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Promoting Student Success in Uncertain Times: Five Practical Strategies for Academic Leaders during the Pandemic

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In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic leaders at colleges and universities across the United States have faced the nearly impossible challenge of rapidly introducing remote operations. Remote instruction is not new within higher education, but deploying all services and instruction from face-to-face to online in a matter of days comes with underlying challenges. Provosts, deans, associate deans, and department chairs are pressed to make quick decisions about instructional continuity with little time for deliberation. Many leaders feel unsure about these decisions and worry about future implications. Student-centered decision-making has never been more critical than now. Here are five practical strategies for consideration when making decisions about academic affairs during uncertain times.

1. Communicate clearly and regularly

Consistent communication is important because students and faculty are looking for guidance as they grapple with the uncertainty of their situation. Crisis communication must be clear to ensure that stakeholders can understand the message (Coombs, 2014). Staying in touch with key stakeholder groups with information specific to their needs will provide a sense of normality and relief. First, students need direction that is unique to the concerns about course delivery, access to services and resources, and contingency planning for on-campus operations. Next, faculty members need specific support about meeting the needs of students and making required adjustments to maintain stability. They need reassurance that flexibility and innovation are welcome. Community members deserve information about the institution's overarching plans and reassurance of commitment to their mission. Moreover, it is helpful to inform stakeholders of when they can expect future communication (e.g., "Updates will be posted every Monday and Wednesday by noon").

2. Consider the barriers for faculty

The barriers that exist under normal conditions are exacerbated in a time of crisis. Academic leaders should consider the challenges that faculty might face when unplanned changes occur during the course of a semester. Sahin and Kurban (2019) present key considerations in flipped learning that include assessment, student motivation, and the role of technology. Communication with faculty must be a two-way process that actively seeks feedback. Provide faculty with suggested options or resources that can help them achieve the goal of continued instruction. Instructors who have less experience with remote teaching will require additional support. Consider asking skillful online instructors to volunteer as mentors for face-to-face faculty who are called to quickly move their courses online in a rapid transition to online learning (RTOL). By removing as many barriers as possible from faculty, we can promote student success in a time of crisis.

3. Champion access and accessibility for students

Face-to-face students who are suddenly moved to remote learning may lack the necessary hardware and software for connecting. Creating alternate formats to reach students will prove beneficial for maintaining instructional continuity. Students from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds face additional obstacles regarding internet bandwidth and technology. Moreover, it is essential to consider how school closure will affect students with disabilities. Learners with accessibility needs will need an advocate for their required accommodations. Academic leaders should be front and center in the conversation about meeting the needs of exceptional learners. Consider overarching laws, such as IDEA and Section 504, that do not disappear due to a crisis. Students require support with academic and nonacademic issues that higher education leaders must address (Simpson, 2018).

4. Reconnect your community through empathy and compassion

While communicating, strategizing, and deploying changes, try to maintain a sense of empathy and compassion for all those involved in your organization, especially students. Remember that your written messages may lack a tone of care, so be judicious in crafting your message. If possible, pair your written messages with video announcements to share a sense of presence and community. Much of the work undertaken in a remote environment can easily go unrecognized, sending an unintentional message of lack of appreciation. Take the time to recognize individuals who have made extraordinary contributions at all levels of your institution. Collaboration through multilevel and cross-functional leadership approaches benefit higher education (Jones et al., 2012).

5. Prepare for postcrisis operations

To develop steps for returning to “normal operations,” keep track of lessons learned through this unique situation. Coombs (2014) agrees that returning to normal operations is a crucial part of business continuity. If possible, take time to check in with colleagues in a “virtual watercooler” setting to compare notes on what is and is not working. Convene a team to chart a path addressing future operations, such as when classes can resume in a face-to-face setting or when on-campus services will be available in person. Working within the state and federal guidelines to maintain safety, start planning semesters following the crisis. Make students aware of plans; this will allow them to make important decisions about registration and enrollment

Final thoughts

Academicians should keep these five practical strategies in mind when leading during a crisis: communicate clearly and regularly, consider barriers, champion for accessibility, prepare for post-crisis operations, and reconnect your community. Reconfiguring campus resources to meet the needs that exist at the time of an emergency will help mitigate risk, preserve retention, and support teaching and learning. Seek out the unique strengths of team members who can assist in your institution’s efforts to maintain instructional continuity. Crises compel us to recommit to our mission with a renewed sense of strength through resilience, community through compassion, and foresight to improve our processes and practices in ways that better prepare us to navigate the road ahead. While utilizing these strategies to care for the people around you, remember that you must also take care of yourself. Tough times don’t last. Tough people do.

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