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Editorial: Navigating uncharted territory: understanding how leaders of minority serving institutions have guided their institutions through the COVID-19 pandemic

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Navigating uncharted territory: understanding how leaders of minority serving institutions have guided their institutions through the COVID-19 pandemic

Robert's story

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, many industries were forced to make difficult discussions about protecting the safety of their workers, trying to stay afloat financially, and navigating an uncertain future. Higher education was not immune to these issues and challenges. Most institutions in the US and around the world, except for those already operating in an online format, had to quickly shift to online learning for the safety of students, staff, and faculty. While embracing online technology seemed logical during the pandemic, for many institutions, it came with steep consequences as leaders had to make critical decisions about budgetary priorities and the needs of human capital. To a large extent, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) have been particularly vulnerable to the issues described above. It is important to point out that while all MSIs are not the same, generally these institutions have been categorized as lacking resource parity with their predominantly white institutional counterparts but being replete with cultural and social capital. Researchers have credited the latter for helping to facilitate and maximize student learning and development for minoritized students.

As an administrator and faculty member at Howard University, a private, mid-size research Historically Black College and University (HBCU), I saw how the COVID-19 pandemic challenged leaders to make important decisions about protecting the financial health of the institution while prioritizing student learning and avoiding faculty furloughs. When the pandemic brought daily life in society to a complete stop, we were just returning from spring break in March 2020. That Monday, I had planned to go into the office to prepare for my evening class, but normal activities on campus, including the format in which

classes were held, were quickly changed. Instead of teaching in person, university leadership had mandated that all classes be taught online. To accomplish this, they rapidly invested in distance learning technology, provided faculty and some students with laptops, and required all faculty to take classes to become distance learning certified. Given that the university had not budgeted for these items, institutional leaders had to take financial resources from other areas of the institutional budget to account for accommodations. While I was not at the table when these decisions were discussed, I would imagine that they were difficult ones, especially since Howard does not have a large endowment compared to many of its institutional counterparts.

Added to the complexity of the university quickly pivoting to online learning during the semester, I believe the university lost additional revenue by having to return part of students' fees and money paid to live in the residence halls. While these decisions had a critical impact on the operational budget of the institution, the leadership of the institution was able to protect the jobs of faculty and staff and avoid furloughs. I would surmise that federal funding from the CARES ACT as well as additional philanthropic gifts Howard received played a significant role in helping to protect the jobs of faculty and staff. During monthly meetings with administrators at the university, consisting of department chairs and associate deans, the president would join these meetings sometimes and indicate that his goal was not to lay off faculty and staff due to the financial strains of the university. I think he and his leadership team did a good job of navigating the university community through the pandemic.

As the pandemic lingered, and Howard was forced to spend additional semesters operating in an online capacity, students started to complain that they were missing out on the HBCU experience. Some freshmen who started attending school online during the pandemic even pondered attending community colleges to save money. Specifically, they felt that they could receive the same education by completing courses online at a community college as opposed to paying thousands of dollars for tuition for online courses at the University. Moreover, other students, particularly those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ), were not excited about the residence halls closing on campus and having to move back home to live and study. Many of these students were able to fully embrace their sexuality while living on campus, but by returning home, they had to compartmentalize their identities once again. In total, I admired the many ways Howard's leadership navigated the pandemic. Administrators in key position at the university were transparent and embraced the notion of collaborative leadership. There was also a strong sense of humanity in the actions by the administrators in that they cared deeply about students, faculty, and staff. I think this sense of care bolstered faculty's morale and reinforced Howard's mantra—"Excellence in Truth and Service."

Terrell's story

In January 2020, I was in Washington, DC attending the Institute for Leadership and Governance sponsored by the Association of Governing Boards (AGB). After a day full of workshops about setting a vision as a university president, steering development of a 5-year strategic plan, and invited talks by sitting presidents and provosts, I retreated to my hotel room in the Hyatt for an evening of relaxation and catching up on email. Curious about what I missed "in the real world" while engrossed in the AGB Institute, I flipped on the nightly news and immediately noticed the scrolling red headline: "Rising number of patients in the U.S. presenting flu-like symptoms". For the next couple of weeks, politicians and pundits made constant reference to "an unknown virus" that seemed to trace its origins back to China but first appeared in the U.S. in Washington State. Fast forward 4 months and I was starting as Associate Provost for Graduate Education, Research, and Innovation at Virginia Union University (VUU)—one of the nation's 101 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) located in Richmond, the Commonwealth of Virginia's capital city. Within a few months of starting at VUU, I was promoted to Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs and positioned to help lead the campus through the now known virus issuing an existential threat to everyone and every industry: COVID-19.

What has been clear over the past year is the bravery and agility of HBCU leadership. While all institutions of higher education were pressed to close their physical campuses and launch online courses in a matter of weeks, leaders of HBCUs had to make these drastic decisions in the precarious context of drastically reduced state and federal budgets, limited resources, decades of inequitable investments, and serving student groups that are even more vulnerable to the pandemic's shockwaves. For example, I keenly recall phone calls from students and parents pleading for assistance, support, and understanding after unexpected layoffs, record-breaking furloughs, and devastating psychological impacts of losing a loved one due to COVID-19, just to name a few.

