

## Let's Talk About Next Semester.

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Picture this: the crisp late-summer air blows color changing leaves off the trees outside the Predolin Humanities Center. The sculpture outside the Sonderegger Science Center spins rapidly as a result of that late-summer air I just mentioned. Weeds and wildflowers protrude out of cracks in the sidewalks that lead from Wingra to Mazzuchelli Hall, and the waters of Lake Wingra crash steadily against the boardwalk. And we – the students of Edgewood College – know all of this is happening... because we've returned to on-campus instruction after an abrupt transition to remote learning.

Sounds nice, doesn't it? There's no denying that. Students and faculty alike are hoping for an expedited return to the learning space we all share with one another. But phasing back into on-campus instruction *too soon* comes not without extraordinary risk.

Let's start at higher education's central focus – finances.

It's no secret that universities are under intense financial pressure to reopen campus facilities in the fall as the sudden closures of dormitories and dining halls and cancellations of sporting events have caused staggering losses worldwide. California reports that its university system has suffered a loss of [\\$558 million](#) dollars just in the month of March. In our own backyard, the [University of Wisconsin system](#) projects a minimum \$170-million-dollar loss for the spring semester alone, with UW-Madison taking the hardest hit. Chancellor Rebecca Blank has announced that the unfortunate turn of events this spring has cost the University of Wisconsin – Madison to suffer an [estimated \\$100-million-dollar loss](#); and that's assuming that life will largely return to normal by June.

The financial shockwave caused by the novel coronavirus isn't just forcing financial fallout on big-state institutions – some small, private colleges similar to ours have been forced to close their doors permanently; 174-year-old [MacMurray College](#) near Springfield, Illinois announced that the economic disruption brought on by the pandemic influenced, but did not define their decision to remain closed. Other small schools, like [Wells College](#) in New York, have warned its admitted students that without a full campus return in the fall, their school cannot afford to reopen.

Both powerfully detrimental and significantly impactful, these massive losses in revenue are proving to be somewhat inevitable. According to [surveys](#) conducted by the Art & Science group, 40% of admitted students haven't made fall tuition deposits. Of those that have, 12% have already changed their minds, retracting their full-time status for the upcoming semester. But the most shocking of them all? One in six high school seniors who expected to attend a four-year college full time before coronavirus are now rethinking their plans, opting for a gap year. We've learned that this virus doesn't discriminate who it affects, and that holds true when we look at the overwhelming evidence of collegiate institutions suffering financial pitfalls in its wake. But to ignore other consequences of campus return on the grounds that

rebuilding finances is of utmost importance is both irresponsible and inconsiderate to those that pay to attend these institutions in the first place. Not to mention the additional financial losses that come with preparing to reopen a campus, only to potentially shut it down a few weeks later.

I, too, fantasize about the epic return of students to their corresponding campuses. I see high energy levels and skyrocketed motivation, increased socialization and even get excited thinking about hearing professors assign projects up-close and in-person. But, returning to campus prematurely is NOT synonymous with returning to the campus life as we come to know it.

Several universities – [Edgewood, included](#) – have disclosed that in the anticipation of a fall reopening, the university will heed recommendations of the Center of Disease Control and strictly enforce social distancing measures.

According to the CDC, [proper social distancing](#) calls for six feet between all persons, limitation of close contact with people outside one's immediate household, and avoidance of group gatherings. By definition, a return to campus doesn't abide by social distancing guidelines loosely, if at all. Collaborative learning and hands-on work in laboratories are unachievable by these standards. Checking out books or using the library's computers are, in theory, a potentially fatal health hazard. Edgewood sports teams will play with empty stadiums, on the off chance they get to compete. This is a claim put forth by many universities, but K-12 learning centers have released similar statements, too. As an aspiring kindergarten teacher, I have one thing to candidly say: if you think you can enforce six feet of distance between six-year-olds or successfully keep them off playground equipment, you aren't just cruel and unusual, but delusional, too.

