Academic Leadership During a Pandemic: Department Heads Leading With a Focus on Equity

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis with momentous challenges for higher education institutions. Academic leaders have been charged with restructuring their systems, ensuring instructional quality while operating with significantly diminished resources. For department heads of units with leadership preparation programs, the complexity of this crisis is layered upon fundamental scholarship about leadership, which reports the effectiveness of leadership as a collective incorporating the shared and diverse talents of faculty, students, and program stakeholders. This work of educational leadership rests on a public and democratic ethic promoting social justice and equity as the practices and outcomes for schooling at any level. In this article, three department heads of educational leadership units in major research universities use dialogic inquiry to reflect on our responses to complex demands brought forth by the pandemic. We share insights into our decision making, as we have led with a focus on equity. We address dilemmas and conflicts that we have addressed as departmental leaders during this critical period of institutional challenges, changing institutional policies and practices, and declining resources, as we have worked to ensure equitable access and distribution of resources for students, faculty, and staff. We conclude with implications for department heads who strive to maintain a focus on equity during times of sweeping organizational change.

Keywords: higher education, COVID-19, crisis leadership, decision making, equity

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis with global consequences. With relatively little warning, personnel in educational organizations, including PK-12 school systems and higher education institutions, abandoned face-to-face instruction in mid-spring semester 2020 and shifted rapidly to online learning. Educators were tasked with maintaining relationships and ensuring quality, while balancing student needs with their own personal safety and—for some individuals—simultaneously caring for loved ones and monitoring their own children's online educational progress. The transition to digital learning is but one example of the significant ambiguous and immediate crises caused by the pandemic that have affected educational institutions, students, programs, and faculty, and staff, and those who lead these organizations.

In higher education institutions the landscape quickly evolved, with senior leaders initially tasked with making rapid-fire decisions, while keeping the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff foremost in their planning. In early spring 2020, academic leaders engaged in a first wave of decisions: canceling events, moving students home, shifting instruction online, and modifying university policies and procedures. Second-wave effects followed soon thereafter, including summer/fall scenario planning, undertaking significant budget reductions, continuing to monitor and adjust policies, furloughs, employee layoffs, and considering longer-term impacts on students and university employees. Administrators, who already had been planning for forecasted enrollment declines (Grawe, 2018) for the 2020–2021 academic year, braced for substantial drops in undergraduate and graduate enrollment, as uncertainty loomed large regarding students' ability to afford college education during an era of job losses, skyrocketing unemployment, and hesitancy to enroll in coursework that would be primarily online. The financial impacts for higher education have been compounded as U.S. public education is among the few sectors to remain negatively impacted by the Great Recession (Laderman and Weeden, 2020).

As administrators of their units, department heads must lead through times of upheaval and crisis. As mid-level administrators they may not be directly involved in the examination and revision of university policies and procedures that have unfolded. Yet, heads typically engage in sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) as they lead equitable implementation of revised policies, consider their effects on faculty, staff, and students, and determine modes of communicating with relevant stakeholders. The department head responsibility encompasses roles both as an actor and agent of the institution (Berdrow, 2010). As an actor, the head "brings his or her individual knowledge, skills, perspectives, experiences, expectations, and objectives to the job" (Berdrow 2010, p. 500). Thus, the head works with others within the unit and across the organization, building relationships, managing human and social capital, handling conflicts, and ensuring equitable resource distribution. As an agent, the head "acts within the context of the institution" (Berdrow, 2010, p. 501), operating within the system to address academic functions, handle administrative duties, and maintain external relationships. For heads of units with leadership preparation programs, the complex demands of a crisis are layered upon the fundamental scholarship about leadership, which reports the effectiveness of leadership as a collective incorporating the shared and diverse talents of faculty, students, and program stakeholders (LeFevre and Robinson, 2015). More deeply, the work of educational leadership rests on a public and democratic ethic promoting social justice and equity as the practices and outcomes for schooling at any level.

RESEARCH BASE ON ACADEMIC (DEPARTMENTAL) LEADERSHIP

Department heads come to the position in a variety of ways (Schloss and Cragg, 2013). Some make a conscious choice to pursue this role, while others fall into it almost accidently. Yet, heads play key roles in the administration and governance of higher education institutions, making decisions that influence faculty careers, curriculum, student enrollments, and department budgets (Berdrow, 2010; Gmelch et al., 2017). Thus, heads are leaders and key decision makers, particularly with regard to procedures within their own departments. It is expected that heads *lead and manage* the totality of the day-to-day work of the faculty and staff who form the unit.

Despite this important organizational role, research (Dopson et al., 2019) suggests many heads receive inadequate training for the position. It has been posited (Bolman and Gallos, 2011) that faculty who come from fields with a background in leadership studies (e.g., business administration, social psychology, educational leadership) are somewhat better prepared for departmental leadership. However, more generally, heads are unprepared for their leadership and management responsibilities (Gmelch et al., 2017). This leadership role is often assumed with limited warning, leaving many departmental administrators entering positions without much formal training, significant prior experience, understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of the position, preparation to lead within a system of shared governance, realization that administration requires a metamorphic change from professorial work, and preparation to balance personal and professional lives (Gmelch et al., 2017). Adding to the complexity, as higher education demographics and organizational expectations change, heads function in more uncertain and increasingly complex institutional environments (Dopson et al., 2019). During times of increasingly scarce financial and human resources, heads are further challenged to equity manage their units, ensuring that programs and personnel are adequately supported. In this way, heads face increasing demands for competency across all aspects of their job duties at the same time the problems they face become more difficult.

In most institutions, department heads have two main arenas of responsibility: handling the business of the department as well as ensuring achievement of its academic mission. As the business leaders of the department, heads are expected to lead and manage their unit by the policies and routines of the university. As academic leaders of their departments, heads must assure the smooth operation of academic programs and student success (Gunsalus, 2006; Buller, 2015). Yet, their placement in the organization (i.e., subordinate to the university president, provost, and college dean) and the reality of the internal politics of academe, suggests that heads are often less a part of formulating strategy and more responsible for communicating and implementing it (Mintzberg, 2009; Weick, 2009). In this way, the duties of heads and expectations for their performance vary dependent on their department, dean, and the institution they serve; furthermore, even within the same institution, heads often find themselves charged with very different responsibilities and tasks due to varying programmatic configurations of departments and traditions and expectations of academic disciplines. For example, heads within schools and colleges of education often are responsible for developing and sustaining partnerships with area schools, whereas heads of hard-sciences departments may be charged with the safety and health of faculty and students in laboratory settings. In sum, research (Cipriano, 2011) suggests that heads address an array of often dissociated

tasks (e.g., course scheduling, hiring, strategic planning, faculty evaluation, coaching/mentoring, budget, program assessment, admissions, student success, stakeholder relationships) with inadequate training and support. It has been long accepted (Tucker, 1984; Gmelch et al., 2017) that the role is stressful and often without tangible or lasting reward.

