

Leading During the COVID-19 Pandemic: One College Administrator's Perspective

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Abstract

Working at the university level prepares campus employees to deal with a diversity of negative issues and even with crises. COVID-19 did away with the rule book for how to handle university crises as universities fell into the middle of a worldwide pandemic beyond what almost every university employee could have imagined. When administrators first closed schools around the nation, many believed we, as educators, were entering a fairly short-term crisis. What started as a few weeks or a few months of total disruption, turned into one of the worst pandemics in the history of the world. Almost nobody could imagine that more than a million people would die in the US, or that the world of business would come to a standstill, or that people would spend months of not being able to even see their family members in the hospital, other than through their hospital room windows or video calls. At our small university, institutional leadership developed an incident command (IC) team to work as a group to try to manage the everchanging pandemic while also attempting to continue to effectively educate as many of our students as possible. In this article, I describe our efforts, our successes and our failures, and discuss the lessons my colleagues and I learned from our experiences. I hope that these experiences will help the reader to be better prepared for the next life-changing crisis that their institution will face.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, incident command teams, quarantine, social distancing, proactive health

Over the past 2 ½ years, our campus, The University of Maine Farmington, experienced what most college campuses did: at first, coming to grips with managing a deadly phenomenon

we did not understand; next, managing a highly politicized pandemic; then, managing the continuing, ever-changing pandemic and its negative impacts, and wondering if it will ever be over.

This essay will explore the management and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a small, regional, public campus that is part of a system of universities. Like many campuses, we are understaffed and have no resources to spare. I am one of six administrators on my campus, and since February 2020, have served on the four-member incident command (IC) leadership team managing COVID-19 related affairs.

I started my job at our university in July 2019. During the fall 2019 semester, I was positive and hopeful. Our dynamic new president had set the stage for meaningful progress. My first awareness of COVID-19 came in early February 2020 from the faculty member responsible for study away programs and international studies. By the end of February 2020, our IC team and emergency operations center were activated and engaged.

Guiding Principles

I have taught leadership studies to college students for many years, including classes on leadership in crisis. And as a long time, student affairs practitioner, I have led and been a part of managing many crises. Early on, I knew I would draw upon those lessons I had experienced and the many things I had learned from my colleagues, leaders, and students over the course of my career. As I thought about dealing with the pandemic, I organized what I had learned into four guiding principles: look for something different from people, be aware of negative opportunism, center on who and what are important, and operate from the benefit of the doubt.

Look for Something Different From People

Often crises give individuals opportunities to exhibit different talents and skills than what is expected during non-crisis times. I resolved to look for opportunities for individuals to participate, problem solve, and even excel.

Be Aware of Negative Opportunism

In any crisis, some individuals and organizations will take advantage, exploit the situation, and benefit from the crisis, even as it negatively impacts others. I committed to ask myself, who or what would benefit from any given aspect of our actions? Who is trying to control the narrative for a particular perspective or outcome? I was determined that if negative opportunism crept into our operations, we would be able to regroup or pivot to make sure we were centering the right concepts, groups, and individuals.

Center Who and What Are Important

What should be centered during this pandemic? The IC team centered “public health” and our students. Most of our policies were created at the system level in collaboration with campus leadership. When participating in system meetings and making decisions related to public health, we asked: What is the best option to maintain public health? What are the costs of the best option? Can we manage these costs? Next, we made the best decision we could. When making decisions centered on our students, we asked ourselves: What is the impact of any given decision on our students’ experiences; on our marginalized or oppressed students? on the students’ pursuit of their academic goals?

Operate From the Benefit of the Doubt

I made a personal decision to give everyone the benefit of the doubt during the COVID-19 crisis. People react differently during crises, individuals have different needs, have varying capacities for managing stress, and have particular responsibilities during hard times. I told myself to put aside anything anyone did and attribute actions to how folks move through the world during a crisis.

