

# COVID-19 – The impact on teaching past, present, & future

Bernard A. Jones<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is derived from the keynote speech delivered on November 12, 2020, at the *Center for Teaching and Learning Enhancement in Higher Education Saxony (HDS)* conference, “*Higher Education Times of Crisis.*” As an assistant professor teaching homeland security and emergency management at St. John’s University, I am honored for the opportunity to serve as the keynote speaker and as the author of this article. This article reflects my experiences as a crisis management professional and thoughts on lessons learned and best practices regarding crisis events that impact higher education institutions. Additionally, there is an exploration into how the COVID-19 global pandemic has significantly influenced higher education teaching and learning. Also, as an African American in the United States, it is necessary to discuss how both the racial climate and political instability have impacted higher education teaching and learning. The overarching goal is to help the higher education community better understand how crisis events reshape how to plan for, mitigate against, respond to, and recover from such events. The COVID-19 pandemic is an authentic wake-up call for organizations and, most importantly, higher education institutions. It is paramount that a renewed emphasis is placed on crisis management in higher education and the overall attention to resilience in the future.

Because of my experience responding to crisis events, it is imperative to utilize lessons learned and best practices to help educate on enhancing resilience at higher education institutions. It is no secret that crisis events, both human-made and natural, pose significant challenges to institutions unprepared to respond to such events. Unfortunately, this has been a reality in higher education, where a lack of attention to crisis management has become the norm.

## Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic; crisis communication; crisis management plan (CMP); emotional intelligence; hybrid & online teaching model; racial & political unrest

<sup>1</sup> Bernard A. Jones, Assistant Professor,  
St. John’s University, New York  
[Jonesb1@stjohns.edu](mailto:Jonesb1@stjohns.edu)

## 1 Crisis Management Overview & COVID-19 Implications

The term crisis can be defined as a significant event with a radical change of status. Additionally, it can be seen as an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs. A crisis is also defined as a decisive change that is impending, or an event with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome. A crisis can be an unexpected and unlikely event that may alter human performance and knowledge at the group, community, individual, and institution levels. How crisis events are addressed is defined as crisis management. Crisis management occurs in four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (Sullivan, 2012, 36–43). To adequately address crisis events, higher education institutions develop crisis management plans (CMPs) to manage all phases of the crisis.

The CMP documents how institutions contain the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and use strategies to prepare for future crisis events. Each crisis event is an opportunity to identify and enhance crisis management capabilities and articulate any gaps or weaknesses in the crisis management cycle. The CMP helps define mitigation efforts, enhanced preparedness planning, focuses during crisis response, and ensures that operations return to normal within the recovery process. After each crisis event, a discussion is warranted and serves as the foundation of gathered ideas on improvement areas to address another crisis if it occurs (Lindell, 2006, 485). The COVID-19 pandemic

has been a prolonged and extensive global crisis and continues to provide opportunities for higher education to evaluate and re-think how to address crisis events.

The crisis mitigation phase involves taking actions to reduce or prevent the repercussions of disasters and crises. Higher education institutions are typically prepared for natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, snowstorms/blizzards, and other natural disasters (Sullivan, 2012, 36–43). Conversely, higher education institutions are equally prepared for human-facilitated crises like active shooter or cyber-attacks. However, like many organizations, higher education institutions were not prepared for, did not adequately mitigate against, or sufficiently respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of preparedness and mitigation has left higher education institutions undertaking ad-hoc measures to continue teaching and learning during the pandemic.

The crisis preparedness phase involves planning for future crisis events. Examples of preparedness measures that an institution can apply are drafting a disaster preparedness plan on what should be done, where to go, or conducting a crisis. Also important are putting crisis management plans through tabletop exercises, drills, and full-scale exercises (Sullivan, 2012, 36–43). Although higher education institutions have preparedness plans for scenarios around natural and human disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique scenario and opportunity for higher education to review, update, and enhance CMPs.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not appear in long-term preparedness planning and subsequently requires higher education to update CMPs as needed.