Let's not forget about dormitory life, a breeding ground for germs *long* before the onset of a national pandemic. On top of the narrow hallways (come on, I know you've been in Weber Hall before,) and communal hygiene centers, a full return to campus asks incoming underclassmen – who have spent the entirety of the quarantine in their own environments, interacting with their own network – to share close quarters with another person. Even when committing to abiding by social distancing guidelines, the potential risks for students and faculty are exacerbated just by circulating the same spaces, so long as a vaccine isn't readily available.

The harsh reality of this matter is that without concrete testing or widespread implementation of an effective vaccine, reopening campus both forces the Edgewood community to interact with a potentially dangerous environment, while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of another abrupt transition to online learning in the midst of a fall community outbreak. While the media has pushed the narrative of expedited vaccines, health officials have warned the public that it's not feasible to rely on a COVID-19 remedy taking less than 12 to 18 months to complete. [Anthony Fauci](#), the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said that "a vaccine that you make and start testing in a year isn't a vaccine that's deployable," adding that a vaccine's earliest deployment will take "a year to a year and a half, no matter how fast you go."

The [CDC](#) cites the creation process of a vaccine to be a three-phase process; the first phase, including a small group of people to receive a small dose, the second, expanding the study, dosing those with characteristics of a high-risk patient, and the third, including thousands of participants. These steps can only take place after several trials of animal testing have been completed. This 12-18 month timeline is simply a model of the best case scenario; [Sir Patrick Vallance](#), the Chief Scientific Adviser in the United Kingdom, calls all vaccines in development “long shots,” warning that coronavirus will be no different. There’s no doubt that scientists are working tirelessly to discover a remedy – but that remedy won’t be readily available come the fall, because let’s not forget the billions of dollars and additional time it takes to deliver to 7.8 billion people.

If campuses reopen in the fall, students and faculty have one of two choices laid out for them: either mask up and enter a potential COVID-19 warzone at your own risk, or sit out a semester, forfeiting your position. We all are in our own, unique circumstances; but I speak on behalf of all other Edgewood College seniors, with graduation on our minds, forced to come to terms with the fact that we may contract a lethal upper respiratory disease throughout the final semester of our undergraduate pursuit. With one semester and a lethal virus standing in the way of my degree, I have no choice but to put on my war paint – a flimsy cloth mask – in hopes it is I that doesn’t face the severest of consequences.

There is only one way to both alleviate students from making these kinds of aforementioned decisions and prioritize the health and safety of students and staff, and that is to **commit to a fully online fall semester**.

Remote learning isn’t anyone’s favorite – I think that goes without saying. I can’t say I enjoyed the spring semester experience; but what I can say is that it is safe, and with ample planning and preparation, can still be enriching.

By committing to the decision to remain online for the fall of 2020 sooner rather than later, we allocate a sufficient amount of time for both students to adjust to new circumstances, and for professors to design enriching online learning modules. When we ask students to transition abruptly from in-person instruction to emergency remote learning, we interfere with their coping abilities, force them to constantly relocate, and ultimately, rob them of the comfort of structure and routine. When we ask the same of our professors, we force them to haphazardly translate a semester’s worth of coursework into an online-friendly format. To make a decision with such a high probability of retraction is a tremendous disservice to both students and faculty; resulting in disappointed, dissociated students with low morale, interacting with low-quality, sloppily curated online learning material. Bouncing back-and-forth between in-person instruction and remote learning is ineffective and unfair to those creating online modules, and those that must use them.

With so much uncertainty in the air, only one thing remains clear – that a fully-online fall semester is both the least exciting, yet safest option we have. To those that sit in the hot seat, responsible for ultimately determining how and when our college will move forward, I urge you to think critically about the detriment that reopening campus for the sake of ‘good news’ has. I urge you to allow financial concerns to take a backseat, and consider the lives of each of the students, faculty and staff that have made a home out of

Edgewood College. I urge you to use your own judgment to make a decision that guides our small, yet powerful community.

Though the muddy trail that leads to the boardwalk entrance may remain untraveled, and the equipment furnishing Sonderegger Science Center may collect dust, it's important to remember what *really* matters: our community. The only way to maximize the chance of each and every Edgewood Eagle returning to utilize our facilities in the future is to err on the side of utmost caution.

And right now, that looks like staying home.