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Hillsdale College Hosts Commencement with Guidance from Renowned Epidemiologists

Health experts deem the College's plan "meets or exceeds" WHO, CDC guidelines for large events

Hillsdale, Mich. — After consulting with epidemiologists and implementing numerous health and safety precautions, Hillsdale College will host its 168th Commencement this weekend.

“Hillsdale College has vigorously planned for many months how to hold its annual Commencement and has taken all practical precautions to ensure a safe event,” said Rich Péwé, Chief Administrative Officer at Hillsdale College. “We are especially grateful to the health experts who have consulted with us throughout our preparations.”

In addition to consulting with health officials, city officials, state government, and law enforcement officials, the College also sought the expertise of four highly qualified epidemiologists: Scott Atlas, Jayanta Bhattacharya, Daniel Halperin, and Joseph Eisenberg.

Scott Atlas is the Robert Wesson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and former professor and Chief of Neuroradiology at Stanford University Medical Center. A frequent advisor to policymakers, government officials, and private companies, Atlas investigates the impact of government and the private sector on access, quality, and pricing in health care, global trends in health care innovation, and key economic issues related to the future of technology-based medical advances. He was contacted by Hillsdale College in mid-June 2020 to provide a professional scientific and medical evaluation of its potential plan to hold an in-person commencement event.

After comparing Hillsdale College's plan against the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlas concluded “that Hillsdale's plan meets or exceeds the WHO and CDC guidelines for holding large events during the COVID-19 pandemic.” He writes, “with appropriate social distancing, adequate hygiene and available sanitization, and in-advance guidelines for high risk individuals, the graduation event planned by Hillsdale College is safe and introduces no serious risk for students, teachers, and families attending the event.”

Jayanta Bhattacharya, Professor of Medicine at Stanford University, also provided feedback on Hillsdale College's Commencement plan. An expert in infectious disease epidemiology and health economics, Bhattacharya has published two papers in peer-reviewed journals related to the COVID-19 epidemic, with three unpublished papers on COVID-19 currently under peer review.

“If the private benefits of the event are important enough relative to the public health risks and care is taken by event organizers to minimize those risks by adhering to the extent possible to safe practice guidelines promulgated by public health authorities, then the event should receive approval by public health experts,” Bhattacharya writes.

“The Hillsdale plan adheres to [CDC and WHO] guidelines to a much greater extent than other similar gatherings,” he continues. “Given these considerations—and the scientific evidence cited in this affidavit regarding disease spread and the COVID-19 infection fatality rate—I believe that support for the Hillsdale College graduation ceremony is consistent with good public health practice.”

Daniel Halperin is an adjunct professor in the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “The infection risk from simply walking past someone or briefly exchanging hugs is extremely low,” writes Halperin. “What’s important is the distance between people’s faces, not between their bodies. If people are seated back-to-back, a safe distance can be considerably closer than if they are face-to-face.”

Joseph Eisenberg is Professor and Chair of Epidemiology at the University of Michigan. In an interview with Detroit News, he spoke about his consultation with Hillsdale College. “Given that they want to do this, they are being thoughtful about how to do it safely,” he said. “Most of the time we see outbreaks, it’s an indoor setting, at big parties, bars, nursing homes, factory settings.”

Hillsdale College will be one of the first colleges in the nation to host an in-person commencement since the advent of COVID-19. Its ceremony is scheduled for Saturday, July 18.

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 5.3 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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