THE JOURNAL OF LITERACY AND TECHNOLOGY

FALL 2020

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and Practice

Fall 2020   ISSN: 1535-0975

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Sudden Shifts to Fully Online: Perceptions of Campus Preparedness and Implications for Leading Through Disruption

Article Info	Abstract

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The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on all sectors, including colleges and universities, has been extensive. The pivot to a suddenly online teaching and work environment raises important questions regarding student learning and development, curriculum design and delivery, virtual team engagement, and the very future of higher education, and as highlighted in this essay, the ways in which institutions adapted quickly to the circumstances of a global pandemic sheds important light on the dynamics of crisis leadership in higher education.

This essay examines varying perceptions of campus preparedness in response to this shift to a suddenly online environment based on an early survey that was distributed in March 2020. The exploratory findings from this project highlight relevant themes for the analysis and practice of leading others in a suddenly online context, including the deployment of careful and systematic emergency operations plans to prepare for such shifts, ongoing leadership communication, familiarity with and an investment in the infrastructure to support fully online work and learning modalities, and a people-centered response to the crisis. The essay concludes with research-informed recommendations as colleges and universities enter what will likely be an increasingly ambiguous and uncertain period ahead.

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The first reported case of COVID-19 in the United States was detected in Snohomish County, Washington, on January 19, 2020. In the weeks to follow, cases became more prevalent in other regions of the country, leading the World Health Organization to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30. By March 11, when the WHO characterized the outbreak as a pandemic, the number of COVID-19 cases outside of China increased 13-fold, and the number of affected countries tripled (World Health Organization, 2020). As of September 2020, there were more than 31 million confirmed cases of the virus, with over 20% of the cases (approaching 7 million) reported in the United States, and nearly 1 million deaths attributed to the virus worldwide (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020).

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on all sectors, including colleges and universities, has been extensive. In short order, college and university campuses announced the transition to virtual instruction, restrictions on employee and student international travel, and new policies for working from home. The unprecedented activities of recent months, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the operations and academic calendar for the 2020–2021 academic year, are disorienting and unsettling for the higher education community. As reported in a recent survey of college leaders conducted by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) (2020), the leading challenges facing higher education have been further exacerbated as a result of the pandemic, including government funding, student mental health, diversity and inclusion, and affordability. Furthermore, as supported by a recent study by Aucejo,

French, Araya, and Zafar (2020), the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on low-income students, who are 55% more likely to have delayed graduation due to COVID-19 than their higher-income peers. The pandemic is apt to accelerate trends that were already underway, and one area that will probably be most impacted by the pandemic involves the further integration of technology into the design and delivery of course instruction and into the college and university workplace. As Marcus (2020) reports, "These trends may not transform higher education, but they are likely to accelerate the integration of technology into it" (para 7).

The pivot to a suddenly online environment—the focus of this special issue—is relevant for the many stakeholders who are engaged in the activities of higher education, with cascading effects on the work of nearly every college and university department. The accelerated migration to this fully online context raises important questions regarding student learning and development, curriculum design and delivery, virtual team engagement, and the very future of higher education, and as highlighted in this essay, the ways in which institutions adapted quickly to the circumstances of a global pandemic sheds important light on the dynamics of crisis leadership in higher education that may serve as a guide for the unpredictable yet almost certainly messy and tumultuous period ahead.

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The Network for Change and Continuous Innovation (NCCI)[1] brings together individuals and institutions with a shared interest in the areas of leadership, change management, organizational performance, and innovation in higher education. As Gigliotti and Scott (2019) wrote in an essay prior to the pandemic:

> Change and innovation remain as important today as they did 20 years ago when this unique higher education association was founded. NCCI helps leverage and scale change in higher education. Across institutions, states, and nations, the association provides an infrastructure to share experiences, explore best practices, and partner in developing new approaches. The scope and scale of changes that our members are making in their institutions now is exponentially larger than even a few years ago, as is the impact of those changes.

Crises provide unique opportunities for invention and reinvention in higher education (Gigliotti, 2016, 2019), and although the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not entirely clear, the crisis of our time is a watershed moment for higher education and likely the source of significant change and transformation across each of our institutions.

