

Conversations with leaders: Sharing perspectives on the impact of and response to COVID-19 and other crises

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Abstract

Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, through trial and error and sharing stories of successes and failures, have resulted in progress in the quest to resume what we refer to as normal or regular college life for students, faculty, and staff. However, it is doubtful that we will ever get back to the exact same situation that we were in prior to March of 2020, and that may not even be an appropriate goal for which to strive. We can learn from this pandemic and continuously improve what we do based on lessons learned rather than simply focusing on getting back to some sort of prepandemic “normal” state. This article and this entire edition of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* are part of those efforts to document our experiences so we all can learn from them and move forward with that knowledge in mind.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major disruptions to institutes of higher education across the country and beyond. Those disruptions began on a large scale in March 2020, with the sudden closure of campuses and the move to remote work and online education. This continued through 2020 and into 2021, at which time vaccines started to be available. However, COVID-19 variants, along with lower-than-expected vaccination rates in the United States, meant that educational leaders continued to deal with variations of the same issues they were dealing with at the start of the pandemic.

We often discuss the effects of the pandemic on institutes of higher education in general or broad terms. Often, those discussions tend to focus on the changes in educational

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methods, or the rapid (sometimes literally overnight) switch from face-to-face to online education. However, when we look deeper, we find that there are a host of additional issues that those of us in higher education have had to manage as a result of the pandemic. For example:

- Financial issues have affected students' ability to pay for courses and have also affected college and university budgets.
- Physical health and safety issues, from cleaning practices to mask-wearing to social distancing to physical isolation, have affected all aspects of campus life.
- Mental health issues have affected students, faculty, and staff, each in a variety of different ways.
- International students have faced issues associated with travel and vaccine, testing and other mandates in both their host and home countries.
- COVID-related restrictions have meant that athletics, student affairs, and other nonacademic aspects of higher education have been modified, curtailed, or completely shut down.

When considering the issues noted above, it is also important to think about context. While those of us in higher education were dealing with these issues on a professional level, we were also focused on our own health and safety, and the health and safety of our families and friends, as were our students and colleagues. The context itself added layers of stress and anxiety to already-difficult situations.

Another contextual point to consider is that there was (and is) no rulebook or set of instructions for how to successfully manage the workings of our institutions during this pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented effects on all of us. Traditional rules, policies, procedures, and guidelines quickly became obsolete or unrealistic. In many cases, problem solving required rapid decisions with very little, if any, data on which to base those decisions. Immediate action was also required, as any lag in action could result in putting people in life-threatening situations. Furthermore, the evolution of the pandemic meant that even effective decisions and actions taken one day were often revised or scrapped entirely the next day due to changing conditions, additional science, or medical advice. Add to this situation the polarizing opinions and subsequent politicization among stakeholders regarding health and safety advice we were all given, and we have a summary of the difficult environment in which all of us have operated throughout the pandemic.

Even though all these issues affected us in higher education, we are beginning to realize and differentiate the ways we were affected based on our positions in our organizations. The purpose of this article is to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education leaders in three different types of positions in higher education. Looking at perspectives from leaders in three different positions helps understand the variety and type of issues faced on a more detailed level than is often discussed.

The three leaders contributing to this chapter are as follows:

Dr. Steve Schmidt is Professor and Program Coordinator of the Adult Education Program at East Carolina University (ECU), which is located in Greenville, North Carolina. His program offers a Master of Arts in Adult Education and three graduate-level certificates: Community College Instruction; Education in Healthcare Professions; and Student Affairs in Higher Education. In addition to Dr. Schmidt, faculty in ECU's Adult Education Program includes one associate professor, one assistant professor, one fixed-term faculty member and one half-time fixed-term faculty member. Enrollment at ECU is approximately 28,000 students.

The program coordinator position, sometimes referred to as program manager or program director, is responsible for the management of the educational program or programs within a specific discipline. Duties include coordinating admissions and graduations, academic advising, and working with students when special circumstances or as needs arise. Curriculum management, including new course development, course revision, and course scheduling, is also part of this position.

Dr. Leona English is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her department has five faculty (two professors, one associate professor, and two faculty who are long-term appointments). The department offers two degrees, one a Master of Adult Education, which is a blend of online and in-person programming, and another, a new Master of Education degree in Health and Learning, that is offered all online. The university has about 3800 undergraduate students, who have traditional in-person classes. The remaining 800 students are Faculty of Education graduate students with a variety of delivery options.

