

Leadership in the Time of COVID-19: Reflections of Latin American Higher Education Leaders

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Abstract

To navigate the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic, university leaders should consider its structural impact on teaching and learning, research and innovation, decision-making structures, and on their own role in providing the academic community with a strong vision. As Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, “Sweet are the uses of adversity, Which like the toad, ugly and venomous, Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.”

In the global crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing a boost in the role of experts. Science is determining public policy decisions. At the same time, leaders across the board navigate the storm, at all levels. The reflections from some higher education leaders in Latin America, collected in this article, suggest some essential directions to senior management of higher education.

Change begins with creating a sense of urgency. There is definitely no want of urgency in the current crisis. Management challenges are cropping up: ensuring the continuity of classes; making educational resources available in a digital format; obtaining resources for university hospitals; mobilizing research groups capable of delivering potentially relevant contributions; giving interviews to the press—not to mention discussions with governments on regulations about distance education, or with teachers unions, which are not always in favor of the digital transition due to its impact on working conditions. Such an accumulation of difficulties makes rectors feel—in the words of one of them—“run over by reality.”

This will be a period of experimentation in every sense. It will be important to shift one’s mindset and, beyond the crisis, identify opportunities. During the emergency,

rectors and their teams should adopt a “test and learn” attitude, be ready to recognize what works and what is not working and adapt quickly, and in the process, also look for opportunities for universities to contribute to communities and organizations in their vicinity. This will provide them with an additional source of legitimacy.

What Impact Will the Crisis Have on Higher Education?

With great urgency, universities are migrating their courses online. For this to succeed, a massive teacher training effort is necessary, as evidenced by the enormous popularity of the course “Adapting My Class to a Virtual Environment without Succumbing in the Attempt,” organized by [Columbus](#) in collaboration with member universities. Basically, two attitudes stand out with respect to the transition to digital modalities, one reactive, the other proactive. The most advanced institutions are capable of monitoring the implementation of the new programs, solving difficulties in the provision of online courses and addressing questions related to assessing learning outcomes. In the short term, especially in Latin America, equity of opportunities is a crucial aspect of the transition: remote modalities create difficulties for students in areas with limited connectivity. This also shows the need for increased responsibility from the public powers.

Carrying on with academic activities implies mobilizing resources and goodwill. “There is initial commitment and enthusiasm among the majority,” says another rector, “but what is needed now is a ‘countercyclical’ pedagogy. Staying motivated is going to be key.” In the medium term, how much of the current transition will impact teaching–learning models when the crisis is over? The value of face-to-face education will surely be reassessed. There will be teachers and students who will be delighted to return to traditional classroom courses. But, undeniably, the virtual classroom is acquiring a new legitimacy.

Although we do not yet know how much will change in the organization of academic activities, the current crisis is likely to have a deep, structural impact on higher education.

Research and Innovation: Funding Scarcity and Societal Expectations

The social responsibility of universities is embodied in a rich combination of teaching, research, and societal contributions. According to Dolly Montoya, the president of Universidad Nacional de Colombia, “it is important to show the active participation of universities in accompanying and guiding governments, and helping them take the right measures at the right time. The Universidad Nacional has organized think tanks in all areas of knowledge, ready to start working on assessing and learning from this crisis to help shape public policy when all this has been overcome. We know that the world will not be the same.”

The foreseeable economic crisis will have an impact on funding. Research and development activities will have to compete for scarce resources with other public sectors—while expectations regarding their economic and social impact will increase. New national policies and institutional mechanisms for the future orientation of these activities will have to be considered and areas of strategic research will have to be identified.

Establishing Structures for Consensual and Effective Decision-Making

Two days after issuing a message to the entire academic community about sustaining academic activities, the rector of a well-known university in Brazil received an open letter from the teachers’ union. Because of its potential impact on working conditions, the union expressed objections against the rector’s call. This debate led a group of academics and experts, gathered by the Cartagena Group, to write a manifesto on “[Higher Education in the Face of the Coronavirus Crisis](#).” The crisis calls for strengthening *leadership*. Yet, stronger leadership requires greater transparency. Difficult decision-making in turbulent times such as those that we are going through requires a *reflection on decision-making*.

Universities have their regular statutory bodies: governing bodies, administrative boards, academic councils, etc. Without bypassing them, nimble and multifunctional teams with clear objectives and a common purpose can contribute to building trust and making decisions in line with institutional priorities. This crisis may give the opportunity to test forms of shared governance that integrate managers, academic leaders, and

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administrative personnel in a process of assessing the viewpoints of all engaged stakeholders when defining courses of action.

Creating a Sense of Community and Leading from a Distance

To ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of students and faculty, it is necessary to maintain a sense of community and common purpose. In the community, the individual is “at home.” The community protects, preserves, and respects individuals. It takes into account people’s needs, including emotional ones. The foundations of a caring culture are a common purpose and unified goals. While goals vary at the academic community level, addressing common problems that arise during this crisis and sharing common experiences may contribute to building community in a time of social distancing.

Leaders need to energize the entire university community by setting a clear direction and communicating it effectively. Presenting a clear vision and offering a realistic perspective can have a powerful effect on motivation throughout the organization. It is important for leaders to inspire and lead their administrative departments in their daily work, while physically apart. One way to do so is to increase levels of interaction. In this emergency, it is advisable to assemble a crisis management team to support the rector in reactive and proactive decision-making.

As the university returns to normal, new routines will have to be incorporated into a “new normal,” taking advantage of the structures, culture, processes, and technology developed during the emergency period, combining face-to-face and remote forms of work. ▲

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