



Reflections

The Value of Brick and Mortar: A Reflective Essay on Critical Student Services and Supporting Vulnerable Student Groups during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lynell Hodge & Falon Thacker

University of Central Florida

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Since this announcement, higher education has grappled with replicating in-person student services. This reflective essay explores COVID-19's impact on vulnerable student groups who rely on critical student services. On the surface, COVID-19 disrupted the conventional brick and mortar structure of higher education and the actions resulted in short-term concessions attempting to serve students without interruption. In our observations, we question how these decisions disproportionately affected vulnerable student groups (e.g., first generation or housing insecure students). It was imperative institutions assessed and evaluated how student services were adapted to meet the myriad of student needs. For many students, COVID-19 disrupted their sense of on-campus safety, and bolstered the anxiety of the who, where, and how to access campus services—such as: on-campus housing, dining, multicultural student spaces, and counseling. These vital student services under non-pandemic conditions holistically work to bridge the gap between academic success and supporting basic student needs. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 revealed how essential these services are to students (Ciobanu, 2013). This essay reflects on the short-term concessions made during the initial stages of the pandemic, assesses the impact of operational decisions, acquiesced that broad policy decisions may not have addressed the diverse needs of vulnerable student groups, and offer strategies for consideration.

Keywords: reflective essay, COVID-19, vulnerable student groups, higher education, student services, brick and mortar

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic. On the same day, the State of Florida Board of Governors, which governs the State University System (SUS) of Florida simultaneously announced that Florida's SUS would transition to remote instruction. This mandate originally was planned for two weeks to curb the spread of the virus. Therefore, campuses made the necessary preparations to transition to remote operation

with the intention to welcome students back on March 30. However, on March 17, the Board of Governors announced that SUS schools would need to extend remote instruction through the end of the spring semester, campus housing should depopulate, and all campus services were to transition to 100% remote operations until further notice. We share this timeline to illustrate that in a matter of six days, Florida's postsecondary landscape changed for the foreseeable future.

As two housing and residence life professionals: this shift meant we had to immediately develop a socially distant programming model, reduce on-campus occupancy, and concurrently develop and manage individual student extenuating circumstances. Additionally, staff members had to quickly develop metrics to approve students in critical need to remain living on campus for the remainder of the semester. An unintended consequence was students who historically experienced access barriers in higher education, were further disenfranchised by the symbolic loss of face-to-face operating environment (Roth, 2020). We encountered students who lived on campus year-round because on campus housing was their permanent residence and transgender students who felt safer on-campus than returning home. Under both circumstances, students were anxious about email communications indicating that campus housing would no longer be available for an unspecified amount of time. These were not hypothetical situations: these were *our* students and real examples of students who were impacted by the cursory decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The student services professional roles we held presented challenges. As mid-level student services professionals, we faced difficult conundrums to meet the needs of students, support frontline staff, and execute campus leadership directives. We were operating in crisis mode to create safety nets that *some* version of the brick-and-mortar environment would exist amidst an unprecedented time. We considered how to maintain community, safety, and a sense of normalcy. In "normal" circumstances, it would be difficult to balance paradoxical priorities; however, the pandemic intensified these priorities and the anxiety of, "did we make the right decisions?" As supervisors of front-line staff (both student and full-time) and executors of decisions, we were very concerned about the impact of our actions. We questioned our judgment, wondered about the impact of these decisions, and debated if these were the best choices, with much unknown about the impact of the virus.

Critical Reflections

As we reflect on the current modality of higher education, we acknowledge critical parts of the campus experience that were lost in the transition to remote, but also as students return to campus. COVID-19 illustrated the duality of educational inequality where some students' learning was not as adversely disrupted while others were severely disadvantaged. This begs us to ponder: when will higher education no longer be complicit in perpetuating these inequalities or, at a minimum, avoid reinforcing these divisions?

Reflecting on this question, we recognized short-term concessions *had* to be made to remain operational and that every college campus in the United States was also facing the same challenges. During the first year of the pandemic, decisions were made quickly; however, those decisions shaped the trajectory for proceeding semesters, for students, faculty, and staff. Two years later though, administrators should continue to reflect on the impact of these short-term decisions. Were they effective and/or sustainable? Specifically, how did these decisions impact vulnerable student groups? We hope your campus asks similar questions and if not, it is not too late.

We were operating in crisis mode to create safety nets that some version of the brick-and-mortar environment would exist amidst an unprecedented time.

