Leadership in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

Leadership in higher education has been challenged to manage a crisis with more unknowns than knowns and at a pace of change and decision-making that is unprecedented. How will we ensure that we keep our values front and center? Lessons learned by a Latina Provost emphasize the importance of inclusivity, transparency, shared governance, and self-care. Discussion on the adverse impact on women leaders in STEM fields and how we can best support them during these times is also included. Lastly, leaders are challenged to be agents of positive change and to seize opportunities for innovation and creativity in advancing equitable and inclusive work environments.

Keywords: Leadership; COVID-19; Women Leaders; STEM Leadership; Crisis Management

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Introduction

At no time in recent history has higher education been tested in its ability to adapt, be nimble, change quickly, and focus on its core mission of education for the public good than during the COVID-19 pandemic. As institutions struggle to reopen, partially or in full, higher education leaders must reckon with our values and priorities as we determine the best course of action for our institutions and the communities we serve.

“Education for the public good.” Do we truly know what that means? We hear it all the time, as part of mission statements, inspiring remarks, and rationale for our existence, but do we understand what this simple phrase demands of each of us? Our current circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic not only question our values and beliefs, but demand action. We face tensions and inconsistencies that raise ethical dilemmas. Our structures come under scrutiny as we evaluate the equity within our organization. What keeps us from being responsive? What disadvantages some people over others? How do we transform ourselves into equitable and inclusive organizations? Leadership in higher education has been challenged to manage a crisis with more unknowns than knowns and at a pace of change and decision-making that is unprecedented. From my perspective as a Provost, instead of focusing on the challenges that are all too familiar, I would like to focus on the lessons learned so far and how these lessons should shape the future of higher education and, more importantly, its leadership.

As a Latina, my experience comes from years of strategically navigating structures that were not created for women of color. My goal has been to educate others, learn by listening to their diverse experiences, influence positive change with each opportunity to leverage my position, and elevate the voices of those who are not always included in decision-making. Higher

education is in need of a more diverse leadership, and as women of color step into these roles we carry the responsibility of challenging existing structures to better facilitate inclusive and equitable practices. In the sections below I share lessons that emphasize the importance of inclusivity, transparency, shared governance, and self-care.

Communication

Regardless of the size of the institution, it is human nature to listen to what we want to hear, to not pay attention to items that do not seem relevant at the time, and to dismiss the sense of collective urgency until it becomes personal. Nonetheless, inclusive communication needs to be multi-dimensional, spanning both the vertical outlets as well as the horizontal (e.g. within university, college, departmental, and office levels). Leaders must communicate with direct reports but also ensure numerous avenues for all voices to be heard. It must be multi-modal encompassing, for example, email, social media, town halls, individual and small groups information sessions so that all have the opportunity to provide input. As one of my colleagues shared with me:

In the absence of being able to provide clarity, the importance of regular communication that includes transparency and a measured (calm) tone is critical to helping those we have the opportunity to lead to feel some level of control in the midst of the unknown.

Above all, communication must be frequent and allow for diverse ways of processing information in various cultural contexts. We must be attentive to the diversity of needs, stakeholders, and messages that need to be addressed. The year 2020 has provoked a long list of issues beyond COVID-19 that has tested higher education values, including Black Lives Matter protests, and has asked the question: “Where do you stand?” Higher education responses to

issues of social unrest, violence, and inequities have varied from absolute silence to the formulaic, from the measured to the courageous and inspiring. In this way, communication has been challenging and complicated. Those who have done it well started by first listening deeply, critically, and compassionately to others. An example of a compassionate response came from President Ana Mari Cauce from the University of Washington. Other responses by the top 25 universities across the nation can be found in *Business Insider*. As Provost, I have the privilege of setting the tone for inclusivity and providing expectations for campus leadership to do the same. I can disrupt the status quo and hold us accountable.

Mobilization of Strengths

During a crisis like the pandemic, position descriptions become less important than needed skills for required tasks. Divisions are blurred, responsibilities belong to those that can get it done, and predictable schedules often go out the window. A leader is responsible for understanding the team's strengths and working to mobilize those strengths wherever they are needed. As I created numerous taskforces to address these challenges, I was able to ensure representation of campus constituencies and, with my colleagues, established processes that allowed for varied perspectives to be included. These high performing teams overlap responsibilities in order to erase any sense of a weak link. Together, and through inclusivity and diversity, we stand strong.

