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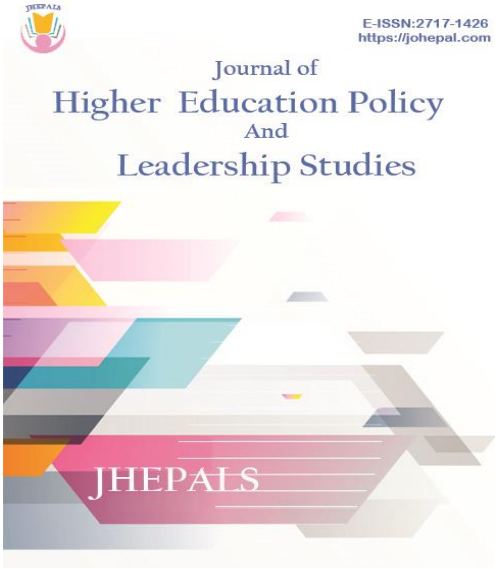
A Challenge for Higher Education Leadership: The Multi-Faceted and Irreversible Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic



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A Challenge for Higher Education Leadership: The Multi-Faceted and Irreversible Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article delves into the multifaceted challenges confronting administrative leaders in higher education, magnified by the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It employs a broad, pan-industry perspective to scrutinize the significant implications that have compelled academic institutions to modify numerous traditional strategies in response to the pandemic's disruptions. Through an analytical review of pertinent literature, the author posits that for leaders in the higher education sector to navigate effectively in the post-pandemic landscape, a keen awareness and adaptability to these emerging challenges are crucial. Additionally, the article presents counterarguments, underscoring the complexity and potential ambiguity surrounding the pandemic's actual effects. These viewpoints suggest that the perceived impacts might not be as straightforward or universally accepted as commonly presumed. This exploration aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving scenario in higher education leadership, emphasizing the necessity for strategic adaptability and critical assessment of pandemic-induced changes.

Keywords: Higher Education; Leadership; Administration; COVID-19; Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many walks of life across the world. According to the World Health Organization (2023), as of October 3, 2023, approximately 6,960,783 people have died from the virus since the onset of the pandemic. Due to the deadliness of the virus many industries were forced to shift tactics such as business models, product delivery, and day-to-day work practices. The leaders in these industries have faced difficulties in leading their organizations to adapt to these challenges while also attempting to recognize which industry changes will continue to impact their organizations after the pandemic.

This is no truer than in the higher education industry, as administrative leaders have had to guide colleges and universities through shifts caused by COVID-19. These shifts have caused leaders to adapt suddenly, leading many institutions away from the traditional higher education landscape. Now more than ever it is important for administrative leaders in higher education to be agile and adaptive for the success of their institutions. The current model for leading higher education is antiquated due to the various new challenges that face the industry in the post-pandemic, and it is imperative that leaders adapt to these challenges to create sustainable, relevant, and vibrant institutions (Edmondson, 2021).

According to Fleener (2021), implications of many of the items represented by the technological and economic shifts of the pandemic include shifting values for flexible work schedules and reconsideration of physical workspaces and facilities needs for businesses. The author also expressed that shifts felt specific to higher education and its leadership has shaken the core of higher education. Drastic changes to the delivery of online learning, industry pressures, and managing the needs of key stakeholders have all impacted leadership approaches in higher education.

As stated by Coll and Ruch (2021), the post-pandemic higher education institution will be data-driven, focused on the mission, and will have a keen emphasis on the market. To achieve this, the authors also stated that leaders must guide their institutions to be student-oriented, have technologically based programming, and relevant fiscal plans (Coll & Ruch, 2021). From this, one may conclude that this level of swift innovation will occur by administrative leaders in higher education being aware of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to create responsive and adaptive institutions. Dumelescu and Mutiu (2021) state that an adaptive institution is oriented by taking unpredictable contexts and turning them into impactful opportunities for constituents.

In the post-pandemic era, the future of sustainable business, with regard to leadership models, may focus on values. Leaders must be able to adapt and understand this as moral and business values may differ from financial values (Abramiuc Todoran & Popa, 2021). This implies that adaptive leaders in higher education must determine these values as the pandemic has had an irreversible impact on the higher education industry that will likely be present for the foreseeable future. The post-pandemic will be a critical point in time for administrative leaders to set the strategic direction of their institutions. Administrators, as effective leaders of change, must address challenges such as appropriately balancing delivery modes that now include online and hybrid, meeting the various related needs of faculty, staff, and students, and re-imagining their institutions in light of both internal and external pressures.