A survey was conducted with NCCI members in the early days of the pandemic to explore the issues of institutional crisis preparedness, the desired competencies for crisis leaders in higher education, and the ways in which the association could best support member institutions amid this public health emergency. This essay examines the preliminary survey findings which address varying perceptions of campus preparedness in response to this shift to a suddenly online environment. The exploratory findings from this project highlight relevant themes for the analysis and practice of leading others in a suddenly online context, including the deployment of careful and systematic emergency operations plans to prepare for such shifts, ongoing leadership communication, familiarity with and an investment in the infrastructure to support fully online work and learning modalities, and a people-centered response to the crisis. The essay concludes with specific recommendations as colleges and universities enter what will likely be an increasingly ambiguous and uncertain period ahead.

Literature Review

Rapid Shifts to Online Learning and Work Environments.

The growth in distance education was underway prior to the pandemic. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), in fall 2018, of the 19,645,918 total postsecondary student population, 6,932,074 students (approximately 35%) were enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and 3,257,987 students (approximately 17%) were enrolled in exclusively distance education courses. One source of distance education includes online-degree programs, which are now widespread across the higher education ecosystem. As Kelderman (2020)

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[1] NCCI is an association of nearly 100 member institutions ranging from smaller community colleges to large research universities for which I currently serve on the Board of Directors. For more information regarding NCCI, please visit https://www.ncci-cu.org/.

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notes, "Nationwide, enrollment in online-degree programs has ballooned since the Great Recession, increasing nearly 60 percent from 2012 to 2017 at public four-year colleges, and more than 66 percent at private nonprofit institutions." Certainly, the rapid shift to remote instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic raises interesting questions regarding the differences between carefully planned and coordinated approaches to distance education and online learning, and what many are labeling emergency remote teaching. Effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development (Branch & Dousay, 2015; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014), and decisions regarding the design of online educational offerings must consider the following dimensions: modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, instructor role online, student role online, online communication synchrony, role of online assessments, and source of feedback (Means et al., 2014). As Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) indicate, "the distinction is important between the normal, everyday type of effective online instruction and that which we are doing in a hurry with bare minimum resources and scant time: emergency remote teaching."

Despite the growth of distance education and partially and fully online degree programs prior to the pandemic, the percentage of faculty who had never taught online remained quite high. According to *Inside Higher Ed*'s 2019 Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology, conducted with Gallup, 46% of faculty taught an online course, an increase from 44% in 2018 and 30% in 2013. In his summary of the survey findings, Lederman (2019) noted the following:

Lest anyone think that that trend means professors have fully embraced the value and benefits of online education, though, think again. While three-quarters of instructors who have taught online believe it made them better teachers in several key ways, professors remain deeply divided about whether online learning can produce student learning outcomes equivalent to face-to-face instruction.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all faculty have now become increasingly more familiar with some degree of online or remote instruction. In a remarkably swift period, colleges and universities across the country cancelled face-to-face classes and mandated that faculty move their courses online to help prevent the spread of the virus. According to Hodges et al. (2020), "the primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis." In a survey of faculty conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "about 60 percent of faculty members, and a similar share of academic administrators, said spring's courses were worse than face-to-face offerings" (Williams June, 2020). Thus, despite valiant efforts to ensure continuity of course instruction, the shift of planned in-person courses to suddenly online modalities was found to be disruptive, and the level of learning perhaps of lesser quality than what otherwise would have been possible through in-person instruction. Furthermore, as found in a survey conducted by Ithaca S&R of 15,000 students at 21 colleges and universities, respondents indicated a desire

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for more communication about the changes being made in response to the pandemic and increased feelings of disconnection with other students and their instructors as a result of the shift to virtual instruction (Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020).

In addition to the dramatic shifts in the delivery of course content, the norms and expectations of the workplace were upended as a result of the pandemic. According to Bowen (2013), trends in information technology have contributed to significant changes in management and administrative processes, research and scholarship, teaching, and the overall work experience and office environment. Teleworking emerged in the 1970s, but as Markarian (2007) highlights (as cited in Waters, 2015), it quickly gained popularity in the 1980s in response to concerns regarding energy, transportation, and the environment. Prior to the pandemic, telecommuting was on the rise, with an increase of 159% in the number of people telecommuting in the United States between 2005 and 2017 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Waters (2015) highlights the benefits of telecommuting, particularly in reducing some of the barriers for work in colleges and universities, but she also addresses many of the challenges that perhaps may have limited telecommuting arrangements in higher education and the myriad challenges such arrangements present for communication, management, and trust (Dalhstrom, 2013).

