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Leading for What, Leading for Who? An International Comparative Analysis of University Presidents' Leadership Amid COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique shared challenge for all HEIs leaders around the world. Besides balancing institutional tasks and ensuring the health and safety of the campus community, university presidents were challenged with promoting equity and showing empathy in their leadership. Framed by Henry Mintzberg's (1973) theory on managerial roles, this study uses in-depth interviews of 14 university presidents in eight countries, to understand how they enacted different roles in leading their institutions through a global crisis. Despite differences among presidential leadership styles in diverse contexts, findings from the study show that leadership roles shifted from securing their institution's financial and academic stability to securing the well-being of the people within and outside their organization in the face of crisis.

Keywords: *higher education leadership; university presidents; crisis leadership; covid-19.*

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The role of university presidents in leading higher education institutions (HEIs) has always been complex and multifaceted. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges, forcing university presidents to navigate uncharted territories and make critical decisions in the face of uncertainty. The pandemic disrupted the traditional models of higher education and presented a myriad of health, logistical, and financial challenges for universities worldwide. As the top leaders of their institutions, university presidents were thrust into the forefront, expected to provide effective leadership and guide their institutions through this crisis. Understanding the leadership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education is crucial for shaping the future of the sector. By examining the roles, strategies, and challenges faced by university presidents, the study contributes to the broader conversation on crisis leadership and can help inform effective leadership practices in higher education during times of crisis.

Many scholars have analyzed how leaders of HEIs across the world have handled crises (see, for example, Chin et al., 2017; Gigliotti, 2019; McNaughtan et al., 2021). However, most work in crisis leadership has been focused on local issues with challenges connected to a single institution or a group of institutions in a small region (e.g., city, state, or country). But for the first time in Post-Great War times, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge that HEIs worldwide engaged with at the same time. The pandemic also highlighted issues of empathy and equity which were viewed through core leadership strategies by higher education leadership. University presidents were forced to turn their attention to the complexities of balancing their institutions' finances, growing political tensions, and most importantly the health of their constituents including students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community (Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). The fact that this crisis disrupted the personal and professional lives of everyone, including leaders themselves, made the issue of leading compassionately even more relevant.

This paper is part of a larger study we designed to better understand how presidents from multiple countries engage in crisis leadership. By interviewing 14 university presidents in eight countries, we wanted to respond to three broad research questions: 1) What was the role of the president in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and how did they fulfill that role? 2) What was the role of their institution's mission and history in driving their response? 3) Given the global nature of higher education, how do presidents engage international students during a global crisis? Building upon Mintzberg's (1973) taxonomy of managerial roles, this paper presents findings in response to the first question. Our findings suggest that university presidents—despite being situated in different geographic, sociocultural, and political contexts—had to adjust their role, their focus, and the priorities of their institutions in response to the crisis. Overall, participants coincide that during the initial stage of the pandemic their main role changed, and they had to enact different managerial roles to help them lead their institutions through a significant global crisis. Under this context, presidents placed most of their time and energy in becoming communicators, facilitators of collaborations, and providers of support to their campus and external communities. What these findings suggest is that traditional leadership roles shifted from a larger focus on securing their institution's prestige and enhancing its financial stability to securing the well-being of the people within and outside their organization.

Literature Review

Executive Leadership in Higher Education

Across the world, there are numerous terms for the highest administrative post in HEIs including president, chancellor, chief executive officer (CEO), director, and various others. This study uses the word “president” as the umbrella term for the top administrative leader at each HEI. Literature on university presidents' leadership can be categorized into four groups. First are studies based on the behaviors and actions of presidents. These studies focused on how university presidents perform their duties, what challenges they face, their leadership style, and how they navigate the complexities of their role (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Nicholson, 2007). Some studies rely on single case studies that look at in-depth experiences of a particular president (e.g., Douglas et al., 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2007; Tan et al., 2015) or are memoirs relating to presidents' experiences (e.g. Bowen, 2011; Chace,

2009; Duderstadt, 2009; Gardner, 2005; Hennessy, 2020; Rangel Sostmann & Murray, 2012). These articles and books highlight the complex roles of presidents as they navigate challenges and seek to lead institutions. While examining leadership behaviors, other empirical studies have investigated personal challenges commonly faced by university presidents, such as managing stress (e.g., Gough, 2011; Mittman, 2009; Thacker & Freeman Jr, 2020).

