department in a review of the unit’s mission, vision, and values; the strategic priorities that existed in place prior to the crisis; and the ways in which the crisis might impact the strategic direction of the department. Establish measurable goals and action plans that are collaborative and sensitive to personal and professional obligations.

Assess dimensions of organizational excellence. Using an available external framework, such as the Baldrige Excellence Framework or the Excellence in Higher Education adaptation of the Baldrige framework (Ruben 2020), engage in a systematic review of the department’s strengths and areas for improvement, and explore needed changes that may result from the coronavirus crisis.

Honor the emotions and experiences of department stakeholders. Faculty, staff, and students have been affected in different ways by the pandemic, and there will be a need for collective healing in the aftermath of the crisis. In addition to advancing a shared strategic direction for the department, chairs can help advance the healing process by recognizing faculty and staff colleagues for going above and beyond one’s job duties during the crisis, acknowledging students for their patience and persistence throughout this unprecedented period, demonstrating gratitude for individuals and offices across the institution who played an important role in the department’s response to the crisis and ability to continue with core operations, and honoring those with a direct or indirect connection to the department who perished from COVID-19.

Conclusion
Unlike past crises, the coronavirus pandemic is unique in its ability to so quickly and dramatically impact all colleges and universities. It is a deeply troubling and disorienting moment for higher education, yet there is also much for us to be proud of during this time. Higher education is not typically recognized for agility and speed, yet the immediate and what some have characterized as heroic response by our institutions is most impressive.

As I write about in my book on Crisis Leadership in Higher Education (2019), it is in the darkness and chaos of crisis where values-based leadership becomes most critical, most visible, and most desired. This is a moment of reckoning for higher education. Looking ahead, we will undoubtedly see many changes across our institutions, and the crisis could provide a valuable opportunity to reimagine, reinvent, and renew our work in higher education, all while remaining sensitive to the needs of students, faculty, and staff.

Maximize the Moment: Chairs and the Learning Community in Crisis

TREY GUINN

COVID-19 is top of mind, front and center, and continues to drive most conversations in the media, (virtual) workspace, and among family, friends, and communities across the globe. In addition to the actual health crisis and associated compromises to well-being, the upheaval to business as usual continues to be tremendous. Colleges and universities everywhere are not immune but instead play a central role in all this. Students being displaced and learning environments being in transition are part of the evidence suggesting that higher education is feeling a bit upside down.

While many of our colleagues are eager to return to normal, I pray that we don’t. Let us not waste this crisis. A rubber band stretched is designed to return to its original form, but we can be different and do better. As we are being pulled and stretched in this season, may we “return” having learned valuable lessons and having grown into something better.

Institutions of higher education have much to learn from what’s happening. Similarly, individual members, meaning you and me, all have growth areas that will be exposed and can be maximized for the future. While some people I love are battling the virus, most are not—we are battling the related challenges. Most leaders I speak to recognize that this crisis will reveal institutional shortcomings as well as expose leaders’ strengths (and weaknesses).

One of my favorite questions to ask my colleagues, clients, students, family, friends, and neighbors during this crisis is: “What are you learning about yourself during all this?” Just ponder a moment. What are you learning about yourself during this time? And what are you learning as a chair? Wrestling with questions like these allows us to get beyond the mind-set of managing amid crisis and into the mind-set of leading through one. What would you like this crisis to reveal about you and your leadership?

In early March, when the coronavirus was starting to escalate in the United States, I talked with my core group about how to manage and lead during the upheaval that would surely come. I noted three key areas—managing department communication during crisis, leading and advancing our learning community during crisis, and modeling compassion for self and others during crisis. In this article, I will share just a bit about all three.

Read a review of the author’s book on page 30.
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References
Communication during Crisis

Noise, chatter, notifications, messages, and more. Most people I speak with at campuses across the country are being pinged by the minute with another notification from a campus leader or department—attend this meeting; oh, never mind, it’s a virtual meeting now; click this link and complete this survey; we updated this survey, try it again; generate this needs report; contact these people and those people to tell them this and that. It’s unending.