Shared Governance AND Shared Responsibility

In a time of crisis, the urgency and fast pace at which decisions are made can sometimes tempt leaders to skip processes viewed as too time consuming such as shared governance. However, the worst thing a leader can do is to decrease the voices and engagement of key stakeholders. Too often we stop with shared governance and do not realize that this is a two-

sided coin. It goes hand-in-hand with shared responsibility. University Senate is core to shared governance but does not always represent all of the voices across campus (e.g., graduate assistants, adjunct faculty). Leaders must continue to engage with campus stakeholders who can inform decisions outside of traditional structures and processes. Gathering information quickly and broadly is vital, with the understanding that the end result is not to bring about a collective agreement, but to contribute to the myriad of variables under consideration.

Courage to Make Tough Decisions

What distinguishes a leader from others is that at the end of the day, the responsibility for decisions made and their impact will fall on the leadership. The pandemic has ignited strong emotions ranging from courageous acts and generosity to anxiety, stress, and fear. Leaders are called upon to manage the entire spectrum of emotions, opinions and criticisms. Courageous decisions do not make most people happy. Many won't like the decisions or the decision-maker, but most will understand when these are made in a transparent way. When facing tough decisions I am often left with my core values guiding me, supported by information, evidence, expert opinions, and the constant weighing of the public good and collective impact. My Latina identity and experience propel me to address "hot issues" that may not be considered appropriate by some groups, and yet, may be expected by others. Institutions that are predominantly white continue to be uncomfortable addressing issues such as BLM, Latino immigration, inequities in the workload of employees of color, diversifying the workforce, and meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. As a woman of color, I have embraced the responsibility of raising the visibility of those issues while navigating the politics and discomfort of others.

Self-Care and the Impact on Women

As another colleague of mine shared, “women (despite the progress we have made) are caretakers. We typically do not do a good job of taking care of ourselves. Self-care is more important in a crisis.” Even before the pandemic women leaders were balancing many priorities, navigating biased structures within academia, and in areas such as STEM facing continued gender inequalities. Then came the pandemic, quarantines, school closures, dangers of senior care facilities, and loss of jobs. All of which amplified and exacerbated the already existing inequities. As we shifted to remote work, women found themselves taking on more of the reproductive labor of the home, managing childcare and eldercare, and, for some, being the sole provider for their home, all while doing demanding leadership jobs. We tell ourselves that this too shall pass and then, and only then, will we take a break. But this pace is untenable and unsustainable.

Leading during the pandemic has relentlessly added to our responsibilities with no break in sight. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “Being a Woman in Academe Has Its Challenges. A Global Pandemic? Not Helping” emphasizes the continued inequities in workload for women and particularly women of color. These inequities are magnified in STEM fields. As stated by Adriana Kezar (2020), the loss of productivity by women in STEM has implications that will be felt post-Covid in their ability to get grants, receive salary increases, and attempt to overcome setbacks in their careers.

In effect, because we have started a marathon without knowing the distance, it is critical to not only practice self-care, but also consider how academia will need to adapt in order to support women who are disproportionately impacted by this crisis. Fortunately, preliminary studies and resources are available for us to begin re-imagining our future. Clark, Mickey, and

Misra (2020) provide recommendations from key institutions on successful inclusive practices to support women's careers. Organizations such as the Alba Network, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) have also developed resources to guide institutions in how best to support faculty.

The reimagining of our work in academia will also require a change in mind set at a personal level that includes knowing our own physical, emotional and mental limitations, being willing to ask for help and take a collaborative approach to problem-solving, and allowing ourselves the grace not to have it all together. As Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*, stated: "Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us but we can't strike them all by ourselves." Now more than ever there is a need for structured mentoring programs, wellness campaigns, programs that support childcare and eldercare, and an intentional review of promotion and tenure guidelines that need to be reviewed for barriers and biases.

As we look to the future, I want to encourage us to think about what might come from the experiences we have faced recently. The decade after the pandemic of 1918 saw the invention of many things, including the grocery bag, hydraulic brake, toaster and blender, polygraph, masking tape, and corn dogs. That period also saw the refinement of penicillin, and the invention of insulin and the electrocardiogram. What might the COVID-19 pandemic see for us? Where will we find hope and opportunities for innovation and institutional transformation? Wherever this journey takes us, my hope is that we will not lose sight of what it means to be part of organizations that advance education for the public good. The landscape of higher education is changing, as is the world. This crisis is accelerating the pace and exposing the inequities around us, but the change was already underway. Be active in the change, and never forget the power of education to positively change the trajectory of lives, of entire families—and of nations.

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