Higher Education and COVID-19: Global and Local Responses

By

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In Short:

- Higher education's response in the early days of the pandemic would seem to confirm that universities, particularly research universities, are a preeminent institution in societies throughout the world.

- Authors from around the world told a story of local partnerships and the benefits that accrue to both the community and university, including significant learning and a better quality of life for all.

- A new kind of university is needed whose _primary_ mission would be *advancing democracy democratically* on campus, in its local community, and across the wider society.

- The core characteristics of this new democratic civic university include a democratic purpose; an inclusive, diverse, equitable campus; a democratic process with community partners; and an anti-racism and justice-seeking focus.

- A global movement that helps develop democratic civic universities is essential if we are to replace the pre-pandemic university that failed to sufficiently address and effectively combat the frightening problems facing our world.

Introduction

To state the obvious, the COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed. Besides being a horrific public health crisis, it has made apparent and exacerbated deep structural crises often rooted in severe inequities and systemic racism. It also has exposed and exacerbated anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies in many countries, including Brazil, Hungary, Poland, and the United States. No institution has been able to avoid the pandemic's multiple impacts – and no institution is the same as it was when the pandemic began in late 2019/early 2020.

Soon after the COVID pandemic hit the United States and Europe with full force, one of us, Ira Harkavy, joined with three colleagues in Europe and wrote an article that urged universities to help shape the post-COVID world (Harkavy et al., 2020). They argued that the post-COVID world must be based on the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as well as social justice, inclusion, and equity – and that higher education had to more actively advance democracy and the public good.

These ideas stimulated interest among a broader group of colleagues and led to a book that took stock of the ways in which universities across the globe responded to the pandemic. In just a few months, 43 authors from across Europe and North America, as well as from Africa, Asia, and South America, enthusiastically contributed 31 chapters to *Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Building a sustainable and democratic future* (Bergan et al., 2021). Published in February 2021, the book not only examines how higher education responded to the immediate crisis but also how it might contribute to a more inclusive, just, sustainable, and democratic world.

Among the authors are academics, institutional leaders, and practitioners spanning higher education, government, and international organizations. Despite the diversity of the backgrounds and organizational contexts of the authors, a good number of common points emerge. One is that while the public health crisis needs to be solved as a matter of priority, solving the public health crisis should only be a first step in a process that cannot lead back to the status quo ante. Rather, it should lead towards a better, more democratic future – a future that higher education must help build. This article describes some of our learnings from this publication, including the significance of higher education's response to the pandemic, the importance of locality, interest in creating a new kind of university, and the need for a global movement to advance higher education's democratic mission.

Higher Education's Indispensable Response

When the pandemic upended the world in early 2020, higher education institutions, as well as individual staff and students, responded in many instances with extraordinary swiftness, dedication, and resolve. Beyond the immediate crisis of moving students off campus and moving all learning online, many institutions also provided health care, research, and medical equipment, among other things.

David Maurrasse (2021), Director of the Anchor Institutions Task Force, which has been studying the response to the pandemic among many anchor institutions in the U.S., summarized the findings in his chapter,

> . . .institutions of higher education have been contributing to finding a cure for the virus, serving as sites for testing, . . . developing and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE), housing patients and the homeless, treating patients through medical campuses, raising awareness about pandemics, providing mental

> health services,. . . collaborating with local governments on plans for their
>
> regions, providing access to technology for children and young people forced to
>
> learn remotely, creating new training programs in fields likely to grow due to the
>
> pandemic, and providing technical services to small local businesses and beyond.
>
> (p. 69)

At what now must be seen as an early stage of the pandemic, Maurrasse presciently concluded, "society cannot navigate the duration and aftermath of the pandemic without colleges and universities" (p. 69).

While expressing uncertainty about European higher education's response to future phases of COVID, Ellen Hazelkorn (2021), a leading scholar on higher education policy, claimed that "the [initial] emergency phase. . .generated truly heroic responses from higher education" (p. 53). While many examples from the book support that conclusion, we cite two from different corners of Europe. Scholars from Norway's main research-intensive institution of higher education, University of Oslo, worked with governmental leaders, providing them with the scientific knowledge across multiple disciplines necessary for developing effective approaches to combatting the virus (Gornitzka & Stølen, 2021). Similarly, in Romania, scientists from the University of Bucharest statistically modeled the early path taken by the infection. Universities across the country, including the Science and Technology University of Târgu Mureş, The Veterinary and Agriculture University of Cluj, and the University of Suceava also developed facilities and technologies for testing. Significantly, higher education institutions in Romania also focused on the crisis facing democracy, providing online activities on how to identify and fight against disinformation and attempts to distort facts (Deca, Gologan, & Santa, 2021).