Totally Consumed

The early days of managing the COVID-19 crisis were wild. Campus and IC leaders worked 12–16 hours a day managing everything from moving students out of the residence halls during spring break, to organizing technology needed for staff and faculty to work from

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home, to grappling with how many of our students would not have what they needed for online learning. IC leadership committed to answering COVID-19 questions in a timely manner and set up a special health info email account. The email traffic was voluminous.

Faculty on our highly residential, traditional campus transitioned to online classes. For many, it was challenging not only technically, but to their spirits; some were demoralized because the in-person classroom environment was where students and faculty thrived. Students struggled with a multiplicity of issues including the abrupt change to an online environment, lack of connectivity and appropriate technology, disrupted friendship groups, financial challenges and worries, and the heart wrench of canceled international classes and trips. How is a student supposed to persist when they are going to classes on their phone (because they do not have a laptop) and are getting Wi-Fi in their car while parked outside of a big box retail establishment or when they had to work extra jobs because breadwinners in their households were laid off? The stories of what students experienced were both inspiring and tragic.

Athletics and graduation were two very sad points during early COVID-19 times. Telling the senior spring sport student athletes their seasons were over was heartbreaking for the athletic director and the athletes. And our decision about spring 2020 graduation was protracted and agonizing; at first, we planned on having it in August 2020 when the crisis would surely be over . . . then December 2020 was considered, but the pandemic had not improved by then.

Relying on our guiding principles helped. For example, when we were criticized for letting too many students stay on campus after they were supposed to go home, we explained that for some of our students, the concept of “go home” was problematic. Not all students had homes to which to go. Some were abused at home. Some did not have beds or bedrooms, or study spaces, or the internet. For many of our students, staying on campus helped their mental health and academic persistence.

Individuals and offices across campus stepped up in a variety of ways. Our alumni department had an emergency fundraising campaign for students. Student organization

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advisors helped student leaders salvage what they could of their year, from holding virtual leadership awards to developing the infrastructure to hold our first online elections. Student life staff implemented online social and educational programs through social media. Our fitness staff created virtual classes and challenges. The counseling and student health department transitioned to tele-health.

I was personally challenged. Both my parents were ill with COVID-19 in March and April 2020, my father seriously so. My daughter was laid off from her job. But I barely had a chance to talk with them about their woes, because I was so busy with COVID-19 related work. In addition, my spouse was 5 hours away. I took the job in Maine, and he stayed to continue his job as a firefighter. We were prepared for regular long-distance travel, but between the travel restrictions among states and COVID-19 work tasks, I hardly saw him that spring, which made the work-from-home isolation and loneliness even more acute.

Building the Road as We Drove on It

The end of the spring 2020 semester did not mean rest for campus and IC leadership. We worked long hours with system leadership to prepare for a return to campus the following semester. I served as the convener of the planning section in the IC structure and worked with a large campus group, as well as IC and campus leadership, to plan our return in Fall 2020.

IC prepared for fall 2020 asymptomatic testing for everyone and move-in testing and quarantining for our residence hall students. Facilities created cleaning protocols, measured every space on campus, and reset offices and classrooms for social distancing. Academic leadership tried to figure out how many online classes were enough and how many would be too many for our residential campus. Academic support staff worked to help faculty move from the emergency state of in-person classes being taught online to effective online education. Faculty prepared to teach socially distanced and with masks, and they helped update schedules for students who could not travel for student exchanges or international programs. Orientation staff reimagined welcoming new students into a hybrid environment to be as inclusive as

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possible. Admissions and financial aid offices adapted in-person visits and a high touch environment to using virtual spaces. Athletics staff and coaches balanced NCAA, conference, and campus policies related to sports, and developed local protocols for practices, travel, and competition. Dining staff analyzed spaces to plan how students would get food and where they would eat, and how to provide take away meals. Student health staff prepared pandemic educational materials and determined how to deliver healthcare safely during a pandemic. Staff in our federally funded student support program figured out how to deliver activity supplies to students. A number of us worked with our webmaster to create website content. And we continued to use our email account as the communications hub.

