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Voiceover: From Curtco Media

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Bill Curtis: Two geniuses have commented on college education and it's placed in our hearts first, a little known fellow named Albert Einstein, who said, "The value of a college education is not the learning of many facts, but the training of the mind to think." And the other genius, whose words have been gifted so often on graduation day, Dr. Seuss, of course, "Oh, the places you will go, you have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose. You'll be on your own. And you know what you know, you are the one who'll decide where you go." Welcome to an exploration of university plans to open this fall while managing through a pandemic.

I'm Bill Curtis, we've got two lauded and renowned presidents of universities with us on today's panel. David W. Leebron President of Rice University in Houston, Texas for 16 years. He's credited with overseeing an international and diversified student body growth of over 30% during his tenure. And he is shouldering the responsibility of a combined student body of around 7,000, including under and postgraduate students, as well as over 800 faculty. Prior to taking the helm at Rice, David was the Dean of Columbia Law and he graduated from Harvard Law. Thank you for joining us President David Leebron.

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David Leebron: Pleasure.

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Bill Curtis: E. Gordon Gee while he's the award winning internationally renowned president of West Virginia University. He's also served as president of Ohio State University from 1990 to 97. And then they pulled him back again in 2007 to 2013. His career also included leading the University of Colorado, Brown University, and Vanderbilt. His first stint as president of West Virginia University, was back in the 1980s and they seemed to have pulled him back in to do it again. His JD and EdD degrees are from Columbia University. And here's one I didn't expect. He has served on boards, including the board of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. So many other accolades and honors, we simply don't have time to list, but Gee's daughter, Rebekah, is secretary of the Louisiana Department of Health. So he has got all kinds of perspective for today's subject matter and on his shoulders stands and undergraduate and postgraduate enrollment of almost 30,000 and 1500 faculty. Thank you for joining today, E. Gordon Gee.

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E. Gordon Gee: I'm grateful to be here. Thank you.

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Bill Curtis: And of course our co-hosts connecting through Zoom, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, bestselling author, and worldwide lecture, Professor Ed Larson. Nice to see you again Ed.

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Ed Larson: Thank you for having me here, and president Gee it's just great to see your bow tie again.

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Bill Curtis: And of course, Jane Albrecht. An international trade attorney who's represented US interest to high level government officials all over the world. Jane, nice to remotely see you today.

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Jane Albrecht: It's always good to be here.

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Bill Curtis: So President Gee, tell us what led to you serving on the board of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

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E. Gordon Gee: My real interest was the fact that I love rock and roll. And I actually was on the selection committee if you can believe it. That would select inductees. So it was fun while it lasted, but eventually I had to get off the board.

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Bill Curtis: You've been quoted saying that your primary focus is how to bring students back to campus while taking all necessary public health and safety measures. So while you consider all the possibilities for the opening of your schools in fall, what are the factors that drive your decision making?

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E. Gordon Gee: The way that I view it as the fact that I view it as a hammer and a dance. We've had the hammer we've shut down, we've done everything we possibly can to flatten the curve, but both for the psychology of our students, for the psychology of our country, we've got to get into a dance. We've all taken the flu vaccine, but 88,000 people have died of the flu this year. We all drive cars and 50,000 people have died in car accidents. So we're going to have to learn to dance with this. And so we have to take appropriate precautions, but we cannot continue to not provide the kind of educational excellence. However, we do it with appropriate mass distancing, making our classes smaller, a variety of other things, but we do have to move to this notion of creating an environment in which students can actually learn from each other and within the classroom.

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Bill Curtis: David, can we ask you, and as you open up, what are some of the needs of the students that you're looking to preserve?

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David Leebron: Well, the students get a tremendous amount out of things that occur outside of the classroom. And even in the classroom, those minutes where you enter a class, you're leaving a class and a casual conversation with the professor. We had one of the lowest student faculty ratios of any university. So it's the informality and the community. And we know from our surveys that students highly value their classes, but they see the classes themselves as constituting, 25% of the value of their education. And so it's all those other things that the mentoring, they can receive, the student organizations, leadership, the entrepreneurial opportunities, and that community also supports them academically.