Building on this prior research, Kruse (2020) has posited that heads work to balance their approaches to the work, striving to employ common sense in decision making, humanity when working with others, and being savvy when approaching an unavoidable and often overwhelming political landscape, all while possessing limited institutional authority. Thus, even under ordinary conditions heads find themselves balancing tensions including those related to the tasks assigned to them, their place within the organization, and how they work with the people within their units. In times of crisis these tensions are exacerbated and their roles even more fraught; heads may find themselves even more adrift as they attempt to respond to the needs and demands of their deans, faculty, staff, and students.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP'S ETHIC OF EQUITY FOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

Most higher education colleges and schools of education include departments housing educational leadership preparation programs (LPP) that focus on the state's public licensing requirements for those aspiring to, and holding, leadership, and management positions in public elementary and secondary schools (Young et al., 2009; Hackmann and McCarthy, 2011). Many of these departments include heads who have faculty appointments in leadership preparation and thus also were students in LPP in their career paths. As mid-management leaders within public higher education institutions (IHEs) preparing professionals to staff schools for children and youth, the overall ethos of schooling youth and preparing teachers and leaders focuses on necessary democratic values with the overarching social mission of a productive citizenry (Starratt, 2004; Fowler, 2013). Among those values, equity is a persisting requirement for school leaders to recognize, negotiate, and advocate among communities (Furman, 2012; Lindle, 2019). Furthermore, as communities' and schools' demographics increase in both social and economic diversity, LPPs face higher demands to better prepare aspiring and practicing school leaders for the challenges of confronting inequities and implementing the necessary associated changes in school practices and resource allocations (Cobb et al., 2016; Bass et al., 2018).

Among the demands for better preparation, faculty of LPP create knowledge through research and teaching (McCarthy et al., 2017) while simultaneously implementing such social justice principles and practices as finding and naming systemic prejudices such as color-blindness, stereotyping, and other coded expressions of biases and racism (Davis et al., 2015; Hernandez and Marshall, 2017). Within the combined scholarships of teaching and research, LPP faculty strive for further identity development of mid-career educators as aspiring school leadership who recognize and work to change systemic bias in

schools' teaching practices or allocation of human and material resources (Ryan, 2010; Carpenter et al., 2015; Robey et al., 2019). This work also has implications for LPP faculty's well-being and success as professors (Hackmann et al., 2017; Martinez and Welton, 2017), as well as graduate students' satisfaction with LPP quality and the adequacy of their preparation to lead within educational organizations.

The combined requirements of program content, instructional quality, and how to ensure both faculty and program success create an amalgamation of responsibilities for department heads (Gmelch et al., 2017). If research-based ethical frameworks for school leadership require confronting institutional inequities, then department heads are compelled to enact these same frameworks and heuristics of socially-just educational leadership practices (Furman, 2012; Smylie et al., 2016). Like PK-12 leaders, university department heads face scarcity of not merely financial resources, but also opportunity resources that higher education systems routinely may distribute inequitably (Martinez and Welton, 2017; Duggan, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019; Laderman and Weeden, 2020). The economic and political constraints on departments of LPP may include the traditions of the *cash-cow* phenomenon (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988), in which tuition revenue generated by the faculty and programs is seized by other administrative units for distribution to other faculty and programs (Carpenter et al., 2017). These ongoing tensions require some acumen in framing the necessary decision making in good times and bad. Within the approach to framing fraught dilemmas while maintaining attention to equity, the following questions can serve as a helpful framework:

1. Which values arise in the conflict, dilemma, or proposal (e.g., choice, efficiency, equity, quality, security)? (Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Cobb and DeMitchell, 2006)
2. Who is raising this conflict, dilemma, or proposal, and why? (Lasswell, 1965; Schneider and Ingram, 1993)
3. Who is mostly likely affected and are they part of the process or not? If not, why not?
4. What are the intended outcomes? What unintended effects might arise? Who could be affected potentially? And potentially inadvertently? How might they be involved in the resolution of the conflict, dilemma or proposal?
5. What are the time constraints on the conflict, dilemma or proposal?

In this way, department heads can work toward establishing an orientation to leadership that is simultaneously grounded by the values of equity while allowing heads to plan for and reflectively respond to that which confronts them.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A crisis is generally defined as an event, series of events, or situation that presents a risk to the reputation of an organization, the safety and well-being of its employees and customers, and/or results in substantial damage to physical property or institutional financial well-being (Mitroff, 2004; Bataille and Cordova,

2014; Blumenstyk, 2014; Gigliotti, 2020). Furthermore, a crisis requires immediate and sustained managerial attention. Research (Mitroff, 1994; Fink, 2002) suggests that crisis leadership is staged, in that usually there is a pre-crisis or prodromal stage when events indicate that an issue is emerging, a crisis event where whatever the issue is has fully emerged, and a post-crisis or resolution phase when there is clear evidence that the issue is no longer a concern to members of the organization or institution.

Yet, suggesting that crisis unfolds in a linear fashion is both artificial and reliant on retrospective sensemaking. Often the beginnings of a crisis are well-underway prior to when leaders discover its presence. Clearly, in the case of COVID-19 tracking the prodromal stage is difficult: Did it begin once a single case was identified in China, or when cases first appeared in the US, or when political leaders failed to decisively respond with clear and focused national guidance? Did COVID-19 become a crisis for campus leaders only when they were forced to abandon on campus-based instruction in spring 2020 or when it became clear that the consequences of the virus' presence would extend well into fall 2020? Clearly, as we write this article at the start of the fall 2020 semester, we are well rooted in the second stage of this crisis, and university leaders are struggling to address the full impacts and unfolding consequences of this crisis situation. Furthermore, thinking of crisis as "an event" minimizes the complexity of crisis. Be it a campus shooting, athletics scandal, natural disaster, or racial tension and protest, how a crisis event is experienced and ultimately, defined, is subject to evolving social and organizational interpretation as a result of the complexity inherent within each event.

