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[MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Hello and welcome to "We Roar." As coronavirus continues to keep us apart, we're asking Princetonians with unusual perspectives to share how they're thinking through the pandemic, how they're seeking solutions with imperfect information, and how they're envisioning the coming year. In this episode, we hear thoughts on the future of higher education from a 1993 graduate alumna who is president of another college here in New Jersey.

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KATE FOSTER: Hi, I'm Kate Foster, president of the College of New Jersey.

So the question is, are colleges and universities going to make it in the coronavirus era? And I guess I'd have to say my answer is a big, fat, resounding, "No." We were already looking at a time when colleges and universities were stressed. It was kind of a stressed industry sector and ecosystem. You had a lot of places that were seeing declining enrollments. A lot of places had financial stresses. You could feel where the states had been cutting back on the support for the publics.

So I've been actually thinking about the metaphor of forest fires and forest danger and fire danger when I think about the sector. And it's been interesting, because you can see that image of that half-circle with the slices of the pie. And the fire danger wheel goes from green to yellow to orange to red. And even before coronavirus came along, that dial was moving to the right. It was moving from yellow into orange or orange into red for a bunch of colleges. And there were closures. There were mergers.

So you'd have to say a lot of places were feeling the stress. There were cutbacks. And then coronavirus comes along, and the next thing you know, the place is up in flames. And that's what it's felt like for the last, oh, probably 10 weeks or so.

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We have not made a decision about what the fall will look like. To think about that carefully and to think about that with clear eyes is something that we're going through right now. So just recently, the Cal State system announced that it would be doing virtual education this fall. This is a massive system out in California, 500,000 students. It says, we're going online.

And I think what will be interesting to watch is: How will the dominoes begin to fall now?

I divide my factors into two sets. So category one are, what are the factors that we have

no control over? So, what will happen with the virus, what will happen with state directives, what will happen with the national, sort of, epidemiology and the way that people give you guidance, what will happen with people's behaviors, the choices of families to — whether they want their kid to take a gap year — those are things that we have some indirect control over, but not direct control.

But I'd say the other part of it is that you can imagine creating a fall of 2020. But you have to balance it against how much it costs to create 2020 in that setting. So we are right now looking very carefully at where do we want to invest our money, to make sure that we can create and spend our money on what matters for creating an environment for education that's meaningful and memorable for the students in the fall of 2020.

We care, especially about our freshmen coming in, as we have cared about this spring, our seniors going out. Because the experience of coming together, of getting those early experiences, of living with one another, the early skill-building that goes on that sets you up for a great career at the College, the early knowledge acquisition that you need to get to make you have confidence and competence to go into your classes, how does that happen if you're at home?

And we have been thinking a lot about that. Because it's a — it's a very important moment of growth and development, that transition from high school into college, and all of the — not only academic, but emotional and social — aspects of that moment in a person's life, in a life cycle.

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So I guess I'll also note that things that were unimaginable to us even 10 weeks ago are true today. So when I ima— think about that, and I imagine out three months, six months, two years, five years, I think to myself, “What is it that is unimaginable to me now that will be true in a few months, or will be true in a year?” And it's hard to see exactly what that will be. But my guess is that there will be a contracted market in higher education. There will be fewer of us. There may be a lot more digitization, a lot more hybrid or online education delivery. And I hope some great ingenuity and creativity and sort of risk-bearing choices that allow us to try some new things that we've never tried before.

So for TCNJ, you're — we're looking around and saying, we're in pretty good shape right now. We could be an attractive partner to, whether it's businesses or nonprofits, or other colleges and universities. How do we have those conversations? What would it mean? What kind of positioning do we want to do?

So I should say that it is a kind of adjustment, and a sense of change that is so profound and so different from any other kind of planning that I've done, and just really other kinds of strategizing that you do under quote “normal” conditions. How do you think about it now, when you know the world already looks very different, and you're trying to create a world that will be valuable and meaningful and attractive to people who still seek that college education, and certainly, at least now, have in their minds the ideal of

being away from home, going to college, or living in a residence hall, and achieving their degree and achieving their dreams in that way?

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And if you want to continue the metaphor of forests — forest fires and fire danger — I mean, the metaphor of the forest fires is of course, that you will regrow. There will be rebirth. In time, places will come back. And they will come back differently, presumably. The forest changes. That's the metaphor. The forest will change. It will look different. There will be new growth. There will be new opportunities in the forest.

And in the landscape of higher ed now, what's the opportunity out there? It's so easy to wrap your head around all of the difficulties. And, "Oh, it's going to be so hard. And we have to figure this out. And our finances are in tatters at the moment. But gee, it will come back."

And I like saying, "Could we take a giant step back now and say: What does this moment allow in terms of opportunity? Who else out there might want to be a partner with us at a time like this? Could we be linking to a theater company or a nonprofit or another group in the pharmaceutical industry?" Because maybe we could be sharing a faculty or people. Maybe we could be sharing facilities. Maybe we could be providing opportunities to one another that we don't currently have.

So in enabling ourselves to just break away from the sacred cow thinking about, this is what college has to be like, and every college and university tub has to be on its own bottom, and instead saying, "Where are the reasonable collaborations that could happen now?" Some of them might be business collaborations, right? We could all be doing our procurement together, and buying things, and getting an economy of scale. That's a kind of prosaic but really important angle on collaborations.

But are there other really creative ones that we could imagine, maybe linking to somebody far away? Maybe deciding we'll do our language courses with institutions that are in, everywhere from different continents around the world, so that you're learning your French from Paris, and you're learning your Spanish from Ecuador, and you're learning your Chinese from Beijing? And that would be an exciting set of collaborations. And some of that had already started. The digital revolution had made it possible. Online education had made it possible to do education in those really exciting ways, even though it was, if you will, online.

What could we be doing now even more — even more? So I think all of us want to be in a place of saying, "We are excited about the education we are delivering. It is forward looking. It is meaningful. It is high quality. It is rigorous. The students are engaged in it." And everyone looks at and says, "Yes. It's different, and it's also good."

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So that, that's what I'm hopeful about, that we will rest our tired brains from all this

planning and in very short order, really be thinking very carefully about, “Boy, that would be fun,” or “Why don't we try that?”

We're about at that point that makes me very hopeful that we have been bringing creative ideas into the room of decision making. It is not all doom and gloom, by any stretch. It is about thinking about what is possible. We have made worlds possible before. What are the worlds we can make possible again?

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