Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 14: PLANNING, ADJUSTING AND COMMUNICATING FOR THE FALL

ELI CAPILOUTO

ERIN HENNESSY

JULY 2020

PROVIDED BY

CAPTION ACCESS

contact@captionaccess

www.captionaccess.com

JULY 18, 2020

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 14: PLANNING, ADJUSTING AND COMMUNICATING FOR THE FALL

ELI CAPILOUTO

ERIN HENNESSY

PAUL FAIN

35:43

====

[MUSIC]

PAUL FAIN: Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the podcast host and a news editor at Inside Higher Ed. It's mid-July, which means we're about a month away from when many colleges expect students to return to campus. To prepare for the fall, the University of Kentucky created a 187-page Playbook for Reinvented Operations. I spoke with Eli Capilouto, the university's president and a former professor of public health policy to hear how UK developed its playbook. President Capilouto also talk about how the flagship university is continuing to prepare and adjust, as well as how it has communicated with students, parents, employees, and many more.

ELI CAPILOUTO: More is more. You know, sometimes less is more. But in this, more is more. And I think we've tried to follow that.

PAUL FAIN: For a national perspective, I spoke with Erin Hennessey, vice president of TVP Communications and the coauthor of a recent opinion piece for IHE about how circumstances may force colleges to change their plans and how they should communicate about those plans.

ERIN HENNESSY: People are operating with the best of possible intentions, but they're also operating under a significant number of pressures from a significant number of people that really hold a lot of weight with a president, a chancellor, a board of trustees.

PAUL FAIN: Now, on to the conversation...

Doctor Capilouto, thanks for taking time to speak with us.

ELI CAPILOUTO: Thank you, Paul. It's always a pleasure.

PAUL FAIN: So we're speaking on July 9th, a busy time in higher education and in the world more broadly. Can you talk a little bit about the stakes as you see them right now as your university prepares for the fall?

ELI CAPILOUTO: We're a 4.4-billion-dollar enterprise, 30,000 students, admit 40,000 patients to our hospitals, 1.8 million visits. This is all on a contiguous campus. For me, when we think about reopening, I want to be standing out there in front of those residence halls where we'll decompress our reopening, so that we physically space and fill our beds and all. And it comes down to being able to look at a distance in the eyes of a parent and say, we have done everything possible to keep your child safe, and everything possible to provide a transformative education. We have tapped our most valuable resource, and that's our talented faculty, staff, and students, in developing a plan. So it's high touch and it's high tech. We have a variety of ways that we're going to intervene your child, your loved one, is going to have to take personal responsibility. But we've also taken in a sort of spirit of public health practice things to make being safe as easy as possible,

PAUL FAIN: So you're a public health person yourself. Can you talk a little bit about your approach to the playbook for a reinvented operation? I know you had a lot of people involved in this and it was a lot of work to put together.

ELI CAPILOUTO: Yeah, well, let me say, I can't thank these 500 plus people who worked through nearly 20 work streams. Whatever came our way over the three or four months after we learned of the first case and we went to shutdown, these groups had worked together. What we've got to do now is a collective effort. So that exercise is very important to how we develop a plan to go forward.

It is extensive, but I think in any kind of intervention you have start with what's your purpose. In our case, it was the safety and health of our university community, starting with students, staff, and faculty. So that was primary. We said, gee, what do we need to deliver? We need to be able to teach. We need

to be able to heal. We need to be able to keep discover. We have 420-plus million dollars of research tackling health disparities, opioid misuse, and all, that needs to continue. This is essential work.

So how do we do that? And we challenged our teams. And so we a few assets. We didn't build them for these reasons, but they've come to be quite advantageous. We invested 2.6 billion dollars in our campus in the last seven or eight years, so we have 6 million new square feet of space that lends itself to transformation, adaptation. You know, we can convert five ballrooms in the student center into adequately spaced classrooms, have 700 at a time in there, get people in and out safely distanced from one another. So we have that the we relied on.