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The Irreversible Impacts of COVID-19

Internal and External Industry Pressures

Internal and external industry pressures have had a lasting impact on higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated some of these pressures but also has added new challenges that the sector must face. As agents of change, administrative leaders in higher education must adapt to these industry pressures. As stated by Acosta (2021), higher education administrative leaders must determine key missions, cannot delay post-pandemic transformation, and must adapt due to new pressures and changes in the reality of the higher education landscape.

One such pressure that is plaguing higher education is the ongoing decline of college-bound students in the United States. Nakra (2021) noted that economists projected that by 2026 the number of traditional college-age students will fall rapidly. Tuition and fees make up 26 percent of revenue for four-year public institutions and 35 percent of revenue for four-year non-profit institutions. As enrollments decline, higher education institutions will experience great strain (Nakra, 2021). University leadership must understand and combat this external pressure as it only has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Competition for college bound students will only continue to grow. Leaders must address this and carve out their institution's identity as competition from other institutions and non-traditional competitors will grow fiercer in the post-pandemic. Fleener (2021), for example, stated that traditional four-year institutions will struggle with their identity and market space as institutions such as community colleges will be presented with new opportunities to serve students at a lower price point as the value of higher education is currently being called into question.

In addition to community colleges and traditional four-year institutions fighting over market share, administrative leaders must adapt to competitors such as non-traditional universities and corporate colleges. Colleges and universities will collaborate and compete with private corporations entering the education space (Nakra, 2021). Organizations such as Google, Coursera, and Microsoft offer certificate programs both independently and in collaboration with colleges and universities. Additionally, according to National Student Clearinghouse (2020) data, private for-profit institutions grew enrollment by 5.3% while public four-year institutions only grew enrollment by .2%, and private four-year institutional enrollment shrunk by -0.1%. Administrative leaders must learn from and adapt to these external pressures of the pandemic to be successful in the future.

From this, leaders must manipulate their institution's role in the market as competition for students will continue to increase in the post-pandemic environment. Fewer students going to university, combined with more competition, could spell financial stress for higher education institutions coming out of the pandemic. Institutions must have strong financial foundations to continue operating. For example, Miller (2021) expressed that the response from institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that administrators may see their role as maintaining financial solidity more so than fostering student development. As a result, it can be concluded that financial stressors from external implications may cause administrative leaders not only to modify their role but also their institution's role in the marketplace.

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Stemming from this is the internal and external pressures regarding how higher education institutions will serve their societies. External pressures of the board-centric governing bodies in higher education continue to foster political agendas as opposed to efficient and effective higher education institutions (Miller, 2021). With new societal pressures such as social justice movements and community engagement, it is then clear that it will be critical for university leaders to act as change agents in determining the post-pandemic direction of their institutions. Király and Géring (2019) concluded that as the higher education industry is a business aimed at preparing students for uncertainty, the industry itself needs to adapt in a way that impacts content delivered, methods of delivery, organizational function, and the function of the university in society.

While research excellence is important, there remains the risk that knowledge production fails the needs of the university's local communities (Király & Géring, 2019). As the pandemic dissipates or concludes, it will be critical for administrative leadership at higher education institutions to decide how their institutions will fit into serving their constituents moving forward. For example, external pressures such as social justice movements like #MeToo have exposed how leaders address the topic of sexual harassment in their organizations, including in higher education. The current response to addressing sexual harassment at higher education institutions focuses on just "checking the box" in terms of compliance and legal liability (Dolamore & Richards, 2020). From this, it becomes apparent that institutional leaders must be aware of how they are serving the needs of their minority and underrepresented populations, such as female employees. For example, Baker (2021) stated that women in academics are individuals that need flexible and innovative work schedules, calling for the continuation of the work from home trend. Therefore, administrative leadership should be aware of the external demands of societal pressures to understand the experience of minority populations in higher education.

