



An Empirical study on Navigating Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities in (COVID-19) Pandemic Situation.

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ABSTRACT:

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges for higher education, necessitating academic leaders to restructure systems and ensure instructional quality amidst significantly reduced resources. As department heads of leadership preparation programs, we must integrate scholarship on collective leadership, social justice, and equity. This article employs dialogic inquiry, where three department heads from major research universities reflect on their pandemic responses, highlighting equity-focused decision-making and sharing insights into Navigating complex demands, Leading with a focus on equity, Promoting social justice and democratic ethics, Leveraging collective leadership and diverse talents. Through this reflective exploration, we provide valuable lessons for educational leaders seeking to address the pandemic's impact while upholding the principles of equity, social justice, and democratic values in higher education.

Key Words : COVID-19 pandemic, social justice, educational leadership, Leadership Preparation Programs ,universities,.....etc...

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for educational institutions, necessitating rapid shifts to online learning and significant budget reductions. Academic leaders face complex decisions, ensuring quality education, student safety, and faculty well-being.

Significance of the Study

This study explores the dilemmas and conflicts departmental leaders face during institutional crises, policy changes, and resource declines. It provides implications for maintaining equity during sweeping organizational change.

Conceptual Framework

Department heads play critical roles in higher education governance, influencing faculty careers, curriculum, student enrollments, and budgets. Despite this, research suggests many receive inadequate training, leaving them unprepared for leadership and management responsibilities.

The Future of Higher Education Administration

Trends and Challenges:

Higher education institutions are navigating complex challenges and trends that shape the sector's future. The increasing demand for online and hybrid education requires institutions to adapt and innovate their delivery methods ¹. Simultaneously, shifting student demographics and needs necessitate a student-centric approach, catering to diverse learning styles and expectations.

Financial constraints and budget cuts pose significant challenges, compelling institutions to rethink their financial models and prioritize resource allocation ¹. Amidst these challenges, higher education is experiencing a growing focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, driving efforts to create inclusive learning environments and address systemic inequalities.

The emergence of new technologies and digital tools, such as AI, transforms teaching methodologies, student learning experiences, and administrative processes ¹. However, this technological advancement also raises concerns about the digital divide and the need for institutions to ensure equitable access to these tools.

Lastly, the evolving workforce needs and skills gap demand that higher education institutions align their programs with labor market requirements, fostering employability and lifelong learning ¹. By understanding and addressing these trends and challenges, higher education leaders can steer their institutions toward a sustainable and resilient future.

Institutional Key Areas of Focus

Higher education institutions are focusing on six key areas to drive success: Student Success and Retention, Digital Transformation and Innovation, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Financial Sustainability and Resource Management, Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations, and Leadership Development and Talent Management. These priorities enable institutions to enhance academic outcomes, foster inclusive cultures, leverage technology, optimize resources, build partnerships, and cultivate visionary leaders, ultimately ensuring institutional resilience and excellence.

Innovative Models and Strategies

Higher education institutions are innovating through Competency-Based Education, Micro-Credentials, Online and Hybrid Programs, Community Engagement, Data-Driven Decision-Making, and Holistic Student Support Services. These strategies enhance student success, flexibility, and relevance, while fostering collaboration, workforce development, and social impact. By adopting these models, institutions can better serve modern learners, drive innovation, and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Future-Ready Skills for Administrators

Higher education administrators must develop essential skills to lead into the future. These include Adaptability, Strategic Thinking, Digital Literacy, Emotional Intelligence, Data Analysis, and Collaboration. By cultivating these skills, administrators can navigate complex environments, leverage technology, foster positive cultures, make informed decisions, and build innovative partnerships. This enables institutions to remain relevant, resilient, and excellent in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Challenges Facing Department Heads

Department heads face:

1. Limited training, experience, Ambiguous and complex roles

Department heads in higher education institutions confront numerous challenges that impact their effectiveness and well-being. A primary concern is the Limited training and experience many department heads possess, often assuming leadership roles without comprehensive preparation. This exacerbates the Ambiguous and Complex Roles they occupy, straddling academic and administrative responsibilities.

