



AN *INSIDE HIGHER ED* SPECIAL REPORT

College Leadership in an Era of Unpredictability



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BY RICK SELTZER



Executive Summary

This special report seeks to be a resource for college and university leaders of all types: presidents, administrators, board members, faculty leaders and those who hold informal leadership positions. Its primary goal is to provide information and ideas that leaders need as the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a moment of unprecedented uncertainty for colleges and universities.

This report's conclusions are fed by an evaluation of key social and economic indicators; a review of literature from the corporate and nonprofit sectors; on-the-record interviews with more than three dozen college and university leaders, consultants and experts; and off-the-record conversations with others.

Leaders must understand that this moment exposes three long-simmering pandemics affecting higher education and American society:

1. **Health:** Poor physical and mental health

among individuals and fragile social or civic health

2. **Economic:** Inequalities in access to capital, earning power and economic mobility
3. **Racism:** A force that is not just in the hearts of individuals but is embedded in institutions that shape everyday life, from government to education to financial institutions.

Those pandemics have been fed by six forces:

1. Economic inequality
2. Systemic racism
3. Technology
4. The pace of change
5. A shrinking world developing growing rifts
6. Political and leadership atrophy



It remains unclear exactly what higher education will look like in the future—but it is clear most institutions will need to change. Leaders repeatedly returned to several themes when discussing the world they see coming:

- Affordability
- The public good
- Alternatives to prestige and exclusivity
- Diversity, equity, inclusion and justice
- Technology

Those in positions of power will need to strengthen dozens of skills to lead successfully in this moment and in the future. Many are soft skills, like effective communication, convening and listening. Making decisions with little information and being humble enough to change course when a better way becomes apparent will also be key.

In sum, the moment calls for a new dedication to servant leadership and a generation of leaders who want to put the public good and the good of their communities above their own career interests or even, in some cases, institutional interests. Although pandemics may sap our sense of agency, the decisions leaders make and the institutions we build today can have long-term effects on the shape of higher education's future and the future of society. ■

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Higher Education at the Confluence

Pervading Uncertainty

Months after a growing COVID-19 outbreak forced colleges and universities across the country to move classes online and send students home, challenge after challenge mounts.

Financial crises loom as institutions find themselves stuck between sharp downward price pressures and suddenly increased costs. Students balk at paying full price for disrupted semesters even as colleges rush to retrofit their physical, technological and human capital for the era of social distancing. Layoffs mount. Schedules scramble.

These circumstances unfold as society grapples anew with the corrosive effects of systemic racism. The nationwide protests that broke out after the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in Minneapolis, forced a still-developing reckoning at

colleges and universities. Leadership teams grapple afresh with what roles their institutions play in deciding who has access to basic safety, education and opportunity in America. Individual campuses have long been home to protests about racism, but the new movement made it impossible to brush them away as one-off events. Everyone seems to be looking in the mirror.

The human toll of the coronavirus pandemic is being tallied but not fully realized. Faculty and staff members died of COVID-19 infections, each a human tragedy and a reminder that the decisions campus leaders make during a public health crisis come with the highest of stakes. Officials worry how many more deaths will come and what the physical and mental health ramifications will be for those who survive.

Long-term consequences won't be known for years—consequences affecting individuals' health, the health of the higher education sector and society at large. Viewed through the interests of college and university leaders, the future could hardly be more unsettling. The pandemic hit the K-12 schools that feed colleges traditional-aged students, and it hit the employers who nudge adults to enroll. It stressed some parents who may take classes while raising children and other parents who suddenly lost jobs, leaving little income available to pay for their children's tuition. It affected students suddenly taking more classes online than they'd ever imagined, posing new challenges to those with disabilities or unreliable internet access.

So much more remains unknown: when the pandemic may be beaten back permanently, when—or if—the economy will fully recover, what America's bungled response will do to public trust in government and institutions. An environment of virtually unprecedented uncertainty pervades.

"We're faced with decision making under conditions of extreme uncertainty," says Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. "That is, I think, the greatest challenge."

It is rare for a university to undergo any radical transformation in a short time, Gilliam adds. Now, leaders are forced to think about radical change on myriad fronts.