Dr. Ali Carr-Chellman moved from a Deanship at the University of Idaho to a Deanship at the University of Dayton (UD) in the summer of 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. She serves as the Dean of the School of Education and Health Sciences (SEHS) at the private Marianist Catholic research university in Dayton, Ohio. SEHS includes 6 departments, more than 1200 students, and around 100 full-time faculty and staff. The number of students increased in 2020 and 2021 from around 1000 to 1200 while faculty and staff numbers remained relatively stable. Departments at UD's SEHS include Health and Sport Science, Physical Therapy, Physician Assistant Education, Teacher Education, Counselor Education and Human Services, and Educational Administration. The school offers undergraduate and graduate degrees to prepare teachers and healers to make a difference in the world every day. These include B.S., B.A., M.S., M.A., Ed.S., Ed.D., and Ph.D. degrees. In collaboration with Sinclair College, the UD Sinclair Academy creates pathways for many teachers and healers interested in starting their education at Sinclair and completing it at UD.

The Dean is the academic leader for the unit. As SEHS Dean, Ali is responsible for many tasks which are primarily administrative or leadership in nature, from making sure curriculum changes get approved to sharing input on promotion and tenure decisions to simply ensuring people get paid on time. In addition, the overall strategy and vision for the unit and appropriate consultations are the responsibility of the SEHS Dean. Deans are often consulted by higher levels of organizational leadership for input on significant academic decisions including financial, curricular, strategic, student affairs, international programs, faculty/staff development, enrolment management, housing and food services, and many other functions that are necessary for operating large universities.

Each of us contributing to this chapter has included a first-person narrative of our own leadership-related experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

STEVE SCHMIDT: OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AS PROGRAM COORDINATOR

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed down face-to-face university operations virtually overnight. The university was on spring break when the pandemic hit, and by the end of the break, the administration decided that there would be an additional week's break for faculty to adjust to online instruction. Students were told to not return to campus, and faculty and staff shifted to remote work. Despite the upheaval at the university level, there was very little change to the way our program operated. All of our courses were already online, so our students were experienced online learners, and we did not have to make any

curriculum or teaching-related changes at that point. Our only face-to-face activity was a session for students completing culminating portfolios at the end of their degree programs. The portfolio process typically involved a face-to-face portfolio presentation to a panel of adult education faculty members. That presentation session was easily shifted online, and we proceeded with the semester.

At the start of the pandemic, we immediately saw changes in our students. Most students in our program are post-traditional, and many are teachers themselves. As such, some of them had difficulties transitioning their own courses and teaching from face-to-face to online. Many also dealt with the transition to at-home work, along with family-related issues such as virtual learning for their children and health and safety-related concerns of family members. However, the end of the spring 2020 semester and the summer session that year moved along with few hiccups. New student enrolments held steady, as did course enrolments for summer and fall. Program faculty voted to remove the standardized test requirement from our program applications at that point. This was something we were considering before, but the pandemic, along with the difficulties of trying to take a standardized test online, made us move forward more quickly with that policy change.

Moving into fall 2020 semester, we started to see many more cases of student burnout or fatigue. Because of our graduate certificate in education in healthcare professions, we have a good number of students who teach and work in healthcare fields, and the longer-term effects of the pandemic were taking their toll on these students, especially those working directly with COVID-19 patients. Additionally, we saw many more students withdraw from courses or simply stop participating. We heard from more students that they needed extra time on projects because they were either sick themselves, caring for sick children or other relatives, or dealing with their own students who were sick. More exceptions, extensions, and make-up assignments were provided this semester than ever before. Our field has taught us that in working with adult learners, we have to be flexible and accommodating when appropriate, and this was certainly a time to be flexible and accommodating. We limped through the fall 2020 semester and moved into spring 2021. At this point, vaccines were starting to become available, and some of our students were deemed essential workers and vaccine-eligible early in 2021. We had expected to see fewer COVID-related issues that semester, but the exact opposite happened. The spring 2021 semester was, by far, the most difficult for students and faculty in our program. It was as if everyone hit a wall and could not move forward. For example, several students graduating that semester were failing their final courses in the program, and several students were failing their final portfolio project. As in the fall, some students stopped participating in coursework and more dropped courses. Most students who had trouble that semester were dealing with the longer-term effects of the pandemic.

The spring 2021 semester saw an unprecedented number of course-related extensions, guidance and counseling sessions with students, and incomplete grades given for work to be finished after the end of the semester. We on the faculty spent more time working one-on-one with students that semester than I believe we ever had in past semesters. After having completed the spring semester, the number of student-related issues did subside for summer and fall 2021 semesters. By that point, more students had been vaccinated, had returned to face-to-face work, and were able to resume more of their regular daily activities.

