Campus Leadership Amidst a Global Pandemic

Citation

Published Version

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Accessibility
THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

Spring 2020, Special Edition
The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School

Spring 2020, Special Edition

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Campus Leadership Amidst a Global Pandemic: Interviews with University Chaplains and Religious and Spiritual Life Leaders

Kevin Weaver

Introduction: COVID-19 and Higher Education

The sense of community created among students and colleagues determines the effectiveness of campus leadership. Amidst these difficult times, hearing from our campus leaders, whether chaplains or faculty chairs, student leaders, or administrators, can be beneficial to not only our own campuses, but also to higher education as an aggregate. The impact of COVID-19 will continue to be a financial, psychological, and operational burden for many universities. While many in higher education are focused on how COVID-19 will transform online learning, or debating how its impact will negatively affect small liberal-arts colleges, we cannot forget to focus on the most pressing issue facing us: the well-being of our students. We know that mental health among students is already a major concern in higher education. Across the country, students’ lives have been disrupted abruptly, leaving their campus dorms, apartments, friends, counselors, chaplains, favorite professors, campus organizations, and mentors. It is important that we remember these types of issues. Being away from home and at school provided particular levels of comfort for some students. When on campus, they have access to laptops, stable Wi-Fi, the privacy of a dorm room, or the quietness of a library to do their work. Despite these concerns, several higher education leaders initially stated they planned to continue to be as stringent on student expectations as they were prior to the pandemic. As I reflected upon that notion, I was set back by the lack of empathy. If there are leaders who feel this way, to whom can students turn for support? I immediately began to think about the role and importance of a university chaplain. Chaplains and other Religious and Spiritual Life leaders are the individuals we should be seeking to help us push through during these challenging times. Reflecting on the prior sentence is what inspired me to interview campus leaders amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Chaplains, religious and spiritual life administrators, faculty and student leaders from eleven institutions of higher education were surveyed and interviewed. The institutions represented include Stanford University, Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Southern California (USC), Azusa Pacific University, Life Pacific University, Emory University, Wellesley College,
Southeastern University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Pepperdine University. In early April, I designed a survey via Qualtrics and distributed the survey link to campus leaders from multiple universities. While some universities and leaders were selected due to personal acquaintances or professional recommendations, others were selected randomly. The survey instrument was designed to gather campus leaders’ perceptions regarding several aspects involving COVID-19 and higher education. Using a Likert scale, campus leaders selected options that inquired about their shift to remote learning and its impact on their ability to mentor students. Leaders were also asked if the pandemic had caused them to ponder the future of their positions in higher education. Additionally, open-ended questions offered campus leaders the opportunity to share (1) how the pandemic has affected them personally, (2) how they have communicated with colleagues, and (3) advice they would offer to other campus leaders across the country. The survey also included a demographic questionnaire that asked campus leaders to provide their stakeholder group: chaplain, administrator, student or faculty leader.

Results

Results indicated that 41% of the campus leaders believed it was too soon to report whether the transition to online was negative or positive. However, 29% believed it negatively impacted their ability to mentor students. Nearly all campus leaders have transitioned to working from home, and nearly 60% have pondered how the pandemic will affect their future position in higher education.

Individual Responses from Chaplains on how this pandemic has affected them personally:

**Response #1**
Working from home, while also home schooling my child, has been difficult and stressful. It's also been challenging to move my class online, which was really designed for in-person experiences, field trips, guest lectures, and group presentations.

**Response #2**
Our program is fairly new and was just building momentum, so we lost the chance to develop a really cohesive core that would have been able to withstand the transition online.

**Response #3**
It has been very hard to hold the grief that the world is experiencing while also balancing my personal sense of loss and insecurity. It has been particularly challenging to see some people treating this as an extended vacation or a minor inconvenience.

**Response #4**
I worry about the well-being of others, even more than usual, and this has increased my moments of anxiety. Many people are suffering and unable to make basic purchases for food and shelter. I'm deeply concerned for the most vulnerable in our society.
Response #5
I am working many hours at a computer, and this has taken a toll on my physical health, my back specifically. I am making myself present and supportive of others but have had little support myself.