Moreover, since institutions of higher education are complex systems, they are susceptible to external environmental factors that may disrupt organizational workflow, direction, and purpose. As such, they are particularly vulnerable. More so, because this vulnerability occurs at multiple levels of the system, it is challenging to obtain clarity and agreement concerning organizational purpose (Blumenstyk, 2014), how and which functions organizational members perform which tasks (Gmelch et al., 2017), formation of relationships and the processes and power structures by which those relationships are maintained (Weick et al., 2005), and the operational structures designed to support the work within the organization (Fink, 2002). In turn, what is privileged and given meaning within the crisis narrative matters, as reality becomes defined by those acts of interpretation, definition, and reaction or inaction (Mitroff, 2004; Gigliotti, 2020). Any institutional crisis is delimited by its causal events; yet, institutional reputation and standing are often more influenced by the social construction and perceptions of its response.

Research suggests (Fink, 2002), that ideally, crisis leaders frame responses with attention toward multiple audiences including internal and external stakeholders. In this way, they are better able to mitigate messages that appear to privilege the perceptions and status of one set of interests or groups over others, or suggest that, for example, departmental and system-wide organizational impacts are of greater concern than individual consequences. Key to conveying the right message, to the right audience, at the right time are leadership actions that consider both the situation and how it is situated

within the context of the campus community and wider crisis narrative. Doing so requires leadership competencies including analytic and communication skills, flexibility, empathy and compassion, presence and availability, transparency and honesty, and established trust and respect (Gigliotti, 2020). Yet, as research suggests (Weick et al., 2005; Schloss and Cragg, 2013), and especially in the current context of higher education, developing these competencies can be undermined by increasingly complex institutional environments and disagreement as to the core purpose(s) of the institution.

METHODS

The phenomenological research question posed for this study follows: Given a global pandemic and its effects on higher education in the US, what do participants, who are practicing department heads, report about their leadership and management of this crisis?

Three participating department heads practice higher education leadership in public land-grant U.S. universities. The team included two women and one man; all are white and have been in academe for over 20 years. All three are married with adult children who no longer live at home. Their universities geographically span both coasts and the center of the U.S. mainland's regions. They share a common scholarship in the field of educational leadership, although their research agendas differ, bridging the range of formal education systems in the U.S. from elementary and secondary school leadership to higher education leadership. Their foundational disciplinary orientations differ from political science and policy analysis to organizational theory to a grounding in curriculum leadership and college and career readiness.

The participants share roles in this study as participant observers in the study with a responsibility for untangling a phenomenon or multiple phenomena which engulf a specific institutional leadership role in higher education—that of the department head (Gunsalus, 2006; Buller, 2015). The appropriate method for this role is a dialogic and biographical-ethnographic form of phenomenological methods (Garza, 2008; Hughes et al., 2012; Lund et al., 2012; Hoppes, 2014). These methods fit the classification of *emergent* (sometimes deemed *qualitative*) research design (Pasque et al., 2011, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). The specific genre involves participants' critical and iterative interrogations of each other's autoethnographic reflections, a duoethnographic approach. "Duoethnographers are the sites of the research, not the topics. They use themselves to assist themselves and others in better understanding the phenomenon under investigation" (Norris and Sawyer 2012, p. 13). Repetitive reflections followed by dialogues engage the discourses of experiences to stimulate insights.

Data Generation

To ensure a systematic engagement with iterative dialogics, this study used two phases of data generation among the three participating department heads. Each phase began with written autoethnographic reflections which the participants posted for each other to read, and then followed with a real-time

conversation facilitated by digital meeting application crossing three time zones.

Phase 1 consisted of the participants' autoethnographic reports of their career progression with a focus on how they came to be department heads in their specific institutions. Despite the fact that all three work in predominately White public universities, they were asked to report on the specific characteristics of the larger institution, the kinds of programs and students within their departments, as well as the ethos among their faculty and staff. Each generated a two to three-page document that circulated to the other two participants, who then inserted marginal comments or probing questions. The group then met to discuss those annotated documents using an ethical dialogic (Lund et al., 2012), or in this case, *trialogic*, as a form of disrupting each other's narratives and confronting the disruption of probes and commentary about their autoethnographic reports (Pasque et al., 2011, 2013). Such a discussion is an intertwining of data interpretation in the process of data generation. Thus, setting a foundation for the next phase of data generation.

In Phase 2, the participants turned to descriptions of their awareness, roles, and responses in the global pandemic. The trialogic concluded with participants agreeing that their current leadership experiences revealed three aspects of the pandemic: (a) dealing with the virus; (b) managing economic crises; and (c) managing the issues of equity associated with the virus's impact on health, financial welfare, and the social systemic consequences of all these forces, including a political climate exposing racism on communities of color, affecting faculty, staff and students. Again, the three participants wrote a two to three-page semi-structured essay about their direct experiences in their IHE leadership roles and shared the documents with each other for marginal comments and probes. The second trialogic produced more sensemaking than disruptive discourse. That is, participants found more common ground than dissonance among their constructions about leadership challenges in the pandemic and confirmed the three aspects of it. This conclusion signaled the structured data analysis phase.

Coding Structure and Analysis

The analysis process essentialized the second trialogic with a confirmatory form (Miles et al., 2014) for each of the three identified aspects (virus responses, budget impacts, and equity issues). Each form required two of the three participants' assignments and then validation of quotations from the second phase's essays with additional relevant statements from the Phase 1 narratives. Each participant assumed responsibility for one of the three aspects, serving as the primary data manager in coding quotations from both phases, and a second participant served in the secondary role in validating selected quotations, adding, or probing the selection. Another synchronous meeting offered an additional opportunity to clarify and confirm this iterative coding process among the three researcher-participants (Saldaña, 2016).

FINDINGS

As a result of our trialogic discussions we established that the challenges we faced fell into three areas. Leading and managing our units in response to the global pandemic, resultant budget reductions, and, as the summer evolved confronting systemic racism. We discuss each in this section.

The Pandemic's Virulence in Institutional Systems

During Spring 2020, institutions of higher education (IHEs) turned to their crisis plans, many of which were designed for the risk management of campus violence, fires, tornadoes/hurricanes, and perhaps, a flu epidemic with little awareness or detail for a global pandemic. Among the three universities in this study, the appearance of Sars-COV-2, the virus, as COVID-19, the outbreak, coincided with the occasion of spring breaks. That traditional scheduled vacation from courses offered a pause in preventing on-campus spread by shuttering dorms and classrooms for a while. As one of us observed, "Of course, that ultimately turned into online instruction for the remainder of the spring and summer."

The immediate impact of COVID-19 on the department head role focused work on managing instructional change from traditional in-person lectures, seminars, and in the case of professional credentialing programs for school teachers and other educator preparation, practica, and clinical experiences. Traditionally university department heads are not direct supervisors of instruction; still all three of the heads in this study had been in an instructional support role for elementary and secondary school teachers earlier in their careers. One of us explained, "I have made deliberate efforts to briefly attend many of our in-person classes," and the appearance of a department head as classroom observer is rare in IHE classes even in Education colleges, schools, or departments.

