FEATURE ARTICLES

Contextualizing Military Insight Within Higher Education: Mitigating Social Vulnerability & Maximizing Sustainability in the Time of COVID

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic, social and political polarization, and economic downturn have caused an untenable situation for many higher education institutions nationally. Concurrently, students, staff, faculty, and administrators are also struggling with the significant adversity stemming from these events. This precipitates increases in emotional wellness challenges, and decreases in productivity and motivation across institutions of higher education. To address this pervasive need, the author examines a three-phase process, inclusive of 1) issue identification, 2) internal capacity building, and 3) external partnership development that is employed by the United States Coast Guard 7th District. The process increases emotional intelligence and personal hardiness across the organization, and concurrently mitigates social vulnerability and maximizes the emotional health and wellbeing of their service men and women. This yields a transferable model for higher education institutions, as they attempt to survive the increasing challenge of sustainability in the time of COVID.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education, both nationally and abroad, are experiencing significant adversity regardless of their institutional classification (Marinoni et al., 2020). The global pandemic, increased civil unrest, disparity of global polarization, political dichotomization, and the significant economic downturn have caused institutions of higher education to reframe how they approach teaching and learning, allocate resources, and ensure salaries, benefits, and professional development funding, all while attempting to remain fiscally solvent (Andenoro & Skendall, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). This is further complicated, as the domestic and international markets have continued to impact endowment performance.

However, while daunting, these issues culminate in a much larger problem for faculty, staff, administration, and higher education as a whole—our students are struggling. Paralleling global communities, universities are seeing significant increases in student anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. This epidemic is compounded as faculty, staff, and administrators are facing their own increased mental health and wellness challenges, which undermine their ability to serve student needs. This ultimately creates the foundation for two overarching complex adaptive problems.

First, the foundation of learning, and the essence of higher education are being challenged. These ideas and are inherently linked to a person bettering themselves, and the idea of bettering oneself requires hope (Ristau, 2011; Waytz & Epley, 2012; West, 2014). Considering the reduction of resources due to a depleted fiscal infrastructure, the erosion of positivity due to anxiety and depression, and the lack of empathy and social interaction due to social distancing and polarization, there is a scarcity of hope in our communities and by association our higher education environments (Baum, 2012; Park et al., 2020; Pimlott, 2020). Second, there is massive expectation violation on the part of students, faculty, and staff within the higher education environment. The experiences and environments of higher education have shifted considerably from what we have come to expect, and regardless of how much preparation or communication takes place, we are conditioned to the default. A default that has been conditioned within higher education environments to include all of the tenets of slowly evolving disciplinary ideations that hold firm to the traditions dating back to in *loco parentis* (Conte, 2000). These complex adaptive problems undermine the sustainability of higher education environments (Satterwhite et al., 2020).

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Understanding this, in times of adversity it is incumbent upon organizations to innovate and invest their scarcity of resources in their most valuable commodity, their people (Kouzes & Posner, 2014; Patterson, Goens, & Reed, 2009; Sawalha, 2015; Wilson & Rice, 2004). While this would seem commonplace to the early-adopter and liberal education focused mindsets within higher education, perplexingly institutions often regress, furlough and eliminate positions, and allocate resources from innovative academic programs and critical student development priorities to traditional and politically insulated areas of the university (Grawe, 2021). Again, these practices undermine the overall sustainability of institutions and undermines the holistic experience required for the development of well-rounded, educated, and engaged graduates (Alawamleh, 2020; Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Sá & Serpa, 2020).