On top of that, we had to leverage our technology and our expertise. We had to have the most modern screening, testing, and tracing. We start with a backup, though, with our academic health center, 900-bed hospital, number one in the state the last several years, new facility. We stood up a 400-bed field hospital. We know how to do that. We immediately could put together capacity to take a surge. It involved our campus and our community. So that expertise is important.

But then what I've loved is how we have tapped into the technology, you know. Everybody uses a smartphone. Daily, you're going to have your attestation app. It's going to pop up and ask you all the symptoms we know that are important. Are you going to have the checked before you an access certain points at campus? And more importantly, you'll be able to sort track your health.

And as we move forward, respecting HIPAA guidelines and so forth, it assembles big data for us. You know, if can track early where you may see a cluster of fevers, can you intervene?

And then the tracing we put together in concert with the state of Kentucky and the Health Department. We're hiring 15 people to be contract tracers. They're going to know our population best and [UNCLEAR] spaces best. But we're also going to use that, you know, not just to focus on [UNCLEAR], but to convert them into wellness connectors and outreach specialists, to better promote health.

And extending the technology, those new classrooms, new spaces, 90 percent of those will be able to record and broadcast, and have online participation. So if you're a student, you wake up one day. You check your attestation. You have a few things... Taste has changed, maybe you don't feel good, we say to you, hey. you don't need to come to class. It's all online. It's all live. Stay where you are. Stay safe. And then that technology that, we have a wonderful team that I know, the least knowledgeable about it to

use all that to target our communications. Stay safe, stay in today. There's this alert. Steps were taken.

Every day we share in our hospital in a daily newsletter the number of COVID positive cases, number of tests, number of ICUs. You've got to give people information today. It's just too much rumor and myth out there.

PAUL FAIN: So it's a robust playbook. There's a lot there. I appreciate you summarizing it. It's not easy to do, but can you talk about you have a backup plan, too?

ELI CAPILOUTO: Yeah. We sort of have bookends. It was fully traditional in-class all the way to fully online. As someone I work with in college sports, our commissioner, I think, said at the Southwestern Conference yesterday, I'm optimistic, but I'm prepared for my optimism to accept reality. So, you know, that's the way to have to look at these things.

And the way to do this is to prepare. So we prepared along that continuum. The virus has a mind of its own. We have to respect it. We have to take everything we know about it to prevent spread. And we also have to know that if we're not successful, what would we do?

PAUL FAIN: You know, I know even with a clear North Star as you articulated it of protecting your students and employees, there are no easy choices here, and likely adjustments along the way, how do you do that in real time? I mean, when you had a process that was so involved as you track daily cases from the med center statewide, nationwide, how do you adjust?

ELI CAPILOUTO: This process we had that had 500 people plus involved, plus work-streams in all its centers around an emergency operations center. So you have to have expertise at that table. You have to have real time information upon which to make decisions. You have to have individuals who are, I think, experienced in working with one another. You almost develop an intuition of what needs to be shared, when, who needs what information to help one make a decision. So that is the practice we have had. And, you know, it started years ago. Certainly, when we deal with adverse events like weather, but it has really met its test this time.

PAUL FAIN: You talk... I know this isn't easy, but what are some of the indicators you're watching most closely? What are some of the things that could trigger a change in the plan?

ELI CAPILOUTO: Well, I think there are certainly ones... When we think about our campus, they're community indicators. We watch the number of positive cases, the number of hospitalizations. You need to know your bed capacity. I think--don't hold me to this, Paul--eight of every ten people who have died from COVID are over the age of 65. And we all know now the comorbidities that put you at greater risk. So you have to have specific information, not just cases, ages of those who are infected. How quickly do you trace, do you isolate, do you quarantine? Are you being infected? Are you having hot spots? How do you get your hands around those immediately?

You've got have, what I would say, sort of global, our commonwealth, our state, and then our local community. Recognizing too, you know, we're trying to get students on campus early, keep them there, no fall breaks, go home before Thanksgiving and stay, cut down on that travel. We know that these viruses hitchhike. They find people. They do where they go, and they spread. So we're doing everything to mitigate that track.