As noted by Guyot and Sawhill (2020), "the COVID-19 pandemic is, among other things, a massive experiment in telecommuting. Up to half of American workers are currently working from home, more than double the fraction who worked from home (at least occasionally) in 2017–

18." As Reeves and Rothwell (2020) report, higher-income workers are much more likely to be working from home during the pandemic. The resistance to adopting flexible work arrangements prior to the pandemic, coupled with the realities of not being able to convert some roles and responsibilities among college and university personnel into a virtual delivery, were two of the many challenges facing leaders in responding to this necessary pivot for the college and university workplace.

Underpinnings of Leadership and Crisis Leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic and sweeping impact on our personal and professional ways of being meet the criteria of what Weick (1993) refers to as a cosmology episode, which "occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system" (p. 633). As he goes on to suggest, "What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together" (p. 633). Those engaged in leadership play an active role in helping others make sense of the conditions within their environments, and the role of sensemaking becomes especially prominent and heightened during times of crisis, change, and disruption (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Stephens, et al., 2020; Weick, 1988, 1993, 1995). Leaders at all levels of higher education faced a number of challenges preceding the pandemic, particularly those dealing with access, affordability, student preparation and instruction, financial stability, public perceptions, campus safety, and diversity and inclusion, in addition to the sweeping array of operational demands required to run a highly complex and

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decentralized organization with multiple missions and a wide array of stakeholders (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017). The pandemic added greater responsibility to the work of higher education leadership, and it remains at the top of mind as colleges and universities prepare for an academic year that is laden with uncertainty.

Leadership is viewed through a wide array of lenses, and it is broadly defined in the literature. Two prominent definitions that take a communication-centered orientation include Northouse's (2018) view of leadership as a "process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 5) and Johnson and Hackman's (2018) definition of "human (symbolic) communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 12). In exploring leadership through the prism of communication, it becomes important to consider not just the actions and behaviors of an individual with positional power, but rather the ways in which leadership, as a process, emerges through the interactions, interplay, and convergence of leader, followers, and context—what Kellerman (2016) characterizes as the leadership system. As recent communication scholarship highlights, followers play a highly significant and critical role in making leadership possible (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013a, 2013b; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b 2019). Thus, as we consider the shift to a suddenly online learning and work environment, the actions, competencies, and decisions of those in formal leadership roles is worthy of analysis, as will be highlighted and explained in the pages ahead, but so too must we consider the ways in which

followers—including the many stakeholders involved in higher education institutions—co-construct the experiences of a suddenly online teaching and learning environment. Leadership can be found at all levels of an organization, and as both a formal and informal, planned and unplanned way of being (Gigliotti, Ruben, & Goldthwaite, 2017; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b). Approaching leadership as a communicative process hones in on the ways in which "power and agency are widely dispersed (rather than concentrated in the hands of leaders) and are marshalled by both non-leaders and leaders to co-construct leadership and followership identities" (Tourish, 2014, p. 80). Thus, from a communication paradigm, we have come to recognize verbal and nonverbal messages delivered by leaders as one source of leadership communication, along with the many other strategies, structures, and processes that make social influence possible (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019), and the training and development of leaders at all levels of higher education, particularly those efforts focused on crisis situations, must consider and privilege the criticality and complexity of communication (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2018; Wallace & Becker, 2018).

One final stream of literature that is worth acknowledging prior to discussing some of the central research findings is the growing body of work in crisis leadership in higher education and what it might mean in navigating the realities of a suddenly online workplace and learning ecosystem. As Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2018) acknowledge, an organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event, or series of events, that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals (p. 7). The

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pandemic has revealed an abundance of threats and opportunities for higher education—exposing that which is broken and forging new opportunities for reinvention and renewal that may now be possible (Ruben, 2020). I have come to view crises as both externally imposed and socially constructed (Gigliotti, 2019, forthcoming), and the perception of crisis among followers, constituents, or stakeholders requires a leadership response that treats the issue or situation with importance. In considering the types of events or situations that might develop into crises of significance for colleges and universities, I offer the following definition:

> Crises are events or situations of significant magnitude that threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, disrupt the ways in which the organization functions, have a cascading influence on leadership responsibilities and obligations across units/divisions, and require an immediate response from leaders. (p. 61)

According to each of these dimensions, there is a widely shared view of the pandemic as an unsettling and paradigm-altering crisis of significant magnitude—one that alters our ways of being, connecting, working, and learning. As Yan (2020) writes, "The widely implemented social distancing measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic have generated one unprecedented shift. That is, various types of human social interactions (e.g., shopping, banking, learning, meeting, and entertaining) are shifted from dominantly offline to dominantly online" (p. 2). For leaders in higher education, the uniqueness of the moment, coupled with the overwhelming uncertainty regarding the virus and the wave(s) that might lie ahead,

make the actions and decisions particularly complex. Consequently, this crisis calls for careful analysis of the actions and behaviors of leaders in supporting the shifts required.