Post-Pandemic Support for Faculty and Staff

A study conducted by Dawson et al. (2020) concluded that higher education institutions must determine how they will foster support for developing leaders and managers. The authors concluded that senior leadership at these institutions must promote leadership development through intentional policies and communications that create a culture of learning and improvement (Dawson et al., 2020). These conclusions have only been compounded upon by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education and its faculty and staff. Now, more than ever, administrative leadership must be aware of the new implications and challenges presented in managing key employees at their institutions.

There is a strong need for support from administrative leadership as key institutional stakeholders encounter the transformation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Morales et al., 2021). Identifying and developing rising leaders within institutional faculty and staff will be critical in managing the post-pandemic university. Ewing (2021) concluded that the pandemic has created a focus on one of the industry's most important resources, faculty and staff. From this, the author stated that leaders will have to guide their institutions to increased investment in employee development, as higher education employees will need to upskill to meet the demands of the post-pandemic higher education industry.

It is important for administrative leaders to develop their middle-level employees; their impact is critically important and can be distinctively felt at the unit level. If middle-

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level leaders are not set up for success, it could harm units and the institution. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed many instances where middle-level rising leaders were not well supported, as this lack of support was evident before the pandemic. As an example, research conducted by Branson et al. (2016) found that the lived experience of the middle-level leader in higher education was filled with feelings such as discomfort and uncertainty, often coupled with tensions and other stressors. As the pandemic expanded on these stressors in the workplace, it has become clear that most faculty and staff need more support from administrative leadership to be successful. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that higher education administrative leaders need to show empathy for conditions that are occurring in the workplace for faculty and staff (Nugroho et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, many stressors faced by faculty and staff members in the higher education industry arose from, or were exacerbated by, the sudden and difficult switch to online and hybrid learning deliveries. In the study conducted by Ashour et al. (2021), the authors discovered that some faculty members found online teaching to be very challenging in terms of providing online students with consistent feedback and clarification of concepts. For many university employees, what was already a challenging work environment as described by Branson et al. (2016) was exacerbated by the pandemic. Further, these stakeholders were likely still not receiving the level of support needed from their administrative leadership.

The research conducted by Ashour et al. (2021) also found that some faculty members were optimistic about the opportunities for growth and development that the "new normal" of the pandemic presented. Faculty may deliver some of the key products of the institution to one of the primary stakeholders, the student. It is for this reason that administrative leaders must effectively work to be opportunistic in giving their employees the support needed to be successful in the post-pandemic higher education industry.

In addition, pandemic work trends have impacted higher education. Trends such as work-from-home initiatives could become a mainstay in the post-pandemic workforce, and higher education administrative leaders must adapt to meet the needs of employees in terms of meaningful virtual interactions. There is a need for administrators to become aware of communicative engagements with faculty and with staff, as a study by Lovell et al. (2021) found that remote communication during the pandemic lacked empathy and caused frustration and confusion.

Post-Pandemic Consideration of Student Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed higher education administrative leadership to implications that many of their key stakeholders face. For many institutions in the higher education industry, students are the most critical stakeholders. Therefore, leaders must be aware of the issues that were created and exacerbated for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed the need for universities to put increased concentration on students' needs in terms of social conditions (Kele & Mzileni, 2021).

García-Morales et al. (2021) stated that to create an equitable student experience during this new adaptation to online learning, university leaders must make sure that their institutions are supporting students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. With these socioeconomic disparities among students who stuggled during the pandemic, it will be increasingly important for administrative leaders to be aware of the new needs of

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students so that they may create equitable environments. Some current research suggests that this may be approached by finding the balance between the need for the new online student experience and the traditional immersive learning experience for the student. A study conducted by Guppy et al. (2022) interviewed key higher education stakeholders about their perceptions of the future of higher education. One respondent noted that they saw the university as a place "with people present, talking to each other, meeting together, teaching, and learning together" (Guppy et al., 2022, p. 11). This signifies the need for the balance of an immersive student experience with the trend of online learning in the post-pandemic higher education sector.