The crisis response phase happens directly to address the crisis event to minimize impact. Regular operations and daily activities do not operate as usual during this phase, and the effect of the crisis depends on the institution's level of preparedness. The COVID-19 pandemic response by higher education has not been as successful due to a lack of mitigation and preparedness for the pandemic. At the same time, some institutions have successfully implemented remote teaching and learning models using online platforms. Unfortunately, due to the sudden shift, both students and faculty members have had difficulty adapting to this new model. It has been challenging for some educators to deliver course content online and respond to students' needs. It is also challenging to teach course content online that requires some form of demonstration. The primary reason institutions promote classroom courses is that students' engagement is paramount for academic performance (Sullivan, 2012, 36–43). However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has forced higher education teaching and learning to go online completely. Thus, training is needed to help equip faculty with skills that can enable them to engage students online and effectively deliver their courses. The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a new normal, and higher education must design measures to cope with the underlying changes the pandemic presents.

The crisis recovery phase is the final phase of the emergency management cycle. During recovery, higher education institutions employ activities to help with the return to regular operations. Recovery can be long or short, depending on the institution's preparedness. Recovery activities may include reducing excess financial constraints and preventing stress-related sicknesses (Sullivan, 2012, 36–43) and reconstructing classrooms based on the experience obtained from preceding the disaster, and reducing the possibility of future disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to manifest itself, and the recovery phase is ongoing. The recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic will contribute to preparing higher education institutions for future crisis events.

## 2 Crisis / Emergency Management Response to COVID-19

Higher education institutions over time have been disrupted due to natural or human-made disasters and crisis events. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception and has resulted in a significant paradigm shift in teaching and learning in higher education. Adopting the online or hybrid teaching module has moved both faculty members and students into different learning forms. Currently, online learning is viewed by many as an innovation. The exceptional educational experience encourages students and faculty members to engage in remote learning communities through col-

laborative learning. Based on the contingency theory, higher education faculty members require a diversified approach to maintain their competency (Soroya et al. 2020). The change from the traditional teaching model to a technology-based approach has been accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was needed due to governmental mandates which require that institutions close to minimize contact and the possible spread of the coronavirus. Higher education institutions have regained some sense of normalcy during the response phase with online or hybrid teaching. In addition, several measures were installed to curb the virus's spread, including installing handwashing stations, wearing face masks, reducing the number of students per classroom, and removing other academic activities to limit contacts, among other measures. Additionally, higher education institutions must also make it mandatory for staff, administrators, and faculty to complete basic training on emergency management concepts (Sullivan 2012, 36–43). Adequate preparation will enable higher education institutions to operate amid the pandemic, and any crisis event, to deliver services to students. Required faculty training will help ensure that operational continuity exists within the higher education institution.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a long-running crisis event and introduced some resistance from faculty, administrators, and staff as most were not prepared for the impacts. Thus, there exists a need for participation between the crisis management team

and stakeholders to understand the importance of crisis management measures. Students should also be engaged, early in the process, to prepare them for the possible switch to online platforms. Participation by all stakeholders in determining the best actions to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, or other crisis events, is vital.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has paralyzed several economic sectors in many countries globally. Focusing on the outcomes of crisis events, Shrivastava et al. (1993) portrayed crisis events as disruptive situations that require urgent decisions and yield huge impacts and restructuring the system. Similarly, the outcomes resulting from organizational crisis events have been examined from other angles. For instance, Pearson & Claire (1998) described the psychological impacts as a disillusionment resulting in unfavorable effects on shared values and beliefs among people associated with crises. In higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both teaching and learning due to its unpredictability, longevity, and external requirements and mandates from the government, which forced an immediate halt to the face-to-face instruction of students.