In early July 2020, we had several online community meetings to discuss our fall 2020 return to campus plans. During those meetings, I realized many students, faculty, and staff were experiencing COVID-19 and its impact on their lives in multiple ways. Managing these highly individualized needs was going to be a major challenge. It was obvious by this point that anything related to COVID-19 was being politicized. We had community members on both ends of a philosophical range from, “How can you even think about being in person given the danger of this virus?” to, “Anything you are doing to manage this fake virus is ridiculous and illogical.”

Fall 2020 move-in days were a very low point. We were organized, prepared, and even excited going into check-in—our students were back on campus! But the process did not go as planned. The final step of check-in was an asymptomatic test. Unfortunately, due to several factors beyond our control, the medical staff provided for us was not large enough to expeditiously move our students through required testing. As a result, students spent hours in line. And to make matters even worse, we had an unexpected thunderstorm with a “seek shelter immediately” directive requiring our socially distant lines outside having to crowd inside, resulting in a confusing, anxious scene. Some parents called their senators or representatives, some called system leadership, many called our president or wrote angry emails to our email account.

During the required posttest/move-in quarantine, the situation further deteriorated. IC leadership had committed to releasing everyone from quarantine after all test results were back, estimated to be within 2 days—the best decision for public health as we were trying to create a bubble of safety. But it turned out the sheer volume of tests delayed analysis at the lab. Some tests had to be redone, which further delayed the process. Students could see their results online, and as negative results started coming in for some students, those students questioned why they had to stay in quarantine. After 3 days, our students were agitated, and some said we were keeping them “in jail.” Again, some parents called their senators or representatives, some called system leadership, many called our president, or wrote angry emails to our email account. After 4 days, we decided to release everyone who had a negative result.

After our move-in testing and quarantine debacle, IC and campus leadership regrouped, licked our wounds, and recommitted to serving our community in the most effective local ways possible. IC also solidified our operating principles and a new communications approach.

Incident Command Values

Deliberation Is Necessary

In our almost daily IC leadership meetings, we interrogated ourselves and each other by regularly asking: Are we centering public health? Are we centering our students? Are we looking at things from the students' perspectives, and thinking about the impacts on students? What is the right public health thing to do? Can we do that? Why or why not? If not, what is the next best right thing? We also asked who else should be at our meetings, and regularly invited colleagues to help us deliberate important issues.

Communication Must Be Direct, Focused, Informative, & Void of Political Perspectives.

In all crises, people crave information and will seek what they can somewhere else, if there is a vacuum of communication from leadership. Our communication plan included accurate and up-to-date web information, frequent meetings of the various IC teams during which information was shared and questions asked, emails informing campus of changes in

policies or protocols and an email address that individuals could use to get their own specific questions answered. We applied the direct/focused/informative/neutral process to all of these communication channels. For example, we avoided incentives to encourage our community to participate in asymptomatic testing, and we did not shame them into testing either.

asymptomatic testing would be a function of public health—period. We sent weekly asymptomatic testing updates to our campus after our first positive result in November 2020. These notes included positivity rates on campus and in our county, references to policy and protocol changes, and a thank you to folks for participating in testing—simple and routine. We monitored the email account 7 days a week and worked to answer folks within a day. And no matter how mean, sarcastic, or political folks were, we answered informatively, empathetically, and with no drama.

These values created a relatively consistent and predictable situation on campus. People generally understood how IC leadership was addressing issues and why decisions were made the way they were, even when they disagreed with us. And when there was discord, individuals knew who to engage with and how things would be handled. This did not mean things had gone well or all outcomes were positive, but it does mean folks could participate, and would be heard and assisted if at all possible.