2. Shared governance, administrative responsibilities and Balancing personal and professional lives

Department heads must navigate Shared Governance and Administrative Responsibilities, collaborating with faculty, staff, and central administration while making tough decisions. Achieving a Balance between Personal and Professional Lives is equally daunting, as the demands of leadership can encroach upon family and self-care time.

3. Increasing demands for competency and Scarce financial and human resources

Furthermore, department heads face Increasing Demands for Competency, requiring adaptability in areas like technology, pedagogy, and diversity. Scarce Financial and Human Resources compound these challenges, forcing leaders to prioritize and make difficult allocations. Collectively, these challenges underscore the need for targeted support, professional development, and institutional recognition of department heads' critical roles.

Responsibilities and Expectations

Department heads are responsible for:

1. Business leadership and Academic leadership

Department heads in higher education institutions bear multifaceted responsibilities, driving academic excellence, operational efficiency, and strategic alignment. On the business side, they provide leadership in developing and implementing policies and routines, ensuring seamless departmental operations. Simultaneously, they exercise Academic Leadership, overseeing program operation and fostering student success through curricular innovation, advising, and mentoring.

2 . Communicating and implementing institutional strategy

A critical aspect of their role involves Communicating and Implementing Institutional Strategy, translating organizational vision into actionable departmental goals and objectives. Department heads must also navigate a diverse range of tasks, including Course Scheduling, Hiring, Strategic Planning, Budget Management, and Performance Evaluation.

3. Managing diverse tasks

Effectively managing these responsibilities requires department heads to balance short-term operational demands with long-term strategic thinking, cultivate collaborative relationships with faculty and staff, and make informed decisions that promote academic quality, student success, and institutional excellence.

Implications for Department Heads

As higher education evolves, department heads must adapt to emerging challenges and opportunities. To effectively lead, they must Develop Flexible and Innovative Leadership Styles, embracing adaptability, creativity, and strategic thinking. Fostering Inclusive and Diverse Departmental Cultures is crucial, promoting equity, social justice, and belonging among faculty, staff, and students.

Department heads must also Leverage Technology for Efficient Operations, streamlining processes, enhancing communication, and improving student experiences. A relentless Focus on Student Success and Retention is vital, ensuring academic programs address student needs, interests, and career aspirations.

Building Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations with internal and external stakeholders enhances research, teaching, and community engagement. Lastly, Prioritizing Professional Development and Talent Management enables department heads to cultivate leadership pipelines, support faculty growth, and attract top talent.

By embracing these implications, department heads can navigate complex environments, drive innovation, and foster academic excellence.

The field is growing, with 13,000 jobs to be filled by 2028. Innovation and entrepreneurship are transforming education, presenting opportunities for leaders to collaborate and innovate.

Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Navigating COVID-19, Racism, and Budget Challenges

The higher education sector faces numerous challenges, including funding, diversity, and workforce preparation. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, emphasizing the need for collaborative leadership.

Defining Crisis Leadership

A crisis is an event or situation that risks an organization's reputation, safety, and financial well-being, requiring immediate managerial attention. Crisis leadership involves three stages: prodromal (emerging issue), crisis (fully emerged issue), and resolution (post-crisis).

Leading During and Beyond COVID

The pandemic, racism, and budget crises demand innovative leadership. Department heads must maintain operations, demonstrate care, and plan for future semesters amidst uncertainty. Scholars describe these challenges as "wicked problems" with no easy solutions.

Eight Critical Traits for Effective Leadership in Higher Education

1. **Strategic Visioning:** Ability to develop and communicate a clear, inclusive, and forward-thinking vision for the institution.
2. **Collaborative Leadership:** Capacity to build and sustain partnerships among faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders.
3. **Emotional Intelligence:** Self-awareness, empathy, and social skills to navigate complex relationships and conflicts.
4. **Adaptability and Resilience:** Ability to navigate ambiguity, uncertainty, and change while maintaining momentum and morale.
5. **Inclusive Excellence:** Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, fostering a culture of belonging and respect.
6. **Decisive Decision-Making:** Ability to make informed, timely, and transparent decisions, balancing data-driven analysis with intuitive judgment.