While the complex problems presented may seem daunting, this article offers an alternative practical approach grounded in a more cosmopolitan and trans-industry perspective. Currently, the United States Coast Guard is facing the same global issues facing our higher education institutions. However, they are approaching these issues from a very different perspective. Through an investment in those that serve, they are ultimately creating value for those that are served. The following provides insight into a phased implementation plan aimed at mitigating social vulnerability that is grounded in personal hardiness, emotional intelligence, and partnership building stemming from the tangible actions initiated by the United States Coast Guard 7th District, an organization serving a 1.7 million square mile area including Puerto Rico, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and 34 foreign nations and territories. The plan provides a transferable snapshot that can be minimally adapted and implemented within higher education settings and institutions feeling the increased pressures associated with our changing world. Ultimately, this provides benefit for students served by our higher education institutions and implications for developing leaders capable of maximizing collective hardiness and a more empathetic approach to serving the organizations and socially vulnerable communities that need it most.

Underlying Conditions & Context

Social Vulnerability. The COVID-19 global pandemic and resulting problems have significantly challenged higher education institutions' ability to maintain services and support student learning. As a gross oversimplification, students are more vulnerable, which increases the demand for services that universities can provide. In an effort to further unpack this idea, it becomes incumbent to more fully explore the idea of vulnerability and how it links to the larger idea of social vulnerability. *Vulnerability* can be defined as the capacity to be wounded (Kates 1985; Dow 1992) or the potential for loss (Cutter, 1996). Despite differences in the conceptualization of vulnerability (Adger et al., 2004; Wu, Yarnal, & Fisher, 2002), two main perspectives have emerged. First, vulnerability is a pre-existing condition and focuses on potential exposure to hazards (Cutter, 2003). A synthesis of existing literature aggregates social vulnerability as a combination of three factors, 1) distribution of hazardous conditions, 2) the human occupancy of the hazard zone, and 3) the degree of loss of life and property resulting from a particular event.

Second, vulnerability suggests that not all individuals and groups exposed to a hazard are equally vulnerable (Wu et al., 2002). Rather, that affected people display patterns of differential loss when faced with exposure to some stress or crisis. This impacts the individual's ability to cope, thus leading to increased vulnerability (Anderson & Woodrow, 1991; Clark et al., 1998; Cutter, 1996; Cutter, 2003; Dow 1992; Watts & Bohle 1993; Wu et al., 2002). Inherently this aligns with a given individual's coping ability. Coping ability has been defined as a combination of resistance (the ability to absorb the damaging impacts of a hazard and continue functioning) and resilience (the ability to

recover from losses quickly) (Clark et al., 1998; Cutter, 1996; Dow; 1992; Wu et al., 2002).

This idea directly applies to students within higher education environments. The economic stress applied to the job market has reduced the options available for high school graduates to consider. Higher education offers an option for these graduates, but due to reduction in estimated family contribution, increased stress levels, domestic abuse, and the lack of socialization due to COVID-19, many of the students entering higher education lack the financial, social, and developmental capacities necessary for success and sustainability with these environments. This problem is further exacerbated when exploring student needs within Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges. Thus, there is a significant problem within higher education settings because students are socially vulnerable. However, the complexity of this problem is extended, as the staff, faculty, and administrators at institutions of higher education are also dealing with challenges to mental health and wellness. This situational complexity begs the question, if our populations are struggling across higher education, how can we create more resilient higher education communities capable of withstanding the mitigating factors and adversity leading to increased vulnerability and decreased learning?

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Personal Hardiness. Personal hardiness has been shown to mitigate the effects of social vulnerability and by association can lead to community resilience (Maddi, 2002). Grounded in existentialism (Golomb, 2012; Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 2004), as the ongoing quest for life's meaning and purpose expressed through a constant decision-making process that provides the underpinnings for what people do, hardiness is operationalized as a set of attitudes or beliefs about oneself in interaction with the surrounding world that provides the courage and motivation to navigate adversity and convert it into opportunity (Maddi, 2006; Maddi 2002). More simply, personal hardiness can serve as a pathway to resilience under stress (Bonanno, 2004).