Therefore, these dormant action plans' purpose becomes questionable by indicating that such documents are there to provide a false image of safety and control (Soroya et al. 2020). It is usually common to avoid the implicit requirements of planning, exercises, and training. Some of the reasons that support the status quo of avoidance of emergency prepared-

ness appear to depend on financial costs when preparing and exercising against the actual occurrences of crisis events. Research on disaster and their impact on efforts to mitigate indicate that cases that fail to attain their full damage potential agree with the view that minimal mitigation and efforts to prepare are justified (Soroya et al. 2020). Also, similar research on giving emergency preparedness a priority indicates that many students appear self-satisfied. Thus, they did not do much to prepare

Emergency management in higher education involves leadership, teamwork, and collaboration across the institution. Some of the shortcomings of emergency management include undefined roles, an undefined chain of command, and poor leadership, often leading to the emergence of a process that should demonstrate flexibility when facilitating large masses (Soroya et al. 2020). Based on the contingency theory, higher education faculty members require a diversified approach to maintain their competency (Soroya et al. 2020). Therefore, it is essential to examine and continue to evolve teaching and learning due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses of the existing CMPs in higher education institutions. The pandemic is unique, and few CMPs anticipated a global health crisis, which requires strict measures as presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the application of technology and online classes is not a new concept in higher education, these technologies have been applied to supplement classroom learning

and improve education efficiency. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to entirely rely on online classes as the safe mode of delivering their services to students. This drastic shift to online education found higher education institutions unprepared.

The disruption of the 2020 spring semester is attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, higher education institutions were required to cancel face-to-face classes and shifted to online education. By the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, most higher education institutions implemented a plan to combine face-to-face classes with social distancing and online learning, with different levels of success by institutions. According to the *College Crisis Initiatives*, at least 45% of institutions transitioned fully to online learning, 20% use mixed models, and 30% provided face-to-face learning (Espino-Díaz et al. 2020, 5646). The majority of the institutions plan to increase face-to-face classes and housing in spring 2021, including testing, contact tracing, and temperature checks, helping minimize campus outbreaks. A recent survey also found that 50% of enrolled students indicated that the pandemic would negatively affect their capacity to complete their degree program.

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought new challenges as higher education institutions had to invest in online technologies and purchase additional equipment to support the same. Further, higher education institutions have historically embraced social interactions and connections. New isolation and contain-

ment measures required all to maintain social distancing, which brought challenges. The longevity of the pandemic also has exposed higher education institutions' temporary efforts. Some proved insufficient in response to the pandemic and halted the ability to regain normalcy in teaching and learning in higher education.

The shift to online-based classes created some concerns about the quality of the online education system. Other studies have warned that students, especially students struggling academically, are likely to suffer from online education. Some studies have indicated that 21% of college students have problems accessing effective technology such as high-speed internet and laptops (Espino-Díaz et al. 2020, 5746). Many higher education institutions unveiled their plans to assist students who may not have access to an internet connection, such as opening college libraries and distributing mobile hotspots to their learners.

The sudden shift to online models left most higher education institutions with no support and resources. Higher education institutions have heavily invested in classroom learning, with little focus on online platforms. The sudden shift to the hybrid model exposed the lack of technological resources to assist the higher education institutions in successfully shift to online models. This hindered the successful delivery of online classes. For institutions to resume classroom learning, there was a need to restructure the classrooms with new technologies to ensure social distancing. Few higher education institutions were fully

prepared for the pandemic and the subsequent pandemic containment measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as an opportunity for remote education to become a reliable teaching and learning strategy for any future disaster or crisis event. Government agencies and international institutions are working to ensure education is delivered remotely through hybrid technologies allowing the curriculum-based study to continue. Additionally, *The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) 2030 plan* to deliver quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for every student. Based on this context, more attention is needed on how the integration of learning and technology can be achieved effectively by including faculty members' essential roles and learners' needs.

Additionally, various nations have applied different online education approaches by avoiding the digital divide. For instance, New Zealand has used an integrated approach using television channels to offer quality education information, combined with hard-copy curriculum resources and internet delivery. In another example, in Queensland, they have used television to engage parents to assist their children in learning because of a lack of internet connection. On the other hand, Portugal delivered hard copy learning materials to students' homes in partnership with the post office services.

