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Where do we go from here?

Who Leads the Leaders? K-12 and Higher Education Leadership Under Duress

By S. Gavin Weiser and Lindsay DeMartino

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Equitable Leadership in Crisis

Beginning in March of 2020, the world of education was disrupted and potentially altered forever. This project considers the ways that leaders in both K-12 and higher education within the United States of America engaged in leadership to engage with their community. Using a two-part project, we worked with 15 educational leaders to better understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their work. In this paper, we outline the ways that these populations used their roles as educational leaders to provide aid, comfort, and voice for their communities. Using these experiences, we close with some recommendations to consider the ways that leadership can help their communities during times of crisis.

“By using [PSL] cultivating practices, administrators are seeking, listening, embracing, and legitimizing the diverse voices within their school community...”

Community Collaborations

Given the shift to more open and collective institutions, it is fundamental for educational administrators to embrace alternative, collaborative forms of leadership. As such, positive school leadership (PSL) and community frameworks are contemporary approaches that move beyond a focus on managerial functions and offer a sustainable approach to how leaders work with their educational teams (Louis & Murphy, 2017). By shifting the focus of leadership from high accountability, including hierarchal structures and an emphasis on rules and regulations, to relationships of influence and collaboration, educational professionals are beginning to favor the individual and community over the institution (Murphy & Louis, 2018). Positive school leaders are invested in aiding, elevating, and providing agency to others in order to generate individual and group growth (Louis & Murphy, 2017). As a result, PSL works from within the metaphor of viewing schools as communities (DeMartino, 2021; Doyle, 2004; Furman, 2004; Watson & Bogotch, 2016) instead of authoritative organizations. In these institutions, administrators cultivate an inclusive, comforting space for school community members and partnerships to authentically collaborate in the institutional processes. By using these cultivating practices, administrators are seeking, listening, embracing, and legitimizing the diverse voices within their school community as they develop an institutional sense of *we*, built on authentic, sustainable and collaborative educational communities.

Methodology

This project used a two-part methodology to collect data from educational administrators in both the K-12 and post-secondary context. First, we engaged participants in phenomenological interviews to better understand their experiences leading under the strain and stress of the pandemic. These semi-structured interviews lasted roughly an hour. At the end of this, we invited all





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participants to continue and engage with the project further, by taking photographs and sharing them with us. These images were to highlight and explain their experiences as educators during the pandemic. Of the initial 15 interviews, 13 participated in the second round. For ease of understanding, Table 1 includes the names of the participants and photographers, as well as their educational context.

The second round uses a modified version of a photovoice study to better understand the lived experiences of these administrators (Castleden et al., 2008; Wang & Burris, 1994). By using photographs as data, these photos serve as proof to back up the experiences of the photographers and thus make these experiences more *real* as they can be seen when they are shared. These images are seen not only by the researchers, but by those who read about the experiences as well. However, it is important to provide narrative context, particularly rooted in the words of the photographers, so as to not reify misunderstandings and stereotypes that may be (mis)interpreted by the photos (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016). As such, we will present some of the findings of this project related to the ways that higher education administrators and K-12 administrators are advocating for or taking the lead with engaging in the community. This data will be presented both as images (where applicable) along with the narratives of the photographer to serve as another touchpoint of data.

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	K-12 or Post-secondary Administration	Photos
Alima	Higher Education Administration	yes
Annamae	Higher Education Administration	yes
Bowie	K-12	yes
Cassia	K-12	yes
David	Higher Education Administration	yes
Frank	K-12	yes

Pseudonym	K-12 or Post-secondary Administration	Photos
Idele	Higher Education Administration	yes
Kelly	K-12	no
Laura	K-12	yes
Lisa	Higher Education Administration	yes
Phyllis	K-12	yes
Richard	K-12	yes
Sam	Higher Education Administration	yes
Suzie	Higher Education Administration	yes
Zach	K-12	yes

Findings

K-12 Schools and Districts

In our participating K-12 schools, our findings are arranged in the following topical themes: an awakening of the importance of family engagement, reliance on existing community resources, and a strong connection with external partnerships. In addition, we offer tensions experienced by school leaders school leaders and the lack of community engagement at their district levels.

