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PRESIDENT CHRISTOPHER L. EISGRUBER '83: I'm confident that by getting our students off the campus we were able to keep the infection numbers in our community small. But boy, the last thing you want to have to do as the president of a university is put a stop to all that activity that people enjoy so much and send them home. And it was a difficult day that I will never forget.

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MARGARET KOVAL *83: Hello, Princeton. This spring, with coronavirus disrupting all our lives, we're reaching out to Princetonians everywhere to hear how we're continuing our collective and personal missions, how we're staying together while far apart, and how so many of us are working to serve the wider world. In this episode of We Roar, Princeton University president Chris Eisgruber describes how the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded from his viewpoint in Nassau Hall.

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EISGRUBER: Well, really where I would see the huge pivot point for the University was what happened in the first week of March. I was just on my way back from a trip where I had been down to see alumni in Texas. And everybody at that point was a little bit nervous about the virus. I remember you know some people were shaking hands, some people were not, but the numbers were very low. And as March began we were just seeing the first cases confirmed in New York and New Jersey.

And right around March 4 or 5 or so — I think the 5th was a Thursday — we got our incident group together to talk about whether the University should be taking more campus-wide proactive steps. Robin Izzo, who is our executive director of Environmental Health and Safety, is our incident commander. And we also had our infectious disease expert in that group, and several other people. But it's basically our group that takes a look at outbreaks when they occur on the campus. So this was our experienced team that had also been involved with the meningitis B outbreak.

And so we asked our group to look at the decisions that had to be made, and I think what we started them off with was the question about, well, should we be taking large sporting events and other events with large crowds and shutting down those crowds. And the group came back with a recommendation that not only should we do that, but that we should put our classes online. And I was astonished, as were my colleagues. And their first reaction was, no, we don't have to do that right now. This is still too far away from us.

But one critical piece of what happened there was that our group had a conversation with a trustee ad hoc committee that we had put together that included people like my

classmate Laura Forese from New York Presbyterian Hospital where she's the incident commander up there, and Dr. Henri Ford at the University of Miami, Brad Smith from Microsoft, Weezie Sams, the chair of the board. And there were a couple of things happening in that conversation. One was our trustees were pushing us on the question of, wait a minute, if you're worried about crowds of 100 people or more at a basketball game or in a theater performance, why aren't you worried about them in a classroom?

And the other thing that was going on in that conversation was we were hearing from the medical experts on the board and from others that community spread was starting in the Northeast. And that we should assume either that the virus was already on our campus, even though we didn't have any confirmed cases, or that it soon would be. And that was really different from what conventional wisdom was saying. Again, it's just sort of hard to believe if you think about where we are now early in April with a stay-at-home orders all across the country. But you know, it was business as usual across the United States with I think the exception of the Seattle area at that point. So the idea that we needed to take these drastic steps on our campus was really astonishing to us.

But as we talked it through and listened, what we realized was that given what the medical experts knew about likelihood of community spread taking place, and given the fact that with a highly transmissible infectious disease that spreads at exponential rates you have to act early, the time to act was now. We could not wait around until we had confirmed cases on the campus. So yes, it was an astonishing moment.

And then things changed very rapidly over the days that followed, too. [MUSIC] We started through this in steps, and our initial judgment was that what we should do is virtualize what we could virtualize — that is get online what we could get online — and make it possible for our undergraduates who are going home for spring break to stay home if they wanted to.

So I think it's Monday now, the 9th, we put out a memorandum saying that. And that puts us out ahead of the curve already on the East Coast. You're wondering, am I being too risk averse about this, right? Are we making the wrong decision here, or are we taking things that people care about so deeply and disrupting them? And is it going to turn out that we've acted too aggressively?

And you know what, we were saying to one another — and what I was saying at this point, I was in constant conversation with other Ivy League presidents — what we were all saying was, look, if we turn out to be wrong and it's less serious than we have had thought, well, we're all going to celebrate. And people might be upset with us, but that'll be a good thing. But if it's as bad as what we're hearing from people leading up hospitals and epidemiologists, then we'd better act now.