The current challenges also suggest that higher education institutions must update technology inventory and training. Faculty members faced difficulties

implementing the sudden hybrid teaching model due to insufficient training and technology. Thus, higher education institutions must train their faculty members on online training and invest in technology. There should be the procurement of new technology infrastructure as indicated by the COVID-19 pandemic challenges. The online training classes will teach faculty how to develop online courses and teach online.

### 3 The Importance of Effective Crisis Communication

According to Ratzan et al. (2020), higher education institutions require a different crisis communication and management approach to the COVID-19 pandemic distinct from other disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented higher education opportunities to explore crisis communications practices in real-time and evaluate how higher education institutions have responded to the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic demand communication to the entire community of stakeholders, and regular and constant communication with all stakeholders, including students, is critical in enabling transparency and trust.

Effective crisis communication can ensure that the student community is aware and trained on COVID-19 pandemic protocols. If a student contracts the virus, they will know what to do to limit its spread (Ratzan et al. 2020). Still, when an effective crisis communication program is in place, the protocols will not be

new to the students. Effective crisis communication will instill trust and loyalty among the students, faculty, and the institution. Trust and loyalty are also critical for institutions with international students (Ratzan et al. 2020). During a crisis outbreak, there is always tension and panic. However, when there are trust and loyalty in the institution, only credible information concerning the crisis should emerge. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of trust and credible information as it is a pandemic characterized by high controversy and misinformation. Therefore, effective crisis communication is a critical necessity.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic requires people to maintain social distancing, higher education institutions must support a crisis communication team. The team is composed of human resources, faculty, administrators, public safety, and student life. The team must meet regularly to assess the pandemic situation at the institution and must be the primary source of information, and provide periodic updates to the students, faculty, and parents. When providing updates, the team must be transparent and explain what they already know, updates, and the conveyed information sources. The team should use clear language when sharing information as all concerned parties may not easily understand some information. Effective crisis communication is very critical. When designing a crisis communication plan, the institution should appreciate the impact of social media. Social media can enhance effective crisis communication. Social media can also be instrumental in connecting with students

and other essential stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic or any crisis event. Although crisis communication is not a new concept in higher education, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is a blueprint for future crises. The current pandemic is unique and has demanded unique approaches different from the available crisis communication strategies.

#### 4 Impact of Racial & Political Unrest in the United States on Teaching / Learning in Higher Education

Racial unrest is another crisis that has recently undermined teaching and learning within higher education institutions. Protests over police brutality have led to faculty, administrators, and students engaging in conversations about police violence, race, and racism. This, along with the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, has made it challenging for many. The racial unrest has also required faculty members to determine approaches to assist students in working through their feelings, perceptions, and sentiments concerning police brutality and the constant protests. Considering that teaching and learning have mainly gone online, faculty also should adjust their online course content to include police violence and racial disparities due to the pandemic. Protests occurred soon after Mr. George Floyd, a black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mr. Floyd's death underscored a wave of violence by white

officers on unarmed black Americans. The feeling of being targeted by the very same people who should protect them inflicted fear among black Americans (Arday and Mirza, 2018). The safety of black faculty members was heavily undermined, and they experienced difficulties in deciding whether to promote the *Black Lives Matter* movement or remain neutral. Considering that faculty members are neither therapists nor social workers, addressing students' reactions, perceptions, and thoughts on the racial unrest was a significant challenge.

As a result of the current turbulent racial climate, black students were most affected. White faculty had difficulty explaining to black students that the racial sentiments propagated by some members of society are not the reality and that black students and black people in general equally belong. Another challenge presented by the racial unrest revolved around social media platforms. The racial unrest occurred when social media and online media are significant in society. Unfortunately, social media can be a place where discussion and commentary on racism and police brutality resonate. Consequently, this also impacted teaching and learning as faculty needed to allow students to reflect and heal.

The issue of race and racial injustices is not a contemporary phenomenon in the United States. There have been concerns over systemic racism in the justice system, racial disparities in healthcare, and systemic racism in social justice. However, the racial sentiments have never escalated to the recently witnessed

protests. The racial unrest exposed the current crisis management plan's weaknesses and called for a comprehensive review of the plan (Arday and Mirza, 2018). The unrest forced colleges and universities to help their students and support their voices to be heard.