7. **Effective Communication:** Clear, consistent, and empathetic communication, actively listening to diverse perspectives.
8. **Integrity and Accountability:** Unwavering commitment to ethical principles, transparency, and responsibility, leading by example.

These traits are essential for higher education leaders to navigate complex challenges, foster innovation, and promote student success.

The Pandemic's Impact on Institutional Systems

In Spring 2020, higher education institutions activated crisis plans, adapting to online instruction and managing instructional change. Department heads played a crucial role in supporting faculty and staff.

Addressing Departmental Budget Challenges

COVID-19 created significant financial losses and uncertainties. Department heads interpreted campus-level communications, provided consistent messaging, and addressed faculty and staff concerns.

Addressing Race and Racism During a Pandemic

The pandemic coincided with increased racial tensions and Black Lives Matter protests. Department heads responded by supporting reeling faculty, staff, and students, acknowledging the deep divides and inequalities in education.

Equity in Times of COVID: Navigating Complexities in Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing divides in higher education, underscoring the need for equity-oriented departmental leadership. This approach involves transforming institutional and departmental policies to improve outcomes for faculty, staff, and students, particularly those from marginalized communities.

Equity-Oriented Leadership

Effective equity-oriented leaders employ critical thinking skills to address systemic inequalities related to race, income, gender, religion, disability, and LGBTQIA+ identity. Department heads must recognize the need for systemic change, prioritize resources, and invest time and effort to measurably and culturally transform their departments.

Navigating Complex Decision-Making

To maintain attention to equity, department heads can use the following framework to address conflicts and dilemmas:

1. Identify conflicting values (e.g., choice, efficiency, equity, quality, security).
2. Analyze who raises the issue and why.
3. Determine who is most affected and involve them in the process.
4. Assess intended and unintended outcomes.
5. Consider time constraints.

Leadership Preparation Programs

Higher education institutions house Leadership Preparation Programs (LPP) that focus on public licensing requirements for educational leaders. These programs emphasize democratic values, including equity, to prepare professionals for leadership roles.

Definition: LPPs are academic programs designed to prepare students for leadership roles in various sectors, focusing on developing essential skills, knowledge, and competencies.

Leadership Preparation Programs (LPPs)

Types of LPPs:

1. Master's in Educational Leadership
2. Master's in Business Administration (MBA)
3. Master's in Public Administration (MPA)
4. Doctoral programs in Leadership Studies
5. Certificate programs in Leadership Development

Institutional Complexity and COVID Response

The pandemic has increased institutional complexity, compromising traditional feedback structures and measures of productivity. Department heads face significant leadership challenges in addressing COVID, budget constraints, and systemic racism.

Findings:

Our research identifies these events as interwoven crisis situations that:

1. Present risks to institutional reputation and well-being.
2. Contribute to significant departmental leadership challenges.

By acknowledging these challenges, department heads can prioritize equity-oriented leadership, cultivate a forward-thinking mindset, and navigate complex decision-making to ensure a more inclusive and resilient higher education environment.

Supporting Department Heads in Higher Education:

Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness and well-being of department heads, higher education institutions should:

- **Recognize and Address Role Complexities:** Acknowledge the multifaceted nature of department heads' roles and provide clarity on expectations, resources, and support.
- **Provide Targeted Training and Resources:** Offer regular professional development opportunities, crisis leadership workshops, and access to expertise to equip department heads for navigating complex challenges.
- **Foster a Culture of Appreciation and Support:** Encourage open communication, feedback, and recognition of department heads' efforts, and promote a culture of gratitude and valuing their contributions.
- **Encourage Reflective Practice and Self-Care:** Support department heads in prioritizing self-care, reflective practice, and wellness, recognizing the emotional demands of their roles.

Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent national unrest due to systemic racism presented unprecedented challenges for higher education institutions. As department heads navigated these crises, they faced complex leadership dilemmas. Our shared inquiry highlights implications for leadership practices and underscores the ongoing disconnect between the scope of department heads' work and the recognition and support they receive.

Finally, we acknowledging these challenges and implications, higher education institutions can better support department heads in navigating future crises and promoting equitable, effective leadership.

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