

## Chapter 6

# Sustaining a Globally Diverse Community Through a Time of Crisis: Challenges and Consequences

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes how Webster University, a global university system, navigated the dimensions of crisis arising from recent pandemic conditions. Placing the university's strategies for sustainability in a broader context, the author considers the impact to students and institutions of threats to health and safety, economic disruption, and needed reckoning with issues of isolation, racism, and discrimination. The author reflects on the pandemic's effects on the accelerating threats to higher education's academic and business models, drawing insights from research and experience for rebuilding after crisis.*

### INTRODUCTION

With its main campus in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, Webster University is an institution with a distinctive history and mission. Founded in 1915 to address gender inequities in access to education, Webster has expanded to function as a global university system with students studying at residential campus locations in North America, Europe, Central Asia, and Asia as well as in a robust online learning environment. A commitment to meeting the unmet needs of the globally diverse students who enroll and graduate from Webster in St. Louis and around the world has resulted in an alumni community of over 200,000 individuals.

As a global university system, Webster coped with the recent COVID-19 pandemic and learned what is likely always true: crises do not occur in isolation, and the consequences are not always immediately realized nor apparent. As the university addressed the ongoing physical health and safety of campus

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communities around the globe, it was also necessary to address the disruptions in students' economic circumstances and the necessary reckoning with the devastating and disparate impacts of isolation, racism, and discrimination. For many students, the pandemic was simply one of several threats to their own and their families' physical and mental well-being. The challenges and consequences of crises, in their many dimensions, continue for higher education systems that seek to strengthen and sustain community. Strategies for a successful future demand multidimensional approaches that address intersecting threats and challenges, tapping the institution's core strengths and enduring values.

Prior to the pandemic, the landscape for American higher education was already shifting. The impacts of changing demographics of college-going populations, disruptive socioeconomic conditions, geopolitical disruptions and tensions, skeptical public perception, an increasingly competitive landscape, and politically charged policy and regulatory environments challenged the viability of long-standing traditions and functions. Pandemic conditions accelerated the threats to the academic and business models, and developments in transformative technologies and generative artificial intelligence create dynamic conditions for unknown futures. Sustaining a global university system through layers of crisis, notwithstanding needed actions for rebuilding, was and is a work in progress.

## **The Crises Unfold: Pandemic Conditions**

In January 2020, Webster University's Student Health Service shared the first informational message about COVID-19 with the Webster community. Webster's sites in China were the first to alert the university to the impact of the coronavirus. The university's global presence provided an early awareness of the impending health threats as the virus spread globally from east to west, arriving in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, site of the main campus by March 2020.

As the coronavirus took hold in the heart of the Midwestern United States, the threat required Webster leadership to "to balance the felt urgency for action with the need to gather accurate information and provide space for deliberation and engagement. The starting point in setting priorities lay in engaging and consulting with key stakeholders in order to create a common vision for health, well-being, security, and safety of all constituencies" (Stroble et al., p. 190). Leadership adopted broad criteria with these areas of focus: "(a) saving human lives; (b) efficiency and effectiveness; and (c) equity and fairness. These individual criteria were ultimately aimed toward achieving and maintaining sustainability and vibrancy of the University" (Stroble et al., p. 191).

The mechanisms leadership put in place relied upon participation by faculty and staff, with leadership by administrators with specific knowledge and responsibility for the areas of work. In March, the university established the COVID-19 task force. By May, three working groups had been formed. The three working groups—safety, security, and communications; transition to campus-based operations; and academic continuity and support—met almost daily in Spring 2020. Each group had access to public health officials locally and globally; the university's faculty expertise in healthcare and institutional partnerships with healthcare agencies and organizations proved particularly valuable.

As the task force and the working groups navigated a particularly dynamic public health environment, they honed the ability to plan and respond from a platform of information with attentiveness to the specific contexts and directives of diverse governmental entities. Little unanimity could be found in public discourse about the best ways to assure safety and still serve students. The campus community's opinions reflected a range of stances, requiring the individuals leading the COVID-19 response to listen and lead. Circumstances changed from day to day and week to week in all the locations where Webster's

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