This is no time for a gap year

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If you're debating college this fall, you must decide whether to put in your application or delay until the world is a safer place. In these uncertain times, it's no surprise that many schools pushed National College Decision Day back to June 1, and about 40 percent of prospective college students are considering a gap year instead.

Many fear what college will be like in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, and few universities are able to provide detailed plans. Some students are worried about their health and safety; others are reluctant to pay full or out-of-state tuition for classes they may end up taking online from their parents' homes.

I realize these are scary, uncertain times. Michigan and our communities near Detroit have been hit hard. It's only natural to feel anxious, or want to delay your education. But how would you even fill a gap year now? You can't travel widely, easily find a good job, or join the temporarily shuttered Peace Corps.

Rather than delay college, this is actually the perfect time to earn a degree. As the pandemic disrupts lives and finances, many students are looking for a safe harbor, a place where they can get an outstanding education at an affordable price while staying close to their families.

I'm fortunate enough to work at a place like that. At Oakland University, where I am president, about 80% of our nearly 20,000 students come from southeast Michigan. Our size and location are strengths: We tailor our classes, programs, mentoring, internships, and job placements to students' specific needs.

Come fall, colleges like ours may take a hybrid approach to teaching that includes both face-to-face and remote instruction. We will carefully use social distancing, COVID-19 and serology testing and contact tracing as we prioritize the health and safety of our students, faculty, and staff. And we'll help you afford college, with funds from the federal CARES Act, Pell grants, financial aid and scholarships. We also set up relief funds to help with rent, food, laptops, and even flat tires.

This is your generation's moment

John F. Kennedy started the Peace Corp to encourage students to engage in the world. Your generation can go to college *and* contribute to addressing the pandemic relief efforts. Faculty, staff and students at dozens of regional and public universities are working around the clock to provide everything from face masks to grief counseling.

The State University of New York is raising $10 million to provide support and protective gear for frontline workers, while Ball State University donated the use of its powerful planetarium computers to help researchers better understand the virus.

At OU, we mobilized a full-scale, multi-level relief effort that includes converting a dormitory into sleeping rooms for exhausted health care workers and first responders. More than 65 heroes sleep there now. We've converted our campus student center into a major food distribution site, where we collect, pack and distribute food and essentials to nearly 1,000 households each week. So far, with help from masked-and-gloved volunteers from 40 community groups, we've delivered more than 50,000 nutritious meals.

Led by Associate Professor Jennifer Lucarelli, Ph.D., an expert in public health and community engagement, students assist on every front – from medical students working shifts in local hospitals to IT students managing databases. Lucarelli says, "What I hear every day is, 'How can I help?' There hasn't been a single 'No.'"

In your own backyard

So, students, please don't sit on the sidelines. We need your talents, ideas and energy.

We'll also need every ounce of your knowledge and expertise as we fight the pandemic and navigate soaring job losses. When the crisis ends – and it will – history shows that the best jobs will go to those with college degrees and advanced skills.

Don't throw this opportunity away. And consider that the best place to both learn and contribute could be in your own backyard.