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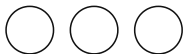
**OPINION**

# Educated move forward

Reopening colleges a priority to economic recovery

**Chris Gibson**

Updated: May 16, 2020 5:55 p.m.



Today would have been the 80th annual commencement day for Siena College. Sadly, that rite of passage, in which students transform into alumni with the joyful toss of a mortarboard and the acceptance of a hard-earned degree, has been postponed by a pandemic that has locked down the world and taken the lives of many.

Except for a handful of very prescient epidemiologists, who could have imagined this way of life when we rang in the new year?

Overnight, colleges and universities across the Capital Region — and the nation — were tasked with transitioning to emergency remote instruction to curtail the proliferation of COVID-19. Now, after weeks of isolation, we turn our attention to methodically re-opening our economy and safely pursuing purposeful lives.

For the past two months I have led a robust and collaborative planning process aimed at welcoming students, faculty and administrators back to Siena this September. Contingency plans must be made of course, should a new wave of infections arrive. But the ultimate goal — concurrent with the protection of public health — is to reopen our campus and resume our residential, in-person program in September.

The circumstances presented by COVID-19 can change quickly, therefore our plans are infused with flexibility to adapt to challenges that arise. The following are absolutely critical: widespread testing and smart, proactive policies that inspire confidence in our ability to operate safely and respond competently. We are coordinating with government agencies to develop the ability to effectively test, trace, and systematically isolate and care for infected individuals. We are adapting our academic and residential programming to comply with anticipated regulations and guidelines. The experience will be different at first, but no less transformational. We can do this.

My experiences in combat in Iraq, peacekeeping in Kosovo and during humanitarian relief operations in Haiti have prepared me to lead in this moment. Understandably, there is concern associated with moving forward. Without leadership, humans naturally turn inward, losing sight of the greater good. For higher education, leadership means leaning into this crisis and taking hard, but necessary steps in the face of persistent potential threats. We fully expect New York state will continue to honor its public mission with

empathy and acumen while providing the required support for colleges and universities to safely reopen and enthusiastically welcome students back to our campuses this fall. In so many ways, the future of our state and the communities that comprise it depends on it.

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In addition to preparing students for careers and instilling a mindset of lifelong learning, across the nation colleges employ more than 3 million Americans (several thousand in the Capital Region alone) and generate billions of dollars in economic revenue for the towns and cities where they are located. Although I'm enormously proud of our faculty and students for the effective transition to emergency remote instruction, there is so much more to education than curriculum delivery from a distance. The heart of the American college experience for our students is seminar discussion, discovery learning, and focused mentorship from accomplished faculty members. It's about hands-on research in laboratories, lively debates in classrooms and even mock courtrooms, rehearsals in theaters, and athletics played on courts and fields. At Siena, this is expressed through our Franciscan, "whole-person" approach designed to develop compassionate leaders committed to creating a more humane and just world.

The advent of the university, which traces its roots to the 11th century, remains among our most influential economic and employment drivers nearly a millennium later. The role colleges play in educating our future workforce, conducting research to expand knowledge, supporting local economies and ultimately shaping our future, is too important not to make them a priority in state and federal recovery efforts. It is equally crucial that colleges and universities adapt to pandemic realities while endeavoring to maintain their proven models. Together, we can get this done safely and right.

*Chris Gibson is president-elect of Siena College, an Army veteran and former U.S. representative for the 19th Congressional District.*

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