

# How Will or Should the COVID-19 Pandemic Change Higher Education?

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially disrupted virtually all segments of society and has affected most profoundly, minoritized and other groups of oppressed and under-served people. Educational institutions, at all levels, are facing unprecedented challenges for sustaining operations, making it difficult to meet the expanded demands to address historically intractable issues of social justice and equity. Framed by concepts related to the professionalisation and latticing of higher education institutional operations, this chapter explores the experiences of three participant-observers affiliated with a large, public US research university—a professor/senior administrator; doctoral student/part-time instructor; and a full time professional academic advisor—related to the pandemic disruption that came during a time of broader, although not as acute disruptions within the sector. Reflections on these experiences culminate with recommendations for building a better ‘new normal.’

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; US higher education; higher education disruptive forces; administrative lattice; professionalisation of university administration; participant-observer case-study

## **1 Introduction**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions across the United States were experiencing a range of what were considered ‘disruptive forces.’ Embedded within a largely market-driven system, with state financial support scaled down notably since the Great Recession (2007 - 2009), higher costs to students triggered a national student loan debt crisis. More recently, demographic-related enrolment declines have led to a pending ‘enrolment cliff’ (Grawe 2018). Simultaneously, advances in information and communications technologies have been reshaping student and staff experiences and expectations for how education and support systems and services are organised and delivered.

This chapter was written when countries were in the difficult position of maintaining practices to limit contagion while re-opening their economies to mitigate the largest loss of jobs and income since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This global situation was compounded in the United States by nationwide protests over the longstanding injustice and mistreatment of people of colour ignited by the murders by police of several Black men and women, and particularly the murder of George Floyd. Although aimed primarily at policing, these protests implicate systemic racism within all institutions, including education at all levels. The public health, financial, and social disruptions U.S. institutions of higher education (IHEs) now face is unprecedented, leading some scholars to predict that there will be a significant contraction in the entire sector (Galloway 2020).

This chapter considers the types of disruption we were facing before the pandemic, how the pandemic has forced us to make changes and the choices we must make about just making it through or instead using the opportunity to make lasting changes toward a system that better educates and prepares diverse learners. Those choices are not dichotomies but a basis for strategy: the individuals whose activities comprise the work of the academy will have to make choices about what to prioritise.

This article provides reflections of ‘participant-observers’ to describe the experiences of three university staff with regard to the pre-COVID-19 realities, the time during the disruption, and the preparations for a ‘new normal.’ All three staff are from a large, public research university located in the Midwestern United States. The case study design employed in this chapter serves both intrinsic and instrumental purposes. Intrinsically, we provide a thick description, allowing the reader to interpret and decide the applicability

to their own circumstances. Toward that end, the narratives are intentionally subjective: reflecting both the thoughts and feelings of the narrators. Instrumentally, we use the case studies to describe several possible negative and positive trajectories that we believe are more generalisable. To frame our reflections, we first consider how HEIs prepare for disasters and the latticed expansion of professionalised administration in the United States. Finally, we take up Winston Churchill's adage to 'never let a good crisis go to waste', and provide our own judgments as to best way that higher education institutions can leverage the COVID-19 disruption to reform longstanding, entrenched issues that hamper student learning and institutional effectiveness.

## **2 Background and Framing Perspective**

In this section we first provide background on the U.S. context for crisis management among higher education institutions to provide the reader with a sense of the administrative infrastructure found at most institutions that is especially well-developed among public universities (which enrol about 75% of all students in U.S. postsecondary education) but also at larger private colleges and universities.

### ***2.1 Crisis Management at U.S. Universities and Large Colleges***

The published literature on reactions by U.S. higher education institutions to emergencies, disruptions and crises include many case studies about recovery from natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes; human tragedies, like mass shootings; and financial crises, like the great recession of 2007-09. Case-specific studies provide useful information from institutional leaders who have weathered such crises. Reviews of these studies and broader based research and scholarship related to crisis management identifies important themes that provide leadership with information useful for crisis planning and management. Most U.S. institutions of higher education have established administrative and operational divisions for public health, environmental safety, risk management, and disaster recovery. The continuing development of these capacities has been bolstered by a series of studies and guidebooks that provide guidance to institutions for setting up such infrastructure.

For example, using theories of evolutionary organisational change and a collective case study methodology, Shaw (2017) identifies seven factors as

the principle determinants of institutional success in dealing with such disruptions. Four of those factors related to the timing and length of crisis (specific timing in relation to key processes, recovery priorities, initial impact of event, and institutional knowledge/memory) and three to the broader resources available to institutions experiencing such crises (status within a larger institutional system, existing community partnerships, knowledge of external resources). In short, Shaw recommends that institutions focus on two key strategies: shortening the length of the crisis and accruing resources needed to recover normal operations.

An earlier analysis by Mitroff, Diamond and Alpaslan (2006) lists 14 different crises most encountered, the first of which is highly relevant to the current crisis: serious outbreaks of illness. Their list also includes natural disasters, fires, financial losses, sabotage, lawsuits, significant reputation loss, and terrorist attacks. They point out that most crises include a precipitating disaster followed by ‘... a complex chain of crises that the originating catastrophe sets off’ (2006: 62). Due to the variety and complexity of these potential crises, they recommend that institutions develop crisis management teams and plans that include a diverse portfolio of response and communication strategies for the diverse crises that an IHE can encounter. Based on a survey of chief academic officers, they find that institutions were most well prepared for such common disasters as fires, lawsuits and crimes, and least well prepared for environmental disasters (e.g., release of toxic chemicals) and athletic scandals. Among less common crises, institutions were relatively well prepared for terrorism but less so for sabotage.

Several well-known and cited systems have been proposed for helping IHEs and other large, complex service organisations develop their crisis management strategies and capacities. Two popular guidebooks, (Coombs 2014; Heath & O’Hair 2010) focus on the role of communication as a core component of crisis management. Other treatments focus on how crisis affects specific functions of higher education, such as admissions processes (Booker 2014) and budget and finance (National Association for College and University Business Officers 2020). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has a website providing guidance to college and university campuses regarding how to prepare for and deal with varying crises (<https://www.ready.gov/campus>).