From a theoretical perspective, I often considered McClusky's Theory of Margin while working through those semesters. McClusky's Theory of Margin is based on the idea that margin is the relationship between load (the amount of energy and resources a person needs to remain autonomous in society) and power (the resources the person has at their disposal to cope with load). Those with more power have more autonomy and are thus better able to learn and grow (McClusky, 1970). In this case, a series of both internal and

external factors related to the pandemic gradually increased students' load of life, thereby dissipating their energy and decreasing the power they had to deal with that load. Faculty allowing extra time, extensions, and taking additional measures to help students complete their coursework helped to provide them with some degree of power, which helped some of them to be successful.

In reflecting on what has been beneficial to me as program coordinator during this pandemic, a few things come to mind. First, the faculty members in the adult education program have always been very flexible and able to adjust quickly based on what situations demand. The pandemic was certainly an extreme situation, but flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to work closely together and come up with solutions to problems as they arose was a great help. Leadership at the department level was also critical, but more in the sense that department leadership empowered us to solve our problems and do what was necessary to keep the program, students, and faculty moving forward.

Revised graduate school policies helped us at the program coordinator level to work with students more effectively. The graduate school implemented a pass/fail grading system for several semesters during the 2020 and 2021 academic years. Dates for withdrawing from courses were extended farther into the semester, and efforts were made to work with individual students who had specific needs based on pandemic conditions. The responsiveness of the graduate school was also helpful when we decided to change our application materials by removing the standardized test requirement. As an aside, we have decided to permanently remove that requirement, as we have found other elements of the application to be better indicators of student success in our program.

University-level services were also helpful. The expansion of mental health counseling services through telehealth made care more readily available to students, faculty, and staff. Hardship-related grants were offered to qualified students who needed help with tuition and fees, as well.

Ending my section on a positive note, I will mention that during the 2021–22 academic year, we have had increases in program inquiries from potential students and increases in student enrolments in our programs. Much of this interest has come about as a result of people looking to change jobs or looking for new careers, often because of the pandemic.

We on the faculty have all learned to be more flexible and adjust as conditions dictate, which is a positive skill as we move forward. Relating the situation back to McClusky's Theory of Margin, we made adjustments that gave our students more power, and in doing so, we also gave ourselves more power. Having worked through the pandemic this far and having kept the program running smoothly (or as smoothly as possible) gave us confidence that we can manage going forward.

LEONA ENGLISH: OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AS DEPARTMENT CHAIR

The first day I remember really feeling the impact of COVID was St. Patrick's Day in 2020. The university went online, all St. Patrick's Day celebrations were canceled, and a great sense of fear descended. Along with the university, this small Nova Scotia town of 5000 shut down, and faculty went home to work remotely. March and April were long months and everyone felt it, especially faculty and students who were pretty much isolated. Every day there was yet another communicate from the province or the university about what we should do to avoid touching doorknobs and kettles, and anxiety reigned. Our Adult Education program continued online with few disruptions for about a month. Once summer 2020 came, we had to make decisions about putting our on-campus courses online for the

summer. Though our main program delivery was fairly consistent, when COVID announced itself, we were in the midst of implementing a new MEd in Health and Learning program, which involved learning new online systems and developing new courses. The ground was shifting, and we were not at our best in making adjustments. Well, faculty thought, we can do this for a few months. Two years later, that early phase seems easy. Academic life was changed forever.

While students in either program experienced little change initially, the health professions learners, who were dealing with COVID at work and home, soon started to voice concerns. They were dealing with a tsunami of changes: Shifting to studying education theories and practices, which was quite a departure from the lab and clinical work that often characterized their undergraduate work in nursing, dietetics, and physiotherapy; learning online for the first time in their lives; and coping with COVID complications in their offices, clinics, hospitals, and community. Most of the students in the health and learning program are women and most have children at home. The pressure of home schooling for them and their children was just too much for many of them and they progressed from handing in papers late to taking a term off from online classes. Even having them agree to change nights for class was an impossibility. The stress on faculty and students continues as we move through the COVID waves, the start-ups and the shutdowns, and the variants of the virus. Faculty did make the transition to the new online system and the new program, but not without a lot of yelling at Collaborate and Moodle. There was a lot to learn about online teaching techniques like padlets, voting buttons, chat rooms, and advanced security measures like passworded online sites.

