

DEEP SPRINGS
DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA
Founded 1917

David Neidorf, *President*

May 7, 2020

Dear Parents of the Deep Springs entering class of 2020:

Welcome to Deep Springs: All of us at the college are very pleased that our applications committee has offered your student a place in the Deep Springs entering class of 2020. Students entering the college will share in one of the most coveted opportunities in American higher education. Admission is a tribute to their ability and record, sure, but also, and more importantly, to their potential. We very much look forward to being joined by the new class later this year. All of us are dedicated to the educational work this college does, and we know that we couldn't do it without your help and acceptance. Thank you.

Scheduling Uncertainty and Coronavirus: I am sorry you must first hear from me in a letter about how our college plans to weather the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless to say, the college is determined to minimize any risks to its students and staff during this period. The short explanation is that we are planning and preparing to admit our entering class as scheduled, on July 3. I am sorry to add that our plans are, well, plans – serious plans, to be sure, but not yet ironclad commitments. We will update you as soon as possible, and no later than a month in advance, on June 3.

All colleges today face this uncertainty, but the fact that Deep Springs doesn't depend on income from its students releases us from trying to sugar-coat that fact. All of us, with good reason, want to make concrete plans. But the uncertainty of the epidemiological moment requires that our plans remain fluid.

What We Are Doing Now: Deep Springs has an academic break (vacation) during March; travel restrictions were issued while most of our students were away. After broad community consultation, we asked traveling students to remain with their families and not to return, (with the exception of two students from overseas who could not easily return home and did not have other places to stay). As a result, those students who happened not to leave for break have been in residence for the last two months - less than one-third of our student body. Our March break fell halfway through the academic semester, so we continued our classes online, finishing them just last week. But we have cancelled most of our May-June academic session; we have one field ecology class for students here in the valley, and one online class in political theory.

Plans for May and June: We have three goals for the way we adapt to the pandemic: to prevent, if possible, the transmission of the virus to residents of the college, to ensure that if a resident is infected they do not spread it to others, and to feel confident we aren't cutting corners, but rather doing everything we can to support the health and well-being of students and staff alike. Those of us living at Deep Springs are isolating those who travel outside of our valley, social distancing procedures for proximity and dining, and working to refine our protocols before increasing the local population. We hope to bring our current students back to the valley, under appropriate initial isolation guidelines, in time for the older students to graduate properly at the end of June 2020. Our ongoing effort to implement and fine-tune the best quarantine and social distancing procedures for our educational needs and physical plant is, at the same time, our chance to practice and hone our procedures before welcoming new students in July.

Quarantine and Social Distancing: When they re-open to residential students, all colleges and universities will impose routines for isolating residents who are potential coronavirus carriers. These routines will be a little complicated for us, since our students don't merely live in dormitories and share seating in classrooms; they do much of the labor required by everyday living on a college, ranch, and farm. We can easily adjust our academic programs to provide for some degree (just how much is impossible as yet to quantify) of protection during the first 14 days' residence of a returning or entering student. After that, at a 45-minute drive from the nearest town, our valley is already socially-distanced.

We do have a variety of deliveries for things like fuel, mail, and food. We have minimized the number of staff who bring supplies from the outside world. Those who travel are restricted from areas used for food preparation and serving, and practice social distancing when meeting with others. But because our college is also a home for our staff, over the course of time many will eventually need to travel to town for things like routine doctor's appointments. This means our quarantine procedures won't merely happen just once for two weeks. Until accurate testing is widely available, some such system will remain in place for the duration of the pandemic.

We are already working to fine-tune our procedures so that we know they will work well on an ongoing basis – this means setting up systems, then evaluating and modifying them. Throughout this work, we are following the guidance of our state and county health departments, the CDC, and OSHA workplace protections.

Outside Advice: We wish that scientific studies could provide an objective basis for the practical questions that naturally come up when designing procedures to fit our community. But such studies are not yet available. For example, we know that there are asymptomatic carriers, so we must treat everyone who enters the valley from outside as potentially infected. But as better information comes out, we will know better how big a risk to the community asymptomatic carriers are. We have installed foot pedals to open major doorways without touching the handles, but other less communally-used doors still have handles. We sterilize them routinely, but should we do that twice a day or twice an hour? Here we have begun experimenting with a benign marker visible only under ultraviolet light to get a better sense of how fast contamination could travel locally. Or, to pick another example, if we accept the risk of one staff member making a weekly trip to town, how much difference would it make if three or four of them do so?