PAUL FAIN: I know no college leader has it easy right now in communicating all this to various constituencies they serve, but I would think a flagship public, particularly one that is so important to its state like the University of Kentucky, has even more constituencies watching closely than usual. How do you do it? You know, you've had a New York Times reporter in your planning process. You all have been-- I've been seeing the press releases--as transparent as anyone. But how do you gear your message to make sure it gets to everybody from the general public, to policy makers, to potential students?

ELI CAPILOUTO: Well, I like us to be high touch and high tech.

The high touch I really liked was when we took it upon ourselves to call over 30,000 students in the middle of this epidemic. We had to make this quick transformation to online. How we followed up with what we learned, the volunteers we had come together from sort of every component of our campus who wanted to be a part of that, wanted to hear what our students were saying, how we could help.

I think from what we learned during that period, too, back to serving those who matter most to us, we can better use technology. Our instructional designers, who are providing our faculty a bigger tool kit to better teach remotely, and so that we can have a hybrid class to cut down on some of the in face, but allow that experience as well. In health care, our vice president of our health systems said, well , you know, we had an 18-month plan to roll out telehealth. I think we did it in about three weeks. So, you

know, we've used that technology and that touch.

And then, we have a good media group, topnotch professionals. We respond quickly. We monitor social media and inquiries that people make. We try to communicate rapidly. Those who lead these efforts say to me now, more is more. You know, sometimes less is more, but in this, more is more. And I think we've tried to follow that.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Well, you know, as a last thought here, any advice or thoughts you'd want to share with your peers out there, both as a university president and as public health policy expert?

ELI CAPILOUTO: I think what's been most helpful to me is the team approach--to have that expertise at the table, you know, to have a health group. And we're fortunate at the University of Kentucky. We're one of eight universities who has a contiguous campus with what I'd say the complete array of distance, so that you can physician, infectious disease expert, epidemiologist. You have people who are experts in technology and communication. Many of these things now have legal implications. To have that expertise immediately available. And most of all for us, to have people who care so much about who they serve. We're in all 120 counties in Kentucky, that's through our extension offices. We're birthed as a land-grant institution. It's in our culture that we're supposed to care about people. We're supposed to come together for their benefit. That started, you know, over 150 years ago. So that's an asset that's important to us.

But I have a feeling, even younger institutions, we assemble in higher education people who care, and care most about the future. So I think, develop a process, get good people involved in that process, trust that process. And I find when we have that working well, by the time those decisions get to my desk, I have good information. You can't please everybody, but you feel like you're making the best decision with the best information available.

PAUL FAIN: Doctor Capilouto, thanks so much for sharing your time and expertise. We really appreciate it.

ELI CAPILOUTO: Well, thank you for these programs. I've listened to some of them. They've been helpful to me, and I bet I speak for many of us in higher education.

PAUL FAIN: Well, thanks for saying that, and good luck to you in these extraordinary times. Keep in touch.

ELI CAPILOUTO: Thank you, sir.

[MUSIC]

PAUL FAIN: If you're looking to go even more in depth with IHE's news coverage, check out our special reports. These deep-dives feature rich data and reporting, as well as thoughtful, substantive analysis you can trust. Visit insidehighered.com/special-reports. To view the topics we've covered and to purchase the report that best supports your area of work or study.

Erin Hennessey, good to see you.

ERIN HENNESSY: Thanks, Paul, for the opportunity.

PAUL FAIN: So you and your colleague Teresa Valerio Parrot wrote an op-ed for Inside Higher Ed on communicating about fall plans. Can you talk a little bit about what you said and what you hope to accomplish with that?

ERIN HENNESSY: The piece really came out of the conversations we're having with colleagues on campus and leadership teams. And it was driven by the unanswered question that we think everybody has in the back of their mind, but very few people two weeks ago were willing to articulate, which was, what happens of the best-laid plans for fall become absolutely irrelevant because of a sudden spike in disease and a sudden concern that a campus can't what might be coming its way in just a couple of weeks? It really felt like we got that piece out right in time, because we saw some early pivots right after it dropped. I'm not saying we're prescient but I do think it speaks to how prevalent the concern is about whether or not we're actually going to be able to execute as a industry on those plans that we have spent so much time and energy both pulling together and touting to all of our constituencies.