These examples of studies and resources are provided to underscore the point that colleges and universities throughout the United States (the focus of this paper), have been paying significant attention to developing strategies

and capacities for natural and human-made disasters and crises. Most institutions have crisis management teams and plans, many of which have been tested and adjusted in response to the common range of disasters that IHEs must navigate. Professional crisis management staff advance their field at professional meetings of such organisations as the American College Health Association (ASHA), the University Risk Management and Assurance Association (URIMA) and the National Emergency Management Association. However, in some significant ways, the current pandemic represents uncharted territory, even for institutions that have dealt with common crises, including natural disasters, public health crises, fires, and scandals of varying sorts. Unlike most such crises, the 2020 pandemic is far more widespread (affecting virtually all institutions and, more importantly, students and staff), long-term (already in place six months as of this writing, with at least another six months until widespread recovery is possible), and covering multiple realms (public health, economics and, especially in the United States, social justice).

Institutional crisis management capacities, developed to respond to the broad range of disasters and catastrophes that colleges and universities commonly face, have been instrumental to the responses of U.S. colleges and universities to the current health, economic and social justice pandemic now confronting most institutions. To further complicate matters, the multi-layered public governmental response (local, state, and federal), has not been particularly well-coordinated within the country, with states taking the lead (as constitutionally mandated) for many aspects of public health matters, local officials given leeway, to varying degrees across localities, for invoking stricter measures, and the federal response ranging from very specific guidance provided by the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) to contrasting and often contradictory messages coming from the political leadership. As a result, there are very large regional differences in response regulations and behaviours across the country.

Although the geo-politics of the pandemic are well beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the context for this analysis, within a state considered to be solid ‘red’ (Republican party dominated) that has taken a pragmatic and comparatively well-coordinated approach with fairly consistent messaging and, more importantly, close coordination between university, local and state officials involved in managing the response. Up until the most recent weeks, our state has not had any of the types of surges seen in many other parts of the country. However, there are some signs that we may see a new wave in

the coming weeks.

The establishment, professionalisation, and expansion of crisis management teams at U.S. institutions of higher education, while directly relevant to the experience of the pandemic, is also more generally indicative of a broader trend in the sector that was described by two prominent U.S. higher education finance scholars, Robert Zemsky and William Massy, as the academic ratchet and administrative lattice.

## ***2.2 The Academic Ratchet and Administrative Lattice***

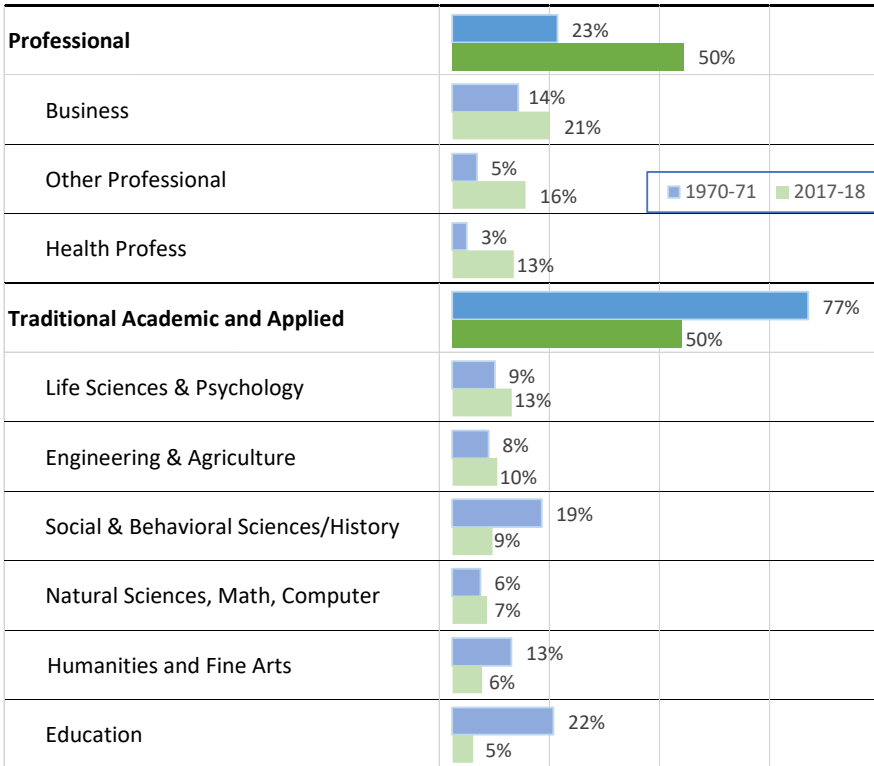
Student fees for attending college in the U.S. began to rise rapidly during the last 20 years of the 20th Century. By the end of the 1980s, higher education scholars were beginning to examine issues related to cost increases and cost containment. Among such scholars, Robert Zemsky and William Massy (Zemsky & Massy 1990; 1994) described the closely inter-related trends of lattice-like proliferation and entrenchment of administrative staffing and ratcheting down of the faculty member role to primarily academic disciplinary matters. They argued further that these concurrent trends have had deleterious effects on cost containment and quality. Specifically, they noted that responsibility for tasks faculty members traditionally performed related to institutional goals (student recruitment, instructional design, student affairs, libraries, etc.) were shifted to professional administrators and their staff. The increased professionalisation of such areas as advising, instructional design, learning technologies, budgeting, and finance, compounded by the concurrent growth in regulation and compliance requirements, had the simultaneous effects of increasing costs and diffusing responsibility for decision making to the point of obscuring transparency and accountability.

The professionalisation of higher education administration has invoked a web of new careers, specialties, and identities within the academy. As noted earlier, a host of professional associations serve the professional development needs of college public safety, public health, and risk management staff. Similar associations exist for academic advisors, student affairs professionals, instructional designers, enrolment management professionals, institutional researchers, assessment practitioners, teaching and learning centre staff, budget officers, information management professionals, and so on. As these higher education professions mature, they develop higher level and more nuanced professional standards and methods for operation. Members

of the profession join national panels to consider laws, regulations, and reporting requirements within the specific higher education profession. These professions become so ingrained that they spawn graduate training programs: the first author's own department offers a master's degree in student affairs administration and certificates in institutional research and academic advising. Recent developments have seen the realm of college advising divide into separate sub-professions related to academic, career, and financial advising, as well as 'life-coaching'.

The concurrent academic ratchet trend shifts the time, attention, and responsibility of faculty members to their academic specialty and the colleagues with whom they collaborate and form scholarly communities with nationally and internationally. Students, and especially those in graduate programs, enter the socialisation stream of this ratchet, preparing papers for national disciplinary associations, learning the language and epistemologies of their chosen discipline or profession. It is also important to note that, there has been a large shift in student enrolment since the mid-1980s, away from the traditional academic disciplines and toward professional courses of study. Figure 1 illustrates this transition showing that the traditional academic disciplines and professions (the arts & sciences and training for engineering, agriculture and education), have shifted from accounting for over three quarters (77%) down to one-half (50%) of bachelor degrees conferred, while the relatively newer and emerging professions (business, health fields, and other professional services), have shifted from less than a quarter (23%) to fully one-half (50%). Changes in the distribution of faculty members by discipline have changed accordingly.