The attitudes or beliefs involved with establishing hardiness and resilience are a combination of commitment, control, and challenge, complimented by hardy action patterns of building social support, problem solving, and effective self-care (Kobasa et al., 1982; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). The development of these interrelated attitudes assists in managing stressful circumstances by turning them into growth-inducing versus debilitating experiences (Maddi, 2002). People strong in the commitment attitude engage versus withdrawing, seeing adversity as an opportunity to experience something interesting and important (Popa, 2012). People strong in the control attitude believe that with effort, they can influence the situational variables surrounding them rather than seeing themselves as a passive bystander and powerless in the face of circumstances (2012). People strong in the challenge attitude believe that fulfillment is found not in comfort, security, and routine, but rather in the continual growth and wisdom that can be gleaned through the negative and positive experiences of an active life (2012). Further, hardiness is inherent to positive mental health (Ghorbani et al., 2000; Ramanaiah & Sharpe, 1999) and consistent with the

more recent emphasis on positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Research has also revealed support for hardiness as the essence of vigorous mental health and wellness (Maddi, et al., 2002), and concurrently a positive relationship between hardiness and various indexes of performance (Maddi & Hess, 1992; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984; Westman, 1990), conduct (Maddi, et al., 1996), morale (Bartone, 1999; Kuo & Tsai, 1986), and health (Bartone, et al., 1989; Ouellette Kobasa, 1993). People who have the courage (hardiness) to simultaneously favor engagement with others and events (commitment), choose to devote effort to influencing the outcomes (control), and emphasize learning from their experiences (challenge), have more fulfilling, satisfying, resilient, and remarkable lives (Maddi et al., 2002).

Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is well-documented in the higher education, student development, and leadership literature, but for the practical purposes of this article, a brief contextualization is merited. Emotional intelligence has four core competencies (Salovey & Mayer, 1990):

1. The ability to accurately perceive, appraise, and express emotion.
2. The ability to access or generate feelings on demand when they can facilitate understanding of oneself and another person.
3. The ability to understand emotions and the knowledge that derives from them.
4. The ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

More specifically, self-awareness emerges from these four core emotional competencies as a governing tenet for the development of emotional intelligence. Self-awareness refers to the ability to recognize a feeling as it happens (Goleman, 2005). This ability is paramount for the development of students' interest in service and leadership and the development of career-readiness. High self-awareness is the foundation from which all other emotional intelligence stems (Weisinger, 1998), and self-awareness is highly correlated with positive social interaction (Lopes et al., 2004). Further, individuals with the capacity for self-awareness and self-monitoring have greater psychological insight and self-understanding (2005), along with increased certainty for their emotional state and how they convey that to the world. This leads to more productive and meaningful lives (2005). In addition, the use of self-awareness and overall emotional intelligence can lead to productive outcomes at the organizational level (Weisinger, 1998). This is further confirmed by the overwhelming majority of employers who feel emotional intelligence, and specifically self-awareness, is critical to success in business (Goleman, 1998).

Emotional intelligence also contributes to more positive social interactions (Bochkova & Meshkova, 2018; Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2005). Further, the need for social interaction and its contribution to communities of belonging is well documented (Clark et al., 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Seppala et al., 2013; Waytz et al., 2010). However, the pandemic, associated social distancing requirements, self-isolation, and the reduction of service industry opportunities (e.g., restaurants, social clubs, etc.), have reduced the opportunities for social interaction. This has led to increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and by association, decreased self-worth (Lange, 2020; Marelli, 2020; Salari, 2020; Twenge & Joiner, 2020). However, it has also led to a reduction in the self and social monitoring that is characteristic of emotionally intelligent individuals. This is further complicated as apathy has seen a recent increase due to the pandemic, increased social media activity, and political polarization (Chaput, 2020; Zhelnina, 2020). These challenges and the diminishing social interactions have the potential to significantly reduce society's collective capacity for self-awareness, empathy,

motivation, self-regulation, and social awareness, which are all fundamental tenets of emotional intelligence, positive social interaction (Lopes, 2004), positive organizational cultures (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2010; Rapisarda, 2002), and higher education persistence (Qualter, et al., 2009; Walsh-Portillo, 2011).