COVID-19 impacted all students—no student was exempt from disruptions. However, historically vulnerable student groups were more likely than not to have less support prior to the pandemic; unfortunately, the pandemic exacerbated disproportionate losses in learning particularly for students of color and widened existing achievement gaps (Davis, 2020). We also learned students who were financially independent immediately needed a new source of income. This need could have been because their on-campus jobs were no longer available and/or they needed to assist with household expenses after a parent who may have also had a pandemic related job loss. We also learned how to assist students who returned to abusive environments, spaces that lacked access to the internet, privacy to learn or study. Now that students have returned to our campuses, we must contend with the impact of COVID-19 and experiences of isolation.

Therefore, it was and remains imperative that administrators continuously evaluate how COVID-19 has impacted vulnerable student groups and the best methods of support. Although most campuses have welcomed students back in person, the experience will remain fluid. Most offices still perform work virtually, social gatherings continue to be limited, and the long-term economic impact of COVID-19 on students and their families is still unknown.

Consequently, how we respond matters! Higher education presents an ideological exchange which implies those who engage in the process will experience knowledge acquisition and economic viability. Why? The role student services professionals play in higher education is to enhance the academic mission of the institution while providing multilayered student support (Ciobanu, 2013). Our students, like most diverse demographics, have a myriad of needs and require support services to be agile enough to respond to trends, threats, or basic environmental needs. This positionality primarily drives student learning and development, a commitment to the community; and is achieved through several arms of student services, which include housing and residence life, dining services, university counseling services, and multicultural student spaces. In these university units, students are provided a safety net if they remain a part of the ecosystem.

it was and remains imperative that administrators continuously evaluate how COVID-19 has impacted vulnerable student groups and the best methods of support.

In retrospect, we pose those operational decisions must be student-centered and nimble, to address the diverse needs of students that shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also ruminate about strategies and considerations to support vulnerable student groups with the full acknowledgement the pandemic continues to evolve, and higher education resources continue to be overextended.

Shaping the Future

In preparation to critically write this reflective essay, it was important we specifically acknowledge the impact to vulnerable student groups, challenges to supporting students in remote and isolated environments and the effects of the first two years of decision making. There is a critical need to evaluate operational decisions moving forward and ensure student centered decision making that addresses the diverse needs of vulnerable student groups. How can we ensure higher education will maintain pathways of access during a rapidly evolving situation? Collectively, there are two options: re-evaluate the short-term decisions and adjust for more appropriate long-term solutions or accept the consequences for the decisions that benefitted some students and disproportionately impacted others. If your approach was the latter, it is important to consider not adjusting may adversely impact your students.

Additionally, as we all examine support services for our most vulnerable student groups through the remainder of the pandemic, we offer you some strategies to consider. First, it is imperative that we rethink a one size fits all approach, it cannot or will not work under these conditions. This approach did not work pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and likely will continue to be an ineffective approach. We must consider innovative ways of communicating and reaching students; and because you may be thinking it, yes, email *is* considered a *traditional* way of reaching and communicating with students. We must engage students in their virtual spaces, on apps like TikTok, Slack, Discord, and GroupMe.

Second, we must empower students and include them in the decision-making processes moving forward. Did your campus ask students what they needed for support during the pandemic? Were students brought into workgroups? Can you imagine how enriched solutions could be when students are a part of the resolution? We argue that students should be included in the co-creation of campus decisions for altruistic purposes, because they will be ultimately impacted. Institutional leaders must move away from the thought process that, “we know what is best for students”, because as their needs change, they become the best resources to describe what is best for their peers. We must identify the most appropriate time and place for their voice.

One underutilized solution was to deploy interpretive reproduction, as this approach allows for co-construction of learning. This strategy cultivates a continued approach to listen, centers learning, and encourages access to stratify learning that is not beholden to a single form of knowledge acquisition (Howard, et. al, 2016). Higher education has evidence of this strategy being deployed for instance, in the ability to be responsive to social/civic unrest, while championing diversity and inclusion to support a robust learning experience.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has positioned institutions nationally to evaluate the age-old question, is higher education a public good? Unlike other crises, higher education faced conducting business under extreme conditions during the pandemic. Decisions that were made over the last two years will determine as either indicators of effectiveness or efficiency. Regardless of your campus’ intentions, these hard decisions were made under extreme circumstances no one could have imagined. We were asked to adjust quickly and did as best as possible, but we should be prepared to answer when asked, was it enough? We are reminded that when higher education alters operations; we do not reduce costs; rather, we increase expectations (Roth, 2020).

Simultaneously, operational modalities had to shift rapidly during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions of higher education did not have the opportunity to close their doors to take extended time to brainstorm. Nor did we afford the time to plan the most effective, efficient, and inclusive ways to continue campus operations and instruction. We were challenged to forge operations while maintaining similar continuity of brick-and-mortar operations. Decisions were mandated to consider campus safety and seamless transitions. In the aftermath, we recognized these short-term concessions including closing and modifying the physical spaces on campus such as: campus libraries, student unions, housing, and dining adversely impacted students. Additionally, eliminating and modifying all student gatherings and events on campus including student organizations and student activism changed the dynamics of the campus experience.