At the present time, all such protocols must rely to some degree on a sense of judgment and proportion. And when a sense of judgment is key, it's important to make sure that we are using informed judgment, judgment based on more practical experience than is available here. For this reason, we are consulting with a group of medical professionals, most of them alumni of Deep Springs who have experience with the demands and routines of life here.

When is the Final Decision? I said above that we *hope* to bring back our current students in time for graduation, and then to welcome our entering class on schedule. When, will we know for sure?

We have the next two months to build confidence that our coronavirus protocols will minimize the risk to our students while still allowing for our educational program to proceed in all of its aspects. We will have a midway progress report by June 3 – if all goes well, we may know by then. We will certainly report to you no later than that date. We know it is difficult not to know for sure, and we will make every effort to update you as soon as possible.

How Will We Decide? The final decision to return the full complement of students to the college will rest with the college's board, who will consider recommendations from the students and staff of the college in their deliberations. In March we tentatively identified several criteria to consider:

1. Confidence in our supply lines of necessary food and hygiene equipment
2. Better knowledge of the risk to the college-age population
3. Tested confidence in our local healthcare system
4. A decline in new infection curves
5. Available testing
6. Compliance with state and local health orders.

As explained above, over the ensuing weeks we added an additional criterion:

7. The establishment of quarantine and distancing routines that meet the ethical standards of stability and reliability in the view of staff and students, and that are considered reasonable and responsible by outside medical consultants.

Where do these criteria stand today? The first three have, unless things change for the worse, been met. Our local healthcare system is not overcrowded or overstressed, and they remain able to send patients to larger hospitals for more advanced treatment when needed. Inyo County, where we are located, has an infection rate far below that of California as a whole (24 persons), and has not reported a new case in over a week – so on the local level, the fourth criterion is met. But our returning students will be coming from all over; do we need to wait for national or worldwide infection curves to decline? This is one of the things we are currently discussing.

As for the fifth and sixth criteria, testing is still reserved locally for symptomatic patients, and we don't expect it to become widely available soon. If we treat each new arrival as possibly infected, does this diminish our need for testing? We are discussing the weight we should give to this criterion; conventional wisdom is in flux as more information accumulates. State and local orders are often vague with respect to colleges, and the state has announced a tentative timeline to reopen its own universities this summer. We are talking with the county authorities to ensure we do not undermine their efforts. And as I noted above, we are actively working to satisfy the seventh criterion.

It would be intellectually dishonest and ethically irresponsible, however, to hold our criteria rigid as the situation changes and more information becomes available. Our list of conditions cannot be static; it may be modified or added to over the next few months. I am sorry that this fact contributes to a climate of uncertainty, but I don't see any way to avoid this. The only way to establish clarity and certainty would be to declare the college temporarily closed, and we are doing everything we can to avoid this.

What if we cannot welcome entering students safely on July 3? Then we will shift the date later into the summer. We would hope, instead, to begin on a date later in July or August; failing that, no later than August 28, around the same time other colleges are beginning. No matter when we begin, we will adjust our academic program to dovetail with the necessary orientation to Deep Springs; making such adjustments would be the easiest part of the pandemic. I find it very difficult to imagine that we will not be open by the end of August; I continue to hope that we will open well before then.

We Hope to Meet You Soon: I know this is a lot of information, and I'm grateful for your patience in persisting this far. I do this work because I believe that Deep Springs is an unusually productive and fruitful place for a young person to spend their first two undergraduate years. If you are left with additional questions about Deep Springs, please feel free to contact me.

All of us here look forward to meeting you sometime during your student's residence. Not all parents accompany new students when they arrive, but for those who do, practical arrangements for parents to drop them off, are, as you can guess by now, yet to be determined. If you do travel here to drop them off, I'll make sure to arrange a way to meet you and speak with you – most likely from six feet away.

With best wishes for you and your family,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'dne', written in black ink.

David Neidorf