And so one of the things that we're observing online is that some of the most vulnerable students are the first generation and the low income students. And one of the reasons for that it's those students that really need that sense of community around them to support them. I think that I agree with Gordon that our students are really anxious to get back. I think this experience we're going through is going to fundamentally change higher education, but it's not going to diminish the demand for the on campus experience that the students really want and love.

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Bill Curtis: Ed Larson, I know that you have a definite opinion about online education versus being on campus and experiencing your courses in person. And of course, living on campus as well. You want to dive in here a bit?

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Ed Larson: I'm teaching a zoom class right now and midway through last semester, I converted from teaching a live class and it's just not the same experience. I'm trying to adapt, students are an awful lot happier now than they were in the spring because it's redesigned, but it's not the same experience for the students. It's not the same energizing experience for the teacher. In fact, it's very flat for a teacher as both of our two presences that interacting with each other in the classroom, seeing eye to eye, because it's not quite the same of watching somebody on zoom. I agree with both of them that the classroom learning is only a small part of what goes on and in university overall, people are coming to school for the entire experience, which is social as well as technical learning.

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Bill Curtis: Gordon, do you agree with Ed?

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E. Gordon Gee: Well, I've never thought that anyone could get a real education in their

pajamas. The way I think about it is the most important learning experience, and this is not to in any way take away from our faculty, but it really is that 150 hours of relationships is those late night pizza parties. It's all the conversations that take place. It is a social engagement, it's the human contact. So, and I believe with David that this virus is going to accelerate the change in higher education dramatically. I believe that we'll see many more of the hybrid kind of models where some of it is online. Some of it is in person, a variety of other things, but I do believe that at least for the vast majority of students, the educational experiences that which takes place in the brick university in some form or other.

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Bill Curtis: So David, if you don't mind me putting you on the spot a little bit, because I'd like to take this from the parent's perspective for a minute, there's no question that parents are looking for excellence in academics when they send someone to Rice. Also dorm living is part of the education process. And you kind of feel that you're passing your kids onto a somewhat safe, reasonably supervised environment where your kids can learn how to get along in society. Would you agree that, that's one of the main goals of parents as they bring their students to Rice?

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David Leebron: Yeah. I mean, this is a critical time in the lives of our students and particularly our undergraduates this time when they're, typically 18 to 22 year old and you really want them to learn a lot of things. It's one of the reasons diversity is so important to us because we want our students having that experience in a very diverse environment. But I want to both agree with what's been previously said, but maybe also qualify it a little bit. We have online degree programs that we offer in computer science and in business. Those are excellent programs that are offered for the same price as the residential degree. I think what's important is that you tailor the delivery to the particular mode. I think as Ed said, going on all of a sudden in the spring. And we went from three courses to something over 1900 courses in the space of two weeks.

We were well prepared for that because we're already engaged in the online space. And so we have the kind of training and resources that others have mentioned, but at the same time we heard from instructors, we heard from an instructor and art who said initially, "I can't take art instruction online. I can't do that." And yet, by the time she got instruction and went through the process, she said, "You know what? I've learned new things about teaching in this process." We're hearing from students and faculty who say, "Students are participating in different ways. Students who didn't use to participate are now participating in this online environment." We heard from students about the online delivery of services where they're saying, "Can we keep this as an available channel to us? We like being able to access some of these services online."

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Bill Curtis: So Gordon, I wonder if I could really put you on the spot for a minute.

There was recently frankly, a Rice student body president quoted on CNN, comparing student housing with cruise ships. Tell us a little about how you propose to manage students in dorms and also within your local community.

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E. Gordon Gee: Well, I think that of course is an immense challenge. We are already putting in place a lot of protocols and also tracing opportunities. We have, one of our researchers is actually figured out a way on the telephone app. How we can track these students and those that are may be coming down with some sort of a fever or the things that they immediately though, we can immediately get to them. And then also I love what David said, because I do think that there's going to be certain number of parents who don't want their kids to start off in that kind of a Petri dish, if you want to call it that. And so we need to make this kind of flexible approach for their education available to them. There's no doubt that the Coronavirus is going to is going to crop up on our campus.