Zemsky and Massy portrayed these trends as contributing to escalating costs of higher education. They were also the front end of a trend that has been further exacerbated by the rise of new providers in the for-profit and distance education markets. Higher education has been repackaged and commodified into a range of products and services. The large textbook providers control content through multi-platform delivery systems and even go so far as create generic classes and curricula that providers can offer through primarily a student service model. As another example of the self-generating nature of these new higher education professions, several have grown to the size where their associations have moved from member volunteer organisations to professionally staffed associations that offer their own certificates and educational services.



**Figure 1. Bachelor's degrees conferred by general field of study, academic years 1970-71 and 2017-18.**

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 322.10*

After presenting the case study narratives, we will return to re-considering the role of the academic ratchet and administrative lattice in relation to the experiences and observations presented in the cases, and the ramifications these have for transforming large, complex institutions of higher education.

### 3 Participant Observer Reflections within Context

The current study employs a participant observer multiple case study approach



to explore the phenomenology of three staff members who have been experiencing the pandemic at a large Midwestern, U.S. public research university. The participant-observer case-study approach, like other qualitative approaches (e.g., ethnography and action research) are particularly appropriate for the study of social and cultural phenomena, such as the experience of a pandemic. The value of this approach derives, as noted by Iacono *et al.*, ‘... from the observations that, given the human capacity to talk, the object of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the actors is largely lost when textual data are quantified’ (Iacono, Brown & Holtham 2009: 39).

The case study approach generally examines phenomena in their natural setting. It is most appropriate when the phenomena cannot be separated from its context, although some schools of thought in the phenomenological tradition suggest this separation is never possible. The author/participant-observers of this article include three higher education staff who generally approach scholarship from a post-positivist perspective, believing in some level of generalisation across contexts, but also believing that the interpretive contexts used in social science or any type of human research, are human constructions that do not represent an objective reality. We also recognise that the level of generalisation possible from a specific setting depends on its similarity to other settings in terms of region (United States, Midwest) organisational type (large, public research university), and staff/clientele (regional and socio-cultural characteristics). However, we also note that one of the points of such analysis is to provide all readers with information that can be interpreted, adapted, and tailored to similar, if not identical settings.

As previously noted, the university within which we work is a large, public midwestern ‘flagship’ campus within a state-wide university. The campus is located in a relatively rural location, but by virtue of the campuses size and operational diversity, the population density of the city it is the fourth highest in the state, well ahead of the state’s major metropolitan areas. The state’s largest city, its capital, is located just 80 kilometres north of the campus. The entire university enrolls just short of 100,000 students, with the authors’ campus being the largest: roughly 45,000 students and 10,000 staff. The campus is very traditional, with the vast majority of undergraduate students (about 33,000 total) attending full-time and either living on campus or with other students (or on their own, or possibly with young families) in nearby off-campus housing. All other campuses of the institution enrol notably higher proportions of older and part-time students, with limited or no campus housing

(that is, ‘commuter’ campuses). However, many of the executive administrators for the entire University (President and Vice Presidents), and their staff, including the institution’s public health, safety, and crisis management core team, work at the traditional, flagship campus.

### ***3.1 Case 1: Professor and Senior Administrator***

Having worked at the university for 28 years, I have been affiliated with two different campuses, two different academic departments (Psychology and Education) and have worked within both campus and system administrations. Currently, my work is split, with half being the duties of a full professor in a doctoral program (higher education) on the flagship campus, and half as a senior advisor in the office of the Executive Vice President for University Academic Affairs, a system-level division.

The mid-March 2020 lockdown came in the middle of the Spring semester, during the Spring Break week, when many students were away from campus. Typically, at that time of year, I and many of my colleagues would be shuffling between conferences and travel for research, with some using the break week to visit family. I was supposed to have flown to Singapore for a research group meeting over spring break, but that trip was cancelled a few weeks earlier, due to the spreading COVID-19 virus in East Asia. It was clear that the U.S. was about to be hit hard, as many last-minute conference cancellations occurred during the last two weeks in February and especially the first two week of March. Very abruptly, our busy, travel-filled lives would transition to a lifestyle to which most of us were unaccustomed: staying in one place, our respective homes, with only virtual contact with our colleagues and students. Within my department, the classes we teach (in my case, one doctoral seminar), shifted from mostly in-person to mostly synchronous, online. This was a relatively minor shift for us because we were already used to accommodating remotely located students who would ‘attend’ class through video conferencing, with most students at the classroom location. However, this was not true for many colleagues, and especially those teaching large undergraduate classes through traditional modes of delivery (in-person lecture, lab, discussion, seminar, etc.).

While we adjusted to the temporary lockdown, the world seemed to be falling apart around us. Having lived through a range of crises in the United States (two major blackouts; civil rights and anti-Vietnam war protests of the

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late 60s-early 70s; serial killers on the loose; and 9/11 to name a few), and been close to locations where major weather disasters have occurred (especially tornadoes, given our location), I have always been uplifted by the way people come together during such times to help each other through. Something is different from most of those prior crises. There are still many visible instances of people acting selflessly to help others, but the news is dominated these days by the political divisiveness and hate that has more recently characterised the national discourse. This divisiveness is fuelled by a series of police led homicides of black men in circumstances that reveal long-standing systemic bias. This ignites protest among people of colour and notably more white allies than after similar incidents that have been occurring regularly throughout U.S. history.

Protests ignited locally when a racist hate crime occurred on July 4 (U.S. Independence Day holiday) at our local recreational lake. Demands increased that our university take visible steps to address inequities. Because this happened during the relatively quiet summer when most undergraduates are not on campus, the calls and actions are primarily among university staff and many graduate-level students who remain at the university over the summer. The senior administrators of the university are very sympathetic. They are aware of the systemic inequities in our institutions and are personally committed to addressing them. The Dean of the School of Education was appointed to lead anti-racist initiatives for the university. The faculty members and students in my program are all deeply and personally affected by these incidents and met several times during the summer to consider how we can take meaningful steps, first to ensure that our own program has a suitable climate for our students and then to work with those students to pursue broader change.

