In response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, Millersville University announced Wednesday morning that it will “move to alternate modes of instruction for a limited period after spring break.” Millersville students have been asked not to report to campus following the March 14-20 spring break.

Classes will resume March 30 but will be held “either online or through other technology-enhanced delivery methods.” Millersville President Daniel Wubah said university officials will reassess these interim measures on a weekly basis. Late Wednesday afternoon, Franklin & Marshall College also announced it would be suspending face-to-face courses starting March 23, after spring break. F&M acknowledged “there is some possibility that the COVID-19 situation could become far worse” but indicated that “at the moment, our plan is to resume normal functioning after April 3.”

Millersville and F&M weren’t the first Pennsylvania institutions of higher learning to announce the suspension of in-person instruction, and they won’t be the last.

Penn State University also announced Wednesday that it will switch to remote learning for at least three weeks, starting Monday.

We appreciate the gravity of these decisions by administrators, and we understand they don’t have to go to, or who couldn’t afford a plane ticket, or students for whom their on-campus work-study job made the difference between whether they would have enough food to eat.”

His points are worthy of deeper consideration:

— Housing.

Colleges should take care that students aren’t left without anywhere to live on short notice. This applies to international students, for sure. But other students might not have the means or funds to get home; they rely on their campus dormitory to be their home away from home.

Millersville spokeswoman Janet Kacskos told LNP | LancasterOnline’s Alex Geli that students with no other housing options who must remain on campus can apply for housing through the Department of Housing and Residential Programs’ existing process for Millersville students who need housing over spring break.

In its news release, F&M stated: “Some students will need to remain on campus, including those from countries with travel restrictions and others with extenuating circumstances. We will soon send a link to a form for those who wish to petition to stay on campus.”

— Meals.

Likewise, it is vital that colleges continue providing access to meals for students who must remain on or near campus.

At Millersville, dining options will be available, though limited, Kacskos told Geli. At F&M, dining services, the library, facilities operations have never attempted before. Many professors will likely need training on using the technology that allows them to instruct, counsel, test and grade students remotely.

Additionally, some classes and majors simply don’t translate well to an online-only environment.

“There’s no online version of a lab,” Millersville University freshman Harmony Lighty, a biochemistry major, told Geli.

Colleges might determine in the coming days and weeks that some classes will need to be suspended temporarily, rather than held or completed online. And while that might jeopardize graduation timetables, we must again remember that health and safety are the priorities as we enter the uncharted territory that is the COVID-19 pandemic.

Millersville freshman Mackenzie Bundra, speaking with Geli, expressed an admirable calm: “I think the campus will do what they have to do, and they’ll figure it out.”

We agree. We trust college administrators to figure this out and make sure student welfare is a priority in the coming weeks.

To college students: Though some of you may disagree with campus closures — and perhaps even call them alarmist — understand that we are entering a period of necessary social distancing to help limit the national spread of COVID-19. Young people, even if asymptomatic, can carry and transmit the novel coronavirus, and the disease can have more
have answers to 100% of the questions being raised in their immediate wake.

But we hope administrators take seriously some of the tangential consequences these decisions will have, and that they find good solutions to limit any adverse effects on their students — and, as much as possible, on employees, including those in food service and maintenance.

Wubah said this in Wednesday’s news release: “We are focused on ensuring our students finish the semester successfully with as little interruption as possible while safeguarding everyone’s health, safety and welfare.”

That’s the proper message. Health and safety first. The situation is understandably fluid. Nevertheless, schools should try to minimize disruptions.

In an op-ed for The Washington Post, journalist David Perry summed up some of the issues students may face when campuses close: “I began to wonder about students with no homes and the wellness center will remain open, a spokesman said.

We have noted in the past that hunger and food insecurity are a real problem on college campuses. This insecurity has the potential to be heightened in the wake of campus closures. It could be especially amplified at community colleges, where hunger is known to be even more widespread and some students are dependent on a campus job or work-study programs to pay for their basic needs.

— Reimbursements.

Understandably, some Millersville students have already asked about reimbursements for room and/or board. University leadership, to its credit, has indicated it is having discussions on that topic.

While reimbursements might be a fair consideration, we hope students — and their parents — understand that not every matter can receive top priority during an emergency that couldn’t be anticipated. Issues directly related to the welfare of those on campus must come first.

— Remote instruction.

Colleges must be realistic about the challenges of holding online classes on a scale most of them serious outcomes for older adults and individuals with underlying medical conditions.

And to college administrators: We ask that you consider the guidance Perry offered in his Post op-ed. “The goal now is to ensure we don’t pass the hidden costs of (campus closures) on to those least able to bear them, which starts with transparency about the decisions that institutions are making and ... being prepared to support vulnerable students,” he wrote.

Finally, as college officials wrestle with these crucial details, we urge K-12 school administrators to think ahead, should closing their schools temporarily become necessary.