PAUL FAIN: As you hint, two weeks is a long time these days. We're speaking on July 10th. In this

moment, what sort of range of planning, adjustment, coping with indicators, are you seeing among the colleges you work with? Now, I spoke with Dr. Capilouto, president of the University of Kentucky in this episode, and they have a lot of resources to tap, including a big medical center to pay attention to what's changing on an hourly basis. But I gather that's probably not the case for most places.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, and I think that's such an important point that you make. This pandemic has revealed a lot of divisions within our industry between have and have-not, between well resourced and less well resourced. Those institutions that have access to a medical center, or a public health function, to epidemiologists on their very own campus who can help with modeling and dashboards and data interpretation, and prediction, are in, I think, a much more comfortable position than some of the smaller liberal arts colleges, who so very, very much need a return to, I'm not going to say normal, but the new normal to make sure that their enterprise can continue.

What we're hearing is a lot of folks are still digging into the details of how they're doing to make these plans work. We've said, we intend to start early. We intend to bring back some proportion of our students. We intend to cancel fall break. We intend to wrap the semester up by Thanksgiving and send everybody home.

What they're really digging into now is what is that going to look like as we actually go ahead and live it. How many isolation beds to we need? Who's going to do laundry for students who are in isolation? Who's delivering meals? How are we looking at classroom spaces? We've said that this lecture hall of 60 will only accommodate 30, but what do the paths in and out of that room need to look like? Do you have--and I know this is everybody's favorite metaphor about this at the moment--so we have enough Plexiglas, a la Purdue and Governor Daniels, to make sure that our faculty are safe in the classroom? And is that an effective way to teach students?

So I think we're going from aspiration to execution. And for some institutions, that is going well and for some institutions, they are feeling extremely overwhelmed, and some of them paralyzed by the number of details they need to be thinking about and how to effectively and efficiently communicate that to students and parents.

PAUL FAIN: We, at Inside Higher Ed, have noticed what seems to be a dearth of guidance and information, a hunger for information, let's put it that way, from our readers. You know, we'll put out a piece about the CDC's latest guidance, and it gets a lot of clicks.

When I think about the University of Kentucky's playbook-- I like the term playbook, because it to me suggests you don't know exactly what you're going to get. You're going to set off a series of responses, not just a kind of static plan. You know, 500 people involved in that that, again... What sort of daily war room are you hearing is happening on the smaller, less resourced campus, and what sort of information do they seem to be lacking in some cases?

ERIN HENNESSY: That's a great question. I'm not sure I have all of the answers. What I can tell you we're hearing is a lot of conversation about how many faculty are willing to come back, which then drives how many courses need to be offered online, which then drives potentially how many students feel that it is a good use their family resources to return to campus, live in a de-densified residence hall, take all of you meals grab-and-go, and take a large number of your courses probably online.

We are hearing from the smaller, less well resourced institutions that they are seeking any kind of best practice, any kind of data, any kind of modeling that they can get their hands on. I think the pieces that Johns Hopkins University has put out have been really helpful/potentially terrifying to a lot of our colleagues across the country, because there is some very stark information in those charts and graphs and spreadsheets. What we're seeing institutions start to talk about now is how do we think about potentially having to pull the trigger on a return to remote education for the fall semester, and that is something that's really, really hard, and really, really challenging for institutions.

PAUL FAIN: To the question of when you pull that trigger, there's obviously so much going on. You've got things from Hopkins, you've got your cases and your deaths in your community and your state, all the indicators of the disease itself that folks are watching. You've also got the faculty return issue, and all the complexities there. You know, today we're talking about the Trump administration's use of online education criticism as a real stick to force colleges and K-12 schools to return in person. You've got football... Lots of things happening right now... What do you see as some of the key triggers to change colleges, to really make them make that very tough call to go remote?

ERIN HENNESSY: What we're really encouraging institutions that we work closely with to think about is a broad-based set of triggers. We are not recommending that you have a threshold number of cases or a threshold number of quarantines or anything like that. It needs to be more universal approach.