At first, institutional support moved seamlessly into provisions of the necessary equipment for digital learning platforms, including hot spots, and equipment for both faculty and students. The department heads invested in instructional support roles for faculty who had to adjust to new forms and modalities of teaching. Yet, two of us reported tensions due to upper administration's shifting messages about online courses for spring and summer, that began to become increasingly insistent to return to in-person formats mid-summer. As was shared, the Provost's initial message was, "if you can teach online, teach online," but then shifted to "we want teacher-student relationships, particularly for our freshmen and seniors."

And,

> This shape-shifting message has a politicized element to it, in that, in my university, there's still the undercurrent of the first, leaving it up to instructors, but additionally a push for the in-person, we're open for business. These dual messages leave the conflict within departments … in [the Provost's] campus-wide meetings with department heads, an explicit message [circulated] that "it's up to the department heads to explain the ambiguity between these two messages and allay faculty's fears and reactions encouraging them to be [face-to-face], not online."

In the two IHEs that reported the ambiguous messages about preferred instructional modalities, both department heads

acknowledged negative perceptions about the quality of virtual instructional platforms. While these two universities were focused on parents' and students' beliefs and preferences, at least one department head mentioned that some faculty had low opinions of online learning as well. That department head recalled the struggles that a recently retired faculty member, whose research was focused on multiple forms of historical approaches to remote learning, including digital platforms. That individual even as a senior full professor had faced peer reviews with dismissive messages about such a research agenda, and informally, confronted uncivil comments from so-called colleagues. Interestingly, even with the strong push for in-person learning, both campuses reported the same absentee student phenomenon, with one of us reporting it as follows: "They started classes with half of their students present, in many instances only one or two students were attending. Instructors have expressed frustration, as they plan their lessons to include small-group activities, but their students are not present."

At least one of the department head reported an undercurrent about the extent to which Academic Freedom may, or ought to, play a role in faculty choices and preferences for teaching modalities, when campus leaders were encouraging in-person instruction in the fall semester rather than online learning. One of us stated, "faculty in my institution have been enormously vocal, but the statistics on class modality suggest far more compliance than rebellion." In fact, in the two institutions reporting the in-person instructional tensions, one reported a third of fall courses started in-person, and the department head reporting compliance cited a 62% rate of in-person classes. That contradiction between rebellion and compliance represents a form of *emotional labor*, defined by Hochschild (1983) as the suppression of genuine feelings to enact a different emotion. As heads, we were tasked with working with faculty to reconcile institutional recommendations with their instructional preferences, which took an emotional toll both for faculty and for department heads.

Besides the faculty's emotional labor, all three department heads described a similar toll and a sense of obligation to manage everyone's emotional state. Our trialogue about emotional management and emotional labor looked like this:

> I feel like I've been forced to pay a compassion tax of sorts where since I'm an administrator it has been my job to address people's fear, irrationality, grief, uncertainty, disappointment, and anger (and that's the short list). I also think that this is entirely gendered.

Followed by,

> I feel like I have gone far into the side of verbalizing emotional support, checking in … with people to see how they are doing, emphasizing that this term is about "flexibility and empathy." …that has not typically been my style, but I'm painfully aware of the importance of helping people be aware of their stress and helping them give themselves permission to step away/relax.

Concluding with,

I'm the emotional "protector" and guide. Perhaps it's what I mean when I mention the aspects of building community and addressing civility and collegiality? …I'm also wondering about the "us v. me" mentality. There's a rhetoric of self-care directed at feelings of exhaustion and the lack of boundaries between work and personal life. Still that rhetoric has a thin line between legit reasons to take a break to preserve mental health and the level of selfishness that arises when someone takes the stance that "it's my turn" to be excused.

We acknowledged that some of our faculty, staff, and students experienced additional challenges, such as lack of internet access, caregiving responsibilities, and homeschooling children, which affected their work productivity and contributed to exhaustion levels. As heads without young children at home, we did not experience these issues. However, two of us had our children's weddings postponed due to the pandemic and we all were concerned about our family members' exposure to COVID. Although we continued to express concerns about our colleagues' self-care, we did not regularly assess our needs to attend to our own stress levels.

During this pandemic, the middle-management centrism of the IHE department head role intensified in the ambiguity of managing a physical health crisis. It initially manifested as an instructional challenge, which unsettled faculty because their understandings of their roles changed rapidly. The instructional challenges did not phase us, but the unsettling of professorial identities, and the emotional labor in allaying anxiety in the face of ongoing ambiguity has taken its toll.

Addressing Departmental Budget Challenges During a Pandemic

As experienced departmental leaders, we were proficient with developing fiscally sound and equitable budgets to consistently and fairly support our units' programs, ensuring faculty and staff workloads were equitably balanced, and managing our units' finances. However, COVID-19 created immediate and unexpected multi-million dollar financial losses at our institutions in Spring 2020 and also affected budget planning. Our campus administrators experienced uncertainties regarding the ability to predict a variety of factors for the upcoming academic year, including Fall 2020 enrollments; revenues from tuition, fees, and student housing; and higher education allocations from our state legislatures. Our universities, colleges, and ultimately our departments were bracing for significant reductions due to the COVID-19 economic fallout.

As mid-level managers, we were not involved in campus-level financial conversations, yet it fell to us to interpret communications once they became shared with employees and students. Each of us sought to deliver regular and consistent messaging to faculty and staff regarding campus-level responses to the economic downturn and university fiscal processes that were being continually adjusted. We provided our insights into these formal communications and made sense of implicit meanings for what was left unstated—being candid about the stark realities of the budget situation while attending to the needs and concerns of our departmental colleagues. At all

three institutions, hiring freezes were quickly enacted, searches currently underway were canceled, and/or additional layers of approval were required for positions that could be justified as "mission critical" to the unit. One of us observed that even requesting an adjunct instructor for a well-enrolled summer course now involved "a form to fill out and at least three emails that have to get sent to make that happen." Noting that some department members advocated for their personal needs without showing empathy with regard to the economic collapse's impact on others, one of us described initially showing care and later became more direct with responses as the community and state struggled economically and second-wave effects began to occur:

> When furloughs, layoffs, and unemployment sky-rocketed, then I hardened my responses, pointing out the privileges among being paid on time while this collapse became more dire. Eventually, faculty reported a variety of authentic moments in classes and in advising sessions, where the working, mid-career adults in our programs revealed economic effects on their neighbors and families. At that point, it was easier to send a message to faculty that they needed to be ready for some kind of downward adjustment such as furloughs, alongside longer-term freezes in spending.