The disruption to our teaching caused by the health pandemic seems much easier to manage than the social justice pandemic. Taking action to shift to all online instruction is a much more manageable task than dismantling institutionalised racism. Many of the recent classes and new degree and certificate programs we have developed are either entirely online or include significant online components, taking advantage of the Learning Management System (LMS) we use across all campuses. A few of my colleagues took the occasion to replace synchronous meetings with additional asynchronous learning resources, student discussions, and other learning activities. The university's online class and program development has been extremely active

in recent years. A relatively new Office of Online Education provides support to instructors and programs for expanding our online programs and classes. A Keep Teaching web site (<https://keepteaching.iu.edu/>) was created to provide a one-stop resource centre that was managed and populated through the collaboration of instructional technology and design experts from our teaching and learning, learning technologies, and online learning offices.

The administrative work I do usually focuses on strategic and tactical matters and less so on operational issues. However, the senior administrator I work with has a portfolio of university-level (system) responsibility that is wide ranging, including public health and safety, the back end of all student systems (registration, financial aid, advising, etc.), state academic relations, executive recruiting, university policy, strategic planning, state and federal compliance reporting, university-wide faculty development, and university-k12 partnerships. In addition, all the chief officers (chancellors) of the five regional campuses report to him. With the crisis at hand, the Executive VP rallied all his units, holding weekly meetings of his 16 direct reports, who together supervise over 200 system-level staff members across all campuses.

Among the most uplifting experiences of this time, which stood in vast contrast to the general news about the global health and social justice pandemic, was the clear devotion to serving students and helping our community through the pandemic that members of the team demonstrated. Area directors were spending incredibly long hours analysing what would need to be done under a variety of planning scenarios. They were as concerned about their staff as about students. The individuals empowered to make decisions that would affect staff and students took those decisions very seriously and conferred with appropriate experts to choose in some instances from among the least damaging among available alternatives. On the other hand, the situation also created opportunities for redesigning traditional practices.

As one example, colleagues in three different divisions coordinated the development of online/virtual campus orientations, since new student orientation is one of the largest and most important activities that occur in the summer. Approaching this as an opportunity to improve the orientation process, student support and online program colleagues went back to basic principles, articulating the essential objectives of orientation and designing online modules, using curricular design and delivery frameworks. Although they recognised that there would be a great disadvantage to not bringing students to campus, they believed that they had significantly improved the

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orientation program on most campuses and, perhaps more significantly, discovered that there was a lot of ‘busy work’ in the old models that did not make good use of students’ time together. The general consensus was that we would continue to develop the online orientation modules and otherwise move online permanently aspects of orientation that do not require interaction, reserving the face-to-face time, when again possible, for relationship building. The changes made to new student orientation are but one example of myriad redesign activities that this group of 16 division leaders undertook to prepare for the immediate near-term and uncertain long-term future.

I also had a chance during the disruption to work with the top executive administrators of the university—the three executive vice presidents and their chief assistants—developing an institutional grant proposal. That experience gave me a sense of what these three top executives were dealing with: working day, night and weekends, meeting with every imaginable constituency including more intensive collaboration than usual with city, county, and state public health officials. They had to make hundreds, if not thousands, of very quick decisions with relatively limited and rapidly changing information. The critical importance of coordinating communications during an emergency became quite apparent as layers of administrators released dozens of messages in the early days, adding more to the general confusion. I noticed in meetings with my faculty colleagues, that the confusion and general frustration was often aimed at senior administrators, alleging how much control they had and how they were not performing as well as my faculty colleagues and students thought they could and should. The dissonance was generally aimed toward a faceless entity: the administration. I have been involved in University administration for nearly 40 years and have learned well that administrators are more often the foil for faculty and student discontent than they are the cause. However, I have also noticed that those who know and work with these individuals think they are competent, well-intentioned people. But when there are no good answers, having a foil can be useful in some ways, although painful to witness and experience.

Because this university was in fiscally sound condition prior to the disruption, and because especially the flagship campus is vital to the economy of the small town it occupies, one of the primary objectives of the central administration was to maintain its workforce. A hiring freeze and 5 percent budget cut were invoked. But even if a staff member was unable to do their work due to the changes in operations, they were guaranteed to be paid through

the end of June. After that point, jobs would no longer be guaranteed, but the objective was to keep as many jobs as possible and to redirect individuals who could not work to new work within the organisation.

Enrolment for the Fall 2020 semester would be one of the determinants of the fiscal health of the institution through the crisis. Like most large research universities in the United States, even public institutions, tuition fees from students comprise the single largest source of revenue: just over 50% of the total for our campus, with state appropriation accounting for less than 20% and the remainder coming from research funding, philanthropy and other university revenue operations (e.g., campus housing, intercollegiate athletics, campus event services, etc.). Much of the activity of June and July was devoted to promoting student enrolment. Indeed, the decision to have both in-person and virtual instruction was motivated by the belief that going fully online would result in a significant decline in enrolment, which would then require more extensive budget cuts and require eliminating a significant number of employees. Toward this end, the institution finally decided, by mid-June, to plan for a ‘hybrid’ fall semester. Having in-person classes for programs for which that was critical (e.g., dance performance, some laboratory disciplines and clinical health programs). In-person attendance would also be available for new students, so we would not lose too many who figured that, if they were going to attend virtually, they might as well stay home and attend a less expensive institution.

In many ways, July was the calm before the storm. With the campuses between semesters, summer session classes winding down, many of the staff who had been working non-stop since mid-March took long needed breaks, although ‘getting away’ had very limited options. This was also the month during which the decisions made in June were moving into implementation stages, with staff who were not generally involved in making those decisions on the front lines carrying them out. In July, the COVID-19 virus flared up across the Southern and Western States, bringing into question the plans made in June based on trajectories at the time. As our university staff started to prepare for incoming students, plans were being made and changed daily about safe opening protocols, including mass-testing. As colleges across the country started to bring back athletes in the summer for training, news of COVID-19 breakouts was frequent. By mid-August, many institutions starting resuming classes, again with very mixed outcomes and close coverage by the media of students congregating at large off-campus and even on-campus parties.

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At our university, 39,000 students were tested during the extended three-week student move-in period (mid-August) with less than a 1% positivity rate. Despite this, I know many students, faculty and staff were uncomfortable interacting closely with students and their families coming in from all over the state and country. Mask-wearing was generally prevalent, but not universally, since there are factions of people in our country who still believe the pandemic is a hoax, or that masks are a political, not health behaviour. Now, just two weeks into the semester, nearly 20 student residents (mostly fraternity and sorority houses) had to go into quarantine due to positivity rates in mitigation testing over 25%. Students and staff had to sign a contract this semester to follow the pandemic health rules. Penalties for 3 incidences of non-compliance lead to immediate dismissal for both students and staff. Of course, enforcing this includes giving everyone an avenue for reporting witnessed noncompliance behaviour, in other words, students and staff ‘turning in’ other students and staff.