They must do so without any definite end to the crisis in sight. Governing board members, presidents and administrators manage crises all the time, but in most past crises they could at least look forward to a light at the end of the tunnel. At some point, a standard crisis

will be over and things will return to normal. In the best cases where institutional transformation is possible, that crisis will prompt an institution to find a new normal that is better for students, faculty, staff or some other important constituency.

But the pandemic means there is no returning to normal.

"The next 18 years' worth of students will have been affected by this period of time," says Joan Ferrini-Mundy, president of the University of Maine. "Universities, in my view, need to reform and transform and not envision getting back to some normal that was pre- all of what's transpired."

For a long while, there will be no finding a new normal. Public health conditions will change rapidly, with political and financial conditions following unpredictably. Long-unfolding demographic changes will coincide with short-term variability, with student populations generally growing less white, less wealthy, older and less centered in the Northeast and Midwest than was previously the norm. These factors will help accelerate financial, social and ethical forces that have been building on higher education and other organizations across society since before the pandemic.

Even after the public health crisis recedes, the world will look radically different. Global consulting firms like [Deloitte](#) and [McKinsey & Co.](#) have eschewed the idea of the new normal, instead embracing terms like "next normal" to show how the future is likely to be a sharp break from the past, with a lengthy period of fleeting certainty and fluctuating operating environments unfolding. A vastly changed landscape will someday become clear. When

and what it looks like remain highly speculative, although signs point to it being shaped by the developing pillars of affordability, the public good, finding alternatives to prestige, promoting racial justice and harnessing ever-changing technology.

This outlook can feel overwhelming. Epidemics undermine our sense of agency. They force us to question our vision for the future and how much we can control it. They crush our sense of possibility.

It is in these times that leadership is most important. Organizations don't think, learn, act and react. People do. When changing environments require analysis and action, organizations need leaders.

"One cannot be afraid to make a decision," says Shirley Ann Jackson, president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, N.Y. "In the end, as a leader one will be judged on whether one makes what, in hindsight, looks to be more right decisions than wrong ones, irrespective of whether they are done in exactly the way someone else might do. There isn't one template that everyone must use or adhere to. But one has to be willing to make a decision."

Leading in this changing environment requires a new skill set for higher education boards, executives, administrators, faculty members, staff and even students who take prominent roles in student government, protest movements or thought leadership. The sector has long enjoyed relative certainty based on government funding, a supportive regulatory environment and the fact that it can start predicting undergraduate student populations 18 years in advance. It's impossible to know what challenges will come in

this newly uncertain environment, but it is possible to detail the skills that will help leaders rise to meet those challenges.

The best leaders don't just respond, however. They recognize that great disruptions are also moments of great possibility. Yes, the future that seemed possible before the coronavirus arrived is now gone. But in its place is a blank slate upon which a better tomorrow can be drawn. That slate will be erased many times as the pandemic takes twists and turns, exacting a terrible human toll. Each time it is erased, leaders can choose to walk away in frustration, or to redraw and refine their vision.

This special report's primary goal is to explore the tools leaders can use to adapt to uncertain times and realize a vision for a better future. In order to do so effectively, it first examines three coincident challenges that higher education faces at this unique moment in time. It then evaluates six long-term forces that have fed into those challenges while shaping society, and it examines what those forces mean for higher education. It then outlines a vision for higher education's future and core ideas upon which a version of that future can be built. Only then can it explore a new tool kit for leaders, looking at the different skills they may have to deploy. This report concludes by discussing the servant leadership model, which may be the most effective way for college and university leaders to rise to the challenges of today and create a better tomorrow.

The discussion and conclusions that follow are drawn from an evaluation of key social and economic indicators; a review of literature from the corporate and nonprofit sectors; on-the-record interviews with more

than three dozen college and university leaders, consultants and experts; and off-the-record conversations with dozens more. This approach intends to strike a balance between distilling best practices from within the higher education sector and widening college and university leaders' understanding of the larger environment in which they operate.

Three Pandemics

A new pathogen caused the global pandemic of 2020. It exposed ancient stresses long affecting American society and higher education, overlooked but no less damaging.

