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Chris Gibson on preparing to lead Siena through the challenges of returning this fall

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While some four-year colleges are reporting dips in enrollment, Siena College is on pace for a record number of new students.

The college has exceeded its goal of 757 new students with a few days still to go before the enrollment deadline. And it builds on last year's total of 842 students, the previous record.

Chris Gibson will become Siena College president on July 1. The former congressman credits the increase to the enrollment department staff carrying out a more personalized communication approach to attract students. The college has also frequently communicated through virtual town hall-style meetings and other means about what to expect this fall.

"I think it's incumbent upon leaders to constantly be visible, to explain what's going on — the good, the bad, the ugly," Gibson said. "You really have to be out and be very candid in every regard about what the challenges are and what your plans are to overcome."

Before he officially begins his role, Gibson is leading a task force to prepare Siena for business this fall. The *Business Review* spoke with Gibson about those plans.



DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS | ALBANY BUSINESS REVIEW

Siena has been offering "drive-thru" tours of the college's campus.

What are some of the main challenges Siena College and others are facing this year? What is different is that we will be opening up the campus and welcoming back students in an era where the coronavirus threat will still be evident. We do anticipate the governor will give authority to reopen, but do acknowledge that it may come with some caveats and stipulations. We're remaining flexible.

What's challenging is we've got to be able to comply with federal and state guidance and guidelines and make sure we instill confidence in our students, their parents, and our faculty and staff.

The enrollment numbers would be challenging in any given year. It's especially challenging when we have social distancing requirements. But we're also very thankful — that's a nice challenge to have.

What are some of the main differences people can expect this fall? What you'll find is, at Siena College, we're going to have a series of actions and policies, both proactive and reactive, to make sure that we're taking the proper steps to be as safe and competent as possible. I anticipate that the threat could potentially diminish between now and the first week of September, but it may also increase by the first week of December; we will have scaled policies that address the threat in the appropriate manner.

We're looking at how many students would be in a class, what kind of PPE will be required, frequency of disinfection, dining activities and gym use.

We are requesting a one-time surge of testing support for coronavirus. After that one-time surge, we'll have to do periodic surveillance. In the event that an individual shows symptoms, we'll have a plan that includes testing, tracing and quarantine, if necessary.

How might the classroom look this fall? I want to be clear that the overwhelming experience is going to be in person. What we wanted to do was provide flexibility. Even though the preponderance of students are getting an in-class experience, we don't want to close the door on parents who may decide they want their child to attend remotely for a period of time. It may be the case that a professor or two is giving their classes remotely because they have high-risk conditions.

Will there be a decrease in students living on campus? The feedback we have from our students and parents right now is their kids want to come back to campus, and they want to live on it. We have looked into contingency plans to provide the residential life even beyond campus if we need to; that could happen if the governor limits the number of people that can be in a dorm room or if someone needs to be quarantined.

What's an academic improvement you'd like to make? When we start to talk about how to tailor internships, I would like the companies to help shape the experiences so that they're absolutely in the best interest of our students. But at the same time, also in the best interest of the business community. I think there's room for more collaboration there. An internship is also an investment on the part of the business because if they end up hiring the individual, that's less overhead for them.

Does Siena plan to bring back its furloughed staff? The only way that wouldn't happen is if somehow the governor says that we can't open. As long as the governor says we can open, we're going to bring our furloughed staff back. We already have a plan to bring them back. Because we're over 100%, we're going to need all our faculty.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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