Lessons, Just Not the Ones We Imagined

From the time of our first positive result in November 2020 to the fall of 2022, our lives were a blur of COVID-19 related work that included implementing a weekly asymptomatic testing (2–5 days every week) program; managing positive results 24/7/365; taking care of students in isolation and quarantine in collaboration with student health, dining, student life, and facilities; informing and supporting faculty when students were in isolation and quarantine; updating policies and protocols as the system, the state, and the Centers for Disease Control changed things in response to the constantly evolving trajectory of the virus; and continuously updating all communication content and channels. Over time, we were able to learn from our

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experiences, regroup, and use precious resources to tweak our operations. We hired a few temporary and part-time staff members to help with three areas that take a great deal of time to manage—testing, contact tracing, and compliance. We also hired a very small group of students to serve as peer care managers. These brave individuals provided peer support to students in isolation and quarantine. They delivered meals, did laundry, and served as liaisons between the students and IC leadership/case management staff. These eager and proactive staff and students made space for IC leadership and staff to do a little more of our regular work. The lesson is: if there is any way to use resources to increase capacity to serve the community during a crisis, do so, because there will be people who want to help, and leaders need space to reflect in order to move forward effectively.

Another lesson learned is that the focus of the crisis cannot be about each of us, or our individual skill sets or interests in a crisis. We do whatever needs to be done to assure the mission is fulfilled. When we were short peer care managers, others would deliver meals. When we ran out of laundry cards in our isolation building, I did student laundry at my house. When students ordered meals after the deadline, our director of student life delivered them because he believed that no student in isolation should miss a meal, even due to their own forgetfulness. One IC leader made sure we all had proper personal protective equipment, sharing some from her personal supply, and our IC testing leader made sure IC members who interacted with positive students had test kits in case they were exposed. Campus police transported student belongings to and from our isolation hall. Dining staff took the initiative to serve special things to students in isolation over holidays. A small but mighty group of staff, students, and faculty planned a creative hybrid graduation for the class of 2021. Many, many folks focused on the mission and supported our students in ways outside of their job descriptions.

One of my personal lessons relates to grief. I have had to come to terms with the grief of not getting a chance (yet) to be the vice president I wanted to be because most of my time has been spent helping manage the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The other personal lesson relates

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to one of my original, personal guiding principles: operating from the benefit of the doubt. This was extremely helpful in the early COVID-19 days, and has grounded me throughout the crisis, particularly through the hardest times when the IC leadership team, our president, or I received a lot of negative feedback and significant criticism.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has impacted everyone, and in a wide variety of ways. Some of our staff still feel betrayed that we came back to campus for in-person classes and activities in fall 2020. Some staff were extremely stressed by the constant writing and rewriting of policies and protocols as the situation evolved. Residential students were afraid that other residential students' carelessness in common spaces would harm them, and many of them moved home or off-campus to the perceived safety of familiar faces and small circles of friends. Some students moved home to take care of their families and never came back—and for some of them, it was just too much to juggle work and responsibilities and classes. Some students could not succeed in the online environment. And some could not succeed in the highly restricted in-person environment. I think about these students often and wonder what has become of their academic dreams.

There have been positive outcomes. Our academic online infrastructure and teaching capacity is stronger, and our virtual programmatic improvements have made us more inclusive. In addition, we now have both in person and virtual health and counseling services, which means we can serve more students. We also realized activities which fostered a sense of belonging and mutual accountability, like sports teams or research projects, positively impacted the student experience. Places where folks could gather casually improved experiences as well. I'll never forget the students cheering when the dining hall put its tables back in fall 2021, or watching students joyfully meet outside when the weather improved. In the future, I will prioritize activities based in belonging, mutual accountability, and casual gathering.

One thing is crystal clear: everything we did to manage public health was necessary, but it took a toll on our community. People are exhausted, and not because they do not care about

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others' health, but because what they experienced is so grounded in *fear*. Fear of transmission, of losing control, of losing time or important activities in life, and, of course, of losing a loved one. We are now keenly aware of the importance of managing fear in a crisis, not with hollow reassurances, but with information and empathy-demonstrating awareness of impacts and bearing witness to those impacts.

In the end, my experience at our university during COVID-19 times has been bearable because of a supportive and trusting president, as well as hard working colleagues, jointly focused on effective communication, and intensely committed to health, safety, and the student experience. I have a great deal of respect for these individuals; I appreciate their collegiality, am inspired by their humanity, and honored to serve alongside them. They give me the strength to carry on as we move to the next phase of living with COVID-19.