Response #6
Covid-19 has disrupted a rhythm that I took advantage of—the rhythm of navigating space freely and without many constraints. What a privilege! It has also forced me to re-imagine how to channel my extroverted energy in productive and pastoral ways. I am basically relearning how to be a faithful presence and leader remotely.

Response #7
I remember when I was twenty years old in college when 9/11 occurred. I experienced firsthand how it affected my family and those around me. I believe that experience has prepared me to help those in times of anxiety/stress during these times.

Individual Responses from Chaplains
On supportive communication to colleagues and team members

Response #1
Take care of yourself!

Response #2
Normalizing the full range of emotions; recalibrating expectations for themselves and others; creating a routine and getting sunshine and fresh air while social distancing.

Response #3
I've asked them to continue to support students by providing regular/weekly online opportunities for connection. But I have also said that we are redefining what success and productivity mean during these times. Higher Ed. is a high-pressure environment to work in, and their constant drive to assess everything needs to be reined in and rightsized for this unprecedented time.

Response #4
I remind them that they are experiencing a form of trauma that they will need to process and work through recovery.

Response #5
I have communicated to our team as well as students to continue to inspire, encourage, help, and be PRESENT with people. Do not allow this physical distancing to disrupt how you care and show up for people. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul and his writings to the followers of Jesus in the NT. For a majority of Paul's letters, he was physically distant from those to whom he wrote. Nonetheless, the people who received his letters still felt joy and love. We, too, can be there and show people the love and comfort amid the pandemic.
Response #6
I am trying very hard to communicate the importance of showing up in the midst of uncertainty. Creating avenues for students to communicate even though they are not on campus. Trying to be present with students scattered-combating the notion of "out of sight, out of mind" . . . basically we are no longer preachers . . . we are pastors! Keeping in touch through every medium possible is our goal.

Response #7
For employees with children at home, I have been as flexible as possible in my expectations while still expecting them to contribute. For students, I have leaned on the words of the Psalmists as examples in times of fear and crisis. On our spiritual life blog and podcast, I have addressed justice issues that are affecting Asian and African-American members of our community. I have highlighted the hope of the resurrection this week in particular. I have hosted podcasts to help get student voices out there so we know what they are going through.

Campus Leaders
On advice they would offer to other campus leaders in the U.S.

Selected Chaplain Responses

Response #1
Help students feel heard. Give students invitations to pastoral care but also give them space. We have a spiritual mentoring program, and many students are still meeting with mentors virtually. This has been the most effective ongoing method that has translated well into a new situation.

Response #2
I think all campus leaders need to recognize that their approach to work will need to evolve. There is no "normal" anymore. This is an opportunity to grow significantly in how campus leaders relate to one another.

Response #3
Learning to sit and identify grief will be so important. There is "ambiguous loss," with the cancelation of commencement, internships, study abroad, or even not being able to return home. . . . These are losses that students don't have an opportunity to grieve over. As a campus leader fostering a space for grief and loss that does not make much room for closure will be vital.

A Graduate Student Leader (Cambridge, MA)
I would advise (leaders) to check-in and to let students know that campus leaders care for them. We have to find a way to balance communication and expressing care.
A Provost at a Faith-based Liberal Arts University

On message to faculty:
Show more grace to students due to WI-FI and technology issues, to students who went home before the semester was over, to students who had to find jobs because their parents might be out of work.

On advice to leaders:
Be patient, make every effort to connect with students-especially those who are falling behind. Show more grace to students in these trying times.

A Religious and Spiritual Life Leader

Be openhearted and not just open-minded, and be aware that this impacts different students in different ways. It is especially difficult for students who are in a different country, or students who don't have supportive home environments, or appropriate resources, to focus on coursework.

An Administrator at a Research University

We're planning to call all students eligible for summer enrollment to have a "check-in," as well as provide academic advising. Concerns are high about completing state and national exams for credential clearance, so we are active in state meetings and report out to students with frequency so they know we are advocates on their behalf. In addition, student affairs has recently assumed duties for supporting graduate students and they are providing info for those with food insecurity, limited internet connectivity (providing hot spots), etc.