Colleges and universities face especially unique challenges when dealing with crises, due in part to the presence of a decentralized organizational structure, reliance on committee-based decision-making, and tradition of shared governance that might lead to slower and more participatory methods of crisis response (Gigliotti, 2019). Crises require immediate attention (Laermer, 2003; Mitroff, 2004), a coordinated and centralized response (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2018), and a dual focus on both the short-term and long-term implications of any decisions that might be made in response to the crisis (Gigliotti, 2019; Klann, 2003); yet there is a long-standing expectation of careful, deliberate, and democratic decision-making efforts in higher education that might restrict urgent responses, alignment with centralized policies and guidance, and short-term triage efforts. Colleges and universities are regularly criticized for being slow-moving operations, and agility may at times seem countercultural and perhaps even threatening to the core values of the academy (Utz, 2020). However, as detailed in earlier sections, colleges and universities engaged in colossal and commendable efforts to pivot quickly to fully online learning and work environments, and some institutions of higher education were among the first organizations of any kind to close physical operations and embrace social distancing in the early days of the pandemic in the United States (Baker, Hartocollis, & Weise, 2020). The exploratory findings from this study of college and university personnel provide a glimpse into perceptions of campus preparedness and desired leadership

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competencies in navigating the dramatic disruptions posed by the pandemic, and as highlighted by the emergent themes detailed ahead, the shift to a suddenly online context requires a focus on the deployment of careful and systematic emergency operations plans to prepare for such shifts, ongoing leadership communication, familiarity with and an investment in the infrastructure to support fully online work and learning modalities, and a people-centered response to the crisis.

Methodology

Upon receiving IRB approval from Rutgers University, the survey was distributed on March 9, in the very early days of the pandemic in the United States, and it remained open for two weeks. Additional reminders were distributed via NCCI committee and communities of practice chairs. Eighty individuals accessed the survey, and nearly 30 respondents provided responses to the open-ended questions resulting in nearly 20 pages of qualitative data. The final data set comprised of respondents from at least 18 institutions, representing varying units across their respective institutions, including senior administration and staff roles in offices of the chancellor, academic affairs, administration and finance, organizational development and effectiveness, change management, information technology, human resources, and alumni and student relations. Using a constant comparative approach to data analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019), the qualitative survey responses were coded based on dominant themes, and subsequent reviews of the data helped the researcher refine, condense, and modify the central

themes highlighted in the sections that follow.

Findings

Crisis Preparation.

Respondents were asked to consider perceptions of institutional crisis preparedness at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic. Individuals noted the following areas where their campuses seemed best prepared. First, as several respondents noted, the existence of an emergency operations plan and the ability to quickly set the plan into action were important dimensions of crisis preparation in the early days of the pandemic. The existence and deployment of this plan, typically coordinated by a COVID-19 emergency response team, allowed institutions to respond swiftly to the crisis.

The demonstration of ongoing communication from senior leadership was also recognized as an area of strength by survey respondents. As one individual noted, "Communications have been ongoing and clear and concise with detailed instructions on impacts and what community members need to do." And as highlighted by another respondent, "Leadership is keeping on top of changing recommendations daily and communicating." Prompt, clear, and ongoing communication are markers of excellence as they relate to crisis communication, and many respondents seemed satisfied by their institution's response in this area. Interestingly, for some, the realization of the severity of the crisis required a shift in communication and response, as detailed by the following comment: "Once they realized how serious it was they've caught up to reality and are

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now much better at communicating and providing helpful resources."

