

Original Paper

Higher Education in the Age of COVID-19: Leadership Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Reduced state appropriations and academic program prioritization compounded the pressure on institutions of higher education while responding to COVID-19. This situation has put leaders in uniquely challenging positions. This article, drawing on autoethnographic approaches, summarizes the first-person experiences of women leaders in this setting. Particularly, their reflections regarding the experiences of planning and implementing their COVID-19 responses will be discussed. Recommendations to address the challenges faced will also be illuminated.

Keywords

COVID-19, higher education, leadership strategies, women in leadership

1. Introduction

The increased pressure on institutions of higher education (IHE) to address COVID-19 responses against the backdrop of thin state budgets has prompted academic leaders to address these challenges strategically and creatively. Navigating the formidable reduction in federal and state appropriations has proven difficult for leaders (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017) and adding the COVID-19 element has demonstrated an increased demand for effective responses. How, then, do IHE respond to COVID-19 when budgets have already been stretched? Exploring the challenges faced by higher education leaders

while living in this context is critical to identifying effective strategies that lead to future stability and program growth. Here we provide first-person experiences of women leaders in this setting to illuminate the planning, implementation, and reflective experiences of addressing the academic environment under COVID-19. We took an autoethnographic approach because it captures the nuances of complex situations (Adams, 2012). These reflections are designed to provide insight on our challenges and strategies we used to respond to COVID-19 in higher education.

The primary author currently serves in the role of Interim Dean for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences while the other two authors serve in the role of Department Chairpersons at a Regional Midwestern State University. The authors come from varying disciplines including: Communication Studies, Geography, and Counseling with years of service in their role that vary from two months to eleven years at this institution. All have a strong commitment to facilitating learning environments that are responsive to the needs of students, engage in pedagogy that reflects a commitment to social justice, and facilitate reflective practice in their own work to enhance their leadership skills. While the focus of this article is articulating the responses to COVID-19, it is important to note that they occurred amidst preexisting state budget cuts of 12.5% and academic program prioritization. The focus of academic program prioritization is to eliminate programs not meeting state completion thresholds while also considering the impact of the budget to maintain programs. We witnessed faculty responding with fear of losing their positions (i.e., renewable non-tenure track faculty and probationary tenure track faculty). The following questions serve as a guide to our COVID-19 responses and address the areas of planning, implementation, and reflection:

1. How did you prepare faculty for the changes in classroom delivery while the institution planned for increased COVID-19 safety measures?
2. What strategies assisted you with the implementation of these plans? How did you address the challenges as they arose?
3. Four weeks following implementation, what would be your recommendations for successfully responding to new and continuing COVID-19 challenges?

2. Planning: Effective Communication and Building Trust

Planning in an environment saturated with fears of job loss while health and safety are at risk prompt questions regarding how one can balance the need for empathy and pragmatism. The following excerpts illustrate the essential nature of effective communication and trust in the context of a global pandemic. Here we describe our experiences as chairs and the interim dean on our quest to incorporate reflexive practices as we led our faculty through the planning stages of returning to campus.

2.1 Campus Closure Spring and Summer 2020

“When people don’t have access to clear and accurate information about what is happening [during a crisis], they yield to fears that are almost always worse than reality” (Buller, 2013, p. 130). At our institution, initial conversations concerning forthcoming course delivery changes from the

administration to department chairs began approximately two weeks prior to the start of spring break. At that time, our faculty and students were approaching midterm week and the flurry of exams, assignments, and midterm grade reports had commenced. Amid that anticipated additional demand upon faculty time, we received notice that for the week after spring break, all courses would be delivered remotely which necessitated that most faculty use spring break to make those preparations. Then during spring break the University made the decision to make a full pivot to remote learning and to close the campus to most faculty and staff by the end of the week following spring break. While institution-wide emails were sent out by administration, the burden for communicating the logistical details to these changes largely fell upon department chairs. My approach to this was to ensure regular email communications to my faculty – both full-time and part-time – through timed and numbered “updates” (even if daily) which sought to consolidate information into focused emails rather than a constant forwarding of individual bits of information sent to me in numerous administrative emails. Importantly, I also let my faculty know this was my communication strategy.