The second group of studies revolves around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion connected to presidential leadership. These studies have two dominant narratives that include a lack of diversity in the presidency and the role of the president in issues of inclusion. As a position historically held by privileged groups (e.g., White men), some recent studies have investigated the underrepresentation of BIPOC and other minorities as leaders of HEIs. In this regard, studies such as Madsen (2008), Timmons (2020), or Woollen (2016) looked into the road for women to become university presidents in a male-dominated environment. Similarly, other researchers have focused on the struggles for Black scholars to become and succeed as leaders of a HEI (e.g., Phelps et al., 1997; Robinson, 2018; Vaughan, 1989), other racialized minorities like Asian (Hu, 2019), and also gender discrimination by publicly-out as queer university presidents (Bullard, 2013). Like Jones' (2013), some studies have analyzed the intersection of multiple marginalized identities in the role of university presidents, such as the challenges faced by African-American women. Similarly, Rodríguez (2020) studied how the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity impact Latinas' access to leadership development and their career trajectories to the university presidency.

The role of the president in promoting inclusion has become critical in the United States and other countries with increasing diversity (McNaughtan et al., 2021). For example, McNaughtan and colleagues (2019) analyzed the mission statements of universities which often discussed inclusion and the role of the president in communicating during divisive times. While different in scope and depth, most of these studies focusing on the role of the president highlight the complexity of their experience (e.g., Cole, 2020; Cole & Harper, 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2021). Further, when considering the lack of diversity, the role of the president is even more complicated when the individual leading the institution must also face isolation and discrimination, and an overall sense of delegitimization based on their gender and race (McNaughtan & Hotchkins, 2021). Based on their sample and representation, the third group of studies is centered on analyzing differences and similarities between an ample and diverse set of university presidents. Our review found that many of these studies are located within a single country (see, for example, Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2020; Birnbaum, 1989; Cote, 1985; Neumann & Bensimon, 1990). However, to the best of our knowledge, only Liu et al. 's (2020) study resembles a similar approach to ours in the sense that they interviewed university presidents from several countries seeking to understand their diverse experiences.

Finally, the fourth group of studies, emerging from leadership literature, focuses more on using university presidents as a group to study leadership more broadly. Contrary to the studies mentioned in the first group above, this body of literature focuses less on the profile and lived experiences of specific presidents and more on the evolution of the position and the overall skills required to be an effective leader. Most of these studies were conducted in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s and promoted by organizations such as the Institutional Leadership Project (ILP) and the American Council on Education (ACE) (see, for example, Atwell et. al., 2001;

Bensimon, 1989, 1990; Bensimon et.al., 1989; Birnbaum, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1992; Neumann, 1989; Neumann and Bensimon, 1990). These studies coincide with the rise of leadership literature in general.

Regardless of the type and sample of these studies, one common theme across the research is that “there is no manual for university presidents” (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 368), especially when they need to respond to a crisis. Almost 40 years ago, Cote (1985, p. 5) noted in his study the complexities of leading a modern university and how presidents (at least in the US) were “under siege, fraught with conflicting expectations from the institutions’ many publics, internal and external (p.5).” While many things have changed in the way HEIs are organized and led, these complexities remain. HEIs keep evolving into multifaceted and loosely coupled yet bureaucratic and stratified organizations. Leading them is a challenge, and international comparisons on leading HEIs is still scarce (for recent exceptions see Coates et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020).

Presidential Leadership Through the covid-19 Pandemic

Beyond the inherent complexities of leading an HEI overall, and specifically through a crisis, the year 2020 brought the grandest challenge this generation has faced in the form of a global pandemic of the COVID-19 virus that halted education worldwide. Under such unknown conditions, priorities immediately shifted, and therefore, traditional leadership roles also needed to evolve. In this case, rather than fundraising and thinking about new infrastructure projects (Jackson, 2013), university presidents were required to take a different role, centered first-and-foremost, on taking care of their communities’ needs and maintaining their institutions (Ruch, 2021). Literature on how university leaders navigated the COVID-19 is still emerging, however, some reports and preliminary studies are helpful to identify the main obstacles they faced, particularly during the lock-down phase of the pandemic.