Germane to the scope of this essay and the focus of this special issue, the institution's history with technology, online learning, and remote work policies played a significant role in perceptions of crisis preparedness. The availability of technology and evidence of an agile response from the campus community to support rapid shifts to remote learning and virtual work arrangements were both highlighted as particular strengths. One individual complimented the institution's "access to many tools and experts to help transition courses and work to a virtual environment." As another respondent suggested, "Our Office of Digital Education has existed for 20 years and is able to be a critical resource to faculty as they transition to remote teaching and learning. Our remote technologies (VPN, Zoom, Teams) were well-utilized by staff prior to the crisis, which has been helpful." The history preceding the crisis matters, and prior adoption of systems, resources, and equipment to support a rapid shift of this kind played an important role in perceptions of crisis preparedness.

One final area of strength highlighted by survey respondents reflected a people-centered response to the crisis by members of the senior leadership team. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the widespread disruption it invoked within institutions of higher education contributed to an environment of high uncertainty and, for some, anxiety. As noted in one respondent's response, "While no one has experienced anything quite like this before, having strong leaders who care about the well-being of the students, faculty and staff—as well as the university as an institution—is a definite strength." This

appreciation for a people-centered response to the crisis was prominent in some of the survey responses regarding the impact of the crisis on students who needed to return home safely and on employees who needed support in quickly transitioning to a remote work environment.

Initial Concerns.

Several of the themes noted as areas of strength were also recognized by many individuals as areas for greatest improvement at their institution. For example, timely, clear, and ongoing communication from senior leaders in response to the crisis was recognized as both a preparedness element and an area of greatest concern. Reflecting on the lack of communication in the early days of the pandemic, one respondent offered the following: "Communication has been poor. The messaging is not being handled centrally so different groups are getting different messages. There is no regular cadence of communication so no one knows when to expect updates, which is drowning central offices in emails asking when they will get info. Additionally, most messages that contain substance come after hours, which people are taking as a sign of avoidance by leadership." This sentiment was shared by others who took issue with the institution's failure to "set up consistent, transparent, broad, timely communication channels" and to "capture and share organizational artifacts and knowledge as decisions are made."

Like the reaction to the perceived absence of communication from senior leadership, some respondents expressed concern with the delayed response by individuals with emergency management responsibilities to adequately address the crisis. For example, as one person noted,

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"We seemed least prepared in our ability to take decisive action. We are still doing a lot of wait and see before we're willing to make the decision." Another respondent characterized their institution as being "late to the game," a sentiment shared by others who compared the institution's response to nearby companies in the region: "The response has been slow and the institution could have been more proactive in responding to COVID-19. Other nearby companies mandated remote working weeks prior to our institution."

Bearing in mind the importance, noted previously, of an institution's history with virtual learning and remote work, the reluctance to embrace trends in either of these areas in the past undoubtedly complicated the sudden transition to remote work required in this situation. For example, as suggested by one respondent, "Our institution is not well versed in these virtual tools and has always been rather conservative with remote work options. Some people even seem to think they still need to be in the office despite not being needed on campus just because they do not enjoy working from home." This sentiment was widely shared by survey respondents, as illustrated in the following response: "We have resisted staff requests to work from home for years; the university had to pivot quickly and find ways to equip and be okay with thousands of staff members working remotely." Additionally, survey results showed that "antiquated and paper-fueled processes," coupled with the very real difficulties of converting some in-person courses and programs to a fully online delivery, posed challenges for college and university personnel.

Inadequate efforts to appropriately engage the campus community and help stakeholders cope with the disruptive change was a final area of concern in the early days of the pandemic. This important dimension of crisis leadership that some perceived to be lacking involved "managing emotions" and "helping people cope with the isolation and change" triggered by the global pandemic.

Desired Crisis Leadership Competencies.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the qualities most desired in higher education leaders in response to the public health crisis. As supported by much of the crisis management and crisis leadership literature, leading during times of crisis is a complicated endeavor, particularly due to the high stakes, ambiguous and uncertain conditions, and competing views of internal and external stakeholders. The following qualities/abilities emerged from the survey data as most preferred:

- Active listening
- Adaptability/flexibility
- Balance short- and long-term priorities
- Calm under pressure
- Clear, concise, and ongoing communication
- Compassionate, and committed to the well-being of students, faculty, and staff
- Confidence
- Creative/Innovative
- Discipline
- Emotionally intelligent
- Empathy
- Fairness
- Familiarity with best practices
- Fast but thoughtful decision-making

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- Holistic point of view
- Honesty/integrity
- Humility/vulnerability
- Level-headed
- Mindful
- Optimistic
- Present, engaged, and responsive
- Resilient
- Resourceful
- Share clear expectations
- Transparency

