



Looking Ahead with Hope and Resiliency: A Message from ROI Consulting Group, Inc.

Gretchen M. Bataille and Barbara Kaufman

A couple of weeks ago Gretchen Bataille received a message from Dean Shafik Dharamsi at the University of Texas El Paso reminding her that March 21 was International Nowruz Day. It is the first day of spring for a community of 300 million people around the world, and it has been celebrated for over 3,000 years. It is a day for the renewal of nature and, according to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “It promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighborliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and different communities.” We both agreed that Nowruz can serve as a metaphor for what we are experiencing now, and it gives us a roadmap for the future. Spring is here with longer days and more sunshine, and all of us are in the midst of a crisis that we hope will end soon—portending a year of peace, good health, safety, reconciliation, healing and prosperity.

In 2012 Diana Cordova and Gretchen interviewed many presidents as part of the ACE Presidential Roundtable on Leadershipⁱ and, subsequently, for the book *Managing the Unthinkable: Crisis Preparation and Response*.ⁱⁱ These presidents had addressed natural disasters, crime on campus, communication during a crisis, mass shootings and student deaths. For each of them, the crisis was a kind of “turning point.” Looking back, we realize that each of these disasters and moments of crisis was individualized, usually to a single campus and with a set of predictable remedies. What each president said was that they had to look forward to a better time, keep the faculty, staff and students energized and optimistic, and know that their leadership mattered.

What we are facing now is greater. Every campus, every faculty and staff member and every student is touched by what is happening. Universities are tackling the practical issues first, as they should—closing residence halls, putting classes online, addressing student needs for food and shelter. University researchers are stepping up to develop vaccines and tests. University medical schools are in the middle of the crisis, and their faculty and students are getting a first-hand look at the pain and suffering in their university and local communities.

We continue to consult with multiple universities and systems and we are in communication with many administrators during this crisis, moving our work online as well. We have not been surprised at the magnificent job that is being done by these campus leaders. What is truly amazing though is the spirit and ingenuity that is guiding university administrators at all levels. At the heart of the work being done on campuses is a commitment to the people all around them.

Faculty have risen to the occasion by converting courses to online in record time. We learned that the Bienen School of Music faculty at Northwestern University are teaching

instrumental classes on Zoom, ensuring that students continue their training to prepare them for artistic careers. In a discipline where online teaching seemed almost impossible three weeks ago, these faculty have forged ahead. Similarly, at University of Houston, Clear Lake, all but a dozen courses out of 512, moved online almost immediately. NYU was among the first to convert classes, while the University of Washington took the plunge as soon as the administrators learned of the seriousness of the virus within their geographical area.

Vice President and Dean Karen Depauw has created multiple channels for graduate students at Virginia Tech to complete their work, including Zoom “lunches” with the dean and a series of daily tweets entitled “Uncertain Times Tips.” President Leroy Morishita at CSU East Bay is reassuring students with video chats. The campus also inventoried equipment and have monitors, Chrome books, and keyboards available for faculty, staff and students in a drive-up station in a parking lot. As new needs emerge, universities are offering up residence halls to local medical facilities, volunteering to be sites for drive-through testing and working around the clock to address practical matters such as tuition and residence hall refunds, grade protocols and safety measures.

But more gratifying are the creative approaches campuses are developing to maintain community and to engage the campus to move beyond pain and hardship to shared joy. The leaders of those campuses recognize that there are many challenges they can meet with technology and coercion. But they also recognize that there is a huge need to attend to the human spirit and to find ways to promise a better future.

President Dianne Harrison told Barbara that CSU Northridge’s Institute for Sustainability is mailing students packets of seeds to plant in “virtual victory gardens” on their patios or in their windows so that in about eight weeks they can come together virtually to share thousands of

“victory salads.” Modeled after WWII “victory gardens,” this effort is engaging the campus community and giving them all a glimpse to a better future. At the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, engineering students collaborated with students in the College of Architecture to use their 3D printers at home to make 1,500 face shields in 48 hours, answering the call of the governor to support hospitals in need. Payton Manning surprised an online communication class to talk with them about staying positive and healthy. UT El Paso’s President Heather Wilson has launched a “Lemons to Lemonade” working group to analyze what used to take five years that they think could be done in a year. Staff on that campus are being encouraged to use the remote working opportunity to focus on professional development. Human Resources has gathered resources that staff can use at home. Bonita Brown, VP and Chief Strategy Officer at Northern Kentucky University, managed the hurricane shelters at the University of North Texas and says that experience with people who felt uprooted has helped her deal with the emotional issues international students are facing as they try to find out how to “shelter in place” when they have no “place.” All of these administrators are focusing on the care and development of those on their campuses, ensuring that their emotional needs are also being met. Yet, Brown writes, “every plan is obsolete within an hour!” The work right now seems unending.

The final lesson of the 2012 Roundtable on crisis management came from Janice Abraham of United Educators. She reminded presidents (and other administrators) that they must “be human” and must remember to have a “cool head and warm heart.” As campuses settle in to online learning as the “new normal” and find ways to ensure quality education for their students and support for their faculty and staff, administrators also are seeking out ways to provide the creative and innovative support networks to fulfill the centuries-old message of Nowruz. It is exhausting and often overwhelming, but what we are seeing is that everyone in

higher education is rising up to meet the challenges. We are proud of our colleagues all over the country who are tirelessly working to ensure that higher education will continue to be the path to a better future.

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ⁱ Bataille, Gretchen, Meredith S. Billings and Christopher J. Nellum. *Leadership in times of Crisis: "Cool Head, Warm Heart."* Washington, DC: 2012.

ⁱⁱ Bataille, Gretchen M. and Diana I. Cordova. *Managing the Unthinkable: Crisis Preparation and Response for Campus Leaders.* Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2014.