As the chair, I was trying my best to deal with faculty stress and isolation as well as student concerns, plus my own tendency for hygge. To complicate matters, the listserv for the university's 300 teaching staff became a place for science and arts faculty to deliver an hourly diatribe aimed at the administration's handling of COVID. A further factor that really grated on faculty was dealing with toxic positivity from administrators who wanted to look at the bright side in the numerous Zoom meetings they scheduled to check in (Ehrenreich, 2009). Other colleagues outside the Faculty of Education appeared to be enjoying the extra time COVID gave them to write at home and publish articles. Nobody in my department appeared to be enjoying COVID; yet, we had to deal with it. It turns out that though we tried, we are not allowed to block our colleagues on email. The emotional labor (Malcolm, 2012) of taking phone and Zoom calls with women students who had nobody else to turn to was exhausting. Departmental faculty spent more time working one-on-one with students in those early semesters than we previously had. After the spring 2021 semester, the number of student-related issues did subside for summer and fall 2021 semesters. By that point, more students had been vaccinated, had returned to face-to-face work, and were able to resume more of their regular daily activities. Along the way, there was a resurgence of fear, of new variants, and the stress returned.

For me, the Theory of Emotional Labor (Malcolm, 2012) has been helpful in framing the effects of COVID, as it brings a critical feminist perspective into play. Women do carry a great deal of the caring work in the home, and they are often expected to be constantly caring and compassionate with their students, which can be draining. The same expectations are rarely placed on male faculty. Four out of five of our faculty are female and one has a teenager at home. While I knew that faculty carried student worries, I came to fully realize the effects of this labor during COVID. Female colleagues in other departments told me how difficult it was to homeschool their own children while teaching graduate students in similar circumstances. Women do indeed carry much of this labor and changes will take time.

Yet, all was not lost. One benefit is that we already had expertise in dealing with online teaching and students, which our colleagues in other faculties did not. Now that everyone on campus is teaching online, academic staff on campus are realizing that this mode is not a lesser form of teaching and that colleagues in the Faculty of Education have expertise that they need and want. As well, living in a small university town decreased concerns about travel and allowed us to protect ourselves from urban spread of COVID. The province and the university were strict with undergraduate students, insisting on rules, masks, and vaccines. Most complied. We felt safer than colleagues in urban situations, and that fortified us for teaching.

As I was writing this piece, my phone rang and a student who called to check in about her progress told me that doing this master's program during COVID had given her a welcome diversion from focusing on disease. Her studies in reflective practice and transformative learning were providing her an opportunity to look inward and around her for a deeper understanding of her practice and herself as a learner. Her perspective reminds me of a line from Irish poet Derek Mahon (1999): "Everything is going to be all right" and that our field matters at this time in history.

ALI CARR-CHELLMAN: OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AS DEAN

I started the pandemic as a dean at the University of Idaho, where I oversaw the immediate pivot. As was the case for most of us, we left for spring break and did not return. Our portfolio at Idaho, the land grant university for the state, included both online and face-to-face (F2F) courses. A great deal of time was immediately devoted to meetings. All via Zoom, the meetings were mostly decisions from central leadership, but sometimes they were also consultative when they could be. To be honest, very little latitude was possible for most of the actions that had to be taken. Higher-ups were meeting daily at that point with city officials, health advisors, and local stakeholders. As soon as their daily meeting was held early in the morning, they would turn to briefing the university leaders, who typically held a later afternoon meeting to inform unit level leaders who, in turn passed their information on to their colleagues. Within short order things moved from daily to weekly and eventually to monthly meetings. A great deal of time during this initial phase was spent passing along communications from central and figuring out how to implement those directives with as much fidelity as possible. Adrenaline fed the tasks of pivoting for F2F instructors who had to move their F2F courses online within a week. The meetings seemed endless and the changes daily. Stress was a daily fact of life. This ran from March through the summer.

My story is different from my colleagues. First, I must share that I am a leukemia survivor with a rare permanent form of leukemia rendering my immune system perpetually weakened. I began my new appointment as Dean at the University of Dayton (UD) in the summer of 2020. Having accepted this new position in February of 2020, we searched for schools for our children and bought a house as things were shutting down in March. In some ways, given our situation, we were grateful to have something other than just fear to occupy our time and our minds. However, in late March of 2020, my doctors locked me down. Shortly upon return from Dayton for our house hunting trip, they determined that anyone who was leaving our house should not come in contact with me, so my children visited me through a glass door we had between the bedroom and sunroom. My husband had to move to the guest room. I set up a kitchenette in our bathroom and got fresh air through a window. Our move from Idaho to Ohio took place in an RV trip across the country, as my doctors told us no hotels, no restaurants, no public restrooms, and as little outside contact as possible. It felt a lot like boarding Noah's Ark as we left without the traditional "goodbye" events.