When talking with students in my program, who are primarily training to be higher education administrators and researchers, I hear the frustration and anxiety they are facing in working the front lines. I know they are not happy with the situation and feel that they do not have a choice. This is no time to be on the job market in higher education, so they just must bear the pain. Our program enrolls a relatively large proportion of students of colour (about 40%) and the scholarship of all faculty in the program are shaped by issues of social justice and equity. As we navigate this unique semester and whatever follows, we see before us more vividly than ever the hate, inequity and injustice that is systemically laced within all our institutions, including the university. We see stark examples of both effective and ineffective leadership in the political domain, and we cannot always agree on which is which. We see more than ever the role that higher education can play in dismantling these inequities but realise the work must start within our own institution. We are energised to be part of that change if we and our institution can survive the next few months... or years.

### **3.2 Case 2: PhD Student**

I have been at this institution for 7 years, first completing a master’s degree and now finishing my doctorate. I am the first person in my family to seek an advanced degree. I returned to school after working in industry because I

wanted to be an educator. I then fell in love with research and enjoyed a welcoming lab environment with ample resources and generous people. I then found myself torn, unable to decide if I was an educator or researcher first. I still do not have an answer—both passions run deep. I care deeply about this institution and believe in the mission of higher education.

Prior to the pandemic, at the start of my PhD program, the department I was affiliated with was merged with two other departments into a new, single entity. I am a member of the inaugural PhD class. The program merger was not an instance of shared governance, but a decision from ‘on high.’ It is my understanding that the change was made to reduce overhead and facilitate bringing together a (financially successful) independent school with the much larger (and financially struggling) College of Arts and Sciences.

Even in my relatively short time as a member of this institution, I have seen what seemed to be a slowly rising tide of neoliberalism turn into a tidal wave. The university is a business, now more than ever. I have also noticed that many faculty members seem unconcerned or resigned to the changes (in addition to systematic disenfranchisement through having their power stripped away by administration). It appears to be normalised at this point and accepted. Perhaps I am naïve, but things are only the way they are because we made and allowed them to be this way. That means we can change them.

When the pandemic struck and the university switched to all-online in March, my dissertation ground to a halt. As an experimental psychologist that uses psychophysiological measures, there was absolutely no way I could or would collect data. Ennui set in, and I considered whether I should just walk away and accept that it is time to move on. If I stayed and waited for the lab to open back up (a wholly impossible thing to predict at the time), I could linger well past my funding. Neither option felt ideal. Then it struck me: this is my personal Kobayashi Maru! When faced with no-win scenario, change the scenario. Thus, with an amenable committee, I re-proposed a modified version of my dissertation using what data I had already collected, and I was unmoored and back to work.

Aside from my dissertation, teaching was interrupted for my fellow graduate workers when the pandemic struck. I was on a fellowship and not in the classroom at the time. However, I learned from my peers about what they were forced to cope with: suddenly redesigning a course in the middle of the semester. Again, many of the courses involve students doing hands-on work with specialised equipment. Others are more traditional courses. While



balancing all their work as fulltime students themselves, my peers needed to suddenly redesign their courses without any additional resources or compensation.

Then, moving through the summer, we had no idea what our teaching experience would be in the Fall. I knew I would be back to teaching but had no idea of the modality. There was considerable talk of face-to-face, online-only, and a hazily defined ‘hybrid’ model. There was disorder across the map, with conflicting information coming from all levels of administration and faculty members. It was clear that the decision to reopen to some amount of face-to-face instruction in the Fall has already been made before there was a plan to do it safely.

Myself and my peers found ourselves completely excluded from this process, even in our own department. We received extremely limited communication, and what correspondence we did have with our administration was that we should be grateful we had jobs. (We asked for clarity on this point because it seemed like a veiled threat. Administration doubled down on their remark.) In all, we received more obfuscation and diversion in response to our requests for information and to have a representative present at meetings. We learned through channels outside our department that the administrators we were talking to were specifically empowered to make the decisions we were asking of them, but they shirked all responsibility, hiding behind the labyrinthine structure and perhaps hoping we didn’t know better.

This brings into focus my primary point: the sharp contrast between faculty members and administration’s handling of the pandemic and how it encapsulates changes occurring in higher education. It is my personal experience that faculty members have banded together, determined to empower and protect graduate workers and students to the best of their ability. Faculty members have been attentive and sympathetic to how the pandemic has impacted our lives, both as people and as scholars. Even the faculty members that grouse at graduate workers’ organizing during the pandemic are busy working hard to try and solve an unsolvable puzzle of how to handle the new not-normal: one of the primary draws for my department is a hands-on learning experience with technology, which presents unique challenge.

Administration, however, holds almost all the power and seems largely unconcerned about the wellbeing of graduate workers, both before and especially during the pandemic. I do not believe there is a nefarious plot afoot, but it is my opinion that graduate workers are treated more like low-level

employees in a business than educators and scholars. Our labour is exploited and taken for granted. Our pay is based on the lowest possible number to populate the positions, and not a liveable wage. The institution's own calculator for yearly cost-of-living as a graduate student shows that cost to be some 40% greater than our pay.

And much like employees at the bottom of any hierarchy; when the pandemic struck, we were treated like 'essential workers': expected to shoulder a disproportionate amount of danger in exchange for sub-living-wage pay. The university's plan to permit an amount of in-person teaching was structured in such a way that graduate workers were far more likely to be subjected to in-person instruction while also wholly unable to decline because funding is a privilege and not a right. Again, no one person is sitting in a darkened room, wringing their hands, and laughing maniacally about how they have pulled one over on the graduate workers. But like in any large, decentralised business, no one is responsible for seeing the big picture ramifications of the choices they make. When staring at a spreadsheet; graduate workers are cheap, plentiful, and readily replicable. We have the least political power and the least ability to stand up to decisions coming down from administration.

The point, again, is that higher education's response to the pandemic is only unmasking the march toward university-as-a-business mentality and a shirking of responsibility for choices being made while at the same time making sweeping choices that impact the lives and wellbeing of many people. There is a lack of accountability and a lack of humanity, just as there is with private industry. However, private industry has far better pay, upward and horizontal mobility, and far fewer barriers to entry. I personally gave up a career where I was already making income comparable to any professor in my department (and was on pace for making far more) because I believed in the mission of higher education. Money is not everything, after all.