That was the beginning of the week. And then by the time we hit midweek, we realized we had to be more aggressive. Because basically if the disease started to spread in the

way that we've now seen it spread in American cities on our campus, it would spread very rapidly through student dormitories given the living situation, and it would overwhelm both the University's health care capacity and the local town's healthcare capacity. So two days later now on Wednesday the 11th we told students that they had to register if they were going to stay, and they would only be permitted to stay for a limited set of reasons. And by that point we were we were beyond the principle of virtualizing what we could virtualize. We now realized we need to get students off the campus.

Prior to the 13th was the day where these decisions kind of weighed very heavily on my shoulders. I looked out — and we were still at a tiny number of cases in the entire state of New Jersey at that point. It was a beautiful afternoon in March, unseasonably warm. And you look out, and you see a lot of undergraduates in small clusters laughing and talking with one another. You would have guessed it was just a carefree day in the spring term at the cusp of spring break.

In fact, that was the last day of in-person instruction on our campus. It was a day when most of the students had to pack up and leave. It was a day where a lot of the seniors recognized that it was the last day they would have on campus as part of their Princeton education. All of us as Princetonians recognize just how special the place is, and how special those experiences and memories are of the place.

And I walked outside at the end of that evening, or that afternoon, and I found myself looking around and just asking, OK, I've made the decisions that take all of this away from these students. And I can see them looking at me. And on the one hand, they're smiling. But on the one hand, they know that I made that decision. And it was a very difficult thing, because again at that point — although now by the end of that week the National Basketball Association had suspended its season, and Major League Baseball had done the same thing. And things were starting to cascade, and they were taking off in New York.

But it was still possible to ask, did we get this wrong? And it was a difficult moment, I have to say. I remember running into Professor Gary Bass from the politics department. And he looked at me and he said, Chris, you did the right thing. And I said, Gary, I just don't know. And he said, you did. This is the Spanish flu. And in retrospect we did the right thing. It was the right thing to do. But boy, it was a tough decision to make at the time we made it.

[MUSIC] We still got about 390 undergraduates on campus, but you really don't see those students because they are not participating in activities. There are not dining halls open. Research laboratories have been shut down. The libraries are closed. The art museum is closed. There are no scheduled events of any kind. For those of us in the administration, we meet daily in meetings over Zoom the way the rest of the world is doing right now.

I have a senior thesis advisee this year in the Woodrow Wilson School. She sent me a draft, and I spent several hours going over it, and sent her back comments, and then we did a Zoom conversation. I think that's a good illustration both of what we can and what we can't do online. What we can do is we can continue these relationships and supervisions that have been built up over the course of the preceding year.

And for some things, like a one-on-one thesis supervision where she's fairly far along already in the process — so the vast majority of her research is complete — continuing that online is a very feasible thing. But in this crisis period I don't think we should ever start to think about what we're going through right now as normal. It's a period we need to get through, but it's a period that we need to get through with an eye to how do we get back to what it is that we need to be doing for our educational and research mission to flourish.

[MUSIC] Our faculty has been spectacular. Everybody did the work to get their classes up online. Some people were wrestling with technology that they had never used before. And everybody did it, and people have been working very hard to do the outreach to students to make that work, and to contend with the inevitable problems. Our students, I think, have been on their side, understanding of what the University has needed to do.

And so I'm not going to claim to you that it is as good as what it is to do residential, on-campus education. There are so many different benefits to being on campus together. But we continue to be able to deliver education that has the core feature of what makes a Princeton education great. We have our world-class faculty communicating in high touch kinds of ways with our world-class student body. And I think people are working together to make that work, and to make the best of it.

What gets you up in the morning as a university president — certainly what gets me up in the morning — is the activity that takes place of discovery in our classrooms, learning in our libraries, research in our laboratories, the alumni coming together. And it's difficult. To work from home and not see all that — it's difficult to come into the campus and find it so quiet, so silent. But what I know is that there is this extraordinarily vibrant community of Tigers ready to burst forth when the moment is right. And I have been so pleased at the way people have been finding virtual opportunities to connect.

But the virtual is not nearly as good as the real. So that's what I look forward to, and I know I know that day will come. I hope it will be soon. And I realize that until then, all of us have this responsibility to conduct ourselves in our community in ways that keep all of us healthy and safe.

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