

**The Importance of Acknowledgement, Authenticity,
and Communication in Crisis Leadership**

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Even amidst times of seemingly stable circumstances, higher education administrators face a variety of challenges. Stakeholders of institutions of higher learning (IHLs) include, but are not limited to, faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members. Like nearly every other public and private organization in the United States, IHLs have recently faced unprecedented challenges in the wake of COVID-19.¹ Chief among these challenges has been changing the modality of many face-to-face courses to either online instruction or a hybrid model that incorporates elements of both face-to-face instruction as well as virtual learning.

Most IHLs in the United States moved all of their learning to a virtual model by the end of March 2020 due to COVID-19. In an early study on online learning, Lim (2005) found that technology infrastructure, robust course development that normally takes longer than face-to-face course development, and an institution's learning culture are the main contributors to its success. These core tenets of successful online learning are still relevant today, but the onset of COVID-19 did not allow for them to be applied to most of the courses that transitioned to an online model this past spring. This sudden shift to virtual learning caused many instructors and students to experience varying degrees of frustration. By July 2020, over 100 lawsuits had been filed on behalf of students demanding tuition refunds due to claims that the quality of their education had been compromised (Van Horn & Zhuang, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to determine an effective leadership response to a fictitious case study involving a student and her parents' appeal to her college to reduce fall 2020 tuition for students with schedules that include more than 50% online or hybrid courses. By utilizing relevant research and literature, I will analyze the key issues and details of the case to provide

recommendations to institutional leadership that focus on acknowledgement, authenticity, and effective communication.

Case Study: Reduced Tuition for Online Learning

Sam Mozzelli, 19, is a sophomore at Krenshaw College, a small public liberal arts institution located in Windham, Maine that was founded in 1948. Krenshaw has an enrollment of approximately 2,500 undergraduate students and 250 graduate students. The enrolled student population is 69% White, 10% Black or African American, 7.6% Hispanic or Latino, 6.4% Two or More Races, 5.9% Asian, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. The annual tuition of \$13,400 for in-state students is considerably lower than the national average of \$20,770 for public schools (in-state) that was reported for the 2017-2018 school year (Song, 2020). While not too well known nationally, Krenshaw's reputation in the northeast is one of a small, affordable institution that offers small class sizes and high-quality education taught by mostly (over 65%) full-time faculty.

Sam matriculated at Krenshaw in August 2018 and had earned 49 credits and a cumulative Grade Point Average of 3.64 prior to the start of the spring 2020 semester. Sam is a commuter student who lives with her parents and receives no financial aid. Her parents pay for most of her tuition, but Sam works part-time at a local coffee shop to help pay some of the costs associated with attending college such as textbooks and additional course requirements such as laboratory fees and materials. At the start of the spring 2020 semester in January 2020, she was registered in five face-to-face classes. Due to COVID-19, Krenshaw moved all of their face-to-face classes to an online model in March 2020, approximately six weeks before the end of the spring 2020 semester.

Similar to the sentiments expressed by many faculty members and other students, Sam found the experience frustrating, stressful, and academically underwhelming. She had never taken an online course before and had little interest in doing so. She sometimes could not maintain a steady internet connection at her house when some of her classes were holding Zoom sessions. At other times, her faculty members had similar connectivity issues and were unable to effectively hold some of their scheduled classes. For some of her courses, Sam would go days without hearing from the faculty member about upcoming assignments. Due to these challenges along with other COVID-19-related stress, Sam felt that she did not submit her best work during the final weeks of the semester. Yet, she received three B+ grades and two A grades for her five courses. Sam felt this was a result of her instructors being “generous” with their final grading as opposed to grading her on the true quality of the work.

Krenshaw remained hopeful throughout the summer of 2020 that most of their fall 2020 courses would be able to meet face-to-face, but did publicly acknowledge that there would likely be many classes offered in an online or hybrid format due to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations and guidelines. As such, Krenshaw invested time and resources in preparing their faculty and staff to invest in ways to support online learning. For example, the provost’s office began working with faculty during the spring semester to move their limited number of summer courses (less than 50) from a face-to-face model to an online one. As opposed to the spring semester, for summer courses, faculty teaching these online courses had to submit an authorization form to their department chairs to explain how they were going to teach the course online. This required faculty members to indicate if it would be synchronous or asynchronous, confirm they would be using Blackboard (Krenshaw’s official

student tool to facilitate learning), and also provide a copy of their syllabus to their department chairs.

Concomitantly, Krenshaw's Department of Information Technology dedicated their time and resources to find ways to improve their technological infrastructure to ensure that should a student or faculty member need a strong internet connection to access their online courses, there would be available spots on campus to use while also practicing social distancing. Moreover, Krenshaw's Office of Digital Learning provided weekly online sessions for faculty members to learn how to utilize different tools to enhance online learning. Many faculty members who had prior experience teaching online courses at Krenshaw participated in these sessions to offer their support and expertise. As it became more apparent throughout the summer based on CDC recommendations that many fall courses would have to move online, faculty began submitting authorization forms to their department chairs in order to obtain approval to teach a course online. Faculty that had previously not taught online were becoming more comfortable with the process, and department chairs and administrators now had protocols in place to ensure consistency of online learning and expectations for faculty.