As department heads, we were asked to submit proposed reductions for the 2020–2021 academic year that averaged 10% for two of us; one described the process in their department when identifying over $750,000 to eliminate: "I worked with the faculty and our subunit leaders to identify areas to cut: four faculty positions (retirement/resignations), one staff position, supplies, travel, lecturers, and graduate assistant appointments." Another noted how deliberations extended deep into the summer months: "We went through about 30 hours of budget meetings in July to figure out how as a college we'd get to the 10%."

Our direct involvement in the budget reduction activities concluded in late summer, and we received our finalized departmental allocations for 2020–21 academic year. Yet, we each received signals from our superiors—both implicit and explicit—that these allocations remained subject to change. Mid-year clawbacks could occur should the economy worsen, Spring semester enrollments dip, or the legislature implement higher education funding reversions. Thus, any sense of relief that we may have felt at the start of the Fall semester was likely short-lived, and the financial consequences clearly would extend into future years. In some instances, policy changes were announced by campus leaders without prior warning. For example, one of us noted that although furloughs were anticipated,

> none of the middle managers were included in the design or communication plan for announcement of furloughs. The message came on a Tuesday within days of the semester's start, and the instructions were not complete. Individuals had a chart of pay ranges attached to the number of days people in that pay band need to take, unpaid. Within 36 h, letters with the stated number of days for a person came. Still, it took five more days to gain clarity about how to get approval for the dates selected.

Another described being surprised with a change in online tuition policies, which resulted in a handful of graduate students withdrawing from programs: "Our budget and enrollments took an additional hit in August, when we learned that our non-resident graduate students enrolled in distance learning programs no longer would qualify for in-state tuition." Our third colleague reported, "we're currently in a holding pattern on the budget, the semester has started and those decisions are over." They further reported that the budget cutting

> just gets us through this budget year. No one is clear about what any of this means for the next biennium until the state legislature comes back in January. So mostly, I'm just waiting for the next round of bad news.

Although we did not write extensively about how equity was at the forefront of our budget deliberations, during our joint reflections we agreed that equity was an important factor as we explored potential areas to cut and considered the effects on faculty, staff, and students. One described how they and their faculty received a letter from students "asking us to support graduating students who were unable to obtain jobs due to the pandemic" through extending health insurance coverage and providing short-term employment. This institution had relaxed hiring procedures for post-docs, should units have funding for their graduates. Within the unit, their budgets ensured all students currently holding graduate assistantships would maintain their appointments the upcoming year. Another observed, "I learned how to communicate with compassion and how to look for where the system was inequitable and what (small) ways I could remedy those issues." Our third colleague reported on their "scholarship in micropolitics of leadership as well as policy implementation in the front lines of educational leadership," which was invaluable when considering the equitable implementation of budget reductions.

Finally, we again mentioned the emotional toll we personally experienced as we engaged in budget conversations, and particularly as we sought to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of others. One described how the economic effects of the pandemic broadly affected individuals in our institutions and throughout our communities:

> Public education depends on the healthiness of the workforce which makes the economy healthy. And the economic future depends on mentally and physically healthy people who are knowledgeable and skilled in their work, and knowledge and skills require education. All these elements of health and wealth are linked in education and the economy. Health took an impact as did wealth, due to this pandemic.

Our descriptions of how we internalized stress provide insights into the challenges of academic leadership during a time of financial crisis. One noted, "I spent three weeks of (literally) sleepless nights in April-May agonizing over budget cuts." Observing that the department head "position is isolating under any conditions," our third colleague concluded, "the back-up and recovery work is exhausting."

Although we are academic leaders who operate at the levels closest to faculty, staff, and students, we were typically not involved in campus-level decision making with regard to policy modifications and budgeting principles in response to the pandemic. This approach is understandably necessary and efficient, particularly within a complex university bureaucracy. Our campus and college administration expanded their communications to those of us in mid-level leadership roles to keep us regularly informed, and particularly as decisions were made and procedural shifts were contemplated. While campus administrators considered the effects of budgetary decisions at the policy level, department heads—as the leadership "boots on the ground"—were essential for interpreting these decisions, explaining their impact and implications, and responding to the questions and concerns of our faculty, staff, and students.

Addressing Race and Racism During a Pandemic

We began this study with the intent of addressing the challenges department heads faced as they attempted to address higher education leadership in the time of COVID-19. However, as the spring and summer unfolded an equally traumatic, pandemic emerged. No doubt, the years leading up to the pandemic already signaled the deep divides that mark the United States. Arguably, the nation entered into the pandemic deeply economically, socially, culturally, and politically divided. The educational leadership literature has, for years, argued that our nation, and by extension the nation's schools, are marked almost unprecedented inequality (Marshall, 2004; Theoharis and Haddix, 2011; Irby, 2018). Therefore, it was no surprise to us, that promoted by the deaths at the hands of police of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests filled the streets of cities across the nation. As department heads, we were called to respond, to comment, and to support our reeling faculty, staff, and students. Furthermore, as one of us noted,

> Among the faculty, six have research agendas focused on identity development including aspects of diversity and inclusion. The rest have declared stances against racism, placism, and effects of poverty. Nevertheless, as with all scholars, these stances are not identical nor even aligned. The protests about Black Lives Matter (BLM) revealed the fissures extending beyond the fissures of scholarship, and even, expanding the anxieties of pre-tenure faculty who may be juggling to find a balance among the tri-partite requirements of research, teaching, and service.

They added,

> While social media trended with multiple illustrations of the vulnerabilities of being Black anywhere in the U.S. or the globe, academic media channels included advice to check-in on Black colleagues. African American faculty's reactions to those check-ins were wide-ranging and exposed differences in their ideologies.

Embracing a definition of equity that calls for attention to systemic injustices and imbalances that have historically resulted in unfair and unjust treatment of students, staff, and Faculty of Color (Brown, 2006; Pasque et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2015), we

understood that it was important to demonstrate our care and concern, even as we received differing responses. Some valued the opportunity to connect through teleconferencing or phone conversations, while others reported that they were—for the time being, at least—adequately managing the challenges. We noted that as the COVID pandemic kept us physically separate and hampered our abilities to connect with faculty as we might have in other times, our ideological distances deepened further complicating our responses. Seemingly, just when our instincts called for us to draw together, we were forced to be separate, confounding our ability to deepen departmental trust and respect as well as our social and intellectual bonds. In this way, our imposed physical separateness served as a stark metaphor for increasingly evident philosophical fissures.