These stresses are pandemics in their own right, according to Earl L. Lewis, founding director of the Center for Social Solutions at the University of Michigan. He identifies three pandemics that collided in the summer of 2020: a health pandemic, an economic pandemic and a pandemic of racism.

"In a serial fashion, one happens, and another, and another," Lewis said in an appearance at the Society for College and University Planning virtual annual conference. "In this case, all three came together to illuminate the fractures in American life and in a global world."

These pandemics are interrelated and complicated. They can be addressed, but only with sustained effort.

The health pandemic can be interpreted to encompass the physical and mental health of individuals as well as the social health in the United States. Even before the coronavirus hit, American life expectancy trailed that in much of the industrialized world. Its medical

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Michael Sorrell

president
Paul Quinn College



outcomes diverged by race and ethnicity. Access to doctors or even fresh food varied widely by geography. Key mental health indicators were deteriorating, with young people experiencing sharply more major depressive episodes even as adult suicidal ideation increased. Respect and open discourse

retreated behind the barriers of partisanship, groupthink and segregation.

The economic pandemic spans inequalities in who holds capital or can access it, who has earning power and earning potential, and whether adequate economic mobility exists in a country that has long promoted the American dream. Indeed, a select few plutocrats enjoyed the bulk of economic gains since the end of the Great Recession, even as low-paying service jobs proliferated and middle-class wages stagnated. Upward mobility flatlined as geography came to dictate one's chances of finding a better economic future.

The crisis of racism came into stark relief as the summer of 2020 began with police killing George Floyd in Minneapolis. Protests spread across the country in the days and weeks that followed. The Black Lives Matter movement had been growing for years, but this moment seemed different, at least according to the national discourse. It redirected public attention toward racism not as something in the heart of individuals but as a system—a web of institutions and structures that have functioned together to benefit white Americans at the expense of nonwhite people.

Systemic racism isn't just a thing of the past. It is still alive today, and it can be seen in key indicators within institutions of higher education and across the sector. Many colleges and universities have not always welcomed all members of society, whether by policy, by price or by unwritten rule.

Consider for example that the first African American student matriculated at the University of Missouri at Columbia halfway through the 20th century. Sixty-five

years later, a student group used the name Concerned Student 1950 after Black students reported being subjected to racial slurs on campus. Its members came to feel administrators weren't taking what they were saying seriously, and a series of attention-grabbing incidents unfolded. At one point, protesters blocked the path of the University of Missouri system's president during a homecoming parade, but he did not leave the vehicle. Eventually, the system president and the chancellor of the flagship campus resigned.

Leadership changed, certainly. But has the university moved key indicators significantly? In at least one area—the number of Black faculty members with professorial titles—the answer is no. Protesting students wanted Black faculty and staff to make up 10 percent of Missouri's employees by 2017-18, slightly below the 12 percent of state residents who were Black. But Black professors were just 3.5 percent of all faculty with professorial titles as of 2019. The university employed 69 Black faculty members with professorial titles that year, 13 more than it did in 2015—out of a total of more than 1,900.

Missouri isn't unique. Today, only a handful of the most selective public institutions in the country enroll enough Black and Latinx students to match their states' demographics.

"When we're talking about these issues, we need to talk about representation in the faculty," says Freeman Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which prides itself on being one of the country's top predominantly white institutions graduating African American students who go on to earn doctorates.

"It's not just about structural racism in our

society," Hrabowski says. "It's on our campuses. Eighty percent of our faculty are white, with a much larger percentage of our students who are of color."

Higher ed can't address systemic racism by papering over the way it contributes. Acknowledging that higher education is part of the problem doesn't invalidate the good work that many institutions and people do to fight racism—it empowers them to do more.

In that spirit, leaders must understand that all three pandemics currently unfolding are interconnected and the ways higher education contributes to each. This isn't a comfortable conversation. It shouldn't be. But it's necessary.

"Higher education and its leaders should ask themselves, 'Why shouldn't this be our moment? Society needs us in a very real way,'" says Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College in Dallas. "But also, we have to hold ourselves accountable, because every single person that is responsible for this condition of society right now came through our doors."

To explore the three pandemics further, we next break them down into six forces that have been shaping American society and higher education. This allows for a deeper understanding of how different factors are connected and which challenges will need to be overcome. ■





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