For example, in the United States, the American Council on Education (ACE) began in April 2020 a series of monthly ‘Pulse’ surveys to capture “presidents’ insights and experiences with COVID-19 and its effects on their institutions and the larger higher education landscape” (ACE, 2020a, p.1). Results from these surveys point to a striking conclusion: the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic pushed presidents to shift gears quickly and focus on different problems every month. For example, while in April 64% of 192 presidents selected “long-term financial viability” as one of the most pressing issues they were facing, that percentage decreased to 38% in July. On the other hand, concerns for the mental health of faculty and staff were mentioned by 25% of the presidents in April versus 33% in July (ACE, 2020a; 2020d). In a similar exercise, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), sent out surveys to presidents in late March and in early July. During the initial survey, most presidents also reported focusing on the financial aspects of the crisis and shared strategies of “‘hunker[ing] down’ and ‘weather[ing] the storm’ by laying off administrative staff, implementing hiring freezes, and reexamining operational processes to identify efficiencies” (AAC&U, 2020, p.3).

However, during the second survey, another issue was raising concern among university presidents in the US that was not solely related to the pandemic: “a palpable shift in the national consciousness with regard to racial discrimination” (AAC&U, 2020, p.5). While issues of racial awareness and mass protests had been growing globally since the 2010s, a couple of incidents in

the US during the spring of 2020—the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by local police in Kentucky and Minnesota respectively—spearheaded a global reckoning of racism and discrimination against Black people, and later, against other racial and ethnic minorities. Protests and other demonstrations were documented mostly across the United States, Europe, and South Africa, but also in many different countries. In places like the US and South Africa, racial protests included the removal (or demands for the removal) of statues or other monuments associated with a history of racism in those institutions. Other actions included calls to change the name of buildings or even universities (e.g., Washington & Lee University or Yale in the US, and Rhodes University in South Africa) named after individuals who perpetrated and perpetuated racism. In the middle of the pandemic, conversations around ‘a return to normal’ were suddenly shifting towards demands for ‘a new normal;’ one where the current state of affairs needed to change, hence, presidents themselves, their role and leadership style, is also in urgent need of an evolution (McNaughtan et al., 2021).

Theoretical Lens: Managerial Roles and Higher Education

Leadership within higher education has oftentimes been studied under management lenses, after all, HEIs—regardless of their public or private nature—operate and are structured similarly to businesses (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) albeit important differences such as dealing with alumni, tenured faculty, and complex selection processes for governing boards (Birnbaum, 1988; Kerr & Gade, 1986). Therefore, using a management theory to understand how presidents of HEIs lead is appropriate. Mintzberg’s foundational work on managerial roles has been widely applied in education among many other sectors. Overall, Mintzberg (1973) identified 10 different roles that managers take as leaders of an organization. While Mintzberg’s work has informed mostly research on leadership in the industry, several scholars have used his framework to study different leadership structures within higher education institutions; for example, the leadership role of department chairs or deans (e.g. Chukwuma, 1983; Crosthwaite, 2010; Fain, 1987), staff in student or academic affairs (e.g. Judson, 1981; Mech, 1990), chief academic officers (e.g. Anderson et al., 2002; Mech, 1997), and university presidents (Cote, 1985).

Building upon Mintzberg’s (1973) framework, Cote (1985) adapted the ten roles to a specific set of presidential roles with the goals of “(1) accommodat[ing] the variety and unique characteristics of academic institutions as well as the language common to higher education; and (2) to present a more detailed, better-differentiated profile of diverse expectations common to presidential role performance” (p. 666). Besides simply ‘translating’ Mintzberg’s roles into higher education’s ‘common language’, Cote’s contribution was expanding and detailing the different functions of a university president within each role. Table 1 shows an adaptation of this expanded framework which serves as a basis for our study.

Using both Mintzberg’s original framework on managerial roles, and Cote’s adaptation to university presidents, we explore in this study which of these roles are prominently enacted by university presidents in different countries facing the same large-scale crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). Building on these management frameworks, we sought to understand the similarities and differences between HEIs leaders in different cultural contexts but during a time of shared challenges. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study was: Which, among the multiple roles that university presidents have, were the most salient ones during the COVID-19

pandemic? And, given the multiple audiences and stakeholders that HEIs have, who and in what ways were being served by these leaders?

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design (Yin, 2014) to investigate the leadership roles of university presidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for this study were collected through interviews with university presidents from eight different countries. A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) was employed to select participants who could provide valuable insights into the leadership challenges and experiences during the pandemic. As previously explained, this paper is part of a larger study that—besides issues of leadership roles—examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions' global engagement from the perspective of university presidents. Therefore, the sample was designed with several characteristics and limitations in mind. First, we aimed to select universities that were considered top-ranked in their respective countries and internationally recognized. Second, we sought a sample that was diverse in terms of country context, culture, and gender; the latter given the enormous inequity in access to leadership positions for women (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Dwyer & Sahay, 2022; Shepherd, 2017; Timmons, 2020).