HBCU presidents and provosts, like myself, needed to coordinate the immediate switch from face-to-face instruction to virtual learning and extracurricular activities, create a budget-neutral approach to operate, and execute in the midst of the unknown. With their leadership and entrepreneurial spirit, HBCU presidents and provosts ushered in a new era of digital transformation that was arguably years ahead of many other research universities. We innovated–not just in the classroom–but in our core operations, in how people access campus through global entry points, in how bills were paid through e-commerce and crowdfunding options, and in how community is experienced, built, and fashioned even in online, virtual spaces.

In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, HBCU and predominantly Black institution (PBI) leaders processed what must be done to enact the necessary changes and lead their institutions, like VUU, through a time of uncertainty. HBCU leaders have worked tirelessly to keep their campuses afloat, to ensure business continuity, to keep their staff employed, and, most importantly, to keep their students safe and thriving. By leaders, I'm not limiting the discussion to presidents, provosts, trustees, and cabinet members only. I'm talking about and *intentionally recognizing* the "invisible labor" of frontline workers, campus security, hall directors, student affairs staff, advisors, librarians, counselors, administrative assistants, disability experts, maintenance and

facilities teams, just to name a few. HBCU leaders have demanded emergency funding from the government to help make up for lost revenue, advocated for their students to be included in stimulus payments, and fought for their campuses to gain access to the most up-to-date technology and resources. That fight is *not* new but assumed a new urgency amid the pandemic. And that fight will (and must) continue in today's New Normal. To do anything less would be unfortunate and highly unusual for institutions that have a proven track record for navigating uncharted territories, while forced by society and systemic racism to "do more with less", as too many all-too-often say.

Contents of Research Topic

Research Topics unify some of the most influential researchers, policy analysts, and leading voices around the latest key findings and advances in high-demand areas. *Navigating Uncharted Territory* consists of original research studies and a critical mini-review. One study presents results from an exploratory, qualitative study on distance learning policies and practices using a purposeful sample drawn from five California school districts. Among its many insights, the paper highlights how educational leaders addressed English- and Emergent Bilingual Language Learners' needs during the pandemic (Lavadenz et al.). A second study by Beckmann et al. seeks to understand the relationship between school improvement capacity (SIC) and efforts to sustain teaching, learning, and student wellbeing amid COVID-19 lockdowns, based on qualitative interview data from 13 principals and teach surveys at schools serving disadvantaged communities in Germany. Results suggest that higher SIC led to greater flexibility in finding pragmatic solutions during distance learning.

Protracting the discussion deeper into tertiary and higher education contexts, du Plessis et al. analyzed data from a rapid review of online social media at the start of COVID-19 and an integrated autoethnography project (post-lockdowns) to illuminate sense-making perspectives at a public university in South Africa. Indeed, COVID-19 is a global pandemic and, thus, this issue also includes proceedings of the Brazilian Academy of Dentistry focused on new perspectives and challenges associated with delivering dental education while following public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in Brazil, India, Portugal, Sweden, and the United States.

Future forward

We're excited about this special issue for several reasons. It provides a much-needed opportunity to dive into the topic of how leaders of MSIs have navigated their institutions through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic is particularly relevant as we continue to grapple with the ongoing, rippling effects of the dueling pandemics—that is, COVID-19 and #BlackLivesMatter—on education, professional fields, and societies at large.

We believe that this special issue will not only shed light on the creative and innovative approaches taken by these formidable leaders, but also provide critical insight and inspiration for other leaders facing similar challenges both now or in the future. Many have noted that COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing inequities in education, particularly for students from marginalized communities. MSIs play a crucial role in addressing these disparities and ensuring that *all students* have access to quality education as/when they need it, regardless of their race/ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, or zip code. MSIs serve (and have served) a diverse student population, including many first-generation, low-income, economically disadvantaged, and international students.

As such, it is imperative that we understand how MSI leaders navigated the pandemic and the unique challenges they have faced. By sharing their experiences and strategies, along with empirical data and data-based evidence, we can learn from their successes *and struggles* in ways that allow us to work toward a more equitable and just education system. Through these various scholarly perspectives, we hope to present a comprehensive view of the challenges faced by MSI leaders during the pandemic, and the creative solutions they implemented to neutralize threat, preserve safety and security, maintain community, all while ensuring business continuity as way toward long-term sustainability and success. To survive, many had to literally "build the plane, while flying it", as it goes.

In closing, our goal is for this special issue to not only be informative, but also empowering for leaders and educators alike, providing them with tools and ideas to better serve the students and communities they serve. It is our hope that the special issue's insights will help write a new chapter for the future where HBCUs, PBIs, and other MSIs across the globe will be supported to *do more with more*.

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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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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