The lack of social interaction is also affecting higher education environments. Currently, a causality dilemma is present where students require levels of emotional intelligence to effectively learn in online environments (Abraham, 2018; Berenson et al., 2008), but the students need the social interactions germane to the face-to-face physical environment to develop the foundational elements of emotional intelligence (Parker et al., 2009; Preeti, 2013). Concurrently, faculty members are also being negatively impacted by the noted challenges. As such, this is leading to faculty members experiencing emotional and mental wellness challenges similar to the students. This compounds the issues facing higher education, as faculty members' emotional intelligence is directly attributable to higher levels of student achievement (Curci et al., 2014; Lillis, 2011; Maguire et al., 2017; Masoumparast, 2016) and the development of students' emotional intelligence (Stedman & Andenoro, 2007).

Emotional Intelligence & Expectation Violation. Our expectations are also intimately linked to our emotional intelligence (Barling et al., 2000; Jordan & Troth, 2004), and by association are linked to our conceptualization of learning and learning environments. This reveals that learning and achievement can be affected by the students' expectations for teaching. Higher education faculty members are currently challenged in this respect due to the global pandemic. Social distancing and distance learning requirements have considerably decreased the face-to-face interactions that validate students' preferences and expectations for interactive discussion and group-based activities in higher education environments (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). Thus, students' expectation violation, psychological contract violations, and the dissonance of what they previously knew higher education to feel and look like, is creating psychologically self-imposed barriers to their learning. This is particularly troubling considering that expectation violation is often connected to the erosion of trust (Afifi & Metts, 1998). In essence, students' perception that higher education has failed to meet their perceived ideal, and the lack of strategic faculty development regarding the navigation, delivery, and cultural challenges of distance learning platforms are creating an unfavorable and unresponsive environment. This has the potential to cause unproductive anxiety and poor performance in our students (De Saintonge, & Dunn, 2001).

Application of Practice

The preceding narrative provides context for the grim prognostications that are happening across higher education environments. However, the rise of innovative multidisciplinary work, translational sciences, and interdisciplinary programs and grant request for proposals (RFPs) provide a model for addressing these challenges. More specifically, we need to look externally to understand how we can promote sustainability internally. Through the exploration of what other industries are doing to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and the compounding challenges existing in our world, we can begin to develop a framework for continuing to serve student needs, support staff, faculty, and administration, and create an environment of innovation amidst tremendous adversity.

The following presents a conceptual model and practical approach for mitigating the overwhelming pressures facing higher education institutions that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, increased civil unrest, disparity of global polarization, political dichotomization, and the significant economic downturn. The accompanying narrative describing

the model and approaches stemmed from unobtrusive site visits and informal qualitative data collection with United States Coast Guard 7th District in South Florida. The resulting phases provide a transferable, practical, low cost, and highly effective means of managing the noted challenges to higher education sustainability.

Phase 1. Issue Identification. Complex predictive modeling and a vast of array of agency and think tank projections can provides a pathway for understanding the future. However, maybe our best chance to predict future challenges lies in the asking people across our organizations "What do you see?" and "How can that impact our ability to achieve our mission and vision?". When the COVID-19 global pandemic arrived in the United States, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) was well-aware of the challenges it would bring, as an organization that serves both domestic and broad international contexts. However, considering the foreseeable increase in anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation due to social isolation, the USCG 7th District asked their service members what were the significant systemic challenges that they, their families, and friends were facing. Identification of the broad-based the problems facing their personnel, families, and extended communities revealed a more accurate scope of the challenges and afforded the USCG an opportunity to be more strategic in its approach to addressing the challenges. It also cultivated a culture of inclusivity, care, and community. By asking for perspectives at all levels of the organization and then truly listening, the USCG validated their personnel's self-worth, modeled positive emotional intelligence, and created the foundation for adaptive leadership practice.