The scale of the COVID-19 crisis is staggering, and its potential impact on institutions of higher education is extraordinary. Given the complexity of the crisis, three quotes presented in the survey data may serve as a useful guide for leading higher education institutions through this unprecedented situation. First, as one respondent indicated, compassionate risk-taking is most critical, for "we are going to have to be willing to take risks to survive this." Another individual recognized the need for one to "interpret and deliver copious changing information in a coherent manner," all the while having the "ability to inspire us to be our best selves in a time of uncertainty." Finally, as one person offered, "Redefining our priorities is critical. What was important two months ago is probably not what is most important now. Make decisions and make them quickly. We need to be ready to respond to the current situation at a moment's notice and de-prioritize things that are no longer top priority."

Infrastructure for Community Support.

A final question within the survey asked respondents to consider the ways in which NCCI could best support individuals and institutions during this challenging time. The open-ended responses are organized around five action items, which are also likely relevant to the work of other professional associations and consortia engaged in efforts to support university personnel:

- Deliver best practices for effective crisis management/leadership and ideas for leading teams and providing emotional support during changing times.

- Develop an infrastructure to help members learn from what other universities are doing to support students, faculty, and staff, and to identify approaches that are most and least effective.

- Provide links to member institution websites to highlight how they are addressing the crisis.

- Create virtual discussion or message boards to engage members in conversation with others and learn how others are adjusting their work to support their institution.

- Continue to offer webinars with content focused specifically on navigating current circumstances.

As these action items seem to suggest, professional associations and institution-specific centers and support units can play an important role in developing a platform for the exchange of relevant resources, an infrastructure for the exchange of salient best practices, and the development of community among geographically dispersed colleagues—each of which takes on an even greater level of relevance during times of organizational and environmental crisis.

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Discussion and Implications

Crises reveal the connected, interwoven, and interdependent features of the human condition. Within times of crisis, we can see more clearly what is broken, what is in need of healing, and what matters. As Solnit (2020) posits,

> When a storm subsides, the air is washed clean of whatever particulate matter has been obscuring the view, and you can often see farther and more sharply than at any other time. We may feel free to pursue change in ways that seemed impossible while the ice of the status quo was locked up. We may have a profoundly different sense of ourselves, our communities, our systems of production, and our future.

At this time, we find ourselves at only a partial and tentative moment of reprieve. We can look behind us to explore the immediate impact of the pandemic and the impact on leading sudden shifts to fully online work and learning environments, while also looking ahead to the inevitable disruptions that might continue to threaten the activities and operations of higher education. In consideration of the preliminary findings of this study, several paradoxes emerge that can contribute to how we engage in the analysis, exploration, interrogation, and practice of leading in times of disruption, uncertainty, and volatility.

The first paradox involves a craving for certainty, clarity, and information during a time of widespread uncertainty. In the immediate pivot to a fully online environment, frequent and ongoing communication from campus leadership was acknowledged as both an area of strength and an area for improvement by survey respondents. As we look ahead to the upcoming academic year and the potential for ongoing waves of disruption as a result of the virus, the desire for clarity during a time that is noticeably lacking such precision can help to guide as well as complicate approaches to leadership communication.

Second, the shift to a suddenly online environment for teaching, learning, and work exposed the affordances of available technologies (Leonardi, 2013) while also revealing the deficiencies that can result from a lack of human connection (Murthy, 2020). The sounds and scenes of the last few months—virtual graduation celebrations to honor the contributions and accomplishments of the graduating class, images of loved ones exchanging conversations separated by glass dividers, the chorus of shared music resonating from the physically distanced balconies of Italy, the routine cheers in New York City in support of first responders, and the now normalized parades and Zoom gatherings to celebrate special occasions—all serve as poignant reminders of the desire and need for emotional human connection during a time of physical and social distancing. The survey findings point to the importance of demonstrating and displaying care for the well-being of the entire community, and in navigating future shifts to fully online ways of being, leaders at various levels will need to continue to explore ways of communicating care and cultivating connection in both physical and mediated modalities.

The final paradox—and one that will continue to complicate the efforts of higher education leadership—is the need for swift and agile responses in a sector that prides itself on careful and collaborative decision-making. When crises strike, colleges and

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universities are held to the same expectations for a speedy and coordinated response as any other sector (Gigliotti, 2019), and as described by several of the survey respondents, the ability to quickly deploy an emergency plan in response to the outbreak of the pandemic was recognized as both a source of strength and area for improvement.

