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# Leading the Return to Normalcy

BY : EMILY BISHOP, PHOTOS COURTESY OF WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

For the past five years, Sabah Randhawa has led Western Washington University as its president.

Under his guidance, the university has worked to evolve and improve its campus. The finished construction of Carver Gym, the addition of the Multicultural Center, and other infrastructure improvements have all occurred during his tenure. Looking to the future, the university plans to add new buildings for electrical engineering and computer science courses, as well as a Coast Salish-style longhouse in the arboretum.



“This is work in progress. It’s a journey,” says Randhawa.

But challenges often arise—especially for Randhawa, who is in a unique position to make key decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic completely changed the university’s operation, meaning that the past year has required innovation.

WWU first went fully remote in the spring semester of 2020. Randhawa says this was an easy decision to make; however, it was the execution that proved to be a challenge.

Most faculty at WWU had never taught an online course. Beyond this, there were issues around access to necessary technology and internet connections for students.

“You know, a lot of credit to them for rising to the challenge,” says Randhawa. “That was very difficult.”

WWU remained remote for the entire 2020-2021 school year. The situation was reassessed each quarter, and a decision was made on how classes should operate. Health and safety were the biggest concerns when deciding whether or not to stay remote.

Given that Western is a residential campus, Randhawa says remote learning was a less than ideal situation. While some aspects of college can be easily moved online, many others cannot. Students grow and learn from activities in and out of the classroom and from interacting with one another. With the increase in vaccination nationwide, WWU has returned to in-person classes for the 2021-2022 school year.

All faculty and students are required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 before returning to campus. Masks are also required for everyone in the classrooms. The university also has on-site testing and is following a strict cleaning and sanitation protocol.

“We are closely following the Delta variant now,” says Randhawa. “Overall, I remain hopeful that with vaccination, and with appropriate precautions, we’ll be able to deliver in person education in fall, but we are keeping a close tab on how things are moving.”

As things move forward, there is hope that life will begin to more closely resemble pre-COVID times. In-person classes are evidence of a slow return to normalcy, and enrollment has also increased. The size of the incoming class for the 2021-2022 school year closely resembles the size of the last pre-pandemic cohort.

“I am also, again, very thankful to the community and particularly to our faculty and students who have stuck with us during this time,” says Randhawa.

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