

**DBusiness Interview – June 22, 2020**  
**President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz**  
**Oakland University**

**Q: What did you learn through the COVID-19 experience?**

**OHP:** There have been many lessons along the way, and I'm sure there will more in the days ahead.

From the point of view of an institution of higher learning, there can be no question that our ultimate priority is the health and safety of our community. Given the urgency of the COVID-19 threat, we had to respond immediately in March, and then since, we've been planning for several possible scenarios based on the public phase of the pandemic as defined by Gov. Whitmer's public health policy team. The key, of course, is to understand the science and epidemiology, and not to be influenced by viewpoints that are uninformed and short-sighted.

The biggest lesson in the challenge to respond effectively is that it's essential to identify objectives, create a flexible action plan and most of all to assemble an effective team. Remaining prepared and flexible is a challenge, but it's necessary to provide a safe and healthy campus environment.

On a personal level, I have learned it's critical to push the team to be prepared for all possible scenarios and foster collaboration. As a leader, I've learned the importance of effectively communicating the goals and status of our plan to our community. This pandemic has challenged all of us, and many people feel isolated and vulnerable. Reaching out, reassuring our community and making sure everyone understands that we are in this together has been critical to making sure we stay focused and responsive so we can act effectively. I've been so impressed at the selflessness, compassion and resiliency of people.

**Q: How did you pivot your operations to account for the virus?**

Initially, we established a task force in January to monitor the spread of COVID-19. Following the spread of the virus allowed us to be prepared when the health threat came closer and the cases increased.

By mid-March when COVID-19 cases were first reported in Michigan, we had operations plans in place, and the pivot – while stressful and comprehensive – was managed extremely effectively. Our task force immediately set in place a plan to sanitize the university rooms and property, establish health protocol, including social distancing requirements, and our on-campus health center identified processes and resources needed to test for Covid-19. Further, our residence halls were closed, except for students who had no other living arrangement. For those students, we made sure they had a safe place to live and kept open a food services to accommodate them.

From an academic standpoint, our faculty responded heroically to the pressing need to teach remotely. In an extremely short period, we cancelled in-person instruction and transferred courses to online. The breadth, expediency and efficiency of the transference was nothing short of remarkable and a testament to OU's dedicated faculty, who continue to put in long, long hours to prepare for all types of possible scenarios and serve our students.

For the fall, we have a contingency plan that allows us to be agile in our response to a range of possible public health threats. For now, we're preparing for phase five of the pandemic, which is containment. That means campus will be open, social distancing and health protocols are in place (including wearing cloth face coverings)

**Q: Going forward, how do you plan to grow your business?**

In higher education, "growing our business" is distinctively different than the private sector, although we do face many of the same challenges.

For instance, right now, any business must address the many uncertainties regarding revenue. For OU, revenue comes primarily from tuition (81 percent of budget), while state support has steadily decreased (currently at 17 percent of budget). Our business plan, which is based on a Strategic Enrollment Management plan, aims to retain current students and attract new students. The challenge is to always adapt to serving our students, and providing courses, programs and degrees in an engaging learning environment.

Our growth is inextricably tied to student enrollment, community engagement and reputation. While OU must be financially sound, we also must play a vital role in improving the healthy, economy and culture of our communities.

At the end of the day, we point to an impressive return on investment, that is, when students invest in their education, they'll find it pays dividends for the rest of their lives based on the quality of job, including the rate of pay compared to graduates from other universities as well as non-graduates.