In light of these three paradoxes, below are several implications for theory, research, and practice during this unique historical moment:

- Revisit emergency response plans based on how the institution responded to the outbreak in March 2020, and critically consider how to move forward in what will likely be an increasingly ambiguous and uncertain environment for colleges and universities.

- Solicit feedback from key stakeholders representing various parts of the institution with a goal of learning the lessons, impact, and implications of the shift to suddenly online on teaching, learning, and workplace engagement.

- Crises threaten reputations and disrupt operations, and they require immediate responses and both frequent and ongoing communication from leaders. At both an individual and collective level, analyze the communication surrounding the shift to suddenly online, and through the lenses of representative stakeholders, consider the ways in which these messages align with the unit, department, or institution's mission, and how future messages on such topics might offer expertise, instill hope, build community, and allow stakeholders to engage in the decisions that impact the institution at large.

- Pursue physical and virtual infrastructures to support community, including the implementation of robust learning management systems and appropriate training opportunities for using such systems, sharing resources on ways of cultivating connections when leading virtual teams, and creating opportunities for forging new interdisciplinary relationships across the institution that can help ignite reinvention strategies that might be necessary to move the institution forward.

- Recognizing the impact on student well-being, consider the following research-informed recommendations from Blankstein et al. (2020) based on their study of student perceptions: continue to communicate with students; rethink how to adapt technical and specialized coursework for online instruction; enhance connection and collaboration with students in fully online modalities; invest in academic and financial advising; and target students with the greatest need. As the authors suggest, and as supported by many recent studies, "Students from groups that were historically underserved and marginalized before the pandemic were more likely to face challenges during the spring 2020 term" (p. 21), and it is incumbent on leaders across higher education to explore ways of best supporting equity, inclusion, and success across the student lifecycle.

- Reimagine the purpose of higher education and revisit how the mission of the unit, department, or institution may meet the needs of a post-COVID world. Many pundits are predicting that the pandemic will be the catalyst to

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and Practice

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forever change higher education, and in consideration of our collective and sudden shift to fully online, the conditions are ripe for some shared sensemaking on reasons for pursuing work in this sector, ideas for engaging more meaningfully with our students and colleagues, and principles to help guide how we intend to handle the inevitable future crises.

The themes raised throughout this article shed important insight on the varying perceptions of campus preparedness in response to this shift to a suddenly online environment; however, it is important to acknowledge several research limitations. The collection of data occurred during very early days of the crisis in the United States and perceptions of leadership during this period were still being established. As such, the survey findings accurately capture perceptions at the time of data collection, but not necessarily as the crisis unfolded throughout the spring semester and summer months. Additionally, although individuals from several institutions responded to the survey, more rigorous data collection from numerous individuals at each of the represented institutions would strengthen the data and perhaps expand on some of the exploratory themes discussed in this article. Finally, as with any qualitative methodology, the ideas raised throughout this article are not meant to be exhaustive or generalizable. Rather, these findings pose important connections and questions for those engaged in higher education leadership, and it is my hope that these themes will prove useful for those engaged in future research on this topic.

Conclusion

Ulmer et al. (2018) present a view of crises as opportunities for learning and improvement, "viewing them as they are perceived in Chinese culture, where the symbol for crisis in the Mandarin language is interpreted as *dangerous opportunity*" (p. 4). The danger, fear, and uncertainty found in this moment can paralyze our institutions; yet we may also use this opportunity to reorient ourselves toward renewal and growth that is centered on a commitment to key stakeholders, a commitment to correction and learning, and a commitment to the core values that uphold our work across higher education (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). As the findings of this project suggest, early reactions of campus preparedness in navigating a dramatic and sudden shift to fully online centered primarily on the importance of the deployment of careful and systematic emergency operations plans to prepare for such shifts, ongoing leadership communication, familiarity with and an investment in the infrastructure to support fully online work and learning modalities, and a people-centered response to the crisis. Looking ahead, research, theory, and practice may build upon these exploratory findings in considering more fully three paradoxes that are reflective of this historic, disorienting, and unsettling historical moment—the desire for information during a time of remarkable uncertainty, the hunger for connection during a moment of social distancing, and the need for agile leadership in an environment that privileges broad engagement and practice.

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