### ***3.3 Case 3: Professional Staff – Academic Advisor***

I attended this university as an undergraduate and then graduate student from 2008 to 2014. After working in industry for close to two years, I returned to the university and have worked as a full-time academic advisor for almost 3 years, now. I advise for three major programs within the College of Arts and Sciences (hereinafter, College) within the university. I received both my bachelor's and Master's degrees from the department for which I advise. It is

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the same department as the Case 2 author, but I received my degrees before the forced merger. I approach this case from my perspective as an academic advisor in the College. However, I acknowledge I cannot separate my past from my present perception of reality, so undoubtedly my years as a student inform my perceptions in ways that I cannot consciously distinguish. At the time of this writing, while I work full-time, I am two weeks into taking a class as a student (outside the department for which I advise) that has a lecture, discussion, and lab component. I feel fortunate that I was given the opportunity to attend all these class components online. Some students in the class have elected to attend the discussion in-person.

Before the disruption, all academic advising in the College was in-person. We had in place an appointment scheduling system accessible online through which students could schedule appointments. Advisors created bookable appointment slots on their end of the system. These slots must be pre-determined as 'in-person,' 'telephone,' or 'online.' Advisors can only choose one option, so all advisor appointments were 'in-person.' There were exceptions, though. Students studying abroad, for example, could email the advisor to let them know to expect a phone call, which they then had to make during our local time working hours. It was generally acknowledged that in-person advising was preferable to remote, since body language and tone are more easily conveyed. We will often have personal and potentially difficult conversations with students; the in-person setting is preferable for everyone involved in those conversations. Not only is in-person sometimes more comforting for students, but it is also good for advisors so that we can assess more accurately if a particular student is in distress or otherwise in need of more than just academic help. I actively discouraged phone appointments and would request that students make an appointment with another advisor in the department if they wanted or needed a phone appointment.

Students in my department are not assigned an academic advisor. There are 6 advisors for the department, and students can schedule with any of us at their convenience. Thus, we do not have a traditional caseload. However, given the number of students in the department, the per advisor ratio is about a 333:1. There was a period of time a year before the disruption where there were only four advisors, and thus the ratio was 500:1. Needless to say, it was a very stressful time for the four of us. With either ratio, advisors in my department can easily get a sense of the general mood of the students we work with. We meet with between 7 and 14 students every day, except for the

occasional slow week during the Fall or Spring semester, and during the Summer.

There is no clear promotional structure for academic advisors in the College, though other units on campus do have promotional structures for academic advisors. In the College, though, it is generally accepted that academic advisors will never be promoted within the unit. We are usually eligible for as much as a 3% raise each fiscal year. Because of when I was hired, and now the pandemic, when a salary freeze was implemented, I have only seen this raise once. I find it difficult at this early and low salary point in my career to work in an environment where there is no monetary incentive to go above and beyond. It feels like I am expected to enjoy the prospects of working as an entry-level academic advisor and if I want to ‘move up,’ I would need to take a different position in another unit.

During the summer, advisors are required to advise students during new student orientation. Traditionally this has been done in the main library on campus. Incoming students from the state as well as many from around the country are required to come to campus for a two-day orientation, then return to wherever they call home, and then come back to campus again to start the Fall semester. International students come two weeks before classes start for their orientation. Unless a student has an impairment that requires the presence of someone else, these orientation advising meetings are just between the student and an advisor. Parents or guardians have an optional orientation during their dependent’s orientation, so they can be physically on campus with the student. In general, I (and most advisors) prefer to only have the student present during a meeting, as meetings can be awkward with other family members present and it can be cumbersome to explain things to two different people at once.

With that pre-disruption context, I have noticed a lot of pandemic-related changes affecting me, my colleagues, and the students I work with. The students who attend this campus are traditional-age, predominantly 18-22 years old. Most undergraduates currently at the university were born after the turn of the millennium. They are members of ‘Generation Z’ (Gen Z). Before the pandemic, advisors were being educated on the characteristics and behaviours of Gen Z students, and the lens through which they view the world so we could advise them more productively. Defining a generation of students is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that Gen Z students and their parents are significantly different from Millennials (the Case 2 and 3 authors),

Generation X, and Baby Boomers (Case 1 author). Most importantly, Gen Z are ‘digital natives,’ who never knew a time without the Internet and very high speeds of information transfer, pervasive access (with some notable inequities), the ability for instantaneous, live online, worldwide interactions through pervasive social media.

When the lockdown began in mid-March, I started to work from home. I remain working from home and intend to work from home until there is a vaccine and things are safe enough, in my opinion, to return to campus. I benefit from a sense of job security, since our administrators know how non-functional the department would be with fewer than six advisors. Students need professional academic advising more than ever. I have overwhelmingly enjoyed working from home, though I frequently remember thinking that advising was more effective in person. But is it?

Students now schedule their ‘in-person’ appointments and, depending on the advisor, elect to meet through videoconferencing, telephone, or email. I like the flexibility this gives students. I have found more students show up for their appointments because they do not have to make a special trip and walk across campus or drive to campus just to meet with me. I enjoy meeting through videoconferencing over telephone, and would rather not take email appointments, though I have them as an option for students who feel uncomfortable with or do not have access to other available options. The disruption has changed the way I conduct appointments slightly, but I have adjusted quickly, and think this new method I have developed gives more transparency and ultimately leads to more understanding with the student.

Remote working has had an overwhelming positive effect on my mental health. Being physically on campus means experiencing the general anxiety level of all the people around you. Gen Z is known to have more reported mental health issues than any previous generation. While I take my responsibility seriously to help students with whatever is affecting them, I am not a trained mental health professional. Advisors experience an emotional and mental-health toll from doing what they do. Before the pandemic, if I was dealing with other issues in my life, I’d either need to take a ‘mental health day’ off from work, or come to work and work through my personal pain while also being confronted with students’ issues. It can be incredibly taxing for someone not trained in counselling. Now that I am not physically around stressed-out students, staff, and/or faculty all day, I can much more easily manage my own mental health. Of course, the pandemic brings other

challenges to maintaining one's mental well-being, but that, too, seems more manageable when I am in the comfort of my own home.

I worry about students who do not live in comfortable or safe environments. I also worry about the growing digital divide. Typically, students with lower socioeconomic status will not pay to live in campus housing, and so will be taking classes from home. They may live in an area or house that does not have reliable Internet access, and possibly do not own a computer. There is undoubtedly the potential for underserved students (in the United States, primarily low-income and black, Hispanic, or indigenous peoples) to face many barriers to education. There is relatively little I as an individual can do to help these students but refer them to other relevant University services. I will always follow-up with a student to see if they have followed through on such referrals, though I do not always hear back.

