

Local newspaper column
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Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University President

I hope you and your loved ones are well during these truly unprecedented times. It's as simple as that. At Northwest Missouri State University, we certainly did not expect coronavirus to be dominating our conversations this March – but I will tell you, it did not catch us flat-footed, either.

COVID-19 is affecting every sector of our country and causing a ripple effect across the globe with the number of confirmed cases and resulting deaths increasing daily. While we are fortunate no cases are confirmed with impacts to our region or Northwest at this time, a team of Northwest staff members has been working diligently since January – and daily in recent weeks – to coordinate the University's response to the outbreak.

Following the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), we quickly instructed our Northwest students who were studying abroad this spring on the European continent to return to the United States. Our decisions also included the cancelation of a School of Education study abroad experience to Italy this month and other study abroad experiences planned in May for business students going to Ireland and music students traveling to Europe.

During Northwest's spring break last week, with the number of confirmed coronavirus cases escalating rapidly, we maintained our focus on protecting the health and safety of the Northwest campus, as well as the communities we serve. We postponed the resumption of all in-person classes at our Maryville and Kansas City locations until Monday. Beginning Monday, all of our classes are moving to an online-only format. This week, our faculty and staff have been hard at work, communicating with students and transitioning coursework to online formats.

Of importance, the campus remains open with limited operations at this time. All activities that are not critical to Northwest's mission or operations are canceled. We are taking measures to flatten the curve and initiate social distancing. Supervisors are approving our employees to work within one of three modes – status quo, a blend of office and remote work, or fully remote – or we are instructing employees to use accrued leave time to stay home and care for loved ones.

We opened residence halls for students to return to campus and retrieve textbook, laptops and other essential items they will need while they are away from campus during the coming weeks. We are requesting our students stay on campus only for employment reasons or because they have no other viable options.

We are asking everyone to continue taking appropriate steps to prevent spread of illness by washing their hands often with soap and water, using hand sanitizer, covering a cough or sneeze, and avoiding close contact with people who are sick. Northwest also is providing a continuous flow of information and resources about its response on a webpage dedicated to COVID-19 at www.nwmissouri.edu/alert/coronavirus.htm.

Our guiding principles during this crisis? No surprises here. First is student success. We remain focused on doing the right things for our students. Second, we are focused on our people, protecting them and making sure they understand we're going to try to get through this the best we possibly can.

Third is planning for the other side of this outbreak. It is imperative that Northwest – and our regional partners – thinks about what may be coming in June, August, January and a year from now. I firmly believe that, by being proactive and making sound decisions now, we can come out stronger as an institution and stronger than our peers.

While COVID-19 is unprecedented, at some point, it will pass. And, at some point, we will return to teaching in Colden Hall. We will host student activities in the Carl and Cheryl Hughes Fieldhouse. Our students will line up again for Starbucks or Chick-fil-A. Our loud cheers will fill Bearcat Arena again. None of us can predict right now what that date is, but it is going to happen and we are working toward that date. For now, our operations and decisions remain fluid and are subject to change rapidly.

This is truly a unique situation that, as we have seen, is evolving in unpredictable ways. As Bearcats we will continue to adapt and demonstrate what it means to be a Bearcat by learning, connecting, caring, practicing civility and showing pride in Northwest.

Dr. John Jasinski is the 10th president of Northwest Missouri State University. For news and events at Northwest, visit www.nwmissouri.edu.