In late July 2020, Krenshaw announced that approximately 70% of their courses would be offered as either entirely online or as a hybrid model. Even though the majority of fall courses would be moved to these modalities, unlike the spring semester and summer term, the campus would be officially reopening before the fall semester begins so that students have access to certain buildings as well as outside areas on campus where an internet connection is guaranteed to be strong barring any unforeseen events or circumstances (power outage, extreme weather, etc.). While some faculty and staff are expected to return to campus on a limited basis beginning in August 2020, many others will continue to telework in an effort to adhere to CDC guidelines

and foster the safest campus environment as possible. Krenshaw was able to provide refurbished as well as new laptops to faculty and staff member that needed them in order to effectively do their jobs virtually. Throughout the summer, academic services, information technology, career services, the health and counseling center, and the library engaged in professional development training to improve their abilities to serve students in a virtual environment

Sam had registered for four classes for the fall 2020 semester in early March 2020 with the intention that they would meet face-to-face. When she learned that one of her courses would remain face-to-face, one would be a hybrid model, and two moved entirely online, she felt that because a majority of her fall courses would consist of online learning, Krenshaw should reduce her tuition by 50%. Her argument was that since Krenshaw is an institution that predominantly offers face-to-face courses, the regular tuition rates should be reduced if that is no longer the modality for the majority of her courses. Sam, along with her parents, felt that this would be a valid reason should they wish to take legal action against the institution.

Immediately after Sam saw the modality changes of her fall courses, she called the office of student accounts and was informed that tuition would not be reduced due to these changes. Sam then contacted the president's office to speak with President Gail McKenney. The president's office referred the case within 24 hours to Provost John Wallford and informed him to follow up with the student to explain that tuition would remain unchanged for the upcoming fall semester and attempt to alleviate her concerns. John contacted Sam by phone within 48 hours of her call to the president's office, but she became frustrated within a few minutes and hung up on him. Within an hour, he received a phone call from her parents requesting a full explanation as to why tuition cannot be reduced. John offered to meet with Sam and her parents either via Zoom or at an open area space on campus where they can discuss the situation while maintaining

recommended social distance requirements. Sam's parents agreed to meet with him on the Monday of the following week in person in the atrium of the Wilson Student Center.

Implications and Analysis

There are several implications of this case study. First, Sam's feelings towards getting a discount on her tuition if courses move to an online model for the fall are far from unique. There were movements and petitions calling for reduced tuition due to the transition to online learning starting almost immediately after COVID-19's impact on higher education in March 2020 (Anderson, 2020). "If I wanted to go to an online school, I could go to an online school. I paid to go to class and sit in a lecture," commented Rosie Oganessian, a freshman at the University of California, Irvine (as cited in Anderson, 2020). Many students felt that it was unfair to pay full tuition for a modality of learning that they felt at best was not their preferred method of learning and, at worst, an inferior way of learning. These are valid concerns that leaders must acknowledge by listening to their students' perspectives on the issue.

Hence, the elements of compassion and empathy of authentic leadership are required during a crisis. Gigliotti (2016) found that leadership is above all a personal encounter with self, and authentic leadership therefore has the opportunity to thrive in moments of crises. Walumbwa et al. (2008) determined that self-awareness, self-regulatory processes reflected in an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency to be the core components of authentic leadership. To effectively interpret the issues of this case study, leadership needs to be aware of how COVID-19 has affected students in situations such as Sam's case. A leader should consider the moral and ethical implications of charging a student for a service that is different from what they signed up for. A leader must have the ability to process information from the student perspective by listening to their concerns and creating a dialogue.

This dialogue must consist of the institution's perspective and the student's perspective in order to effectively resolve the matter.

Lastly, leadership communication is essential when handling issues as precarious as the ones that higher education faces amidst COVID-19. In keeping with the aforementioned strength of authentic leadership in times of crises, leaders need to have a strong capacity for strategic, emotionally intelligent communication when there are disruptions in higher education (Thompson & Miller, 2018). Anderson and Sun (2017) found that a major impetus for developing authentic leadership was that it is a style that "promoted the positive organizational behavior states of optimism, resilience, and hope" (p. 88). Yet, leaders need to use their presence as a leader to effectively communicate these intangible assets. Hedges (2017) described a strong leadership presence as a combination of communication aptitude, mental attitude, and authentic style. Leadership style and presence in higher education administration is not simply about inspiring and motivating direct reports and colleagues, but also inspiring and motivating students and parents. For this particular case study, I believe the provost needs to keep this at the center of his response to Sam and her parents. The provost will need to clearly communicate why he believes the institution's decision to keep the same tuition rates for the fall 2020 semester is moral, ethical, and necessary.