This sentiment speaks not only to the complexity of higher education but to the social contract to be a model, even during uncertain times. Working under this level of ambiguity means administrators had to consider short-term decisions that may adversely impact operations negatively in the long term. Fundamentally, operations may result in low enrollment projections, deepening of state and federal

financial support, and overwhelmed and burnout faculty and administrators. Today, we submit—this current approach is not sustainable.

Simultaneously, operational modalities had to shift rapidly during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions of higher education did not have the opportunity to close their doors to take an extended time to brainstorm. Nor were we afforded the time to plan the most effective, efficient, and inclusive ways to continue campus operations and instruction. We were challenged to reimagine executing student services while maintaining similar continuity of brick-and-mortar operations. Decisions were mandated to consider campus safety and to seamlessly transition. In hindsight, we recognize these short-term concessions including closing and modifying the physical spaces on campus such as campus libraries, student unions, housing, and dining adversely impacted students. Additionally, eliminating and modifying all student gatherings and events on campus including student organizations and student activism changed the dynamics of the campus experience.

Furthermore, understanding the continued needs of vulnerable student groups is more critical than ever. For example, research is clear s first-generation, low-income students, and/or students of color may experience barriers while in college. However, understanding how these populations are experiencing the intersection of existing barriers and the long-term, global pandemic is an opportunity to facilitate further analysis.

For now, we can only make assumptions about what we know and observe. More importantly, it is urgent to understand how COVID responsive focused solutions may have adversely impacted their experience. This essay in some cases could be a thought exercise to bring students to the table, ask for their feedback, and to let go of our egos. We encourage you to lean into the feedback, so if you learn short-term decisions disproportionately impact particular groups, for instance, underserved or historically vulnerable students (e.g., first-generation students) compared to their advantaged peers. You take this information as an opportunity to restore their fate. Listen and believe them when they tell you their stories—you just might find healing and answers you struggled to resolve previously.

*understanding the continued needs
of vulnerable student groups is
more critical than ever.*

We must make the time to evaluate decisions that were made quickly, identify the students who fell through the cracks; and we reimagine work that is no longer asynchronous. We will be held responsible for the decisions, so we must be prepared and contend with the outcomes. History has taught us that there will be institutions that will rise to the top and will be benchmarked because of their response. Conversely, there will also be those who will be marred for their COVID-19 response-related choices. We ask, what side of history will your institution be on and why? Did you serve your most vulnerable student groups while overtaxing your administration, or the converse? Did your decisions align with your institution's mission? If you answered no to any of these reflective questions, that may be a sign you should make room for your own reflection and conversation.

References

- Ciobanu, A. (2013). The role of student services in the improving of student experience in higher education. *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 92, 169–173.
- Davis, T. (2020, July 20). *Widening the gaps*. Georgia State News. https://news.gsu.edu/2020/07/20/widening-the-gaps-education-inequity-coronavirus-pandemic?utm_source=news-story&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=coronavirus&utm_term=widening-the-gaps
- Howard, C., Di Eugenio, B., Jordan, P., & Katz, S. (2017). Exploring initiative as a signal of knowledge co-construction during collaborative problem solving. *Cognitive Science*, 41(6), 1422–1449.
- Roth, M.S. (2020, July 18). *Will the pandemic blow up college in America?* Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/18/will-the-pandemic-blow-up-college-in-america-368067>



Dr. Lynell Hodge currently serves as the Assistant Director of Occupancy Management for Housing and Residence Life and an adjunct faculty member at the University of Central Florida (UCF). She earned her Doctorate from the University of Central Florida in Higher Education and Policy Studies and Master's from The Florida State University in Higher Education. Her research interests and publications include vicarious/secondary trauma, student leadership and development, homelessness, food insecurity, barriers to first-generation students and women's equality.



Dr. Falon Thacker (she/her) serves as a Senior Consultant at Be Equitable, an inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility (IDEA) consulting firm. As an IDEA practitioner-scholar-advocate, Dr. Thacker has worked with a wide range of industries and organizational segments to design, lead, train, inspire, integrate, and assess IDEA as a strategic practice for educational and corporate entities. Her research interests include the use of liberation frameworks and theories in the implementation of multicultural and social justice competency training for educators and leaders. Dr. Thacker holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Kentucky, an M. Ed from the University of Florida in Student Personnel in Higher Education, and a Ph. D from the University of Georgia in Counseling and Student Personnel Services with a graduate certificate in equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Hodge, L., & Thacker, F. (2023). The value of brick and mortar: A reflective essay on critical student services and supporting vulnerable student groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal*, 8(1), Article R1141.