Chapter 13
Presidential Onboarding During a Time of Crisis:
Lessons That Transcend the Moment Navigating Leadership in a Post–Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the unique challenges and strategies of presidential onboarding during a time of crisis, drawing from the author's experience as President of Queensborough Community College, City University of New York, beginning in August 2020. Despite the pandemic-imposed restrictions, various approaches were used to connect with the campus community, build trust, and learn the institution's culture—all virtually. These strategies, while initially crafted for remote engagement, have proven invaluable for ongoing crisis management. The chapter will delve into specific methods employed to foster meaningful relationships, create a culture of care, and develop a strategic plan that reflects the institution's needs and values, offering insights that transcend the immediate moment and are applicable to any leadership transition.

INTRODUCTION

Although the height of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the lessons I learned while onboarding as president of Queensborough Community College (QCC) during an unprecedented time of crisis and uncertainty have proven to be invaluable. Un-

fortunately, college campuses continue to face a myriad of additional crises—both internal and external—making those insights increasingly relevant as we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of higher education.

My tenure as president of QCC, a member of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, began on August 17, 2020. By then, I had already accumulated 17 years of experience within the CUNY system, serving in various capacities. Despite my familiarity with the broader institution, I had never actually visited the QCC campus until after my appointment as president. This added a unique layer of complexity to my transition, especially during a time when remote work and restrictions on physical presence were the norm due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It took almost six months before I met all of my cabinet members in person and even today, there are occasions where I meet a colleague in person for the first time.

Adding further complexity, I succeeded an interim president who had earned widespread admiration and respect across the campus community, having led them through a successful middle-state accrediting and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. He had established strong relationships with faculty, staff, and students, and was regarded as having done an excellent job. However, due to CUNY policy, he was ineligible to apply for the permanent presidency and would return to his prior role as provost at the college. This created a delicate dynamic, as I needed to establish my own leadership while acknowledging and building upon the strong foundation laid by my predecessor. Navigating this transition required sensitivity and a strategic approach to ensure that the campus community felt supported during a period of both leadership change and broader societal upheaval. Another balancing act I had to navigate was the transition from my previous role as provost, which I had held for five years, to my new position as president. It was critical to ensure that I did not overstep or encroach on the current provost's responsibilities, and equally important that he did not perceive me as doing so. I had to consciously adjust to my new role, recognizing that I was no longer serving as provost and allowing him the space to lead in his domain.

ONBOARDING DURING A PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

When I stepped into the role of president of QCC, I was acutely aware of the unique challenges that laid ahead. Not only did I have to prove myself as a leader to a community I had never physically met, but I also had to foster a sense of connection and trust entirely through virtual means. To further complicate matters, misinformation and social unrest were fueling distrust in institutional leadership across the country, and I knew I had to be strategic in my approach. My priority was to ensure that the

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