In some cases, faculty members privately texted their black students to express how they felt about police brutality. In turn, faculty members allowed all students to express how they felt as part of reflection. Higher education institutions quickly moved to include race and ethnicity courses in their programs. The aim was to educate students on the importance of diversity in society and harness such diversities to promote cohesion. Such approaches help higher education institutions prepare for future incidents by ensuring that all students study racial diversity and our differences (Arday and Mirza, 2018). Education is integral in presenting norms and values in society. When people negatively perceive diversity and inclusion, higher education institutions can play an important role. Incorporating race and ethnicity in all higher education institutions' courses will help students learn and appreciate their differences.

Higher education institutions have also suffered from political unrest. The 2020 Presidential elections, and the unfortunate events which led up to the election, left the country fractured. There is a vast political divide, and tensions are high. This means that faculty members should help their students embrace unity and move away from divisive politics. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, minimal direct contact between

faculty members and their students and issues around politics has made teaching and learning challenging. The current crisis events have significantly hindered the faculty and students, and higher education institutions have several concurrent crises to address.

Faculty members have had difficulties executing their duties. As educators, faculty members must be mindful of the effect of crisis events on students. The well-being of students will determine their academic success, and educators want students to succeed. The current racial and political unrest has undermined students' mental and emotional status and make it challenging for students to concentrate and study. Faculty members and students have had to endure the new hybrid models and racial and political unrest.

## 5 Psychological Dynamics of Emotional Intelligence Related to Teaching / Learning in Higher Education

Higher education teaching and learning can benefit from understanding and incorporating the concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was made famous by *Daniel Goldman* in his groundbreaking book entitled, *“Emotional Intelligence, why it can matter more than IQ.”* With the concurrent crisis events dominating the globe, now more than ever is a need for better understanding and incorporating the principal and core competencies of emotional intelligence

within teaching and learning in higher education and our lives in general.

Five elements make up emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills at a high level. A vast amount of research in emotional intelligence exists. Emotional intelligence should become an integral part of a college education and an essential component within emergency management training. With the COVID-19 pandemic and racial and political unrest dominating life in the U.S., emotional intelligence within higher education institutions and increased empathy across the globe are needed. My current post-doctoral research is focused on connecting emotional intelligence and emergency management to help implement new training and awareness for emergency management professionals.

## 6 Conclusion

Many lessons learned, best practices, and considerations regarding crisis events impact higher education institutions. These items summarize actions that higher education institutions must consider helping enhance crisis management capabilities and build resilience. Higher education institutions must seek to develop CMPs if not already in place and create a program to manage, test, and provide governance over the plan. Also, during the response to any crisis event, crisis communication must be provided to the entire campus community, which is constant, straight-

forward, and easy to comprehend. As a result, once the crisis event is over, faculty, staff, administrators, students, parents will expect and demand the same cadence, openness, and speed regarding crisis communication. There should be better awareness, better lead time, and guidance before shifting to a 100% online/hybrid teaching model. Higher education institutions should also leverage those with experience in crisis management as early in the response phase as possible. Mandatory faculty training should be implemented to deliver online courses if the need arises. Lastly, it is vital to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a chance to reflect on both successes and failures and update CMPs, crisis communication plans, and procedures accordingly. Additionally, higher education institutions must conduct a post-mortem meeting, including the creation of an after-action report.

The current challenges experienced by higher education institutions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial unrest, and political violence helped validate CMPs. The immediate and drastic shift to online platforms was challenging to the faculty members and the students. In some cases, faculty members lacked the online teaching skills on how to ensure students' engagement. Additionally, students had to deal with high-stress conditions, panic, and uncertainty. The racial and political unrest witnessed in the United States also impacted higher education teaching and learning, making the situation more challenging. These crisis events only demonstrate the need for effective crisis management within higher education. Since

the COVID-19 pandemic has been a prolonged health crisis, higher education institutions should take the opportunity to develop a comprehensive and effective CMP that can help to address similar or worse crises in the future.

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