Some of the things that we're encouraging folks to look at include faculty and staff absence rates from

work because of illness. We're looking at percentage of courses online. We're looking at community spread in the surrounding community, hospital and health care capacity. In case faculty, staff, or students get sick, does the local health care system have the capacity, or do we the potential to swamp that system when we return to what we hope is a relatively robust on-campus presence?

But we're also thinking about what you're hearing from students, what you're hearing from parents, what financially the institution's able to do. And I know a conversation this morning that have included no refund language in their residence hall contracts and dining room award contracts. That's going to be really interesting to watch unfold. And I'm not sure that we won't see some backtracking there.

But we're really encouraging folks to look at a broad suite of indicators. It's not the minute we have the 50th case of coronavirus on campus, we're pulling the plug. It's a more holistic set of indicators that have to be tailored based on the institution, because, obviously, it needs to be relevant to their mission, vision, values, and approach to operating the campus.

PAUL FAIN: I regularly violate a journalistic rule in this podcast by asking folks to do a little speculation. It feels like we all need to be doing more of that than in normal times. And to the question of timing, July 10th, many institutions planning to welcome back students in a little more than a month, so we're really out of time here. So when do you see, if there are going to be a bunch of pivots, how soon are we talking?

ERIN HENNESSY: That's a really great question. I thought that once we say USC pivot last week, earlier this week, time is a flat circle, once USC pivoted, I thought we'd see a lot more institutions follow. I do think it's interesting that California State University System floated yesterday that it's, or earlier this week, that it's highly likely that they will go online for the full academic year. So I think you're going to start to see a couple of circles next week, and then, honestly, I'm guessing that we'll see more announcements before the end of the month.

I would love to be able to tell you that I'm confident that some number of institutions will make the hard decision and pull the plug, but I also think that there's such pressure from so many constituencies to get us back to quote-unquote "normal." I think institutions are underselling in some cases how unnormal living on campus is going to be this fall. And I am deeply concerned about how much trust we're putting in our students, whom I adore, to live up to the expectations we're setting for social behavior, social norms, masking, hand washing, six feet, no social gatherings. We've seen early indications that at some institutions, it's just not happening. And I would look at our track record as an industry in terms of

persuading our students not to engage in unsafe behavior around alcohol and sexual activity, to say that I'm not sure we're going to crack the code on social distancing and masking, and responsible behavior this time around.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, all good points. I think a lot about, you cannot understate how much this is a rock and a hard place, how important and how much motivation from so many different directions there is for colleges to reopen, and some sincerely good intentions there. But, you know, I was thinking about the University of Kentucky's really interesting description yesterday of the apps that students would have on their phones to do kind of a daily attestation of possible symptoms, and then, you know, encourage them to stay in their rooms. Putting aside whether or not that can really work, it again is a bit of a have and have-not situation, right? I mean, Cornell, talking about monitoring student misbehavior, Cornell can do that better than most of the colleges you're talking to.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, absolutely. Again, so much of what happens in higher ed comes down to resources. And that is exacerbated in a situation like this. I agree. People are operating with the best of possible intentions, but they're also operating under a significant number of pressures from a significant number of people that really hold a lot a weight with a president, a chancellor, a board of trustees. I am concerned mostly about the institutions that feel enormous financial pressure to return to some sort of normal operation, and at the same time don't have the resources that are going to help their faculty, their staff, their students, and those parents feel really comfortable with what they've got laid out for the fall semester. And I'm not sure how to advise institutions or students or families about how to think through that risk.

I think we've seen as a society, everybody has their own level of comfort with risk. I am comfortable going to the grocery store without gloves because I know I'm going to come home and wash my hands afterwards and I'm diligent about not touching my face, and so I'm comfortable there. And some people will feel very differently about that. And I think it's going to interesting to see how people's perception of risk and comfort with risk changes when they actually get to campus and see what all of this looks like in its lived reality.

PAUL FAIN: And, again, time being a big factor here... In many places, it looks like that spikes aren't slowing down, so you'll have a different reality even a week from now. So let's turn briefly to comms here.

The University of Kentucky made the point yesterday that more is more here, that because of the

misinformation, the confusion out there, that they really feel like they need to communicate as much as they can as often as they can.