First, according to Laura, with their district's pandemic emergency restructuring, her district found that equity issues were much more systematic that the district had previously realized. As such, they realized the imperative and are preparing to authentically engage their diverse families in district initiatives. Similarly, Bowie talked about her district's reliance on their established equity and community-engaged departments as resources. More specifically, she discussed the importance of equity departments, including Mexican American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American and Indigenous, and African American services, and their integral contributions to community collaboration. For example,





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these equity departments were able to engage broader and more diverse community collaborators in their district forums and reporting that "people feel that we are connected, and we want to hear and see how we can be partners in this work".

Next, Zach, Cassia, and Richard spoke about the reliance on external partnerships to create more equitable opportunities for their students and families. As such, Zach highlighted the work of neighborhood associations as leaders in community partnerships. In terms of family agency, Zach cited the work of these organizations in the responsive efforts to remedy a plethora of different hardships, including immigrant rights, housing, job security, economic uncertainty, and food security. Likewise, Cassia referred to non-profits as educational partners, such as Literacy Connect and Habitat for Humanity. She also elaborated on (re)imagined community collaboration, using food trucks outfitted with WIFI to reach lower socio-economic neighborhoods in need of both nutritional and technological sustenance. Similarly, Richard, discussed the common challenges and resolutions associated with the pandemic, "the digital divide is real, especially in the communities that our students living. However, we have received some private donations that goes directly to our families, getting internet and other sort of technological things." In this way, through various community collaboration, external support was provided to students and families in our administrator's districts.

Additionally, an existing tension was the inconsistent pacing of new information disseminated to the schools from district offices. As such, Frank shared that he needed to be very clear with his school stakeholders that information was constantly changing, and they should be aware that directives might change on a moment's notice. Further, Zach elaborated on the tension between site administrators and the lack of timely, community-based emergency district initiatives. He expressed frustration with the lack of district policies and procedures to cure "the things that we could have been doing over the summer to be ready for the fall. Now, we are in a situation where we are rushing in the last week to attempt to do it". He went on to say how unfortunate it is when districts do not value or listen to teachers,

families and community members who are advocating another way as they are viewed by districts as having less than important feedback and are largely ignored. In Figure 1, the screenshot of this tweet that went viral serves as a humorous representation of Zach's frustration with his district and the lack of community input.

Figure 1. Zach's Tweet Selection.



Finally, as a beacon of hope, Zach offered the following promise to his school community, "we are going to make learning as best as we can in this situation that we have no control over. It's a tough one to move forward, but I think educators do this well. This is what we've done for forever."

Institutions of Higher Education

The experiences of higher education administrators leading within the larger community is quite stark when compared to their K-12 peers. Perhaps due in part to the notion that institutions of higher education are sometimes thought of as their own community – thus providing a retrenchment of the famed town and gown





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divide that has plagued higher education for centuries, the majority of outreach to the community was more insular – reaching out and supporting the internal community, more so than the community where the institution was located. Despite this, these leaders shared the lengths to which they went to support the communities in which they are located.

David, like so many of us across the world, had to celebrate the achievements of the students with whom we work without being able to see the students. As such, he and many of his colleagues set up a display of placards in the quad outside of the building in which his academic program is situated to honor these graduates. He shared with us that he and his colleagues spent three hours one morning, starting at 4 am, right after a thunderstorm, staking all of these [mascots]. It was the last big project he was a part of at his previous university. According to David, the project connected to the experience of being in student affairs amidst a pandemic. He noted that “we spent a lot of our time thinking about the impact on our students...but it was also really impactful on the staff and some of the faculty. You build a relationship with the students and it ends artificially”.

For David, there was pain in his voice as he explained the context of his leaving the university over the summer. While he did not have the best of experience at this institution, he had a deep care for his students, and having to leave without being able to experience closure in a typical manner was frustrating. Despite this, he and his colleagues attempted, like so many educational leaders, to celebrate the achievements of their students in a new and inventive manner. In this case, it took the manifestation of yard signs with student names on them on the quad. This is something that was echoed through many other leaders’ experience both in K-12 and higher education.