Outside of the United States and Europe, we found similar actions. According to Barnabas Nawangwe (2021), Vice Chancellor of Makerere University in Uganda, the response of African universities involved "provision of clinical services in hospitals, testing for the coronavirus, conducting studies on the epidemiology of the virus, . . . innovations to help with management of the disease, . . . [and] advisory services to national task forces on the response to Covid-19" (p. 168).

Given the examples provided above, it is no wonder that the coeditors, including Harkavy, concluded that "the well-being and prospects of countless individuals as well as of entire societies depended partly on how well and how rapidly the academic community and its leaders responded to the Covid-19 crisis" (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 7). Indeed, higher education's response in the early days of the pandemic would seem to confirm that universities, particularly research universities, are a preeminent institution in societies throughout the world. They not only have a range of resources, including most notably the intellectual and human resources of creative and idealistic students, faculty, and staff, but they also often engage in partnerships with government, the private sector, and community-based organizations to revitalize local neighborhoods and schools (Harkavy et al., 2009; Maurrasse, 2021). In fact, another learning we took from the book is the significance of locality and the local response of universities during the first phase of the pandemic.

A Local Focus

Universities are uniquely local, regional, national, and global institutions. It is, therefore, not surprising that their contributions would span all four domains. It is also not surprising, given the devastating impacts the pandemic has had on underserved communities, particularly on poor and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, that colleges and universities

devoted significant energy to ameliorating the effects of the pandemic in their local neighborhoods.

This was particularly evident in the case studies of U.S. higher education institutions, which have a history of community engagement. But that history is probably less significant than who wrote the chapters. Four of the authors are former or current college/university presidents recognized for their interest in and contributions to local democratic partnerships: Nancy Cantor at Rutgers-Newark, Paul Pribbenow at Augsburg University, James Harris at the University of San Diego, and Brian Murphy of De Anza College. All of them highlighted local work, calling on colleges and universities to up their game and make the local focus a, and perhaps *the*, primary focus, devoting themselves to eradicating racism and injustice, increasing access, and decreasing inequality in their own geographic environment. For example, Rutgers-Newark, whose efforts were deepened as a result of the pandemic, engages with public, private, and non-profit partners across Newark in "collective, place-based work that focuses on the roots of racism and social stagnation" (Englot & Cantor, 2021, p. 99). This includes multi-pronged initiatives particularly focused on housing and educational opportunity, as well as criminal justice reform.

Authors from around the world reporting on work in their own universities, regions, and countries also told stories of local partnerships and the benefits that accrue to both the community and university, including significant learning and a better quality of life for all. A chapter written by Ronaldo Munck and Tony Gallagher, professors from Dublin City University and Queens University Belfast, respectively, provides a compelling case study of how two universities across the contested Irish border each responded to the pandemic in their respective cities, identifying deep local-to-local collaboration as crucial for both universities and their cities, as well as for Ireland and Northern Ireland in general (Munck & Gallagher, 2021). A case for the

local was also made by Santiago Acosta, the Rector of the Private Technical University of Loja

(UTPL) in Ecuador, who argued that efforts in response to the pandemic, including in public

health and social assistance, have helped universities improve their standing with the public. He

went on to emphasize that "universities must learn from the crisis that their social commitment

lies in helping transform their own local territories" (Acosta 2021, p. 185).

The need for educating locally-rooted global citizens ("glocally"-oriented) motivated a

number of contributors, including Kiyoshi Yamada and Koji Nakamura (2021) at Tokai

University in Japan who wrote, "universities should offer [students] 'living knowledge 'while

relating to and contributing to global society" (p. 179). In other words, universities should

educate students for democratic citizenship, engaging them in projects to help solve locally

manifested global problems, such as poverty, health inequities, environmental sustainability, and

unequal education.

