

Chapter 1

Higher Education Leadership in a Changing World: The Coronavirus Pandemic and COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic remains one of the most significant and unpredictable global public health crises. The disease (COVID-19) caused by the virus represents a complex and ambiguous adaptive crisis that prompted the rise of the allostatic higher education leader. These leaders were able to learn from the pandemic and inspire faculty to exhibit similar leadership behaviors such as connecting with people, distributing leadership, and communicating clearly. COVID-19 provided higher education leadership with the opportunity for mission-driven changes related to course delivery models, pedagogy, student choices, affordability, access, and opportunity, and the post-COVID-19 institute of higher education will be a better place to work, and more student-centric. Those academic leaders with the adaptive capacity to see the crisis as an opportunity will envision a continued role for new and disruptive technologies. The pandemic has also provided faculty leaders with an opportunity for self-reflection that in many cases was long overdue.

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), pandemic remains one of the most significant and unpredictable global public health crises in recent times. The disease (COVID-19) caused by the virus is a once-in-a-generation complex adaptive crisis for which nobody was prepared. COVID-19 started building in intensity through 2020, with the first case reported in the United States confirmed on January 21, 2020. COVID-19 was officially designated a pandemic

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by the World Health Organization on March 19, 2020, and despite significant measures being taken to slow the nationwide spread of the disease, at the time of writing, according to the latest Center for Disease Control data, there have been over 35 million cases of coronavirus reported in the United States and over 600,000 deaths from COVID-19. As the crisis continues to unfold, underserved populations, those with underlying conditions and the socioeconomically disadvantaged remain the most vulnerable.

Though supplies of the COVID-19 vaccine in the United States were initially limited, federal, state, and local governments implemented vaccine rollout plans to reduce the spread of the disease. However, poor access to the vaccine, distrust of the healthcare system and low confidence in the vaccine amongst certain populations including college-age young adults (Funk & Tyson, 2020) remain significant barriers to vaccination. Despite these barriers to vaccination, at the time of writing, according to the most recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention data, over 50% of the population of the United States is now fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and the number of daily reported new COVID-19 cases is declining. Many higher education institutions are requiring students to be vaccinated before arriving back on campus, while others are incentivizing students to get vaccinated, in hopes of a traditional college experience in fall 2021. At present, higher education vaccination policies vary by state and are subject to change amid COVID-19 surges across the United States, and the emergence of more infectious coronavirus variants. However, given that some states have banned colleges from requiring students to disclose their vaccination status, it is difficult to establish what proportion of returning students will be fully vaccinated upon their return to campus in fall 2021.

COVID-19 continues to affect every aspect of daily life with all industrial sectors adversely impacted and the highly competitive, complex, and diverse higher education industry is no exception. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant challenge to the business model in traditional higher education, prompting long-overdue transformational changes for both academic leaders and faculty. Many of these disruptive COVID-19-inspired changes are here to stay, and the world of higher education will be better for it in the future.

In the spring of 2020, with COVID-19 designated a national emergency, and Stay-at-Home orders issued across the United States, the growing immediacy of the coronavirus pandemic, prompted those in higher education leadership to abandon in-person instruction and move more of their educational activities to the virtual classroom to limit the spread of the disease between people, with the health and safety of the campus community as a foundational principle. This strategic decision by academic leaders and policy makers to transition quickly to emergency remote learning when faced with the uncertainty, ambiguity and growing intensity of the impending novel coronavirus pandemic was made quickly and decisively. The speed of this response by higher education leaders and policy makers was critical, faced with the exponential growth rate of the pandemic (Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020). At the time, nobody could have predicted that higher education would still be engaged in pandemic-induced remote instruction over a year later. In fact, remote instruction quickly became a more permanent means of course delivery, rather than serving as a temporary adaptation, a band-aid solution to complete the spring 2020 semester. The sudden pivot to online instruction effectively accelerated the already prevailing trend toward e-learning and online education. Few institutions were prepared for such a rapid shift from the traditional face-to-face classroom to the virtual classroom, however those institutions with a culture of online learning and a strong online curriculum delivery system already offering classes online, and those already exploring digital learning were best positioned to make the transition, while remaining true to their educational and research missions. These institutions were able to leverage the expertise of faculty

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