Let us run with perseverance the race set out for us.

–Hebrews 12:1

As final exams approach in this historic semester, I offer highest encouragement, support and thanks to our students and faculty as you work toward a strong finish. The instant transition of our entire university to online learning in mid-March reflects remarkable commitment and execution — and requires continuous adjustment for improvement every day.

This has taken a great deal of agility, collaboration and resiliency. Thank you!

Commencement

Our virtual Commencement will be Saturday, May 9 at 10:00 am (CDT). Information for accessing this online celebration will be available in the coming days — and we offer our congratulations to our graduating students! Your work has been outstanding, and even though this was not the May 9 you planned for, we look forward to celebrating your historic accomplishment. My thanks to Provost Johnson, Dean / VP Kersten, and our deans for their participation in this celebration.

Even as we lament what we have lost, we can also rejoice in what we have achieved — and in what these achievements have to say about us as a community of teachers and learners.

Change and uncertainty

This global crisis brings constant change to our campus, our city, our nation and world. It also brings uncertainty about the future and that can be unsettling for all of us. We may continually bring our hearts to God and bring our best efforts to our work, while finding good methods of encouraging each other in every way.

Before this crisis we knew we were facing a very challenging landscape in higher education — declining enrollments, declining revenues and compensation, increasing demand for evidence about student outcomes and return on their tuition investment. We knew we needed to review programs and practices, optimize our academic and co-curricular portfolios, and seek new revenue producing opportunities.

Now, the unprecedented invasion of this global pandemic has elevated the uncertainty and the risk for every college and university in the nation. You are likely reading and absorbing the range of articles available on this. University leaders across the country are devoting their efforts to daily problem solving, while also trying to plan for a sustainable future.

It’s impossible to project enrollment results and operating budgets as we have in the past, due to the uncertainties about student residency and academic delivery. Much is unknown.

But this crisis is also creating some clarity. The need for conservative planning and resource management is clear. Pursuing new revenue streams is imperative. We must determine the best way for us to express our mission within the resources we can generate.
Challenges and opportunities

This crisis has certainly created some unprecedented challenges for us. We will continue to address those day by day, and week by week.

But the crisis will present unique opportunities too. We want to be alert to those opportunities on behalf of our students and our university and seize them when we can!

Planning, problem-solving and decision making is best done with as much information and data as we can generate. The more information we have, the more informed decisions we can make — putting us in the best position to maximize the opportunities that may be available to us.

During the first week in May a group of our faculty and staff members are going to be working together with our Gray Associates partners to review internal North Park data and external market opportunities. The initial workshops were postponed from the mid-April due to the pressing needs of this pandemic crisis — which included the successful switch to online learning.

Conducting the workshop virtually was not the original plan, but as with so many other gatherings, it is the effective mode available to us today. The workshop information will be very helpful — and Gray has had experience and good results in conducting virtual workshops over recent weeks.

We appreciate the willingness of the faculty and staff who will participate in this process, and who understand that the Gray workshop will be about engaging important data, not making decisions. It will provide information for a disciplined and strategic process of discernment around future planning.

This workshop comes at a busy time, May 5-6, but this process is much too important to delay. We have never done a comprehensive data gathering project like this in the past, and it will be very valuable to us now. Given the massive enrollment and financial disruption now facing every college and university in the nation, the more data and information we have available to guide our planning, the better. We are grateful to those who will devote their time and energy to this important process.

We can all take confidence in the fact that the data engagement exercise and subsequent strategic planning process has the full support of our Board of Trustees who will be involved with us as we process the results of the workshop, and move toward future planning for the university.

This is the perfect time to remind ourselves to pray for our Board of Trustees. The ultimate responsibility for the future of our mission and our institution rests in their hands, and they understand and embrace that sacred responsibility. They are deeply devoted to our school, give generously of their time, their intellect, and their financial resources. They bring their very best strategic thinking and understanding to their work — and stand together with so many who have gone before them in North Park’s history. Now they will face the future with us, and we can trust that they will bring their best efforts to the challenges before us.

Disciplined scenario planning — operational and financial

Thanks to good planning and careful management, our campus operations and financial budget for this fiscal year are currently stable. Students are progressing academically; the campus is secure, and we believe we can sustain our current financial obligations this year. Thanks to those who have done the hard work that has accompanied that enormous effort!

We are approaching 2020–21 planning through disciplined scenario planning — both operational and financial.
We will plan for various academic and operational scenarios including how and when we will be able to reopen campus, what mode of academic delivery we will employ, along with various financial scenarios and budget projections that are tied to enrollment revenues.

I am appointing a working subcommittee of our Emergency Management Team to work with the President’s Cabinet to examine various scenarios for bringing our students, faculty and staff back home to our beautiful campus. We will involve additional campus partners (faculty and staff) in this process, of course — making sure that we continue to prioritize safety for all, along with successful academic delivery.

Our highest goal is to welcome our students, faculty and staff to campus as soon — and as safely — as possible! We will direct all our efforts with that in mind.

The Senior Team is already collaborating on various budget scenarios to prepare for our Board. Tied to that work, will be the planning for long-term institutional health. We will gather as much information as we can, model out a range of scenarios and keep working hard on recruitment and retention.

To those of you who are offering to contact current and prospective students for recruitment and retention purposes — thank you!