The examples cited resonate with John Dewey's (1927/1981) famous statement

"Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (p. 368). Creating

the neighborly community might well also mean creating neighborly civic universities dedicated

to working in their local geographic area with others (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007;

Benson et al., 2017).

Toward a New Kind of University

The concept of the neighborly civic university captures the animating idea behind the

volume – that the post-pandemic (or more accurately, the pandemic impacted) university needs

to be radically different from what currently exists. In the United States, there has certainly been

an increase in university civic and community engagement since the early 1990s. No higher

education institution, as far as we can tell, however, has the depth and breadth of engagement

being called for by many of the authors. Labeled a "democratic civic university" by Harkavy and

others, this new kind of university's *primary* mission would be *advancing democracy*

democratically on campus, in its local community, and across the wider society (Harkavy et al.,

2021, p. 24). As emphasized by Martha Kanter and Carol Schneider (2021), this would include

"building cohesive, inclusive communities that ensure a quality education for all" (p. 190).

Paul Pribbenow of Augsburg University remarked that "democratic excellence" would

also be at the heart of a democratic civic university's policy and practice (International

Association of Universities, 2021, p. 3). This would entail a focus on higher education's core

purposes – education for democratic citizenship and the creation of knowledge to advance the

human condition (Harkavy & Hodges, 2021).

Members of a democratic civic university would

also work democratically, listening to the

community, and treating all community members as

full and equal partners. Contributing to democracy

across all aspects of society would then be reflected

Core characteristics of a Democratic Civic University
- Democratic purpose - Inclusive, diverse, equitable campus - Democratic process with community partners - Anti-racism and justice-seeking focus

in policies and reward systems, including in tenure and promotion, accreditation decisions, and

community relations.

For colleges and universities in the United States, as well as elsewhere, functioning as an

anti-racist, justice-seeking institution would be a core component of a democratic civic

university. As Henry Louis Taylor (2021), professor at the University at Buffalo, powerfully

asserted:

To realize in practice their aspiration of being democratic civic universities

dedicated to producing knowledge and educating ethical, empathetic students for

just and sustainable democratic societies, they must be "anti-racist" and produce

knowledge for racial and social change. It is not enough to simply produce

knowledge; they must produce knowledge for "social change" that can inform the

creation and development of the "neighborly community." An anti-racist

university consciously seeks to dismantle the structures of racism and social class

inequity while fighting to implement policies that promote the development of a

racially equitable and just society. (p. 42)

Building a Global Movement

Calling for a democratic civic university and describing what it should do is relatively

easy. It is more difficult to figure out what can be done to bring it about. *Higher Education's

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* does not offer a detailed roadmap for getting from where

we are to where we need to go. It does, however, propose a way forward through a global

movement to advance the democratic mission of higher education.

The problems the book addresses, such as sustainability, racism, and economic

inequality, as well as the pandemic itself, are global in scope, requiring global learning and

solutions. The volume was also made possible in practice by a long-term effort to build the

global movement mentioned above. For over 20 years, a number of organizations have engaged

in a transatlantic and now global co-operation working to realize the democratic purpose and

promise of higher education, including the Council of Europe; the International Consortium for

Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy; the Organization of American States;

and the International Association of Universities. The resulting partnership was recently named

The Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education (Harkavy et al., 2021).

This global cooperation undertakes cross-national research projects, joint meetings, and the sharing of best practices. To date, partners have hosted six global forums; each has resulted in an edited volume in the Council of Europe's higher education series.

> For more information on the Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education, visit www.internationalconsortium.org.

Other major global networks similarly promote the civic and democratic responsibilities of institutions of higher education: the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities, the Global University Network for Innovation, the University Social Responsibility Network, and the Open Society University Network among them.

The Global Cooperation's next Global Forum (planned for June 2022 in Dublin, Ireland) on "Higher Education Leadership for Democracy, Sustainability, and Social Justice" will be an international gathering for leaders from higher education, government, and civic organizations to critically explore and actively advance the democratic mission of higher education. The explicit goal of the 2022 Global Forum is to contribute to a movement that helps develop democratic civic universities to co-create more just, equitable, inclusive, sustainable democratic societies with local, national, and global partners. Strengthening such a movement, in our judgement, is essential if we are to replace the pre-pandemic university that failed to sufficiently address and effectively combat the frightening problems facing our world.

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