

Health Sciences Subcommittee Summary

This document summarizes methods, findings, and recommendations from the Future of Work health sciences subcommittee. Key recommendations are reflected in the full Future of Work@Iowa report. This summary offers additional background.

Health Sciences Subcommittee Members

- Karen Butler, chief of staff, Office of the Vice President for Medical Affairs
- Gary Milavetz (chair), executive associate dean and professor of pharmacy practice and science, College of Pharmacy
- Rob Piper, associate dean for research and professor of molecular physiology and biophysics, Carver College of Medicine
- Galen Schneider, executive associate dean and professor of prosthodontics, College of Dentistry
- Ellen Twinam, senior HR director, UI Health Care

Health Sciences Subcommittee Charge

Originally charged with assessing the impact of remote/hybrid work on health care culture, leadership, and workforce factors, the subcommittee refocused its work to look more closely at education and research enterprises within the university's health science colleges: Carver College of Medicine, College of Dentistry, College of Nursing, College of Pharmacy, and College of Public Health.

Educational processes and training of health sciences students differ from undergraduate education. Generally, the health sciences provide three areas of instruction:

- Traditional classroom instruction (lectures, discussions, active learning exercises)
- Skills laboratories for demonstration, simulations, and practice
- Experiential education

The subcommittee set out to assess the health sciences colleges' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and summarize lessons that may impact future education and research initiatives.

Methods

The subcommittee met regularly to refine its charge, establish methods, review findings, and draft its report. We chose to focus on conversations with leaders from the health sciences colleges, asking them to address these questions:

1. How have you maintained continuity of education during the pandemic?
2. How have you continued to conduct research and maintained continuity of research projects during the pandemic?
3. What changed and worked and should be retained for the future?
4. What didn't work or needs modification to accommodate productivity in research/team management?

5. How do we keep people engaged and continue informal communication, the type that fosters creativity and ideas and solves research problems?

Subcommittee members met with representatives from each health sciences college. Key findings from these conversations follow.

Findings

The experiences summarized here may inform how the university responds to future education or research disruptions, particularly in the health sciences. They also may influence how colleges/divisions integrate remote/hybrid work and other arrangements into regular operations.

What Worked Well in Classrooms/Laboratories

Technology

- Classes and meetings utilized Zoom and other virtual-conferencing software. These tools allowed more people to participate in educational events, including seminars held locally on campus or anywhere in the world.
- Several interviewees noted that we have only scratched the surface—we can explore the full capabilities of Zoom and other technologies to communicate in more creative ways.

Practices

- Social distancing, hand hygiene, and mask use have been routine.
- Students, staff, and faculty used personal protective equipment in situations where face-to-face interactions were required to demonstrate specific care-delivery or laboratory skills.
- Flexible scheduling of students in skills courses and laboratories helped preserve essential in-person instruction.

Culture

- Faculty, staff and students were generally engaged in the missions of education and discovery regardless of their physical locations.
- The health sciences colleges uniformly were able to pivot to a hybrid mode for didactic education.
- Some students expressed a strong interest in being able to choose whether to receive their education online or in-person. Availability of hybrid options (or lack thereof) could have an impact on enrollment in the future.

Challenges to Teaching and Research

Social connectivity

- Uniformly, interviewees commented that people missed social connections among faculty, students, and staff. Virtual tools could not replace the richness of human connection.
- Some people reported feeling isolation and mental stress. There may be lingering effects of this experience.

Engagement with work on campus

- There was a general perception that something—productivity included—was lost by not being on campus and engaging with others while working.
- This extended to town-gown connections, where lack of personal interactions in the community had a somewhat chilling effect on public participation in research.

IRB-approved projects

- IRB-approved research involving face-to-face interviews and data collection was paused and required submitting modified protocols to allow for alternative data collection.
- This delayed research until the IRB approved modifications.

Culture

- Several people commented on Zoom burnout/fatigue.
- Others raised equity concerns. As we contemplate a future of research work where one's time is divided among many different projects in service to team science, who makes the decision about whether one works remotely or in-person? How do we ensure these decisions are applied equitably?

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Consider subcommittee findings in normal operations and crisis response

- Technology tools show potential to expand collaboration but also raise risks of burnout.
- Campus communities are flexible and resilient. During the pandemic, they found ways to continue their work effectively.
- Especially in the health sciences, face-to-face instruction is essential, and students expect it. Some teaching cannot be moved online.
- Face-to-face interactions—formal and informal—strengthen research by enhancing collaboration and building community connections. They can be lost when work shifts online.
- Changes in research operations can be especially disruptive for IRB-approved projects. Revising and approving protocols takes time.
- Decisions about work arrangements must be made transparently and equitably.