As my colleague mentioned, effective communication is important and continues to be important throughout the stages as we respond to the challenges of COVID-19. Last spring, while we were all in remote teaching mode, I was asked to consider serving as Interim Dean of a college at our institution that was outside of my discipline. While the role was different, the context wasn’t new to me. Several years ago, I was asked to serve as Interim Chair of what was then, the Department of Psychology. I enjoy the opportunity for challenge, learning, and building relationships so I agreed to serve. One of my primary goals in this interim position is to work towards effective communication as this will be the springboard for building rapport and trust. After my first two weeks, I sent a message to the faculty and staff newlist for our college welcoming faculty and inviting them to meet with me virtually or in person, whichever way they were most comfortable. I also indicated that I would be visiting each department and encouraged them to invite me to one of their classes, not for evaluation, but to learn about their areas and their students. This invitation continues to be extended and I had the opportunity to visit my first few classes during the first seven weeks of the semester and hope for future opportunities. Making myself available and accessible to faculty is critical while building trusting working relationships. In addition to being available, I worked intentionally with Department Chairs to address technology needs for our classrooms that were integrating the mixed modality that includes a synchronous Zoom component y. This required coordination with Information Technology (I.T.) and communication with Chairs in identifying need. Communicating consistently (without inundating faculty), being accessible, and following through facilitated an environment of trust.

2.1.1 Campus Reopening Fall 2020

Because I transitioned from a regional institution in the South to a regional institution in the Midwest during the period of time that is the focus of this essay, I faced the challenge of getting to know an entirely new faculty while isolation and social distancing were required. In an effort to establish a rapport that would make it more feasible to work through the challenges we would face I spent three weeks prior to

my official start date meeting with faculty individually, learning about them, listening to concerns they had about going back to campus while the pandemic raged on, problems they had experienced during their time at our institution, and things they would like to see addressed in the department. Most of these meetings took place outside to decrease the risk of exposure, I offered to bring coffee or soft drinks to encourage a more casual and inviting experience, and made myself available to them for as long as they wanted to talk. In some cases, the meetings lasted for three and four hours, some lasted only forty-five minutes, but each was left to the discretion of the faculty member. To further emphasize my investment in them as individuals and be mindful of the anxiety we faced as we braced to increase our potential exposure to Covid-19 exponentially by returning to campus, I purchased supplies to make “Covid-19 Survival Kits”. These kits were meant to be humorous and bring a bit of levity to a difficult situation. Each kit included a mask provided by the university, small items I purchased which included chocolates, mints, tea bags, hand sanitizer, etc., and a “check sheet” that explained the purpose of each item. Examples from the check sheet include: “mints to protect you from mask breath,” “chocolate because chocolate makes everything better,” “hot tea to relax after an exhausting day,” and because I included a 100 Grand candy bar “how much I wish we could pay you for all you do”. None of these things are specific to getting the schedules worked out, different classrooms that allowed for better social distancing, or the effort to explain the new delivery formats designed to allow in person classes, but all of them were essential to the well-being of the faculty and ultimately the success of the department in persisting through a pandemic.

During the planning stage, it was imperative that we considered ways we could effectively communicate with our faculty and build environments of trust. The examples above highlight the ways we worked to address the anxiety around the transition. Laying the foundation of trust and effective communication allowed us to work alongside our faculty as we implemented our plans.

3. Implementation

“... [A] leader would have difficulty being effective if she or he had never managed a department or office, and did not have an appreciation as to the everyday expectations of the job” (Roof & Presswood, 2004, p. 6). After preparing for meeting the challenges of COVID-19, we were tasked with the practical application of planning. Most of our classes went hybrid (mixed/blended versions) to address safe spacing in classrooms recommended by the CDC. Our institution also requires masks in all buildings and where distancing can’t be met outside. Many of us experienced anxiety as we started hearing of institutions across the country going fully remote after the first week of classes (Flaherty, 2020). Would the energy, time investment, and commitment to providing face to face options for our students pay off?

3.1 Modeling

While leadership literature outside of higher education espouses leading by example, or modeling, as a best practice (e.g., Caldwell, 2004; Kouzes & Posner 2010), scholars of higher education leadership have been less explicit in their guidance. Rather, they highlight the need for integrity (Roof & Presswood,

2004; Bolman & Gallos, 2001; Buller, 2013). We find integrity plays out in a very particular way for department chairs because our roles require that we be both faculty members and administrators at the same time. The duality of the role of chair situates integrity as a willingness to lead by example and do no less than what we ask of our faculty. This has been increasingly important during a time of constant rapid change and anxiety-inducing crisis not only on our own campus, but across higher education and society. Despite the many unknowns, we came to understand that we needed to be consistent not only in our communication but also in our behavior.

All department chairs at our institution have regular teaching loads of two courses per semester. To serve as an example to our faculty and better understand the challenges they face, we led by modeling. We opted to try new teaching modalities developed by our institution in response to social distancing needs. These modalities include a mixed format that involves dividing classes into groups so that some will attend class face to face while others attend synchronously online and an approach labeled as HyFlex (Maloney & Kim, 2020) which allows students to be face to face, synchronously online, or asynchronously online. By choosing these modalities ourselves we were able to preserve larger capacity, socially distanced classrooms for our faculty members. We also chose to teach our own classes at less desirable times so we could accommodate faculty preferences. These choices meant staying ahead of the curve in terms of reconfiguring our classroom spaces and learning mixed modality classroom technology. The latter of these was particularly important as we have been repeatedly called to classrooms to trouble-shoot the new equipment or simply assist faculty who are less technologically adept. Though we have experienced considerable frustrations, it has been crucial that we model a calm demeanor and remind faculty and students that there will be bumps along the way, and that offering grace to each other will go a long way to help us shoulder the burden.