This summer, orientation was all online. I think the advising portion of orientation benefited massively from being online. It forced us to think critically about what should happen in that meeting, and thus improved the overall structure of the meeting. Meetings were lengthened, and so ultimately much more demand was put on advisors' time. However, I noticed that I was not nearly as exhausted at the end of the day as I had been doing in-person orientation appointments.

One undesirable effect of online meetings was not being able to bar parents or guardians from the meetings (students were typically videoconferencing from their parents' house). In many cases, when parents were present in my appointments, they would start talking for the student and pass judgement on the student for their course elections. They would also get frustrated when they could not follow along at every step (the student was the one using the computer to explore, plan, and sign up for classes). I do not blame the parents, though. Usually when parents want to be present, it is because they are paying for their child's education. Now, not only are they paying the same price (or more), but they are doing so for what many believe is an inferior educational experience, with university deadlines constantly shifting as the university made many last-minute decisions. Parents are concerned and worried that their children will not 'get what they signed up for.' And they are right, their children will not get a traditional college education, at least not this semester.

The students I interact with seem to be much more compassionate, understanding, and patient than before the pandemic. The pandemic and

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sudden change to education in the Spring semester apparently forced many of them to mature quickly. In mid-March I received an overwhelming amount of email that I (and other advisors) were not able to keep up with in as timely a fashion as we wished, the amount of emails started to ease as summer approached. Now, students are kind and less demanding in their emails. (I do not blame students for being demanding in email, they are still figuring things out.) They acknowledge they are emailing a real person who, like them is working from home during a common experience of crisis and not reacting to the staff member sitting behind a desk in a university office. I receive many more thank you emails. Students acknowledge when they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed, and thus acknowledge that their emergency is their own responsibility even when exacerbated by their emotional state. I've witnessed an immense growth in emotional maturity, which is wonderful, but sad since it came from such an unfortunate circumstance and may even be due to a better understanding of just how bad things can be or maybe they've been personally affected by COVID-19 or are engaged in soul-searching about racism.

Throughout this crisis, I have been underwhelmed and disappointed by the university's communication with students, staff, and faculty. A lot of emails were sent with very little tangible information. There are many policy questions for which I do not have a clear answer to provide students. When important decisions are made at the top, they trickle down and enormously affect advisors' jobs, since we are one of the main student-facing services of the university. Policies concerning grading and class structure were made without informing advisors. Some policies were changed so many times that it was impossible to keep track. There was enough room for interpretation of university policy statements, that implementation at the department level varied considerably. This put students in confusing situations that even advisors could not figure out. Advisors work closely with the Director of Undergraduate Studies in my department. On several occasions, he had to apologise because he had announced a policy and then had to amend what he said. He claimed the university had inconsistent and confusing messaging. Essentially, as the Fall 2020 semester was about to begin, we did not have a good idea of what was going on.

To be clear, and to echo Case 2, I do not think the administration's intentions are bad. I understand they have and continue to work hard to find solutions within a no-win scenario. However, as the adage goes: 'The road to

hell is paved with good intentions'. Just after it was announced that the Fall 2020 semester would include in-person learning opportunities, the administration said students should be brave to go back to school, even comparing it to war and a defining moment of the students' generation. I think it was wholly inappropriate to ask students to be soldiers, willing to sacrifice themselves for their education. This led students to question the intentions of the university and was not a great way to start the implementation of an in-person fall semester.

As a more specific example of good intentions not playing out, the university made it clear it wanted to provide as many hybrids and in-person opportunities as possible, especially for incoming students. What ended up happening was the opposite. Most of the students I advised for new student orientation were enrolled in entirely online courses. We would often have a conversation at the end of the appointment where I validated their disappointment and frustration. I explained to them that most of the courses that incoming students take are large and that it was impossible to offer them in a safe way. The university promised them hybrid options, but that became an unfulfillable promise. As a result, a lot of students now feel as though they were victims of a 'bait and switch' operation.

Ultimately, I do not think 'new normal' is a good phrase for the situation in which we currently find ourselves. This was apparent to me when meeting with incoming students (and their parents) during orientation: referring to 'normal' only creates expectations that a new normal will be close to the old normal. Many parents and their new-to-college students wanted to take as many in-person classes as possible to 'maintain a sense of normalcy.' In contrast, most returning students wanted mostly online classes. This is probably an indication of the rocky transition from in-person to online learning in the K-12 system, whereas many university students had been previously exposed to our online classes during the lockdown and could informatively assess whether the difference in quality was worth risking their lives. Gen Z is the most diverse generation to date. Because of their diversity, and considering the social justice component of the current pandemic, a notable number, if not a large majority of these students, have been energised by the social justice and equity dimensions of the current situation. I agree with that sentiment and think that we should use this disruption to completely dismantle and rebuild the higher educational system, so we do not return to a normal but rather create something better.



## **4 Conclusion and Recommendations for a Different than Normal Future**

This year marks our institutions bicentennial (200<sup>th</sup> year) anniversary. It was established in 1820 as a state seminary. Became an official university in 1838 and continued to evolve and expand its reach across the state to become the state's largest higher education institution. Our history is both unique but also characteristic of how higher education in the United States has evolved since that time.

The cases presented in this study reveal a disjuncture in the experience at this institution between the people who make the decisions and those charged with carrying them out. This is not a surprise finding. In the remainder of this chapter, we put forth a set of conclusions drawn from our differences.

### ***4.1 Large IHEs can Change Processes and Systems Fairly Rapidly***

Like most large, organisationally complex public universities, our institution has developed over time a very significant administrative infrastructure that combines the academic and administrative operations necessary to run an institution that operates at the scale of a modestly sized U.S. city. That infrastructure seems to have served the institution well, even though it carries the burden of sustaining employment among a very large and diversified workforce and operating very complex management systems required given the diverse nature of U.S. higher education funding sources and pricing structures.

Stories have emerged across the country of instances where the changes did not produce highly effective results. Polls of students taken during the pandemic reveals that many students did not get the quality of education they experienced before the pandemic. However, when given a choice of resuming in-person instruction for Fall 2020 or continuing with online instruction until it is safer to congregate, those who went through the experience of our online instruction were much more inclined to stay online for the time being. Our cases include instances of three people continuing their work with relatively little disruption and, in the one case where dissertation studies were at first severely knocked off course, a correction was made to resume progress. We have each mentioned and have heard many colleagues indicate that they expect that this situation will permanently impact where they do their work from, with all of us expecting to employ videoconferencing more

as a routine way to meet with people without have to take the time to walk across campus. We were already doing this at times for our teaching and administrative work and, while we long for those random encounters in hallways and on campus, we have experienced how much more time we can devote to our important work if we reduce the amount of time moving between meetings. We are looking forward to resuming state, national and world travel, more so for the sake of travel and less so for the purposes of conducting business: that we can do from anywhere.