Recommended Actions

Based on applying relevant literature and theories to the facts and implications of the case, there are three main recommendations Provost Wallford should consider when speaking with Sam and her parents. First, he needs to listen to their concerns and acknowledge the difficulty of the situation that Sam as well as other Krenshaw students have experienced as a result of COVID-19. Provost Wallford should also acknowledge the impact of the situation on

faculty, administrators, and staff. An IHL is a community of many different stakeholders, and as such a leader must acknowledge the interconnectedness of these individuals. As it relates to Sam's request for reduced tuition, acknowledgement is not agreement as Hedges (2017) pointed out, but it does have the ability to move two people at cross-purposes to the same purpose.

After listening and acknowledging Sam's concerns, Provost Wallford should then communicate clearly that tuition for the upcoming fall semester will not be reduced because of the modality changes of courses. He should explain that tuition costs are used to provide funds not only for instruction but also for institutional support, students services, operations, and scholarships; he should also use the opportunity to explain how decreased state-funding has led to sharp increases in tuition over the past several decades which is why reducing tuition for students is often untenable (Harriman, 2015). Provost Wallford can attempt to alleviate Sam's concerns by confirming there are no current plans for tuition increases, but since the institution is continuing to operate, funds are needed to provide the necessary support and services to do so.

Since evidence suggests that the public has given up on the idea of either funding higher education or valuing it as a public good indispensable to the life of any viable democracy (Giroux, 2011), it is imperative that leaders remind students of the notion of higher education as a public good and the part they play in it. He should, however, provide elements of hope and optimism to Sam and her parents that based on Maine's strong response to COVID-19, there is reason to believe that more classes will be able to be offered in the spring 2021 semester in a face-to-face format. He should also reiterate that Krenshaw's faculty, staff, and students are resilient and working very hard to get through this experience together.

Since Sam's main concern is the quality of online learning compared to her previous face-to-face learning experiences, Provost Wallford needs to communicate all of the aforementioned steps that Krenshaw has taken to ensure that online learning will be of a higher quality than Sam may have experienced in the spring. He will also need to communicate what steps were taken to expand services to accommodate students learning in an online or hybrid format. By providing this information, Provost Wallford must explain how resources have been used to improve online learning and the student experience. Yet, he should also acknowledge that unexpected things may happen that will cause frustration as that is the nature of operating during a crisis. Communicating how proud he is of Krenshaw's faculty and staff and how confident he is that they are up to the challenge of serving students in a virtual format until face-to-face classes can return will hopefully alleviate some of Sam's concerns.

Provost Wallford needs to communicate all of this relevant information to Sam to accomplish three things: 1) explain that the ability to provide these services are dependent on student tuition 2) explain the steps that Krenshaw has taken to improve the online experience for faculty, students, and staff and 3) provide hope and optimism that the institution will get through this struggle together and hopefully return to more face-to-face learning in the spring. As Lake (2013) pointed out, higher education is long past the *in loco parentis* era where administrators could get away with telling a student "no" without having to provide an explanation; the current *facilitator* era requires a commitment to the partnership between the institution and the student. Should the president's office or provost's office receive other inquiries about reduced tuition for students, the aforementioned recommendations could be included in an official public response from President McKenney to address these concerns.

Even with the aforementioned recommendations, Sam and her parents may not accept the provost's explanations as to why tuition cannot be reduced. Should that happen, Provost Wallford should consult with academic services to see if they have recommendations for courses that Sam could take through one of the schools of the Maine community college system that could transfer in to Krenshaw and count towards her program. This would be a possible alternative option for Sam so that she could continue her education in the fall at a lower rate of tuition until Krenshaw would be able to hopefully expand their face-to-face learning courses for the spring 2021 semester.

Conclusion

The transition from face-to-face learning to online learning that many IHLs have had to make over the past few months in response to COVID-19 has been a tremendous challenge to faculty, staff, and most especially students. A crisis such as COVID-19 that brings about short-term as well as long-term uncertainty in how IHLs will operate moving forward will inevitably cause a great deal of anxiety and stress for students. While leaders will find themselves in the position of having to inform students of decisions they will be unhappy with, there are steps that can be taken to relay this information in a productive and supportive manner.

Leaders must acknowledge student concerns in times of crisis by demonstrating the compassion and empathy of authentic leadership. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty and crisis, leaders must communicate the relevant information that students and stakeholders need to know in order to understand how and why decisions are made. These leadership skills may not alleviate all student concerns, but they do create an opportunity for stakeholders of the same organization to have an open and respectful discussion that is essential in times of crisis.

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Footnotes

¹ Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an illness that has spread throughout the world and can be spread easily from person to person. COVID-19 symptoms can range from mild (or no symptoms) to severe illness. A global pandemic, there have been more than 153,000 deaths in the United States as of July 31, 2020. For more information go to <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus>