowledge, training and experience that allow me to evaluate our options critically, and I know that the vaccines are the best tool we have to protect our communities.”

As a university president, my first concern is always for the health and well-being of the community that I serve — the faculty, staff, alumni, parents, friends and, most importantly, the students of Millersville University. The pandemic has presented numerous threats to the health and well-being of that community. The decisions that must be made in response to those threats have rarely been easy or clear. Easy and clear decisions are made well before they reach my desk.

Decisions are most difficult when they strain aspects of our value system.

This is true, in part, because our community members weigh values differently. Do we place a greater value on providing spaces to learn face-to-face or on exhausting options to limit the spread of the virus? Do we place greater value on supporting the long-term health of the institution and the countless lives it will improve or on the immediate risks to individuals? Similar questions were asked and are continuing to be asked by university presidents, business executives and community leaders across the state, the country and the world.

In my role, the fiduciary responsibility of leading a university weighs heavily on me. Being a microbiologist by training, the science and data about the spread of COVID-19 also weigh heavily on me. Yet confidence in decision-making comes from galvanizing the commu-

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► *Daniel Wubah, Ph.D., is the 15th president of Millersville University.*

## Wubah: *The many challenges of leading during the COVID-19 era*

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 nity around common values and the use of valid data. At Millersville, our core values include exploration, professionalism, public mission, inclusion, integrity and compassion. My leadership team and I refer to these values frequently, using them as our north star as we navigate today's turbulent waters.

Our values are manifest in our mission to be a "community dedicated to high-quality education at an exceptional value." As a community, we have a responsibility to safeguard the health of everyone, including those adjacent to our campus in Millersville and Lancaster city. That responsibility led us to transition to entirely remote instruction in just two weeks in March 2020. As citizens of a global community, we helped flatten the curve, but the decision came with a loss of treasured traditions such as graduation, athletic competitions and performances.

During the summer of 2020, we explored scenarios to reopen that fall; however, as the number of cases across the country continued to rise, we made the difficult decision not to risk bringing all our students back to campus. We stayed with that decision through spring semester of 2021.

Ultimately, we decided that safeguarding the health of our community by limiting the spread of the virus took precedent and the best tool available was to keep the number of individuals on campus low.

There was tension regarding the decision — the trade-off between safeguarding the health of our community and providing

a college experience that includes face-to-face instruction. And the decision was not without consequences.

It placed an even greater burden on our faculty to participate in training and prepare their courses for remote delivery. It challenged our students to learn in different ways and necessitated that we increase our ability to offer student support services such as counseling, advising and student-life activities remotely. It required reducing dramatically the number of students we could accommodate in our on-campus housing. Fewer students on campus meant fewer meal plans, which imposed a problematic financial burden on our dining services, ultimately requiring staff furloughs — a clear and challenging demonstration that leadership decisions directly impact people's lives.

Now, here we are in the fall of 2021. We have returned to a regular distribution of face-to-face and online classes; we have full capacity in our residence halls; most employees are returning to work on campus; and we are holding on-campus university events. The health and safety of our university community remain our top priority, and we are emphasizing vaccinations for eligible and able adults, and we are requiring face coverings for both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals while indoors.

Our approach during 2020 and the spring of 2021 helped to keep our number of COVID-19 cases low, and we're hopeful our mask requirement and other measures will assist us in keeping numbers low this fall. As a microbiologist, I have knowledge, training and ex-



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Millersville University freshman Olivia Erickson, of Mifflinburg, left, is helped by her father, Chuck, as she moves into her dorm in South Village at Millersville University on Aug. 19.

perience that allow me to evaluate our options critically, and I know that the vaccines are the best tool we have to protect our communities. We are fortunate to have them and should welcome such achievements of human ingenuity and learning. Generations who have come before us and individuals around the world yearn for such advantages in the face of similar threats.

Earlier this summer when I visited my home country of Ghana, I saw people standing in line for more than eight hours to be vaccinated. In a country with a popula-

tion of about 31 million people, only 600,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines were available at that time. This incongruous nature of the distribution of the vaccines baffles me at times and serves as a reminder to encourage people in our community to get the vaccine.

As we start the fall semester, I am left with a feeling that is likely shared by leaders across the state, country and world. While we are hardwired to make the right decisions, we must at times accept that "right" decisions may not exist. There are only trade-offs. Our job as leaders is to set the framework

for decision-making, to be honest and transparent with our community about the trade-offs, and to focus on the light at the end of the tunnel and not the tunnel.

At this moment, when we are still steeped in uncertainty and waiting due to the delta variant, one cannot tell exactly what a post-pandemic future will look like. I am certain, however, that the values held by our community, expressed in our mission and invoked by our leadership, will continue to be our beacon to lead us to a safe landing.