Before we begin a deeper discussion, a note about the contexts in which our campuses operate. As land grant schools we all sit on what was Native land, and one of our campuses had been a plantation. These contexts matter. Not only do they define, in real ways, who we are as universities, colleges, and departments but context also has the potential to limit a head's ability to address issues of race both within the department setting and beyond. In our explorations, we found that institutional context contributed to the level of preparation exhibited in responding to the issues of racial unrest we faced. In one case, the institution had been diligently working to develop, prior to this summer, a comprehensive campus-wide faculty and staff professional learning program that confronted topics such as microaggression, "color-blindness," and "the ways higher education structures and systems have marginalized our black and brown students." Other campuses were less assertive about these conversations and about their explicit attempts to remedy long standing inequalities and racist practices. Simply put, and of no surprise to scholars of educational leadership, where we worked mattered and framed our ability to respond to the second pandemic that griped the nation. Our discussions during this time led us to talk about the enduring tensions that heads must negotiate as they relate to race and racism and the real limits of a head's ability to effect systemic change.

As heads, we have all been part of our college and university's efforts to address racial inequalities. Of these, most evident is support of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). As one of us shared,

> A persistent problem we have been experiencing—which was happening prior to my [hiring] and has continued while I have been [head]—is retention of Faculty of Color. This issue has become even more challenging as a result of the dual pandemics we have been experiencing in the U.S. this summer—COVID-19 and heightened racial unrest and growing awareness of structural racism.

These tensions become further complicated by the ways in which these departures are experienced by other faculty and students. They continued, "I feel like… a large boulder has started rolling down the hill, and it is difficult to get in front of it."

Clearly, the ability to make targeted BIPOC hires was an advantage not all of us shared. Faculty lines do not come easily to

all heads, nor do positions, when posted, always attract a diverse pool. As we discussed,

> Sometimes it's the place. We have a hard time attracting BIPOC faculty, we're not in a place that is well-known for diversity. It's hard to convince people that living here would feel good or that their families would be welcomed.

Furthermore, even when, on the surface, our campuses strived to address issues of race and racism within the institution change does not come easily. While heads can be out in front of efforts to mitigate systemic racism and inequality, they are often unable to affect change that produces the desired results. As was revealed,

> [Even as we work to educate faculty and staff] we're struggling with a campus conversation that permeates to the classroom, advising, and interpersonal levels. We have the supports in place but it's not enough. Our retention and graduation rates differ in all the ways you'd expect them to.

Additionally, we struggle with the very nature of this work. As was suggested above, faculty intellectually and politically disagree about what work is needed and how such efforts might be undertaken. In turn, it rests on the head to negotiate the interpersonal disputes that arise when faculty cannot work in consistent and coherent ways. As was reflected,

> My role as [head] required my negotiation of perspectives among faculty whose side-bar conversations often expressed surprise or hurt at a colleague's reactions. Most were careful not to name names, but most of the incidents, even the phrasing of quotes, revealed who said what to whom simply because we are a small unit. My role was to acknowledge how that phrase hurt the individual relaying it and then to keep asking questions about how to address it. This mediating step can build community rather than dismantle it.

Furthermore, as heads we found that even as we worked to support faculty efforts, we struggled with faculty positionality. As was shared, "I struggle with how performative faculty, staff, and students can be about their "wokeness" seemingly without an awareness of the impacts of their claims and statements." This author went on to explain,

> I have one faculty member how regularly tells students that "silence is complicity" but then polices what is "acceptable" speech dependent on who is saying what. I have faculty that claim to be speaking for students only then to have those very students tell me they felt infantilized by [their] actions.

Yet, another author pointed to a situation that made national news where a university faculty member's syllabus statement overstepped in regard to the free-speech rights of students.

Clearly, we agree that heads must be out in front of efforts to mitigate systemic racism as it exists in our departments, colleges, and universities. We acknowledge we will not be able to address the tensions inherent until our institutions take seriously the ways in which an authentic sense of belonging amount faculty, staff, and students is fostered. We also acknowledge that belonging is not something we can create for others. Rather, we understand that belonging requires that an organizational member's experience of personal connection to the larger organization and a sense that they matter to others working and learning within that same environment. Inasmuch as we understand that a sense of belonging is fostered by effective organizational communication, open interactive patterns of governance and decision making, and ongoing and authentic support and encouragement, we admit the challenges we face in creating these environments.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We set out to address the phenomenological research question: Given a global pandemic and its effects on higher education in the US, what do participants, who are practicing department heads, report about their leadership and management of this crisis?

As we explored our own processes and experiences, we identified addressing COVID, budget, and systemic racism as interwoven crisis events. We submit that the series of events faced by department heads in the Spring, Summer, and early Fall of 2020 meet the definition of a crisis we set forth earlier in this article. That is, a crisis is an event, series of events, or situation that presents a risk to the reputation of an organization, the safety and well-being to its employees and customers, and/or results in substantial damage to physical property or institutional financial well-being (Mitroff, 2004; Bataille and Cordova, 2014; Blumenstyk, 2014; Gigliotti, 2020). Indeed, COVID, budget, and addressing systemic racism each presented serious risks to institutional reputation, student, staff, and faculty well-being, and organizational finances. More important to our thinking, and beyond the risks each presented to our institutions, we submit that each created and contributed to significant departmental leadership challenges.

Our experiences are not unique, and they had a compound effect. As a friend who was also a department head suggested, "Any one of these crises [alone] I could have handled no problem. Two, I could have juggled. Three, it's laid me flat. I'm really not sure I can do this much longer." Furthermore, we assert that although we have distinguished between each for the purposes of discussion, they are, in fact, mutually informing and as a result, more highly charged. In turn, we suggest that the difficulty of these crisis events was felt more deeply because they challenged our notions of, work around, and commitment to equity within our departments, were deeply complex, and required nimble and adaptive leadership. Each of these claims are addressed in the following discussion.

Equity in Times of COVID

We submit that equity-oriented departmental leadership focuses on transforming institutional and departmental policies and practices toward improved outcomes for faculty, staff, and students within the higher education arena. This definition is in keeping with the educational leadership literature (Brown, 2006; Theoharis, 2007) which suggests that equity-oriented leaders employ critical thinking skills and knowledge of the systemic inequalities present in PK-12 and higher education systems,

particularly as they relate to race, income, gender, religion, disability, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, intersex, and asexual or allied (LGBTQIA+) community. In practice, leading from a stance toward equity requires that department heads recognize the need for systemic change and set priorities, invest time, effort, and political capital toward marshaling the necessary resources to measurably and culturally transform their departments. This is, of course, no small charge. Furthermore, the directions of such work are disputed and contested. We contend that these intersecting pandemics have simultaneously exposed and exacerbated the divide that was already present in higher education.