Upon arriving in Dayton, there was a great deal to learn, as with any new job. The transition from public to private institution was significant. I was counting myself fortunate that I had four years of “cleaning” under my belt. At that point, the interim Dean had done an outstanding job of handling the initial pivot. The university had moved to test optional (admissions tests), they had prioritized student mental health, and had started serious data analysis on student retention and student success metrics. Like my colleagues, I saw the burnout, fatigue, and mental health issues descend in the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021. I also observed the gender and racial inequities interplay with pandemic issues. Grounded in their beliefs and mission, understanding their identity as a primarily residential undergraduate institution, the issues that arose around budget, burnout, and enrolment shifts, were all handled remarkably well. UD landed its largest, most racially and economically diverse, most talented, and most Pell eligible class of its history in the fall of 2020, and repeated that success in 2021. The university maintained its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) throughout the pandemic. While I do not wish to overstate the positivity with which I view the successes of UD during this time, I feel strongly that the university is not only well-run but decidedly so because of its clarity of mission and Marianist beliefs. Still, issues have emerged and remain within the unit including:

- Growing pains from increased enrolments
- Large numbers of faculty searches creating additional work
- Budget alignment issues associated with discounted tuitions
- Burnout and mental health issues across the faculty, staff, leaders, and students
- Twin pandemics of COVID and racial injustice and the events of January 6, 2021, creating even more intensity and immediacy in DEI
- Need for flexible policies and ongoing evaluation of those policies for equity, fairness, and sustainability
- Vaccine-reporting compliance (under ongoing appeal to the Supreme Court) has fallen to Dean’s offices so we are on that see-saw presently
- How to, and how much to push for work from home or return to office given the ongoing demands of the pandemic

It is clear to me that as an academic scholar leader, there are many things learned in the crucible of the pandemic. The one I would like to highlight here is the importance of caring (Sinek, 2017). Of course, I have always cared for those with whom I work, but the pandemic put this caring in a different light. Tested during this time, my care for others, from students to staff to faculty had to be brought forward in clear, demonstrable, observable fashion. People needed to not only *feel* that I cared for them individually, but they needed to *see* that I cared for their colleagues, students, staff, and other leaders across the institution. My role prior to the pandemic was focused on *facilitating*—helping others to reach their goals be they promotion, awards, new programs, grant proposals, or scholarly productivity. But now that role, while still playing in the background, became decidedly less prominent and *care* took over. Yes, caring includes facilitation, particularly in high stakes moments, but care also includes grace, prayer, concern, and even self-care to ensure I can continue to care for someone else tomorrow. We have had many mottos in our home which our children live by, and which we used to recite before they would go to school in the morning. Things like “treat others the way you want to be treated,” “you are what you repeatedly do,” “bloom where you are planted,” and “thank you God for the gift of life.” We added a new one during the pandemic, “If you let love guide you, you won’t be wrong.” There were so many ways that we worried we were doing the wrong thing and we puzzled over so many of them together, but in the end, we knew that if we let faith, care, and love guide us, we

would come out the other side in the right place. For me, that is the most important lesson learned as a dean during COVID.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As noted at the start of this chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of us in higher education in many different ways. Some of those differences are highlighted when looking at how the pandemic affected leaders at the program coordinator, department chair, and dean levels. Many of the differences are related to the scope of the specific leadership position. Those at the dean level, for example, are concerned with the same types of things as those at the department chair and program coordinator levels; however, in addition to those similar concerns, they are also more focused on the development of policy and guidelines. Those at the dean level are also charged with interpreting, communicating, and implementing policies and guidelines set by stakeholders both internal and external to their institutions. Because higher-level leaders are responsible for larger groups of people, including faculty, staff, and students, these tasks are all the more challenging. This is not to say that the positions of department chair and program coordinator have been easier during this time period. Those at the department chair and program coordinator levels faced many pandemic-related challenges, as noted in this article, but they most likely have had to handle more of the on-the-ground issues and had to serve as the first line of complaint and concern from students, faculty, and staff. Each level of leadership has had similar and different experiences simultaneously.

When we look at the individual experiences of three leaders at these three different levels of higher education administration, we see many similarities along with the differences noted previously. Regardless of title or position, concern for student, faculty, and staff well-being has been paramount. Leaders have been charged with ensuring appropriate health and safety measures were in place and followed. We in higher education often teach about the importance of flexibility in working with our students and other stakeholders; however, institutional policies and procedures are often inflexible. This time of pandemic has demonstrated that despite its bureaucratic reputation, institutes of higher education *can* be flexible and *can* pivot in very short periods of time, in response to changing conditions. We have learned that we can “practice what we preach.” In higher education, students learn through a formal curriculum, and they also learn through an informal curriculum, or one based on the actions and behaviors of their instructors and others at their institutions. What our students have learned from how we have managed through this pandemic may be as important as what they have learned in our courses.

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