



Chancellor Devinder Malhotra's remarks to the Board of Trustees March 18, 2020

Chair Cowles, Vice Chair Moe, and members of the board

My remarks today are a bit unusual. I have shared with each of you my board update and it will also be posted to the board website, as well, for you to review the important work and conversations that are taking place.

To the Board and to the wider Minnesota State community, thank you for all that you are doing in providing leadership and guidance during this unprecedented time.

My message to the Minnesota State community centers on the response and decisions made regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just 20 days ago, I made a difficult decision to suspend international travel for all students, faculty, and staff. As I have shared, in hindsight, that was the easiest decision.

The rapid pace by which this crisis has unfolded and new information presents itself has never been witnessed before. Never has higher education – not just a single institution or a system – but each and every institution of higher education across the nation and even the world – have had to face this type of challenge that effects not only a segment of what we do but every aspect of how we deliver education and support our students.

I have often asked the question – “how many times does one get to rethink one’s own profession”. This is not exactly what I had in mind but it will have lasting implications not just for the semester, or summer, but extending long into the future.

If we pause and reflect on the last 20 days:

- The CDC has increased the number of international countries to a Level 3 threat now including most of Europe and the United Kingdom and Ireland with the United State categorized as a Level 2.
- The guidance for large gatherings went from 200 to 50 to now a cautionary suggestion for the next, now 14 days of gatherings no more than 10.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education stopped tracking the number of higher education institutions who either suspended classes, extended spring break, or moved entirely online after the number reached well over a hundred.

- Our way of life has changed, social settings are temporarily closed, some cities are issuing in home stays as a way to flatten the curve and reduce the number of people convening and possibly transmitting the virus more.
- The Governor has signed 7 Executive Orders with the last one announced last night – and perhaps the most impactful to the core business of what we do – temporarily closing K-12 schools in order to plan for a safe educational environment.

For Minnesota State, the decisions made have been equally as swift and bold:

- On February 28 – I suspended all international travel for students, faculty, and staff.
- Following that decision, I charged Interim Vice Chancellor Maki to serve as the system point of contact to lead our COVID-19 response and we established the operational infrastructure, including single points of contacts at each of our colleges and universities.
- On March 11, I requested that all colleges and universities begin to plan in earnest their academic continuity plans for spring semester.
- On March 12, I made the difficult decision to suspend classes by one week, thus extending spring break, to provide our faculty and administrators time to explore moving all spring semester classes to alternative modes of delivery.
- In addition, I suspended all out-of-state business travel for students, faculty, and staff.
- And placed a limit on large events to total no more than 100 attendees, which as of today is now a moot point given the current guidance. That was just 5 days ago.
- On March 15, I extended spring break by an additional week, recognizing the enormity of the situation in front of us and wanting to ensure that we are doing all we could to keep our students safe.
- At that same time, I highly encouraged those to follow the guidance given to us and to explore telework options, practice social distancing, and to use alternative meeting methods whenever possible.
- And just yesterday, I updated that previous guidance to take immediate action to implement telework for all employees where feasible while still maintaining and making available the services needed by students, faculty, and staff.

None of these have been easy decisions and not one decision was made lightly without thinking about the impact on our students, faculty, and staff, and our campus leaders.

I like many of you have been glued to the news. One of the most insightful pieces I have heard was from Dr. Michael Ryan, the World Health Organization Executive Director Health Emergency Programme. When he was asked lessons learned from dealing with past outbreaks. I will paraphrase. Here is what he said:

Be fast, have no regrets, you must be the first mover...If you need to be right before you move, you will never win. Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management – speed trumps perfection. The problem now is that everyone is scared to make a move – paralyzed by the fear of failure.

A school superintendent said, “it will be impossible to know if we overacted or did too much, but it will be quite apparent if we under reacted or did too little.”

I want to be clear that we will gladly take the criticism of being over reactive.

