**Academic Leadership During Crisis: Lessons Learned by Academic Leaders During COVID-19**

Panel

90 minutes

**Abstract:**

This panel discussion of deans and department chairs/heads brings together academic leaders from a range of institutions to discuss academic leadership in the COVID-19 era - both its challenges and opportunities. Despite the significant troubles brought by the pandemic, how has it prompted growth and opportunity that can ultimately make us more resilient? We consider lessons learned during this crisis and how new skills developed can be used in colleges of business and in departments both in times of crisis and calm. Time is included for participants to share questions and best practices from their institutions.

Keywords: Academic leadership, COVID-19, Leadership in Crisis

**Introduction**

COVID-19 has a major impact on higher education as a whole and on our field of management education. We have heard a number of important lessons learned and new tools from the classroom to teach effectively during these times, (Carlin, 2020; Jenkins, 2021; Lovelace, 2020; Sockbeson, 2020) yet there remains a relatively limited assessment related to the effects of the pandemic on academic leadership. This panel looks to bring together leaders from a range of colleges of business and departments to talk about how COVID-19 has affected academic leadership in our field. While the panel will certainly discuss challenges, its focus will be on what can we learn from this situation to be better leaders going forward and to support faculty in their important roles of teachers and scholars. We will cover some major topic areas and include time for attendees to ask their own questions related to leadership during these times. Attendees should leave with a better understanding of how academic leaders have struggled with the challenges and concerns raised during the pandemic and ideas for how they themselves can be leaders or support leaders during this crisis and in the future.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Even in normal times, the role of an academic leader is complex and multifaceted. It includes leading and managing faculty and staff, handling the daily operational activities, and advocating for the relevance of the unit within the larger university structure (Kruse, 2020). The roles are both internally and externally facing - especially for deans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the complexity for academic leaders, which McKinsey (D’Auria & DeSmet, 2020) suggests requires a change in mindset. Decisions need to be made in heightened uncertainty; relationships need to be managed to show empathy, build trust, and convey calmness and optimism. Grint (2020) argues that leaders especially must act carefully in considering how they make decisions in this complex COVID-19 environment. Some have argued that department chairs in particular need to be “trauma informed,” drawing on ideas of trauma informed teaching, where a chair needs to be aware of the stress all are feeling and put people first (Whitaker, 2020). Chairs and deans need to help with the heightened stressors facing faculty of working more from home, such as family responsibilities, while those leaders are facing the same challenges (Furtak, 2020). In addition, academic administrators were tasked to assist students in the adaptation to new course requirements and a new way of teaching and learning.

The personal effects of the pandemic on faculty, staff, and students cannot be understated; however, leaders in higher education are concurrently faced with issues expedited by the pandemic related to an abrupt challenge to the current business model. That is, increased expenses, decreased state and federal funding, declines in enrollment have created concerns of a higher magnitude, and decisions in this regard will change academia forever. One only needs to look to the Kansas Board of Regents’ decision to remove the protections of tenure (Pettit, 2021), the University of Arkansas Little Rock’s decision to consolidate from 5 to 3 colleges (Walkenhorst, 2020), the consolidation and elimination of programs at the University of Evansville (Admin, 2020), or a myriad of other examples, to know that the effects of the pandemic on higher education (and how we make decisions) will be long lasting.

COVID-19 and its related challenges are significant and academic leaders need to do their best to make it through this crisis and support their followers. While just making it through is important, we also want leaders to learn from this crisis and become better leaders, better prepared for the future in both times of calm and times of crisis. This panel has the goal of highlighting these lessons learned that can be applied by academic leaders in the future.

**Panel Overview**

The panel includes people from a variety of different universities and contexts. It includes deans and department chairs/heads. The panelists also vary in their time in the role, but all have been in a leadership position during the COVID-19 pandemic and dealt with its challenges.

Panelists include:

* A long serving Dean currently at a small private institution in an urban setting with a heavy emphasis on graduate education.
* A former Department Chair and current Dean at a small public liberal arts university with a majority undergraduate population and a handful of specialized graduate and certificate programs in the College of Business.
* A Department Chair in their 4th year in the role at a mid-size public university in the Midwest, who leads a multi-disciplinary department focused on leadership and HR.
* A former Department Chair and current Interim Dean at a mid-sized public comprehensive liberal arts institution, with emphasis on undergraduate programs and growing master’s-level programs.
* A new Management Department Head who joined (in the middle of the 2020 pandemic) from outside the university, at a mid-sized public university with a highly unionized faculty.

The panel session will include the perspectives and lessons learned of these leaders but also provide time for attendees to ask questions and give their own leadership examples. Panelists will be asked a series of questions related to challenges and lessons learned across a number of topics including unexpected events, effective teaching, and how to support faculty during such situations. We also expect some great questions from attendees that will allow us all to think about what we have learned and ultimately provide insight to people across a number of different educational contexts.

While we will talk about a challenging time, our perspective is to focus on how these challenges can help us all to learn and grow as leaders. This learning will be related to leadership during COVID-19 but also leadership in other crisis situations and leadership in more normal conditions.

**Session Description**

15 minutes: The panel will start with each panelist introducing themselves and talking about their leadership experience in general and the specific leadership position they held during COVID-19. They will also share information about their university and its characteristics so attendees have some idea of how that university might compare to their own.

We will also ask attendees to introduce themselves and where they teach so we all have an idea of where others in the session come from and their own context.

40 minutes: The panelists will each answer a number of questions related to the challenges they have faced during COVID-19 and what they have learned from them.

Questions:

What have you seen as the biggest challenge for your particular college/department related to COVID-19 and what is something you’ve done to rise to the challenge?

How has the pandemic changed the role of an academic leader?

What changes have occurred in higher education due to the pandemic that will last after we see a return to more normalcy?

How have you seen COVID-19 impact teaching and learning across your college/department?

What are some things related to COVID-19 that you weren’t prepared for?

How have you worked to keep good communication going in your college/department during this time?

What do you think is most important for an academic leader to do in a situation like this?

How can we best support faculty during such a situation? How can faculty best support their institution?

What did you do to learn and develop your understanding during this time?

How have you shepherded and cultivated relationships with external stakeholders during the pandemic; what changed and what stayed the same?

15 minutes: The panelists will each share a major lesson they learned during this crisis and how what they learned will be applied in their future actions as a leader. This part gives the panelist a bit more time to talk through an example rather than the shorter time for each answer found in the questions of the previous section.

20 minutes: The session will be opened up to attendee questions for the panel. Attendees can ask particular panelists questions or ask the panel in general for their perspective.

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