Certainly, the early days of the COVID pandemic had all heads looking to identify easily addressed soft targets. These included providing for student need, including seeking emergency funds, advocating for increased Wi-Fi access on-campus and in students' communities, and finding avenues to tackle issues such as food insecurity and access to compassionate mental health services. Concurrently, we also ensured that supports were available to faculty and staff as they moved to shift classes to online and hybrid delivery models, providing instructional and curricular supports with the intent toward maintaining program and degree integrity. Such work required considerable responsiveness and the ability to employ existing and limited resources to meet shifting and uncertain goals.

Take for example the near ubiquitous move toward online instruction. From an equity perspective, it required heads to coordinate not only the provision of instructional materials to faculty including those on the tenure and clinical tracks and those in adjunct and instructor positions but it also required that heads coordinate student access and opportunity. We witnessed how both students and faculty with the advantages of reliable Wi-Fi, home offices, older or adult children, and stable incomes were able to accrue advantages that others were not. Similarly, those who were more tech-savvy, either faculty who were better able to pivot instructional mode or students who had adequate home computing resources were more able to immediately respond to, if not benefit from, changed circumstances.

Additionally, such signals and symbols of inequality were readily apparent. Unsurprisingly lower income, first generation, and BIPOC students were first and most hard-hit. Heads shouldered the responsibility of communicating, often without clear direction, support for impacted students as well as calls to re-direct resources to mitigate student distress and need, including locating financial supports. Further exacerbating COVID response was our clear understanding that racism, xenophobia, and aggression toward institutionally and societally underrepresented populations was on the rise. As equity leaders it fell to us, and others like us, to be advocates for faculty and students in need, the face of compassion, and their primary source of information. Often, we were required to work behind the scenes and our efforts to obtain supports were not visible, which sometimes caused faculty and students to question whether we were truly advocating for members of our departmental communities. Addressing the interwoven pressures of support for marginalized faculty, staff, and students proved difficult, as there were few places to turn to for encouragement, guidance, and resource supports.

Institutional Complexity and COVID Response

Institutions of higher education are complex places. Smooth operation requires that schedules are maintained, budgets balanced, the safety and health of students and faculty is ensured, and accreditation agencies, state, and federal policy makers have confidence that core missions and goals are achieved. Yet, as complicated as they are, when each component unit operates well and interconnects as planned, the institution largely functions as is intended (i.e., classes are held, students attend, the sum total of educational experiences lead to degree).

However, when complexity within a system is increased, for example, when factors external to an organization (such as a global pandemic) influence the working of the system, the system becomes less predictable. In the case of COVID, as traditional feedback structures (e.g., communication practices, budget forecasts) became compromised, the typical measures of productivity, performance, and efficiency began to fail to provide meaningful and consequential feedback for heads. In turn, our ability to assure organizational outcomes (e.g., student attendance and degree completion, instructional quality, faculty productivity) was compromised. In this way, the complexity of our institutional structures served to undermine effective leadership action.

For example, as upper administration worked to determine next steps as the pandemic spread, it was often unclear as to what decision principles were at play and what outcomes were most valued. Unmistakably, faculty, staff, and student health were priorities. Financial viability was and remains a core concern for university presidents, provosts, and deans. Speed matters. Decisions could not be made in the typical glacial pace of the academy. Yet, because of the constantly changing nature of CDC and state guidance, existing institutional structures of and for decentralized and participatory decision making (e.g., presidential cabinet, faculty senate) seemingly had been rendered ineffective and our usual organizational routines (e.g., weekly or monthly leadership meetings, hierarchical information sharing and processing) failed to provide a robust communication network for the messaging of end decisions and decision processes. Often it was unclear as to the quality and quantity of data used for decision making as well the ways in which sensemaking was achieved (Weick et al., 2005). Additionally, any decision was intensely politically charged. In turn, the ability of university leaders appeared compromised, at times ineffectual, and ultimately, inadequate to meet the pressures placed upon the system.

To be clear, we submit that our institutional leaders worked to respond in ways that were responsible and effective. Yet, just as COVID and the Spring and Summer of racial unrest made increasingly evident the long-standing inequities in higher education, it too surfaced the ways in which the complexity of higher education fails to support leaders in times of stress and crisis. Additionally, the predictable, linear fashion in which

decisions traditionally are reached on university campuses was disrupted. Moreover, we would suggest that in the very instances when institutional leaders sought to express and demonstrate their commitments to ethical, value-centered leadership, the reality of the complex challenge that COVID created undermined their ability to do so in transparent and convincing ways.

Leadership During and Beyond COVID

Meeting the challenges presented by the crises of COVID, racism, and budget asked us to lead in innovative ways. Likewise, administration at all levels of the academy has been called to assess how they lead as well as to construct new, distinctive, responses to the challenges presented by these crises. As department heads we acknowledge that, in this moment, we are charged with responsibility for maintaining the continued operations of our units, demonstrating care for those under our charge, and planning for future semesters, all while working in and with on-going uncertainty. Scholars of leadership (Rittel and Webber, 1973) would suggest that the problems we face are wicked, that they lack easy resolution where no single solution can address the complexity of the issues faced. Indeed, at this juncture the pandemic appears to have no stopping point (Alford and Head, 2017).

Yet, as heads we are called to confront, and tackle, challenges that include coordinating human resources (i.e., hiring freezes and furloughs, staffing courses including tenure line, clinical, instructor, and adjunct faculty, working with support staff), evaluation (i.e., advocating for the adjustments of annual review, tenure, and promotion timelines and deadlines), professional learning (i.e., use of new pedagogical technologies, hybrid and hy-flex models of instruction, course and content delivery, and integrity), and enrollment management (i.e., continued recruitment, student retention, and persistence). While critical, these are not the kinds of issues that are well-addressed "on the fly" and absent relevant data. Furthermore, we assert that, although challenging, these issues are largely technical in nature (Heifetz et al., 2009). All lie within prior areas of expertise and all are solvable, at least within the short term, by the application of relevant available data and well-understood institutional policy and practice. At some level, they might even be considered management issues in that they may be addressed through organized processes even if those processes require some change in response to the circumstances at hand.