The professionalisation of higher education behind the administrative lattice may well have contributed to cost escalation, but it has provided U.S. colleges and universities, with a supporting infrastructure that can work rapidly to respond to challenging circumstances. This institution's ability to maintain operations during the pandemic has been successful to this point, although at the price of contributing to the angst and uncertainty for students and front-line colleagues. While we do not know what the months ahead hold in store: so far, we are operating without having to furlough staff or consider other significant changes in operations.

## ***4.2 Rapid Change Comes at a High Cost***

Rapid change within a constantly evolving multi-faceted pandemic comes with some significant costs. It is seemingly impossible to be transparent about decision making when the volume is so high and so widely distributed. On the plus side, the decentralisation of decision making made it possible to adapt decisions to local needs. But the downside is that the individuals whose lives were most affected by those decisions do not feel they were adequately consulted. The diffusion of responsibility that Zemsky and Massy described as the consequent of the administrative lattice and academic ratchet is clearly evident in the case narratives.

## ***4.3 Shared Governance Needs an Overhaul***

Higher education includes more shared governance than many other types of institutions, but that shared governance has its limits both in terms of ability to respond to fast-changing circumstances, and perhaps more importantly, being based on somewhat outmoded assumptions regarding the composition of the higher education workforce and the operation of higher education institutions.

Faculty senates or councils are the prototype of shared governance. In the last year, the faculty senate at this institution extended the vote, albeit with proportional representation, to non-tenure track faculty. While that expanded participation in shared governance from roughly 1500 to 2000 campus staff, that still represents a small portion of the near 10,000 total campus staff. Other groups are represented through staff council and some collective bargaining units. Students participate in shared governance through their student governance system, which interfaces with the faculty governance system. However, these rather archaic structures, while modernised through virtual meetings, may not be the most effective way, and they are not the only way faculty and staff participate in decision making within the institution. Indeed, the very decentralised nature of decision making allows many students and staff to participate if they seek out those opportunities.

Our sense is that we need to enhance, reshape, or replace these antiquated forms of governance and communication with new ways to collect, analyse, share, and debate information among the full array people that participate in the education, research, scholarship and creative activity in which we collaboratively engage.

#### ***4.4 Systemic Transformation is More Challenging and Important***

The social justice dimension of the current pandemic underscores the need for higher education institutions to make substantial changes in the ways they operate if they wish to contribute to dismantling systemic injustice and inequity. There is no lack of consensus: our individual and collective experience at this institution and the others in which we have been students and staff, is that a substantial majority of students and staff recognise the problem and would like to see existing opportunity and attainment gaps by race, gender orientation, and geographic origin reduced and eventually ameliorated. But we also recognise that we are complicit in preserving these inequities due to the depth of their systematisation in our culture and our institutions.

The pandemic has demonstrated that practical change is possible and relatively manageable. Addressing entrenched institutional racism and other social inequities is far more important and difficult. The entrenched administrative and academic systems that have evolved over two centuries carry the full weight of the social injustices and inequities on which they are built. Our

university has a land acknowledgement statement, maintained by a First Nations Educational & Cultural Center, that acknowledges and honours the indigenous communities native to the region on whose ancestral homelands and resources the university was built. Like many institutions with a relatively (by U.S. standards) long history, some of our buildings were named after individuals who explicitly promoted racism and bigotry. We are in the process of reviewing and as deemed appropriate, changing those names (and several such changes have already been made). These small steps signal good intentions and the beginnings of needed reforms, but we understand that the depth and pervasiveness of those inequities will require sustained attention and action and may still take generations to unravel.

#### ***4.5 Advances in Technology can Promote or Inhibit Systemic Transformation***

Rapid advances in communications and analytical technologies have enabled us to develop more accessible personalised resources for our students. For example, learning analytics have been used to identify aspects of the curriculum that have large success gaps by race and ethnicity. Once identifies, we can then devise and assess pedagogical and curricular reform strategies to support the success of diverse students. We are now starting to see the use of artificial intelligence in applications that enable students to better manage their studies, including a new tool that that rakes data from the institution's learning management system to provide students with a cross-curricular assignment and time management tool.

Students entering in recent years are, on average, notably more digitally literate than their predecessors and, in many cases, instructors. However, that also means that the divide between those with higher and lower levels of access, opportunity and skill is larger than ever. While today's technologies are far more accessible than ever, the dependency on them is higher and so those without access or skills are at a greater disadvantage. We need to be very careful when leveraging technologies to ensure that we do so in ways that reduce and does not contribute to the 'digital divide.'

#### ***4.6 Expertise is our Core Asset***

The intellectual and humanitarian assets of our organisation are its most val-

uable commodities. Traditionally, this expertise has resided within the academic programs and departments. Now it is more diffusely organised throughout both the academic and administrative bureaucracies we have cultivated over many years. One of the disruptive forces from well before the pandemic, was the translation of university knowledge into products and services that help advance healthcare, education, public services, private enterprise, and all forms of scientific and scholarly endeavour. Indeed, these efforts are part of the commodification of higher education, but they also provide tangible positive outcomes that garner public support.

Universities have a long history of sporadic use of academic expertise to help manage and further develop the institution. The use of internal expertise tends to take three forms: academics with talent for administrative duties taking leadership posts, traditional shared governance, and expertise that can be tapped into for specific, episodic needs. For example, the first author of this article assembled a group of internal experts from computer science, operations research, learning sciences, and public policy over the summer to address the issue of using artificial intelligence to reduce the digital divide. When discussing the cases among authors, each of the co-authors referred to research they or another student or staff member had conducted relevant to our discussions.

It is hard to imagine an intellectual and problem-solving resource stronger and more concentrated than the full array of academic and administrative expertise housed within a modern university. The administrative lattice and academic ratchet have contributed substantially to the development of that expertise but have also contributed to the diffusion of responsibility characteristic of large, decentralised and highly specialised organisations. If we can figure out how to better harness our own assets and deploy them for the type of transformative changes needed to address the pressing problems of social injustice and inequity. To paraphrase the ancient proverb, ‘University, educate thyself!’

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