We acknowledge that leadership positions at higher education institutions can vary significantly across countries in terms of titles and main responsibilities. In this study, our focus was on interviewing the individuals who held the highest authority within their respective institutions, those who had the power to influence decision-making processes during the pandemic. Although some participants held the titles of President, Chancellor, or Rector, for the sake of readability, we refer to all these positions as 'university president' throughout this paper.

With these considerations, we identified an initial list of 85 universities (and their respective presidents) in 15 different countries. Based on the internationally comparative scope of our study, we prioritized having a larger number of countries represented, therefore, we started by sending invitations to only 3-4 presidents in each country hoping to secure participation from two institutions in each one. An initial set of 50 presidents received an invitation to participate in a 30–45-minute online interview and was provided a list with the ten general questions that would guide our conversation. Fourteen institutions declined to participate, 19 did not respond, and 17 accepted and completed the interview. Three of the institutions that agreed to participate indicated in their response that a senior leadership team member would represent them in the interview, as they believed this individual had decision-making responsibilities related to COVID-19. However, for the purpose of this particular study, which exclusively focused on the leadership role of the top administrator in guiding their institution through the crisis, those three interviews were excluded from the final sample. Table 2 provides a summary of the main characteristics of the 14 participants included in this study.

Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and were recorded for transcription. Considering the scope of the project, the sample of participants, and the researchers' language proficiencies, interviewees were given the option to be interviewed in English or the primary language spoken in their respective countries. Six interviews were conducted in a language other than English, and the verbatim transcriptions of these interviews were subsequently translated into English.

The data analysis process followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step coding process. Initially, the research team divided the transcriptions among four members, who engaged in open coding individually. Each line of the transcriptions was coded, and then the team met to discuss and identify common codes (axial coding). Based on this discussion, all the data was recoded using the new coding framework, and the team met again to discuss and select the most salient codes (selective coding). To ensure the reliability of the coding process, a second coder reviewed all the transcripts to confirm the coding (Patton, 2001).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the limited sample resulting in a lack of broader representation. Getting access to—and conducting—one-on-one interviews with university presidents is challenging (see McClure & McNaughtan, 2021 for a thorough discussion on the main obstacles for interviewing academic 'elites'). The challenge is even greater when the targeted population is focused on leaders in multiple countries. The research team took several steps to overcome this limitation. For instance, our research team was composed of members from four different nationalities who collectively could conduct interviews in English, French, Spanish, German, and Mandarin. The team's multicultural background also helped in having familiarity with both the educational sector in the sampled countries and issues related to the development and challenges of the pandemic in those particular contexts.

Another limitation of this study, similar to previous literature, is our focus on leaders' voices to assess the roles they enacted during the pandemic. By missing the voice from people on other sides of the leadership spectrum, we realize that the interpretation of the results is one-sided. Yet, we believe that there is ample value in this study and others that similarly consider only the leaders' point of view since it provides an oftentimes missing perspective. HEIs, like any other organization, have just one top leader but hundreds if not thousands of employees which opens up possibilities for debate and disagreement. Given the diversity of opinions, it is common for critiques of leadership to be more frequent than praise, however, it is also difficult for anyone stating such critiques to fully know and understand all the implications during the decision-making process. As a result, we take our findings with caution since they represent only one perspective, but we invite readers to consider how this perspective can inform and balance future critiques on the subject of presidential leadership in higher education in times of crisis.

Findings

After coding the interviews, three broad themes were identified regarding the top roles that university presidents took during the pandemic: 1) communicator, 2) collaborator, and 3) supporter. After the second round of coding, we identified three to four sub-codes for each of the roles. In the following section, we present a summary of the main findings illustrated in Table 3.

Communicator

The first role evident in all the interviews was the importance of university presidents as communicators. Similar to Cote's (1985) identified role of presidents as PR specialists and image builders, university presidents in our sample felt obliged to take the lead in receiving, understanding, synthesizing, and sharing the constantly-evolving information regarding the virus and its effect on their institution. They recognized the significance of their 'presence,' even in a virtual setting, as they became the face of the university for students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. Moreover, the presidents believed they had a responsibility to speak in alignment with the current context and the institutional mission.