More challenging are the adaptive problems we face (Heifetz et al., 2009). This set of issues is characterized by more demanding and conflicting concerns including balancing the ambiguity and anxiety created by uncertainty (i.e., student and faculty worry and fear about disease spread, availability and safety of field placements, job security), self- and communal-interest (i.e., maintaining individual faculty travel fund accounts vs. creating funding for unit graduate students), transparency and conflict (i.e., mask wearing, decision processes, productive and destructive dialogue, and culture norms), and problem framing and solution finding (i.e., who owns the problem and likewise who is responsible for solution finding and execution, allocation of resources to address need). In each of these cases, on-going learning is required to robustly address the depth

of the circumstance. Furthermore, handling these well-requires leadership (and opposed to management) including the ability to ask deep, rather than superficial, questions and seek out solutions that may well-require compromise and cooperation.

Yet, we found in the face of rising uncertainty and indecision more often than not, faculty and staff sought immediate answers: asking of us, and department heads across the nation, that we be able to simultaneously respond in the present and predict what the future will bring. Faculty, even those who have traditionally supported collaboration, insisted that we attempt, albeit measured, to control the circumstances we faced. We attribute this call for leadership as control to faculty, staff, and students' deep need to grapple with and confront their own discomfort with the unknown. We suggest that there are two ways to generally solve the "problem" of the unknown. One might, as most of our faculty, staff, and students sought to do, decrease the perception of risk. For example, we found that sharing even small certainties (e.g., increased Wi-Fi signals across campus, scheduling clarification, prepping classrooms for in-person sessions) created pockets of calm that allowed us to continue to work on more complex issues. A second response to uncertainty is to increase one's tolerance of it. This proved a much more difficult task, and we found ourselves asking faculty, staff, and students for patience, compassion, flexibility, and grace as we worked to develop robust, timely solutions to college and unit problems. We were challenged to provide space for faculty, staff, and students to handle their personal stresses and increased workloads, while at the same time were being asked to devote attention to complex issues that needed to be resolved within our units. Working across the boundaries of these three intersecting pandemics created additional leadership challenges for us, as we sought to identify workable solutions to increasingly complex issues.

One of our insights into leading in a time of COVID, confronting systemic racism, and budget crises is the importance of knowing and living by our leadership values. Addressing the issues has been especially difficult, with problems and issues competing for attention and demanding their piece of significantly diminished resources. Although challenged, these crises offered the opportunity to make public what we believed important as well as to demonstrate our beliefs in practice. Each time we decided to extend a deadline, offer support and assistance, listen to concerns, or simply acknowledge how hard this all is for all of us, we found we were able to make prominent our stances toward equity, transparency, and leadership.

CONCLUSION

As COVID-19 swept through the nation, it created an unprecedented crisis with momentous challenges for higher education institutions. Further complicating COVID leadership response and foundational to the work of department heads at this time was the emergence of national unrest as communities struggled to confront the impacts of long-standing systemic racism fueled by both the health crisis and resulting economic

downturn. As a result of our shared inquiry into the challenges these co-pandemics created, we offer implications for leadership practices.

First, our experience suggests that there is a strong therapeutic dimension to shared inquiry (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). By engaging in this particular methodology, we each were better able to clarify and deepen our understanding of the issues we faced. We found that by sharing our experiences with our peers we each felt less alone and more supported as we worked to respond to events as they unfolded. Additionally, because we did not work for the same institutions, we were able to provide fresh perspectives as well as have some much-needed distance from any single happening or issue. Our experiences here suggest that it is worth exploring the importance of systematic processes of reflection on our own leadership actions. We submit that beyond traditional mentoring and coaching models that often focus on problem resolution, an implication of our experiences as they are outlined in this article is that department heads, and by extension other educational leaders, look to models of support that focus on empathy and extending compassion in the face of difficultly and uncertainty.

Second, we highlight the ways in which institutional policies and practices must be unpacked and examined in light of ongoing COVID related concerns. Well-beyond an immediate resolution to the virus, institutions of higher education must reckon with the lasting impacts of disruption and the inequitable distribution of that disruption on budgeting practices, research productivity and foci, faculty evaluation, student learning experiences, and K-12 school/university partnerships (Alford and Head, 2017; Dopson et al., 2019). We recognize the ways in which our prior work in educational leadership preparation sensitizes us to engaging in social justice-oriented work. We call for increased foci by the academy for comprehensive attention to how departmental leadership must address these concerns. Department heads would be wise to begin now to question and prepare for the effects of the pandemic on institutional policy and practice extending into years, not merely months, of recovery. As research (Ryan, 2010; Schloss and Cragg, 2013) suggests, questions heads might want to consider include:

- How might faculty seeking tenure and promotion best represent the challenges they negotiated and experienced as a result of COVID?
- In what ways should faculty who faced significant personal trauma and/or added effort as a result of the summer's national focus on long-standing systemic racism represent this work in evaluation and review documents?
- How should course evaluations be read as a result of shifted modalities and as students suffered traumatic illness, economic, and racial impacts?
- How might budget items need to be reallocated to more fully support students and faculty who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID and systemic racism?
- How will heads keep their understandings top of mind through at least 2022 and beyond?

In short, we suggest department heads consider not only the present but the short- and long-term future as they seek ways to support and represent faculty and students.

Third, we assert that we must begin to look toward the ways in which these circumstances forced us to shift our attentions and disrupted the status quo. Here we suggest that department heads consider not only the ways in which institutional policy and practice is impacted but also consider how our departmental mission might be reconsidered and restructured (Cipriano, 2011; Kruse, 2020). As prior thinking (Hernandez and Marshall, 2017; Lindle, 2019) suggests, the following questions serve as a basis for reflection for department heads:

- What did these events teach us about who we are as social justice leaders and what we value, as individuals and as departmental colleagues?
- What did we discover that we are proud of and where did we learn we have space to grow?
- As we move beyond the immediacy of this moment what will we take with us, how will it inform our work going forward, and how will we assure that equity matters in that work?

Finally, we acknowledge an ongoing disconnect between the scope and difficulty of heads' work and the ways in which that work is recognized and supported. It has been long suggested that the work of department heads is marked by any number of challenges related to being middle managers and that many of their efforts go unrewarded (Gmelch et al., 2017; Kruse, 2020). Therefore, it was no surprise to us that our efforts to resolve the challenges that these crises presented were met with resistance and scant praise. To be clear, each of us experienced moments of real support and gratitude for our efforts. The perpetual challenges of the position were made worse by the challenges faced during this time. As we note above, this is a time for department heads to reflect on their work and the ways in which they cope with the complex challenges it includes.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data set includes identifying data and cannot be released. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Sharon.kruse@wsu.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not provided for this study on human participants because the research contains reflections of the authors. It is our own thinking and experiences. We have completed the Frontiers consent forms and can present them for review if required. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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