With all the (mis)information flying around, it’s hard to sift through the messages and to do the sensemaking. This is to be expected, and you likely are feeling the pressure mounting from all sides with each new public statement, crisis revelation, and trickle-down responses that ensue. While some institutions have a clear chain of command with key communicators at the helm during crisis, I am seeing numerous institutions operating like a free-for-all—individual departments and auxiliary services preparing and pushing their own messages of response, often duplicating—or even worse, contradicting—senior leadership and institution-wide messaging. Then there are the messaging recalls, walkbacks, and clarifications adding to the noise and confusion. This is happening across our country like it is within our individual institutions—one agency/department says this, but the president’s office says that. Moreover, it may happen within your own department—my professor told me this, but the department announcement said that.

One learning for colleges and universities is to name and yield to the key communicator(s) during crisis. Not doing so leads to more chaos and confusion, which only amplifies the feeling of crisis and tears at the fabric of safety and security that we wish for in our learning communities. A way to think of crisis communication is this: When the lights go out, everyone ought to know who is holding the flashlight and who will capably guide people in the dark. For institutions that have appointed and yield to the chief communicator(s), when the lights go out, community members are better prepared to remain calm and listen for the voice of the one holding the flashlight.

As chairs, we can’t always control the messages we receive, but we can control the messages we send. I’d argue that we can be different and do better than most of what we observe. When communicating during crisis, we can choose to take a deep breath, stay calm, be cool and collected, and boil down content into meaningful messages before sharing up, down, and all around. To do otherwise, and to merely be a message-forwarder, is to turn up the volume on chaos, clang more cymbals, and perpetuate the communication problems that are being exposed during this crisis.

One way that I do this is by chunking and simplifying information. As messages flood in from varying entities about student housing, access to campus and resources, courses moving to online, reimbursements for lab fees, strategies for finishing the semester, and more, I filter the content coming in and repackage it into meaningful messages. Ultimately, I am asking myself how I would prefer that the information was coming to me. From there, I develop routine messages with titles like “Five updates worth knowing right now.” My repackaging of all these random messages has a quick intro, and then I chunk out the five things, each of which is broken into a simple, predictable pattern of what we now know about this (e.g., access to campus), why it matters to us, and how to manage this information or respond accordingly. By the end of my communication, people have now received the most critical information chunked and simplified, with key calls to action where appropriate. This method for making messages clearer and more compelling minimizes ambiguity and uncertainty, and it promotes greater calm surrounding the crisis and confidence in you—the communicator.

Community during Crisis

Many of my colleagues and clients tell me that they are stretched beyond thin with trying to accomplish regular tasks in such odd times. This is mainly because we have all the new things thrown our way due to the crisis being stacked on top of all the old things that we must keep doing. But even doing those is all upside down and can feel a bit like trying to eat with your nondominant hand or learning to drive a car on the opposite side of the road. The crisis has demanded immediate solutions: How do we get courses online overnight? How do we ensure that faculty and students have the resources they need to carry on virtually? What do I need to get from my office before they lock the buildings? Some chairs quite impressively foresaw the next questions that were coming: How long will the buildings stay locked? What about summer and fall courses? How long will I have access to my budget for this year? What will this mean for the budget next year? Will that position be filled or eliminated?

With all the time and effort devoted to managing logistics and procedural matters, questions about community and concerns for caregiving and togetherness can be lost in the heap. So, I dare you—perhaps during crisis more than ever—to not just manage the department but to lead the learning community like a family. Toward this effort, ask yourself: How will our department preserve and maintain a sense of community during this crisis? How will we grow closer as a department and reaffirm our culture during all this?

In the season of social distancing, my department has been innovative with distant socializing. We initiated virtual activities like Monday morning breakfast clubs and Friday night film-watching parties. Just like parents know their families and how the members connect best, chairs ought to know their departments and how to protect and promote community from within. For my department, activities like virtual breakfast meetings and film nights have been the perfect way for faculty and students to come together virtually, laugh a little, talk about heavier things, and ultimately feel like a family.