The question is not that, the question is, do we panic or do we deal with it? And that's what we're trying to determine and try to get ourselves prepared for.

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David Leebron: But what's really different about this is the length of time and the uncertainty at every stage. And so it's really critical here is that frankly we're constantly prepared to change course back in the spring within 24 hours, I had announced a complete reversal of something I'd announced earlier, but I have constantly been saying people, we are going to reevaluate consistently reevaluate. And so, right now what we would say is we're going to have social distancing in the dining halls, recognizing that that people who live together as roommates are like a family and they're going to be in contact with each other. And so we'll have to measure the way that people come into the dining halls. That probably also means that we'll need to rethink the way classes are scheduled. And then we also have to recognize the particular populations that are vulnerable. And frankly, the people, our food service workers are more vulnerable than our students. And we have to figure out what are we going to do to make sure that our food service workers and others are protected?

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Bill Curtis: Are you, Gordon finding any challenge with some of your faculty not really wanting to reengage this fall?

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E. Gordon Gee: Yeah, absolutely. I think that some of them are very fearful and so who we have to recognize that. And if someone just feels very, very vulnerable and does not really want to be teaching the course and we have to accommodate that too, by that, I mean, if they're going to teach, then maybe we have to put it online or do some other kind of a format or change the faculty perspective or the faculty person. Anything we have to do to make sure that we're providing a broad based and excellent

academic experience, is what we're going to do. So like planning the Normandy invasion, we're just going to have to be very cognizant that things will change, but it's very complex.

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Jane Albrecht: I think it's probably relatively safe for the students. What do you do about the students when it's time to go home and they have grandparents and others, I don't know that there's a way to sort of quarantine them for 10 days or two weeks. Have either of your universities thought about that fact?

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David Leebron: There are a lot of different scenarios that could develop. We could see as we saw in the spring, students going home quite quickly and making fast decisions around that. And we have to be very prepared when we did this in the spring, we gave our students lots of notice because that seemed to be the thing that's appropriate under the circumstances. And then we have to recognize that for a variety of reasons, going home may not be the best thing for students. And so we had students who for one reason or another felt their home environment was it would not be supportive of online learning and we permitted them to stay on campus. We had international students for a variety of reasons might not want to come home, including as it turns out, the difficulty of coming back.

And so that's a little bit the adaptability aspect of it. It's not enough to say here's our plan and everybody's subject to the plan. It's here's the plan, here's how most people are going to be treated under the plan. And here's the process for applying to be treated differently than most people are treated under the plan. And all of those are critical all the time in an academic institution.

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Bill Curtis: We're going to take a quick break if you don't mind. And when we come back, we're going to look at the other side of the question and how colleges and universities are doing from a financial perspective now and how they're meeting the challenges that this pandemic has brought. We'll see you in a minute.

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Voiceover: On Medicine, We're Still Practicing joined Dr. Steven Taback and Bill Curtis for real conversations with the medical professionals who have their finger on the pulse of healthcare in the modern world. Available on all your favorite podcasting platforms produced by Curtco Media.

00:16:09

Bill Curtis: We're back. And guys, one of your associates in another school said to the New York Times this week that, "If schools were to remain closed this fall, it's not a question of whether institutions will be forced to permanently close it's. How many." How has this time with the coronavirus affected your institutions financially?

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E. Gordon Gee: Well, I'll start with that. You know, large public universities are, of course are dependent on a couple of things. First of all, we're dependent on tuition, our institution which is about a \$ 4 billion institution, only about 10% of our money comes from the state piece. So therefore tuition, the other revenue generating aspects of an institution are very important. And so those depend on numbers. Those depends on retention, those demand on the quality of the delivery systems are able to put together and how we're able to manage that financially.