Leadership, problem-solving and decision making

I am thankful for a Cabinet of strong and thoughtful leaders who are working hard at this every single day. We are leading and caring for our people, our responsibilities and gathering as much information and expertise as we can on everything. It will help us make the best decisions we can, at the time we must make them, with the information that we have. We won’t get everything right! And this environment will continue to change. Thinking through what our scenarios could be and gaining wisdom and perspective from other institutions and leaders will help us address our challenges and succeed.

Next steps

First, we must recognize and embrace the fact that some of the underlying assumptions that have guided many universities including ours, for a generation or more, are no longer true. We can’t count on ever increasing enrollments and tuition.

Instead, we will conserve resources wisely, adapt quickly to new realities as they appear, invest strategically, reallocate resources for efficiency, and work to generate new net revenue.

This will require making the most of our resources — human, financial and social — and trusting in our relationships.

At North Park we will plan in ways that protect our institution, its mission and its future. Protecting the institution does not mean maintaining everything just the way it was before. It means focusing on our core strengths and doing everything necessary to sustain our mission through what we know will be a period of challenge and uncertainty.

In short, we will adapt to new realities, live within our means — and then build, with creativity, hope and vision. We will be alert to the unprecedented challenges of this pandemic, and the unique new opportunities it may present, for the good of our students and our university.

We can make sure our academic and co-curricular portfolios are aligned with what prospective students and prospective employers in the marketplace will be seeking. With creativity and innovation, we can seize some of the opportunities that this environment will present and begin to sculpt a robust future.
We must be ready to immediately adapt to market demands for delivery in the coming months, but we will be thoughtful about making long term decisions around our core identity as we evaluate a range of data, think about innovation and make plans for the future.

It bears repeating: the financial model for higher education was under siege long before the pandemic. The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the need for strategic planning with a focus on core strengths, and careful execution. Higher education will be forced to do things differently but focusing on strengths and making sure they align with professional opportunities for our graduates must be a priority.

We are gathering as much intelligence as we can from other institutions, experts in the field, and from those who have encountered market and medical challenges before. It requires, and is receiving, our highest efforts. Everybody has the responsibility to contribute in the way that they can. That takes sacrifice on everyone’s part, and I know many have already given of themselves and their intellectual, relational, and financial resources. Let’s keep working together and keep moving.

**What will change, what will remain?**

Will North Park look different than we do today? Likely so; nearly every university will. But some things are certain and will never change. Our mission and identity are more important now than ever — to our students and our world.

Faith-based education has never been more essential. Our world has been robbed of health, safety, life, relationships, finance, freedom. And we still have countless questions about where it all may lead. This public health crisis has also exposed even deeper gaps and injustices in our communities related to equity, health and opportunity.

Christian higher education must be a vibrant and relevant option for students. They will seek to process these realities, form their thinking and prepare themselves to act. North Park’s Christ-centered environment, urban location and intercultural student community must be here to educate, mentor, and help students discover truth — now, more than ever before. We have the profound opportunity to model a Kingdom vision while preparing students to serve and influence in fields that will address these challenges. And we must be a leader.

As the caretakers of our mission we will do all we can to protect our future.

**Strategic planning**

We have realigned our strategic planning process for the new reality. The short-term planning and execution will inform the long-term health. We plan to survive, and then thrive!

First, we will address the unexpected **North Park Now** — the immediate response to the next academic year, depending on the delivery and residency opportunities available to us - then **North Park Next**, emerging as the model for Christian higher education in 21st Century America.

At this university’s founding, the Evangelical Covenant Church built a school for their prospective students, seeking to meet educational and spiritual needs. North Park was a “start-up” then — and North Park needs to think and act with the agility, creativity and energy of a “start-up” now. We need to refashion our institution in a way that meets the educational needs of our student constituency today. We need to be as conservative as possible with our financial resources and as innovative as possible in our thinking.

We will be faithful — but we won’t be flawless.
We will get through this. We will create our future, with God’s help — for we know from Jeremiah 29:11 that, *He has plans for us; plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future.*

**A strong statement!**

This week we saw once again the faithfulness and generosity of the North Park community as our 5th annual Blue & Gold Day successfully raised over $113,000 for student tuition assistance. Many of you participated in this important tradition and for that, we are deeply grateful! In this current and challenging environment, the generosity of the North Park community provides a model of support for student success.

**Good advice**

Our highly respected faculty member Professor Linda McDonald gave me some good advice last summer. We had a conversation outside the Johnson Center one afternoon. She learned I was battling insomnia. My concerns about the long-term challenges in higher education were leaving me sleepless. Linda came to see me a few days after our conversation and graciously gifted me with a dozen novels she had selected from her personal collection to offer for my late-night reading.

Professor McDonald reminded me, “There is a reason that in-flight emergency instructions include directives to secure your own oxygen mask first, before assisting others.”

If we care for our own health and wellness, we are better able to assist and support those in our care.

We are all working long hours under conditions that are challenging. And we are all being asked to do more on top of that! I get that, and I am grateful for all you are doing. Let’s follow Professor McDonald’s advice, especially now.

While so much vital institutional activity is underway, we are also experiencing some degree of loss. We need to find healthy ways to process our fears, anxieties and fatigue. The way we hold ourselves and treat each other will be an important reflection of our mission and our vision. Let us practice extra grace, with ourselves and each other. Let us love and honor our families, friends, neighbors, students, faculty, staff, teams, and community of alumni and friends.

In all things, let us trust our God — and remember Hebrews 12:1–2, *“Let us run with perseverance the race set out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.”*

With gratitude and respect for all you do,

Mary K. Surridge, President