3.1.1 Shouldering the Burden

Several of our departments experienced last minute resignations of full and part-time faculty for a variety of reasons, some of which directly resulted from the additional demands of teaching under pandemic conditions. This meant we took on overload classes, found ourselves teaching entirely new classes at the last minute rather than ask our faculty to do so, and worked with new faculty to prepare classes in less than a week. With a smaller faculty to still accomplish the service work during the semester, we also took on new or pre-existing faculty service assignments so faculty could focus on redesigning and teaching their courses during the fall term. Committee service is a core component of faculty duties; however, not necessarily one that department chairs are allowed to take on alone in light of shared governance principles. On those occasions, our dean encouraged department chairs to temporarily inactivate those departmental committees which are not essential to the functioning of the Division of Academic Affairs, setting an example herself by doing so with respect to college committees.

4. Reflection and Recommendations

“Caring expresses ethically significant ways in which we matter to each other, transforming interpersonal relatedness into something beyond ontological necessity or brute survival” (Bowden, 1997, p. 1). Amidst a global pandemic, faculty around the world were faced with an unparalleled crisis that extended beyond the need to move classes from face-to-face delivery modes to online offerings. And, while universities typically function from the perspective of broad moral philosophies related to an ethic of justice, we as members of the leadership team at this institution, found that it was insufficient. As Virginia Held (2006) explains, moral theories related to the ethics of justice prioritize “equality, impartiality, fair distribution, and noninterference” while the ethics of care emphasize “trust, solidarity, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness” (p. 15). As our faculty attended to adjustments in course delivery, they also struggled with personal fears of well-being and safety, concerns over loss of employment affecting significant others, family, friends, and wide-spread helplessness. In this context, then, it was essential that our approach to managing our respective departments had to meet faculty where they were, provide both professional and personal support, and maintain an elevated level of empathy when tackling all the problems that emerged. As we look back on the choices we made, the strategies we employed, and the efforts to maintain the feasibility of our departments and college, we see both successes and failures. Here, we consider what worked and what we would do differently.

4.1 Mixed Results

The effort to build trust and rapport has rendered mixed results. For some of us, those relationships have manifested better working dynamics, a faculty willing to do all that is asked and more. For example, faculty who previously were unwilling to adapt in their pedagogical modality were now willing to teach online or within the general education curriculum. For some of us, those efforts seem to have rendered little, and as a result, many of the needed changes have been met with resistance or refusal. Some faculty chose to leave the institution, threatened retaliation, or held us emotionally hostage when they didn’t get their way.

Reflecting on our communication strategies, with regard to changes in teaching modalities, we realized the need for improvement. Confusion over what the new modalities meant to content delivery and classroom management was rampant. Changes in the number of people allowed in classrooms based on social distancing guidelines were modified the week before classes began and created additional burdens and considerable stress for the faculty affected by these changes.

5. Recommendations

Based on our experiences addressing these challenges, we realize that recommendations to address them moving forward is critical. Since the semester has started we also recognize how our actions as leaders affect other areas on campus such as: Informational Technology (I.T.), admissions, upper administration, facilities management, advising, the registrar, and the broader campus community. With clarity and consistency of messages we experienced a considerably positive impact on the ability to navigate this

situation. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations:

1. Effective communication is multi-directional. Our roles require that we function as mediators in a transactional model. This requires us to communicate effectively to multiple constituents and to be responsive to needs under COVID-19.
2. As much progress that has been made in the Academy regarding gender equity, we still face unique challenges as a result of being women in leadership roles (i.e. emotional labor). Therefore, we recommend finding/developing networks of women peers in leadership positions to elicit support and mentorship.
3. Self-care is critical to modeling positive leadership. This is not to say that we recommend leaders add yet another task on their to-do list; however, we encourage leaders to find ways to incorporate activities that promote wellness in their personal AND professional settings. As an example, while preparing this article, we engaged in work sessions which provided therapeutic elements such as: shared support for one another, an outlet to express concerns, and a sense of comradery as we address the unknowns together.

6. Conclusion

Exploring the challenges faced by higher education leaders was discussed. In particular, the first-person experiences of women leaders shared their reflections on how they planned, implemented, and reflected while addressing the academic environment under COVID-19. We discussed the strategies we employed and challenges we underwent while living in this context. It is our hope that these reflections supplied insight on the challenges we faced and recommendations for consideration while others in the higher education context respond to COVID-19 constraints.

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