In the post-pandemic world, the new higher education sector will become more personal and self-directed rather than the traditional institutionally-fixed model with prescribed requirements and procedures (Gurukkal, 2020). Leaders who recognize this immersive and intimate personalization will enable their students to succeed. Kele and Mzileni (2021) note that universities in their study provided flexible forms of assessment and service to their students. Examples of this were opportunities to resubmit late assessments and increased interactions with instructors over social applications or another telecommunication. As a result, administrative leaders must be aware of these trends to best lead student serving institutions in the post-pandemic.

Meeting the needs of students is critical to academic administrative leadership success in the post-pandemic higher education industry. Students who are happy and engaged will likely also be students who continue to enroll at higher education institutions. Tuition and fees from the enrolled student are a substantial chunk of revenue for institutions, with about 26 percent of revenues for four-year public institutions and 35 percent of revenue for four-year non-profit institutions (Nakra, 2021). Considering this, administrative leadership must manage and develop institutions that address student needs to ensure the financial health of their organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on many of the needs of the higher education student in the post-pandemic world. Leaders that fail to respond to these needs could spell danger for their institution's success.

The Trend of Online and Hybrid Learning

Among the most challenging impacts that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is the sudden change of the delivery of pedagogy through some form of online learning. The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for faculty, staff, students, and university leaders who needed to reinvent themselves to effectively run their campuses during the pandemic (García-Morales et al., 2021). The switch to online learning revealed both challenges and opportunities for academic leadership to now consider as they plan strategically for their institutions in the post-pandemic world. Leaders who do not understand and adapt to this trend in the post-pandemic may fail their institutions. This was reinforced by Ashour et al. (2021), who expressed that for the creation of the new post-pandemic world, leaders must understand the impact of the pandemic on the higher education industry so that they may plan for the future of higher education.

Leaders who effectively adapt to the new trend of online and hybrid learning can expose their institutions to new communities and constituents that they might not have been exposed to otherwise. Opportunities for new markets in the higher education industry will arise due to the online learning trend provided by the pandemic (Ashour et al., 2021).

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New ventures such as this one can create an opportunity for leaders to create institutions that value students' preferred learning and social experiences, which may help to solidify retention and enrollment as many institutions fight the demographic enrollment decline that was exacerbated by the pandemic. Garcia-Morales et al. (2021) expressed that the natural innovation of higher education institutions from old learning systems should promote a participatory culture with engaged participants and evidence-based decision outcomes.

Academic administrative leaders that can take advantage of the challenging yet opportunistic trend of some form of online learning in the higher education industry should be able to serve their institutions well heading into the post-pandemic. As society and higher education continue to emphasize the personalized student experience, it will be important for leaders of institutions to understand the best learning offerings for their constituents. Institutions that have leaders who fail to do this may have trouble succeeding in the post-pandemic higher education industry.

Needed Change in Leadership and Management Approaches

To properly adapt to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, leaders may need to rethink approaches to leading their institutions. Dumulescu and Muţiu (2021) state that an adaptive institution is oriented through taking unpredictable contexts and turning them into impactful opportunities for constituents. For leaders to excel at effectively being opportunistic, they must know how to approach unpredictable situations that have been spurred by the pandemic. Higher education institutions must be prepared to make tough decisions in the post-pandemic that will shape the future of their key constituents through the use of sound leadership practices. To be effective, this will need to be done by balancing the intricacies of financial costs and public health with the educational mission, knowledge creation, and serving society (Rashid & Yadav, 2020).

To create this balance and move forward in the post-pandemic, new approaches to leadership in higher education should be considered. Jones et al. (2014) state that there needs to be an emphasis on the need to create a context for leadership in higher education that is focused on trust rather than regulation. The authors pointed out that this culture of leadership respects individualism while fostering collaborative relationships. Instilling this new culture into higher education institutions will be critical for leaders as they address the needs of their constituents, especially faculty and staff.

Kalra et al. (2021) provided insight into the leadership principles and characteristics that were adopted and successful during the pandemic. Several findings of best practices of leaders as it pertains to lessons learned from the pandemic arose. One of the primary practices was creating collaborated logistics and decision making. During situations that are complicated and unpredictable, leaders must exhibit collaborative and adaptive behaviors by receiving feedback from their constituents that is critical to decision making (Kalra et al., 2021). This means that leaders in the post-pandemic must actively trust, empower, and listen to their subordinates and peers while also taking careful consideration of the needs of their stakeholders.