Regarding the first idea of presidents as disseminators of information, one of the participants defined their role as the "environment scanner;" as someone who needed to "be making sense of lots of data inside and outside the world, what's happening in higher education, what's happening in the city, [in the] community that I work in, the other peer-colleges in the area" (President C). In relation to the importance these leaders felt of being the face of the institution, our findings show how this task was equally important both when considering their internal and external presence. Since the pandemic is a public health crisis that crossed general institutional boundaries and affected the larger community, presidents in our sample also argued that they had the need to reach out to their local community and communicate what the university was doing to support them. As explained by President D:

[My role was] to make sure that people in communities knew that [University] was still here, that it is their university. We cared about them. We were listening to them. We were getting out to the communities... It was really important that as the leader, I was visible there. Because they're part of the university.

These presidents believed that as leaders, they had the role and ability to reduce confusion through sharing information.

Collaborator

The second role that presidents took was as collaborators. In this role, they saw themselves as coordinators of their institutions' responses. Similar to Cote's (1985) role for presidents as interinstitutional diplomats, our participants shared how they needed to build connections with and across departments and help coordinate efforts. They also talked about the team mentality that had to be created to be successful. For example, President D referred to their role as "one of guidance and coordination of the different teams we have at the university; the different vice-rectories, the rectory itself, and the colleges/schools too."

A crucial task in being coordinators of their institutions' response was that of empowering their team. Here, presidents talked about concepts like shared governance and ensuring that faculty and staff got the resources they needed to make decisions and complete urgent tasks. However, the pandemic proved to be different from other crises because its reach was absolute. Therefore, presidents had to rely on empowering a smaller team that could help them extend their authority and decision-making capabilities in a situation that demanded rapid responses to numerous situations stemming from every area of the university. One of the presidents illustrated this phenomenon as follows:

You have to keep your leadership team small. You have to keep it close. You have to be very non-bureaucratic. You have to be very agile. You have to be a ballerina [and] work very diligently to constantly make certain that everyone has the right amount of information. But [also that] they are empowered to make the calls that they need to make without always having to check back to the center in some way or another. (President A)

But given the complexities and unfamiliar territory of navigating a pandemic, university presidents also expressed how they needed to become flexible decision-makers with high and quick adaptability in coordinating their institutions' efforts. Presidents shared that they needed to adapt to needs expressed by students and adjust government guidance. This adaptability was critical, and it needed to address the issues raised directly from their campus community. Two presidents illustrate their role in listening and acting in the following way:

Universities are a cacophony. There are so many voices... We hold these campus conversations... talk about what we are doing in terms of opening or closing, what we're doing in terms of supporting faculty in their teaching and research functions, all those kinds of things... Anyone can join virtually, try to answer, and ask a lot of questions. But we do it very consistently. We have them once or twice, sometimes even three times a week, with different leaders taking the responsibility... It is a way for us to constantly stay connected with our faculty and the staff. And we do the same thing, obviously, with our students. (President A)

Whenever I meet someone, whether it be a parent, a faculty, or a staff or a student, I'm saying, "Tell me your thoughts on COVID-19, should we open? Should we close? How have you been experiencing it?" I have ways to get to those conversations. And so, there were a lot of informal and formal mechanisms. We just surveyed to ask students what they wanted... but there are no right answers. (President C)

As illustrated by these two presidents, the role of collaborator during the pandemic required an openness to hearing the perspectives of multiple groups connected to the campus (e.g., faculty, staff, students, and community).

Supporter

The third role that was identified from our findings was that of support. Here, presidents shared that they were able to provide support to needed strategic areas and those areas hurt most by the

crisis. Most of this support came in the form of resource allocation. Almost all of our interviewees felt that an important role they played was making sure everyone at the university could get the resources they needed to move things forward. Whether that was authorizing emergency budgets to acquire technology that supported the transition to online learning, modifying policies and procedures to make academic and human resource processes more flexible, or shifting priorities from other projects to ensure people could focus on the most urgent activities considering the current situation.

Another form of support that most participants surprisingly highlighted was emotional support. Contrary to usual beliefs of university presidents being distant figures that mainly interact with their top circle, presidents in our sample shared that an important part of their role was to keep their campus calm and offer emotional support. Presidents felt the need to directly support both their inner and outer communities including the students, faculty, and staff (internal) and the larger external community where their institutions are located.