Throughout all of this, we have kept two very important priorities front and center in our decision-making:

- To safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of our faculty, staff, and students, and
- To enable students to complete the spring semester and progress toward their educational goals

I am confident that you will agree that after listening to this morning’s presentation led by the Interim Vice Chancellor Maki, Associate Vice Chancellor Yolitz, and Senior Vice Chancellor Anderson as well as the remarkable leadership on each of our campuses by our presidents, their administrative team, faculty, staff, and students that I hope you feel confident that we all understand what we need to do during this crisis.

The information we are presented with literally changes on the hour and the truth is no one know with certainty on what lies ahead but if we understand what our decision-making priorities are we can act in a cohesive manner.

Two organizing principles have guided our work:

- We will act as a system. The gravity of this situation, the torrent of information, and the growing health crisis requires we act with a unified voice and action plan with flexibility to the campuses to deal with their local compulsions.
- We need to stay ahead of the curves based on the rapid changing information and guidance that is available to us from CDC, WHO, and MN Department of Health

It is also clear to me that we cannot underestimate our ability to over communicate. I want to reassure the board that we are communicating and we are consulting – just in a very different manner and sequence. This is how we learn about what is going on at our campuses and what we can do to provide them with additional assistance, clarify guidance, and learn from one another.

This week, in my individual conversations with each and every one of our presidents and statewide bargaining units and student association leaders, after those conversations, I am confident, more than ever, of the creativity, passion, commitment, and energy which will

enable us to overcome these challenges and provide the needed resiliency to successfully navigate our campuses through these difficult times.

COVID-19 will test the mettle of our leadership. On one side, we have to take swift, decisive action with increased levels of accountability given the fast, changing pace of information.

But it is equally as important to remember that during this crisis that we lead by our hearts. This is what binds us together as a community of learners and educators. This is what has brought our campuses and communities together. Faculty and staff across our 54 campuses have ramped up their efforts - coming together - focused on ensuring that our students can meet their educational goals and continue to provide the services that they need.

My deepest thanks and gratitude to the 15,000+ employees at our 37 colleges and universities and the system office employees for the amazing work that is being done. Thank you to our presidents and to the system level cabinet and in particular to Interim Vice Chancellor Maki for your steady leadership during this unknown time.

This work also has other challenges that cannot be ignored. The stress of the situation not only on ourselves as leaders but on our students is an ever increasing concern. The mental health of our community will remain a focus point as we help our students, faculty, and staff wrestle with their new normal.

The change in our delivery modes requires students to have to grapple with the ever increasing divide of access to technology. As we have talked about together, meeting the basic needs of our students is a struggle. This is enhanced ten-fold when you consider the security of our campus operations and services for many of our students and the impact on reducing or limiting those services during this crisis. Our students need more than ever before the community connections that each of our campuses have created and fostered to help them through this time.

We must continue to be on guard of behaviors that target our fellow Minnesotans based on their ethnicity and the fears surrounding the coronavirus. This is unacceptable. Disparate treatment or uncivil behavior will not be tolerated.

None of us know what tomorrow, or to that end, what the semester or next academic year will bring. I have to be honest - I am scared, as I believe we all should be.

We are really dealing with a set of unknowns: the potential financial implications for our campuses both in the short and the long-term; and the possible effects this crisis will have on retention and enrollment.

However, I know that with the leadership on our board, the teamwork in our system office, the campus leadership of our presidents, the community of our faculty and staff, and our amazing students - my fears are alleviated knowing what we can and will do together.

We also have unwavering partners at the state and federal level. We have been in constant communication with leaders from the Minnesota Legislature, members in the Walz and Flanagan administration, in addition with the congressional delegation. Their partnership and leadership is and will continue to be vitally important to Minnesota State.

Chair Cowles, today more than ever I want anyone who is listening to know I am honored and humbled to serve as Chancellor of Minnesota State. I am honored and humbled to work alongside my system office colleagues, our presidents, but most importantly bargaining units, student associations, our faculty and staff across all our colleges and universities.

We are a resilient bunch, and we will get through this together, and we will come out stronger.

Thank you Chair Cowles.