Sam worked as an entry level student affairs practitioner at the time of our conversation. She had experience as a graduate student leading her community through natural disasters which tempered and informed her response to this new disaster. Due to the threat of furloughs hanging over many of them, their engagement was perhaps less due to job insecurity. Despite this, one of the actions that

Sam participated in was to call 100 students at her institution. Many of the 100 students she called “probably 30 actually answered. A lot of them just like basically hung up on me or denied the call” but those she was able to actually speak with she “had really great conversations” who shared their experiences with her. She was also armed with information and resources to help the students should they have questions. While many of the students were frustrated by being set on this new course of online learning, the majority of them were accepting and understanding that this was necessary. While this project produced additional work for the staff, and it was stressful at first, Sam admitted that it was “a good commitment to student affairs being a student-centered division. This was a testament to us backing that up”.

Annamae engaged the community not in a function of her professional role, but as a member of a young professionals group within her community. As a member of this group, she hand-made masks for front line workers at the beginning of the pandemic, when masks were still very hard to get access to. Despite her doing this as part of a local community organization, a “few of my colleagues went ahead and donated \$20, which I mean it all adds up”. Due to these financial donations, she was able to keep doing this throughout the pandemic and was even able to ship some masks to some of the students that she worked with that had moved back home and were working front-line jobs, helping to keep them safe and protected during an anxiety-inducing time. For Annamae, delivering these masks out of the back of her care on-campus to some of her students was the first time she had seen people in some time. She shared that many of those who came to pick up masks “just kept profusely thanking me, they wanted to stay and talk for just a minute, just because you know, one guy said, “you’re only human I’ve really seen for like two or three weeks”. This occurred in April, three months before this state enforced a statewide mask mandate.

Future Collaborative Leadership for Equity in Crisis

Due to the differences between the actions taken for collaborative leadership in both higher education and K-





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12 administration, we have two sets of recommendations for educational administrators and leaders to cultivate an included space for school community members and partnerships to authentically collaborate in the institutional processes. First, for the field of educational administration, as was the case with Zach in K-12 and Annamae in higher education, it may be prudent to step beyond the scope of what the institution is doing and engage in mutual aid efforts to help support the community in ways that are needed most. However, it is important to note that often these efforts may end up being co-opted and altered by the institution (Spade, 2020). This, in some ways, ended up happening with Annamae, as the institution she worked for ended up putting her efforts into their newsletter signifying that the actions were done on behalf of the institution, rather than by a well-meaning individual engaging in and helping the community.

Further, many of the ways that the higher education administrators engaged the community, exemplified by the stories of David planting the mascot stakes and Sam making phone calls to students were not the ideas of the staff participating in the labor. In fact, both shared sentiments of the way this labor was expected and not something that they wanted to do, either at all (David) or initially (Sam). David shared with us that this was done right after a thunderstorm in which the ground was saturated, making it wet and miserable, but somehow the ground was still hard, making the work laborious and dirty. As such, evidenced by our K-12 administrators, notably Bowie and Cassia, collaborative leadership might look more like mutual aid – engaging in and doing the work with the community rather than for or upon it. This is a harder process but learning what a community needs and then delivering it with them makes for a more meaningful and long-lasting impact. As both K-12 and higher education administrators, it is important to do the work the community needs to develop a sense of *we* – whether the institution supports it or not.

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Prior to serving on the faculty at Illinois State University, Gavin earned his Ph.D. in Foundations of Education & Inquiry from the University of South Carolina's College of Education. Beyond this, he also completed a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina. His research interests involve embodied affect and emotions within queered subjectivities and the leveraging of affect as activism for political capital. Gavin is also interested in the intersections of queer theory and education, and how we can continue to challenge the notions of education to create a more radically inclusive space for learning. In addition to his academic work, Gavin worked for several years as a university administrator in the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs at Carolina focusing on social justice and diversity work. Prior to this Gavin was an outdoor educator for Princeton University, leading urban youth on backpacking and other outdoor adventure activities.



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