When it came to the community, mostly the public institutions indicated how important it was for them to interact with the local community, to provide services and emotional/moral support. One of the presidents indicated how they even drove around the region served by the university to meet with different community leaders:

This university has right in its mission that it needs to serve all people of [Region]. So that does influence how I manage a crisis. So, once we opened up a little bit, I went on the road as the new president. And I went [for] five weeks. Drove almost 9,000 kilometers all over [Region] and into the communities. I met with the mayors, I met with the city councilors.

Lastly, and while not related to their direct actions in leading, some of our participants mentioned the importance of having a support mechanism for themselves. The pandemic has indeed been a daunting and exhausting experience. The amount of pressure that university presidents have felt, if unattended, presents a risk to the way they need to lead their institution. As expressed by President F: “I feel exhausted, and probably many people [among the study’s interviewees] will have that. And there are some mental issues [that] will start to happen, I believe, and this is something to be aware of.” To cope with and manage the stress, presidents in our sample shared some strategies. Most of them coincide in the importance of talking with their peers about these issues and the everyday challenges. For example, President E recalls how having a national council of rectors was helpful

I have received a lot of support from colleagues. We have a council of rectors in [country], which is very important [and] very supportive since more or less the same is happening to all of us. So, in that sense we console each other. But, deep down, it has been a tremendous support. Among the rectors of the council, we check-in on how one is doing, how the other is doing, and certain things are shared. So, it has been tough, but it has been accompanied, but it has been exhausting.

In other cases, that support circle was much more intimate. University presidents, just like everyone else, had to face challenges related to their work while at the same time deal with all

the personal and familial disturbances brought by the pandemic. As President Fs recalled speaking about the date when they decided to close the campus:

That week for me was extremely complicated because the day before, the 10th of March, I didn't sleep because my father-in-law died. So, I had a very complicated time at home. We had to take care of the burial and everything. And so, I was under extreme stress. And then on the 11th, I had to go to the government palace, and I heard the news there [about closing all universities]

To cope with those intersecting personal and professional challenges, presidents also turned to friends and family as a coping mechanism. They also tried to instill the importance of taking care of oneself unto their teams, as shared by president C:

So, we have this motto that, take care of yourself, take care of your team, take care of the university. And that's the motto. So, I spend a lot of time with family and friends...A lot of time I think about my spiritual life or the kind of self-reflection asking, why is this pandemic happening and what do I want to be after the pandemic? I mean how can I find joy?

In summary, presidents perceived their role in times of crisis centered on relationships. They provided critical communication, sought to collaborate with multiple constituents, and support their communities. This role involved consistent effort and required the presidents to rely on their executive teams in order to maintain connections.

Discussion

Being a university president during a crisis is a challenging task, and many leaders may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable with their crisis responsibilities, leading them to delegate these responsibilities to professional first-responders or subordinate figures in the university hierarchy (Brennan & Stern, 2017). Our findings align with this observation, as participants expressed that leading through the COVID-19 pandemic was a daunting task that required rapid adaptation to a new environment. The three main roles identified in our study (communicators, collaborators, and supporters) closely align with Mintzberg's informational, interpersonal, and decisional roles, respectively. Furthermore, these roles also resemble some of Cote's (1985) adapted roles for university presidents (see Table 4). For example, their facet of being responsible for sharing accurate and timely information and being the university's face echo what Cote (1985) described as 'P.R. specialist' and 'symbol/ceremonial official'. Similarly, our participants' collaborative tasks oriented towards coordinating their institutions' response and building connections across departments are similar to what Cote names as 'rapport builder/advisor.' Or those activities aimed at supporting and helping the local community align well with the 'community leader,' 'government liaison,' and 'interinstitutional diplomat' roles (see Table 4).

However, our findings indicate a slight shift in leadership intent and priorities compared to Cote's (1985) study. In Cote's study, the president's job was viewed as "requiring an extraordinary individual to perform it effectively" (p. 672). As a result of the evolution of the president's job, as well as due to the specific needs of responding to a large crisis, our findings

do not reflect this central role of the president as someone ‘extraordinary.’ In contrast, our findings suggest that roles focusing on collaboration and facilitation were more prominent than executive and authoritarian responses. This shift may be a result of the evolving nature of the president's role and the specific needs of responding to a large crisis like the pandemic.