What's most important to you in terms of which constituencies college leaders should be reaching and what sort of information they need to be providing?

ERIN HENNESSY: There's an old Army, I think it's an Army slogan, that says you need to tell people, you need to tell them you told them, and then you need to tell them again. And that's very much our operating principle, and we're working with institutions who have so much complex information about plans for the fall and what move-in's going to look like, and what you need to do to get tested or not tested. We are absolutely pushing on repetitive, consistent persistent communication. And that, I think, is the coin of the realm at this point.

But we also need to be sensitive to the fact that, number one, our traditional age students abhor email and don't see it as a useful tool anymore. We have been emailing them so often to try and stay engaged with them, to make sure we're supporting them appropriately during an online spring semester that they are beginning to tune us out, and that is to their own detriment and to ours as well.

We have been thinking a lot about how to utilize info graphics, how to make things visual. If I had a dollar for every time a got on a conference call with an institution and then said, you know what we need is a video, I would have a lot of dollars right now.

Again, what I think we need to do is think about a broad suite of channels to communicate with our students, because if we go too hard on one, they're going to start tuning that out. It's an important conversation to have, particularly as we shift from communicating about getting them back to campus to communicating about social norms and physical distancing, and things like that once they're one campus. We can't afford to have them tune out these messages, so we really need to be creative here.

Again, that kind of goes back to the have versus have-not, the big, you know, flagship research institution has people on faculty who can advise on these kinds of things and the smaller, private, liberal arts college doesn't necessarily have those resources to put on a full PSA campaign about social norms. So it again becomes that same challenge of who can afford to do it really, really well and how can we trickle that down to other institutions that don't have access to those kinds of resources.

PAUL FAIN: You know, beyond students and their families, what are some of the more creative, better ways that you're seeing colleges communicate to faculty and staff, or the general public, policymakers, I mean, they've got a lot that they need to be conveying these days.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, and I'm sorry, that raises a point in response to your last question that I skipped over. One of the most important audiences that we're pushing institutions to think about right now is parents. Most of the time we say these traditional age students are on the cusp of adulthood and so we're going to communicate directly with them, and what they share with parents is their decision. But in these times of heightened anxiety and heightened risk, we're really pushing parents to pull parents in, wrap them within your audiences for communication so that they can feel empowered to help their student make some really hard decisions about what their plans for fall look like.

What we're seeing institutions do in terms of communicating with faculty and staff is again that consistent, persistent drumbeat of here's what we're planning, here's what we've thought through, establishing two-way communication so that faculty and staff feel comfortable coming back and saying ,thanks for that information, but what about this thing over here.

And we're seeing a lot of surveys. Some of them are really well designed. Some of them are much more informal. Some of them are being done by faculty and staff groups that aren't feeling comfortable about returning or don't feel like plans have sufficient levels of detail for them to be able to assess the risk for themselves and their families. But we're definitely hearing a lot about video and we're definitely hearing a lot about surveys in this run-up to the fall semester.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Erin, we've run out of time here.

ERIN HENNESSY: How is that possible?

PAUL FAIN: I know. Time is strange and fickle these days. But I hope that you will time and motivation to join me again, potentially on a less difficult topic, but I kind of doubt that in the coming weeks and months.

ERIN HENNESSY: Please call me when you find the less difficult topics, please...

PAUL FAIN: Maybe next time we speak, we can share with the audience our dispute over whether or not you actually did yell at when you were working for the American Council on Education and I was at the Chronicle. But we'll save that for next time.

ERIN HENNESSY: Let me just say, since you've begun to besmirch my reputation, that I have enormous respect for you in particular and all journalists in general and would never, ever raise my voice at someone in the fourth estate.

PAUL FAIN: Well, with that, Erin, thanks for your time. Take care.

ERIN HENNESSY: Thanks, Paul.

[MUSIC]

PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode of The Key. Thanks for listening. I'll be back next week speaking with Lori Williams from NC-SARA and Marni Baker Stein from Western Governors University. We'll talk about the outlook for online education this fall and how to best ensure both academic quality and access for online programs. Catch you then.