



Office of the President

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

April 10, 2020

To our partners:

As we prepare to celebrate our spring 2020 commencement, I want to first recognize the resilience and spirit demonstrated by the entire NAU community during what has certainly been one of the most challenging times we have faced in our 120-year history. Throughout this time of uncertainty, our staff, faculty, and students have kept working, and, in some cases, have joined the fight against the virulent disease that has changed all of our lives in the blink of an eye.

In a Herculean effort, our staff and faculty transitioned more than 8,000 classes to a virtual format in a matter of weeks. As a result, our nearly 30,000 students will successfully complete the semester. In the face of incredible stress and adversity, our students have persisted. In fact, 6,000 students will become Lumberjack alumni next month as we celebrate our first-ever virtual commencement ceremony, a truly special occasion that reminds all of us of the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of our mission at NAU.

While our on-time graduation and seamless transition to online learning are major accomplishments, our NAU faculty and researchers also are making headlines in their fight against COVID-19.

For example, our world-renowned experts in disease detection and treatment in the Pathogen and Microbiome Institute are teaming up with other university and private industry partners to do genomic research aimed at deconstructing the virus and unlocking its mysteries. One product of this work is a highly ambitious undertaking called the Arizona COVID-19 Genomics Union (ACGU), a partnership working to sequence samples from COVID-19 patients. They are analyzing genetic codes, tracking strains, showing where samples originate from, where they may have been transmitted, and attempting to reveal details for diagnostics, anti-viral drug targets, and vaccine development.

Faculty from the Center for Health Equity Research (CHER) are offering Coconino County their expertise to investigate cases, contact exposed individuals, and analyze the effect of COVID-19 on county health systems. This effort, in partnership with NAU's School of Informatics, Computing, and Cyber Systems (SICCS), is focused on modeling and analyzing the virus spread in northern Arizona communities.

Economists from NAU's Economic Policy Institute are working closely with Coconino County to create economic models to help plan for and handle the current and future effects of the pandemic. And, through its FEWSION project, SICCS is leading an effort to map critical U.S. supply chains and analyze the potential impacts of COVID-19, which can help communities plan in the midst of the crisis.

Our support of the community extends to helping keep our local health care professionals safe as they treat our fellow citizens. Examples include Cline Library's partnership with Northern Arizona Healthcare, which uses the MakerLab to 3-D print masks for medical professionals. Students at the Wearable Informatics Lab, which provides prosthetics to children with missing limbs, among other projects, spearheaded an effort to 3-D print face shields for health care professionals working on the front lines.

A campus-wide effort to collect personal protective equipment (PPE) from labs and other users has resulted in distribution within the Flagstaff community of critical supplies, including masks, gloves, cotton swabs, gowns, hand sanitizer, goggles, and face shields.

We also intend to continue delivering on our commitment to our Native American students and our neighbors in native communities in Coconino and Navajo counties, which have been particularly hard hit by the virus. With the support of Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, we have expanded WiFi access at a number of locations, including the Fort Defiance mission, where NAU educates a nursing cohort.

This effort will support NAU students pursuing their education online. In addition, students at other institutions of higher education and K-12 students whose education has been shifted online will be able to take advantage of this resource as they continue their studies at home. We are delivering WiFi hotspots, laptops, and other technology to Navajo and Hopi communities.

Volunteerism has been a major facet of our overall community commitment. Our faculty, staff, and students are volunteering at the county call center to support individuals requesting information about testing and needing language assistance. Our faculty have assisted with data collection to implement intervention plans to help further flatten the curve and assess bed supply for area hospitals.

Meanwhile, our spirits are buoyed and our hearts are filled by the students who continue to fulfill their aspirations at NAU. I am proud to report that three NAU students received prestigious national awards: two Goldwater scholarships and one Fulbright scholarship. These are just a few examples of our students' many successes.

Throughout this crisis, we have pulled together and have been galvanized by our commitment to our students, our community, and each other. It is a testament to the resilience of our staff, faculty, and students that we look forward to celebrating another graduating class in May. I have no doubt that these students—made tougher and more flexible by this shared experience—have the confidence to face the world and pursue their dreams.

I am grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from many of you throughout this shared ordeal. It makes me even more resolute to see this crisis through, and in so doing, position NAU for greater future success. I also want to extend our friendship, partnership, and support and ensure that you are confident in the fact that if you need us, we will be there for you.

Please be well and stay safe.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rita". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Rita Hartung Cheng
President