Additionally, our findings suggest that institutional characteristics, such as size or type, played a lesser role in determining the roles enacted by presidents. Cote noted how “the unique nature of their institutions—as defined by size, type, history, and so on—was critical to determining the priorities of presidential roles” (p. 672). However, in our study, neither these characteristics nor others such as the country/region where the institution was located, were fundamental in determining the overall roles enacted by presidents. Certainly, the specific mission of their institution or their relationship/dependence to/from government authorities, altered partially how the presidents responded but not in their role per se, but rather on the scope of their response.

When a crisis hits a university campus, leadership is expected to provide a sense of safety and security to the institution's constituents (Ferraro et al., 2010; García, 2015); after all, a HEI “is expected to be—and needs to be—an institution especially committed to life and safety” (p. 2). It's from within our most human needs, as explained by Maslow (1943), to feel safe just after any physiological need. As participants expressed, the safety of their community was the most important aspect they had to consider while juggling several other concerns. Interestingly from our findings, the concept of who represents the community that university leaders felt the need to care for, was wider than the more common faculty, staff, and students' definition. Particularly, (and understandably) at public institutions, presidents were concerned about—and acted upon—the benefit of the larger community where their institutions are located.

One commonality among our participants was their shared belief that they needed to look back at their institutional mission, vision, and values to be used as a ‘North Star’ (McNaughtan et al., 2019) when shaping their response to the pandemic (Knobel, 2021). It is evident from our data that presidents based the scope of their institutions' response on the intrinsic value and significance that it had among its constituents. As opposed to the president of a small private university in New England, it was natural and expected for the president of the flagship university in a Canadian province to drive around the province and meet with local authorities to reassure that the university was their ally during the pandemic. While the president of the largest public university in the capital of a Latin American country was expected to redirect a lot of its resources (facilities, personnel) in the health sciences to help with testing on the community, the president of a private comprehensive university in Mexico had to focus on reallocating resources to make sure their students had the opportunity to continue their education uninterrupted, even in the co-curricular side of their educational model.

This finding also shows how past literature on contingency theory stands true only partially now. While our sample is indeed small, data suggest that individual characteristics of the leader had a much less important role in leading this crisis. The personality, demographics, and lived experiences of the president were less salient. The only situational characteristics that seemed to matter were the severity of the pandemic at their locality at a certain point in time, and the political role of the university in that context. Unfortunately, as other studies have shown (e.g. Collier et al., 2020; 2021; Knobel & Leal, 2021; Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022) the response, particularly the reopening strategy, that universities in certain countries had was more

related to their alignment or misalignment with the current State or Federal government. For example, in the United States and Brazil, political tensions were much more evident than those in other countries, where the pandemic seemed less polarized by the political spectrum.

Conclusion

This study shows how managerial styles from university presidents can evolve during a large crisis. During ‘normal’ times, and at the beginning of a crisis, university presidents tend to focus their attention on strategic and logistical aspects of maintaining institutional prestige, financial stability, resource accrual, and long-term impacts of the crisis. However, as crises progress, in this case a large health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an observed shift to focus on people as presidents sought to fulfill their roles as communicators, collaborators, and supporters. In this vein, and in line with Ruch (202), this study advances our understanding of different leadership roles within higher education during times of crisis. Most importantly, it shows that regardless of the leader’s personality or their institution’s national and local context, leadership centered on the well-being of an organization’s constituents was a common thread that helped institutions navigate difficult times. With this study, we illustrate how leaders understood their position and the expectations vested upon them.

In doing so, presidents in our sample also help us move forward with our notions of leadership in higher education. In line with more recent calls towards humanizing HEIs in a way that addresses the manifold inequities that exist (e.g. Eddy & Hart, 2012; Kezar, 2020; Kezar & Posselt, 2019), this pandemic is forcing institutions to reorder their priorities, and therefore, the way leadership is executed. This study shows how what seemed to be the main role of a university president suddenly changed. Under normal circumstances—as literature has shown—presidents’ job is to move the organization forward, secure its financial stability, increase academic quality, and care for the institution’s prestige. But during this crisis, they mostly focused on securing the well-being of the people within the organization, guaranteeing equitable access for the continuity of education for their students, and an overall care for the institution’s many stakeholders. Said another way, university presidents’ leadership shifted from being focused on leading *for something* to leading *for someone*; a shift from ‘*leadership for what*’ (Kezar, 2020), to *leadership for who*. Based on empowerment, involvement, and service to individuals and society, this shift offers an alternative way of leading colleges and universities, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

