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A Model of Leadership in the New Normal: Part 1

As I write this article, students are arriving on some campuses and the start of classes is imminent. According to the data collected by Davidson College, “Crisis College Initiative” or “C2i,” the approach to the Fall semester varies widely. While 26% of all colleges and universities (private, public, four-year and two-year) are still deciding, only 2.5% are trying to go fully in person, and only 5% are planning to go fully remote. The largest number of institutions are committed as of now to being primarily online (25%), primarily in person (21%), or hybrid (14%). I am sure that these percentages will change come September or October. In the last few days as I prepare to submit this article, a number of institutions have already abandoned their plans of bringing students back to campus.

What must also concern senior college administrators are the results of a recently published survey conducted by SimpsonScarborough indicating that 40% of incoming freshmen at four-year, residential institutions are likely or highly likely not to attend in the Fall. Twenty-seven percent of returning students gave the same answer. The primary reason given is that these students (75%) don’t believe that these institutions will keep them safe on campus.

A small college president and a senior administrator at a highly selective university both told me that they have a good plan for the Fall. Both are planning to bring new and returning students back to campus. Well, it’s a good plan until it isn’t. And it won’t be a good plan if the students don’t actually arrive or there’s a number of infected students and staff in the first few weeks.

I hope and pray that these predictions are wrong. I hope and pray that whatever your plan for the Fall, it works. As angry as I get seeing images of young people partying in backyards and on beaches without masks and no social distancing, it breaks my heart every time I hear that a young person (really any person) contracts this virus. And the number keeps rising.

I really can’t do or say anything more about the Fall, 2020 plans. What I have been focusing on is the next few years and the kind of leadership that will be essential. I am doing this for two reasons. First, leadership is my academic discipline and professional experience. I have studied leadership formally for the past 40 years, and served as a superintendent of schools, a provost at two institutions and a president at five institutions.

But more important than my interests and credentials, I am thinking about leadership because even if there is a vaccine soon, the reality of COVID-19 will not go away. If you listen closely to the epidemiologists, they keep reminding us that these diseases do not disappear. For example, a majority of people get an annual flu shot, but too many people still get the flu and too many people still die from flu related complications every year

Sadly, there will be COVID-19 cases for years to come. And unfortunately, some people will continue to die. I read an article recently by a well-respected epidemiologist (not a politician or a

political appointee) that advised us all not to throw away our masks too soon. It made me think that if too many people refuse to wear masks now, what will they do when a vaccine is available.

Even more than the reality of this disease, I am thinking about future leadership because so much has changed for people. As the recent SimpsonScarborough study indicated, there is a lack of trust that grows each day. And this lack of trust exists more and more with faculty, staff, communities, as well as students. My sense right now is that there will be a heightened sense of disequilibrium on our campuses and within the entire academic world... this year and for the next few years. People not only mistrust, but they are impatient, lack focus, and are distracted, angry and worried about themselves, their families and their friends.

What I am proposing in this article and the next, is a model of leadership that will be important -- and hopefully successful -- in the coming year and beyond. I believe strongly in servant leadership. I taught the Greenleaf model and tried my best to practice it for the past 30 years. But beyond a review of the principles of this approach, I will share the ways I believe leadership needs to both focus and be applied in the new normal we will all be facing ... and leading.

Before that, however, I want to propose one administrative idea for you. I have written and said for the past six months that there is no playbook for leading through a pandemic. If I am correct in thinking that you will need strategies for longer than the Fall semester, I encourage you to build a playbook of effective and ineffective strategies.

While articles appear regularly in publications like *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about successes and ideas for leadership on campus, I find these minimally helpful because they are often taken from institutions different than those I led. I want to know what works on campuses with students, faculty staff and resources like mine. I advise you to establish a formal group of colleagues who serve at institutions very much like yours, in positions very much like yours. Even if you are not "friends" with these colleagues, these are the people you need to establish as your network. If you don't know who fits that description, I am sure that you can get help from a search firm like Hyatt-Fennell, a national organization like CIC, your accreditation body or your state association.

Take the lead on doing this. You might think that you don't have the time. I would suggest that it is critical and you need to make the time. Set up a regular call or meeting. And the two important questions are these: What have you done that worked well (or better than you expected)? What have you done that did not work well (or less well than you hoped)? Write it down. You will need this resource in the future and it will likely save you time, money and a loss of trust.

Here's an example. A number of senior administrators recently told me that their institutions are using telecommunication for meetings by necessity. We all have done this and are still doing this. These administrators were working from home. Students, faculty and other staff were not on campus either. These administrators were doubtful about using Zoom for meetings. They thought online meetings would be less effective than in-person meetings. But after weeks of scheduling these meetings with new, prospective and returning students, and with new and

returning faculty, staff and colleagues ... it works. Attendance is good, participation is good and communication is effective.

These administrators have determined effective strategies for these meetings. And they plan to use telecommunications more and more, even when the staff returns to campus. You need to know what and how they maximized this form of communication. For example, they learned that scheduling these meetings when the students and faculty were available and willing to meet was not that difficult and highly effective. In some cases, late evening meetings worked well for students and faculty, and the timing allowed these administrators to have dinner with their families, put their children to bed, etc., and then make a few video calls. This strategy was effective for training sessions, advisement, crisis management and more.

What other administrators shared was the lack of effectiveness of sending out memos or posting information only on the internal website. While reading long memos has never necessarily been the best way to communicate, these administrators are convinced that in the pandemic environment, attention spans, patience and memory are shortened. Verbal communication and repetition are the keys.

I advise you to set up this discussion group as soon as possible. Experiences, both good and bad, are recent and will be happening more and more in the coming weeks and months. Take the lead on this. If you can afford it, send each of them a bottle of wine or a six-pack to show your thanks (just for the record, I don't drink beer but like an occasional glass of Frascati in white and Montepulciano in red).

The next article will focus on the central tenets of servant leadership and the key areas of leadership for the new normal. As always, do not hesitate to reach out if I can be of any help to you. Know that you and your community are in my thoughts and prayers. Have a great Fall semester!

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