We have certainly prepared for significant financial disruption. About six or seven years ago. I chaired the American Council on Education. They commission on the teacher to the American university, all of them. And, and at that time it was readily apparent to me from our commissions work, that this fall tuition driven, particularly private institutions, although some publics also are very vulnerable. And so I think that there is the possibility of somewhere in the neighborhood of 1000 institutions that may not be able to survive this out of the 5000 universities and colleges that we have this contract.

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David Leebron: Wow, that's significant.

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E. Gordon Gee: I think it is a significant, significant potential of economic disruption for a number of small institutions.

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Bill Curtis: Ed?

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Ed Larson: I think it's going to fundamentally change education, higher education, the successful universities are going to expand. As a historian, I look back to what did the Great Depression do for education? Well, what we saw was higher education expanded during the Great Depression, because more people went, the percentage went up from about five or six to about 10, but smaller private universities sort of died away.

And what exploded, were the high quality top elite schools like the Rices and Harvards of the world and the state universities just exploded. Places like Ohio State tripled in size, I think during the Depression, I think just like during the Depression, we're going to see a growth in the elite institutions and the state universities. And we're going to see a weakening of the sort of middle lower level private schools.

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Bill Curtis: Are you allowed to use your school's endowment funds in case of an emergency like this?

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David Leebron: We're draw about 40% of our resources from the endowment and tuition accounts for something like 20% and undergraduate tuition is only somewhere around maybe 13% of our overall budget. Regarding the question, the endowment there is this sense of the endowment is a piggy bank, a rainy day fund, or emergency fund. That is the one thing it is not right.

The endowment is there to sustain the university year in and year out into the future. And the necessity is to make sure the resources are there to continue providing the same level, although adjusted for inflation that it has provided in the past, otherwise we won't be able to deliver. What the endowment can do is enable us to smooth the transition. So if we think we've lost significant resources on the endowment or other things, we don't necessarily have to turn around and say, we need an immediate, substantial reduction on our endowment payout. We can phase into that reduction. And that's what we did in 2008, 2009, where we had a substantial market correction in a very significant recession in the country. And we had to reduce our expenditures at that period of time. Now, at the same time, we also increased our income. We had already put in then a plan to grow so, we were in the midst of growing our student population 30%, and that turned out to help us a great deal under those circumstances.

So the challenge now is to sort of phase into the reductions. We need using some limited flexibility in the endowment, cut expenses, where we can and grow revenues where we can. But there's fundamental notion that the endowment is a rainy day fund or piggy bank that the university can just go to. It's just fundamentally wrong in terms of what an endowment actually is and how it is used to foster the success of a college or university.

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Bill Curtis: On this show, we very often endeavor to get multiple sides of a question, to see the other side's position. Students have a bit of a groundswell where they're complaining that their education might not be worth the tuition that they're paying. And part of the support that you really need is students willing, and their parents, to pay the kind of tuition necessary to keep these schools vibrant. How are you communicating as presidents of both of your schools with the base of parents and students that have those issues foremost in their minds?

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E. Gordon Gee: We're not, bullyish on tuition. In fact, we will not raise tuition this year. And, and then of course that represents potentially a significant loss of revenue for us. But we think, and particularly as a land grant institution, the smallest thing we think is very important for us to make sure that the institution remains very, very affordable. Now, the issue of cost and quality is immensely important in these kinds of institutions that I'm in right now. And so we work very hard to keep our cost to the families as low as we possibly can.

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Bill Curtis: And there is a real need for a certain level of financial viability so that you can function. It's not a desire to charge parents full price for an education that may be rather different this year.

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David Leebron: We don't charge for price by any measure, we don't charge for price in terms of what the market would bear. And we don't charge full price in terms of the cost of providing the education. The tuition actually covers perhaps a little more than half the cost of providing the education. We have very aggressive scholarship and financial aid programs for us, for any student from a family, earning less than I think \$130,000. They pay nothing toward their tuition to come to Rice. And so everything we do in effect loses money, the one exception to that really has to be the endowment, but it's really vitally important that we continue doing what we contribute to society.