It wasn’t long before faculty in my department began volunteering to lead upcoming breakfast clubs—one was a workout/fitness theme, another was a meet-up with prospective students from across the globe. It’s not about getting it perfect but
about being that smiling face and showing that you care—not just that one time but regularly. My department has grown closer during the crisis because, amid a sea of uncertainty, everyone has recognized with certainty a sincere prioritization for preserving and promoting community. These gatherings require zero preparation, just heart and a little vulnerability. Mostly, I am finding that these gatherings are strengthening our community, especially at a time when most communities are being strained.

Compassion during Crisis
Early into the pandemic, a client in New York called me for counsel about how to manage work and family life while caring for a spouse who had contracted the virus. I shared with him my belief that this virus will demand extraordinary amounts of compassion—for his wife, for his kids, and for the team he leads—but that it would have to start with him. Sacrificial leadership is no good if it can’t be sustained, and one way to sustain your leadership is to practice taking good care of yourself. I reminded him of the familiar phrase for frequent flyers: “In the unlikely event of an emergency, oxygen masks will appear …” We are facing an emergency, and the rule of the oxygen mask is to apply yours first. I believe the same to be true with compassion. To care for others and to give compassion completely and freely, we must first demonstrate self-care and compassion. To be clear, I am not equating compassion with shirking work for a spa week. Quite the opposite. Because the workload can’t be shirked, we must start the day with being kind to self, cutting out negative voices and vices, and finding time for good energy and that much-needed jog.

Caring for yourself compassionately will equip you with the right mind-set for loving others better. Modeling self-compassion will also give you a leg to stand on when encouraging loved ones and department members to do the same. Simple wellness practices like exercising, mindfulness and meditation, volunteering, and seeking connections with others will help you build resilience and positivity—which may also be passed along to the people in your life.

Conclusion
We are in the midst of unprecedented times as chairs. Challenges of this magnitude demand that we learn and grow. I have highlighted some key areas (communication, community, compassion) in this article where I am focusing my leadership and learning to maximize the moment. Wherever you decide to focus your attention during this season, I urge us all to be fully checked-in, not only with the breaking news of what is going on within and outside our various institutions but also with the numerous lessons in leadership to be learned along the way.

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Leading the Academic Department during the COVID-19 Crisis

Craig Hlavac and Jeffrey L. Buller

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities across the country have been forced to close to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. However, this precipitous closure has left many department chairs with the difficult task of supporting their faculty and students in ways very different from those with which they are accustomed.

While some institutions were prepared for virtual delivery of coursework without much adjustment, most institutions offered at least some of their classes in person, with the result that a sudden switch to online-only teaching left faculty and students alike wondering how best to complete course requirements. Coupled with the new realities of home life—including many family members living together in cramped quarters for weeks, the need to share a computer or smartphone for course materials, limited and often slow internet access, and the somber realization that some of them will become infected with the virus despite their precautions—determining how to lead a program effectively during this crisis has been a daunting task. At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has provided academic leaders with a crash course in the best ways to handle a crisis. This article shares some of the practical ideas chairs and other leaders have learned that can equip them to deal not only with COVID-19 but also with other crises in the future.

The Importance of Clear Communication
When leading during any crisis, clear and accurate information is critical. COVID-19 is a new enemy, and information regarding how best to deal with it from an academic perspective is scant. Complicating the chair’s task is the fact that people are inherently averse to change. Throwing their whole lives into a state of flux has caused both anxiety and uncertainty. For this reason, providing clear and accurate information to your faculty and students is crucial. Does your institution send out regular updates via email or on their COVID-19 website? If it does, you can tease out the points most important to your department or unit and report these out regularly in personalized updates. If it doesn’t, create your own within the guidelines of your campus communications or public affairs office.

Chairs regularly report that one of their most frustrating tasks is sorting through the myriad emails they receive from various university officials and determining what is most important to share with others. During this time of crisis, this task becomes even more difficult—and your faculty members are feeling this frustration as well. Making the effort to help streamline these messages will keep faculty focused on what’s most important: their health, their families, and their students. Therefore, consider sending regular (perhaps weekly) email...
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