The tactics that Kalra et al. (2021) describe relates directly to Vuori's (2019) application of the concept of distributed leadership in higher education. According to Vuori, distributed

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leadership focuses on collective decision making in leadership as opposed to an individualistic approach to leadership and decision making. Vuori's study found that distributed leadership emerged as an effective tactic for collaborating and organizing work in higher education. This is demonstrated by participants in the study referring to their peers as "family," the university as "home," and their work as a "family business." This suggests that leadership principles which foster growth in the community and organizational culture should be valued by leaders in the post-pandemic higher education industry.

A key to effective leadership in managing higher education institutions is understanding organizational structures, institutional culture, and both internal and external politics (Dawson et al., 2020). Higher education administrators who want to be impactful must recognize that empowering leadership diversity by distributing key decision-making responsibilities, while also recognizing the needs of stakeholders, will be critical to success. To accomplish this, it is reasonable to conclude that leaders in higher education must be proficient at managing the varying values of stakeholders. In post-pandemic higher education, leaders who are not able to adapt to such leadership principles to uplift the values of their stakeholders while setting the foundation for the fiscal wellbeing of their institutions may falter in their roles. To support this claim, Abramiuc Todoran and Popa (2021) stated that in the post-pandemic era the future of sustainable business when it comes to leadership models will focus on values. Leaders must be able to understand this important concept of values, as well as note that moral and business values may differ from financial values.

Counter Arguments

While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lifestyles of many in higher education, some argue that its impact will not necessarily be felt in the post-pandemic. Regarding the needs of faculty in the post-pandemic, it is important to note that not all faculty members were comfortable in the shift to the online higher education environment during the pandemic. The study conducted by Ashour et al. (2021) discovered that some faculty members found online teaching to be very challenging in terms of providing online students with consistent feedback and clarification of concepts. If an abundance of faculty is not comfortable teaching online, the perceived permanent shift towards increased online higher education may not be successful in the post-pandemic. Faculty who are forced to take on more online educational responsibilities may not remain happy with their workplaces. There is evidence that people who are committed to their organization are more likely to be engaged in the development of that organization (Dawson et al., 2020). From this, leaders may find it challenging to implement strategies that involve enrolling more online students if faculty buy-in for distance learning is lacking. These commitments toward online learning in higher education may fail if the popularity of hybrid and distance learning wain over time.

Developments such as this might not be a terrible occurrence for some institutions recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Radwan (2022) notes that post-pandemic it will be necessary for colleges and universities to "right size" as opposed to down or upsizing. The author suggested that adding more students is not always the best option, as more students bring increased operational and support costs. Therefore, some might argue that the pandemic may have only accelerated a change in the higher education that was already in

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motion before the pandemic, indicating that the pandemic did not create as many new challenges for leaders to face as one may believe. Grukkal (2020) also supported this notion as the author stated that the COVID-19 pandemic will not bring about a radical change in higher education but has only accelerated change that was started before the pandemic.

Conclusion

Leaders in higher education administrative leadership must adapt to the impact that the pandemic has had on the higher education sector. As García-Morales et al. (2021) stated, there is a strong need for support from administrative leadership as key institutional stakeholders embark on the transformation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership at higher education institutions in the post-pandemic have a challenging task of shifting with industry trends while balancing the values of their many stakeholders.

Pressures such as societal influence and a shifting landscape of competitors have caused higher education to face challenges never seen before. From this, faculty and staff members were taxed, creating new needs with which administrative leaders must confront. Laufer et al. (2021) stated that in terms of technology in education, the COVID-19 pandemic is most likely to create a change that is impactful unevenly across institutions and instruction. Draw this to the shift to online and hybrid learning as well as the challenges that both faculty and students continue to face, and the resulting combination is a very difficult situation for academic leadership.

As a result, leaders in the post-pandemic higher education environment must understand, learn from, and adapt to the irreversible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education industry. Within the challenges exacerbated or created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the solution to carving out the role of higher education might be that leadership must engage in a transformational process (Sá & Serpa, 2020). Shifts in leadership principles may act as drivers for higher education to thrive. A viable model for post-pandemic higher education institutions is yet undetermined, but this is the challenge moving forward for leaders who recognize and address the needed change necessary for future success.

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