

Crisis Preparedness and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Early Reactions from University Staff

Ralph A. Gigliotti, Ph.D.

**Director, Center for Organizational Leadership¹
Rutgers University**

**Member, Board of Directors
Network for Change and Continuous Innovation**

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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 become 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 World Health Organization 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). As of April 20, there are 2,432,092 confirmed cases of the virus, with over 30% of the cases (761,991) reported in the United States, and 166,794 deaths attributed to the virus worldwide (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center).

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 weeks, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming months and academic year, are disorienting and unsettling for the higher education community.

The [Network for Change and Continuous Innovation](#)—an association of nearly 100 member institutions ranging from smaller community colleges to large research universities—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, 2019), and although the long-term impact of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic is not entirely clear, the crisis of our time will likely lead to widespread change across each of our institutions.

A survey was conducted with NCCI members to explore institutional crisis preparedness, the desired competencies for crisis leaders in higher education, and the ways in which NCCI can best support member institutions amid this public health emergency. Upon receiving IRB approval from Rutgers University, the survey was distributed on March 9 and remained open for two weeks. Additional reminders were distributed via NCCI committee and communities of practice chairs. 79 individuals representing at least 20 different institutions offered responses to the survey. Respondents represented a number of units across their respective institutions, including offices of the chancellor, academic affairs, administration and finance, organizational development and effectiveness, change management, information technology, human resources, and alumni and student relations.

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:

- Existence of an emergency operations plan and ability to quickly set the plan into action
- Demonstration of ongoing communication from senior leadership
- Availability of technology and agile response from the campus community to support rapid shifts to remote learning and virtual work arrangements
- People-centered response from the senior leadership team

The following illustrative quotes capture the connections across these four emergent themes:

“Communications have been ongoing and clear and concise with detailed instructions on impacts and what community members need to do.”

“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.”

“Access to many tools and experts to help transition courses and work to a virtual environment.”

Areas of Initial Concern

Interestingly, 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 as a preparedness element and an area of greatest concern.

According to the respondents, the primary areas of initial concern at the outset of the pandemic included the following:

- Lack of communication from senior leadership

- Reluctance to embrace virtual learning and remote work policies in the past complicates the transitions required at this time
- Delayed response to the crisis by individuals with emergency management responsibilities
- Managing the emotions of the campus community to help stakeholders cope with the disruptive change

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

Crisis Leadership Characteristics

Survey respondents were asked to identify the qualities most desired in higher education leaders as we collectively navigate the coronavirus 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 and competing views of internal and external stakeholders. The following qualities emerged as most critical from the survey data:

- 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
- 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 crisis is staggering, and the 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.”*

Implications for NCCI

A final question 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:

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

These action items will be considered by the NCCI Leadership Team and Board of Directors in the forthcoming weeks.

Conclusion

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) 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*.” The danger, fear, and uncertainty found in this current moment can paralyze our institutions. Yet, as an association dedicated to change and improvement across higher education, NCCI and its member institutions

can use this opportunity to explore the short and longer-term innovations that might emerge from this crisis, and the ways in which leaders at all levels of higher education can help to advance these efforts.

References

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ⁱ The [Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership](#) is a national leader and resource for Rutgers University and the higher education community. The Center provides a portfolio of programs and services for current and aspiring academic and administrative leaders seeking to develop and enhance their leadership, communication, and organizational competencies. Founded in 1993, OL is a Division of the Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. As a hub for academic leadership development research and initiatives, our signature offerings aim to improve individual and collective leadership capacity and cultivate a culture of leadership development across the University.