A Faculty Chair at a Faith-based University

Over-communicate. Students are also craving face-to-face contact, and zoom meetings have helped in that way. Keep a similar flow of course work that you had before. Just make it a bit more flexible.

An Administrator at a Research University

Offer the support you would want to receive as a student and/or that you would want your child to receive from a college.

A Religious and Spiritual Life leader

I encourage campus leaders to stay connected. It is tempting as this becomes normative to stop reaching out. I think the more we can provide connections, the easier it will be now and when the time comes for recovery. I also encourage campus leaders to begin assessing who they are and want to become as departments and as institutions. What are the guiding
values? Are these values evident in the crisis or have they somehow atrophied over the years? How can those values be reactivated in crisis? Are the values once articulated no longer the right ones for this new era in higher education? If we have to re-build higher ed, how do we want to re-build it? Can we use the un-doing of COVID to re-imagine or restructure higher ed in a more equitable fashion? Can we re-create who we are and want to be out of this crisis?

Conclusion

This project has allowed me to view both student experiences and educational leadership in a broader context. Results from the interview responses provide evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant challenge for both campus leaders and the communities they support. Two chaplains informed me that this has been one of the busiest moments in their professional careers. Remarkably, these spiritual leaders continue to lead and offer support to many individuals. Their compassion, thoughtfulness, and willingness to lead are the reasons these individuals and the departments they represent are vital components for human development, both spiritually and socially in higher education.

As I reflected upon the interview and survey responses, two prevalent constructs emerged: presence and empathy. Campus leaders display empathy by keeping students' needs in mind by altering curricular expectations. Many schools have shifted their grading system to pass/fail. As an example of presence, leaders have encouraged members of their campus communities to attend online student graduation celebrations. A graduate student leader offered another example of being present, “I would advise (leaders) to check-in and to let students know that campus leaders care for them.” A Religious and Spiritual Life leader encapsulated empathy when they suggested, “Be openhearted and not just open-minded, and be aware that this impacts different students in different ways.” This advice further demonstrates how being present and showing empathy requires a multifaceted approach amidst this global pandemic. A chaplain’s response epitomized what it means to show empathy, be present, and provide comfort to colleagues:

Do not allow this physical distancing to disrupt how you care and show up for people. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul and his writings to the followers of Jesus in the NT [sic]. For a majority of Paul's letters, he was physically distant from those to whom he wrote. Nonetheless, the people who received his letters still felt joy and love. We, too, can be there and show people the love and comfort amid the pandemic.

Undoubtedly, some will look back and question the removal of students, faculty, and staff from their campuses. Others will question the grading scale changes or critique decisions that have yet to be made. For the time being, we need not focus on future debates and challenges. At this moment, it is important to be present for students. Be present for colleagues. Be present for family and others close to you. COVID-19 has shifted many of us away from our schools, jobs, social organizations, and religious communities. Therefore, anything that conveys to students or colleagues that you understand their challenges will be essential in providing a sense of community. I conclude by thanking the chaplains, spiritual life leaders, and other campus leaders who participated in this project. Thank you for all that you do for your campus and the higher education community. In
addition, I want to thank the spiritual life leaders whose work, both research and practice, inspired me to complete this project. Your dedication to your role as a spiritual leader will continue to shape me as a scholar and advocate for students. The complexity of higher education stems from its plethora of stakeholders with varied ambitions. However, a vital component of campus leadership remains to provide a sense of community via empathy and presence.
Appendix A

Demographics

Twenty-five surveys were administered to campus leaders from multiple institutions, with 17 completed for a response rate of 68%. The following sections include gender, race, and leadership demographics of the campus leaders who participated.

Gender demographics are shown in Table 1.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 70% identified as female and nearly 30% as male.

Table 1.1 Gender Demographics

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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Racial and ethnic demographics are shown in Table 2.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 40% identified as white and nearly 60% as persons of color.

Table 2.1 Race/Ethnicity Demographics

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<td>African-American/ Black</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino (of any race)</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td></td>
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Campus leadership demographics are shown in Table 3.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 40% identified as a chaplain, 35% as an administrator, and nearly 23% as a faculty or student leader.

Table 3.1 Campus Leader Demographics

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<th>Answer</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Faculty Chair/Coordinator</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student Leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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