While it may have taken a global pandemic for HEIs to realize their fragility as well as that of their constituents, lessons learned about the importance of physical and mental health should remain as common practice and of focus among HEI leadership (Ruch & Coll, 2022). Through this study, we hope to open a door for a future where university presidents show more of the empathy reflected here in other areas, but most importantly, throughout their tenure as leaders of their institution and not just during times of crisis. New leadership styles need to be reminiscent of the role they have towards the people participating in their institutions, as opposed to the institution itself. Developing an institution’s image, revenue, or prestige should be the result of presidential leadership that has built a community based on respect and the recognition of everyone’s humanity, dignity, value, and common interest in learning from each other.

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Table 1.

Lawrence Cote's Related Presidential Roles, as adapted by authors (Cote, 1985)

Higher Education Presidential Roles (Cote, 1985)	Managerial Roles (Mintzberg, 1973)		
	Interpersonal	Informational	Decisional
1. Academic planner/innovator			Entrepreneur; Negotiator
2. Administrator/executive	Leader	Monitor; Disseminator	Entrepreneur; Disturbance Handler; Resource Allocator; Negotiator
3. Alumni liaison/motivator	Liaison	Spokesperson	
4. Community leader		Liaison	
5. Consensus builder/mediator			Disturbance Handler; Negotiator
6. Educational advocate		Spokesperson	
7. Faculty advocate		Spokesperson	
8. Financial manager			Resource Allocator
9. Fundraiser	Liaison	Spokesperson	
10. Government liaison/resource stimulator	Liaison	Spokesperson	Negotiator
11. Interinstitutional diplomat	Liaison	Spokesperson	Negotiator
12. Labor relations specialist			Negotiator
13. Marketer/salesperson	Liaison	Spokesperson	
14. P.R. specialist/image builder	Liaison	Spokesperson	
15. Physical plant/property overseer			Resource Allocator
16. Symbol/ceremonial official	Figurehead		
17. Trustee rapport builder/advisor	Liaison	Spokesperson	Negotiator
18. Visionary/long-range planner	Leader	Monitor; Disseminator	Entrepreneur

Table 2.
Study Participants

#	Pseudonym	Sex	Country	Institution Type
1	President A	Male	US	Public
2	President B	Male	US	Public
3	President C	Female	US	Private
4	President D	Female	Canada	Public
5	President E	Male	Chile	Public
6	President F	Male	Brazil	Public
7	President G	Male	Taiwan	Public
8	President H	Male	Mexico	Private
9	President J	Female	Taiwan	Public
10	President K	Male	Germany	Public
11	President L	Male	Germany	Public
12	President M	Female	Germany	Public
13	President N	Male	Austria	Public
14	President O	Female	Austria	Public

Table 3.
Summary of Main Findings

University Presidents' Roles While Leading their Institution' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic		
Communicator	Collaborator	Supporter
Share accurate information	Coordinate response efforts	Provide resources to support strategic areas and more pressing needs
Speak in alignment to context	Build connections across departments	Keep their campus calm and offer emotional support/security
Be the face of the university	Empower their team	Support/help the local community
	Quickly adapt to their constituents' needs	

Source: Authors

Table 4.

Comparison between identified roles and their relation to Cote's (1985) study

Identified Presidential Role	Identified Presidential Subroles/Tasks	Related Roles from Cote's (1985) Study
Communicator	Share accurate information	P.R. specialist/image builder
	Speak in alignment to context	P.R. specialist/image builder
	Be the face of the university	Marketer/ salesperson; P.R. specialist/image builder
Collaborator	Coordinate response efforts	Consensus builder/mediator; Financial manager
	Build connections across departments	Interinstitutional diplomat; Consensus builder/mediator
	Empower their team	Administrator/executive
	Quickly adapt to their constituents' needs	Academic planner/innovator; Educational advocate; Faculty advocate; Interinstitutional diplomat
Supporter	Provide resources to support strategic areas and more pressing needs	Administrator/executive; Financial manager; Government liaison/resource stimulator; Interinstitutional diplomat
	Keep their campus calm and offer emotional support/security	Interinstitutional diplomat; Trustee rapport builder/advisor
	Support/help the local community	Community leader; Government liaison/resource stimulator; Trustee rapport builder/advisor

Source: Authors' findings with data adapted from Cote (1985)