And, and we think we're ultimately about three things which are excellence, opportunity and impact. And all of those come at a very high cost. And, and you can see now more ever in this pandemic every time there's a crisis of this time, what really becomes apparent is the importance of the universities, and particularly the research universities. This problem will be either solved by universities, or if not directly solved by universities as a result of knowledge that came out of universities.

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Bill Curtis: Both Gordon and David, the statistic is that education employees, about 3 million people and accounts for 600 billion annually in spending in a GDP. What's the message that you would like to send to congress as they hack out the next stimulus package on how they should consider structuring the helping of colleges and universities.

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David Leebron: I think our institutions of higher ed are engines of opportunity and engines of impact for our society. And if we're, we're building in difficult times, enabling people to shift gears, in some sense, people already out in the workforce to get education they need to go into the sectors where they can be more productive in the future. Enabling students to go to schools who might not have other opportunities right now. And that's the full range of institutions. I think taking a special care of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which have provided incredible opportunities to people who haven't otherwise had those opportunities. They continue to play an important and vibrant role in our society. We want to be internationally competitive. Supporting the research universities of this country. And I have literally a self-interest there, but that's where the new ideas and new technologies and new industries come from, and that needs to be invested in.

And that's an area where we've been losing ground. We're about to enter a kind of new stage for our country and new industries are going to emerge. And people were really thinking about problems in different ways. And a lot of the solutions for that are

going to be coming from our universities. So if we really want to invest in the future, whether that's future as a few years from now, or whether that future is 50 or 100 years from now. These are vital institutions to, to invest in.

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E. Gordon Gee: Obviously David makes a very strong case of which I fully concur, which is of the power of the universities. We are the economic engine in many instances, but I also think that there is this reality and I'm going to talk about from the large public university and particularly land grant institutions that we need to be much more cognizant of the fact that we have responsibility for our communities and that we have responsibility for the economic development in the state, not simply by creating ideas, but also by generating economic vitality through a number of things that universities should and could be doing.

The truth of the matter is, universities live in a bubble, there quite arrogant, they're very good at telling other people how to do their business, not terribly good about doing business themselves. And so I think that this pandemic is going to bring to the floor, through federal funding and through state funding. And David used the word impact. People want to see that their university has an impact on their lives and it's embedded in their hearts and minds that, that university is making a difference. And so I think that any package is going to have to look at the immediate impact that universities can have in job creation and the variety of other activities that go to the heart of the economy, of the state or of the nation.

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David Leebron: And even though we're comparatively small, we're located in the great city of Houston, we're deeply involved in it in the city. We're building an innovation hub near the center of the city to foster new technologies and industries in Houston. And I think that's true of almost all of us that we, I think as Gordon says, we're all deeply engaged in our communities.

And we can provide a lot of that vibrancy, but first and foremost, to invest in the opportunities for our students to make sure that all potential students have the means to go to our institutions. And it's a vast variety of institutions. And then I think second is this possibility of sort of the short term job creation. How do we work with industry? What are the ways to invest in that collaboration that can really foster rapid development. And then third, investing in fundamental knowledge. It turns out location does matter. Where ideas emerge does matter. Where new technologies emerge does matter. And if we want to be as fast on the other side of this crisis and really a vibrant growing nation, we need to continue to be the place where new ideas and new technologies emerge. We need to be the place where solutions to pandemics are going to emerge. We need to be the place where new ways of doing things virtually online are going to emerge.

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Bill Curtis: Well, I think we're going to leave it there. There's no doubt. This is an

absolutely crucial subject for parents, for the students that we see as the future of our society. Let's keep in mind. We don't tend to be longterm thinkers in this country. And I think that's one of our greatest failings things will change, but we know that this isn't forever. We know that we're trying to figure out a way to get to the other side. And we wish Gordon Gee, West Virginia University and David Leebron from Rice University. We wish you much success this fall. Thanks so much for joining Ed Larson and Jane Albrecht and myself. This is politics. Meet me in the middle. Thanks for listening.

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