Phase 2. Internal Capacity Building. Once the USCG had an understanding for the challenges facing their broad personnel base, they began investing time in the reinforcement of structures that would mitigate the foreseeable and noted challenges. This came in the form of train-the-trainer programs. Emotional intelligence, counseling, and wellness training extended the capacity of mental health professionals to identify, support, and treat those suffering from increased emotional wellness challenges (e.g., anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation). Further, it instilled a culture allowing for vulnerability through the development of trust and relationship building. USCG Personnel (personal communication, December, 23, 2020; personal communication, December, 29, 2020) shared that to address the negative stigmas often assigned to emotional wellness challenges, the USCG embraced the idea that a "community of support is grounded in the moral courage to find out who is struggling and care for them accordingly as our brothers and sisters in service". Specifically, a reinvestment and extension of *Applied Suicide Intervention Skill Training (ASIST)* and *SafeTALK* (Stennett, 2016) training led to the identification and treatment of struggling service personnel and actualized a tangible commitment and investment in the USCG's human capital.

In addition, USCG officers worked directly with supervisors and subordinates to manage workforce demands, creating a more supportive environment across the organization. Consideration was also given to the factors that could potentially lead to the spread of COVID-19, as the USCG provided technological resources including computers to personnel to allow for productive remote working environments. Finally, the USCG made a concerted effort to assist the family units of their personnel by extending childcare options to mitigate school closings, exploring and securing grant funding, and providing emotional wellness sessions to spouses and family members serving as first responders and healthcare professionals. United States Coast Guard Personnel (personal communication, December, 23, 2020) noted that this new culture has ultimately prevented deaths, assisted people in leading

more productive and positive lives, and enhanced overall sustainability as society continues to struggle with the COVID-19 global pandemic.

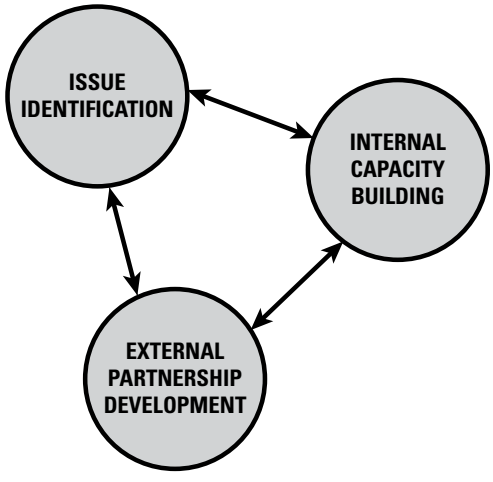
Phase 3. External Partnership Development. External partnerships were also a critical piece of the process for mitigating the challenges facing the USCG and those that they served. Strategic partnerships with the Center for Disease Control, local municipalities, and healthcare organizations allowed for the receipt and dissemination of critical information. Partnerships with Customs and Boarder Protection, local law enforcement, and the Cruise Ship Industry assisted the USCG in increasing response time and communicating critical information that could potentially prevent harm.

Additionally, as the pandemic merited the need for social isolation and the reduction of service industry options (e.g., restaurants, movie theatres, social clubs, etc.), boating sales increased. This increased the number of novice recreational boaters, and by association the need for the USCG to work with the closely with the Fish & Wildlife Association, local search and rescue groups, and law enforcement to create social restrictions (e.g., limited sandbar usage), promote safety, and respond to emergencies.

The previous three-phase approach is reflected in the following conceptual model (See Figure 1). The model demonstrates the cyclical nature of the implemented plan starting with identification of the issues/problems, investment in internal capacity building, and the development of external strategic partnerships. However, it is critical to note that the arrows of causality point in both directions indicating that constant evaluation and adaptive implementation are essential for mitigating adversity.

Figure 1

Model for Mitigating Vulnerability & Maximizing Sustainability



Recommendations

The identified model reflective of the USCG's approach to addressing the pervasive problems facing our world currently presents a viable option for higher education environments attempting to mitigate vulnerability in students, staff, faculty, and administrators while maximizing overall sustainability. The first phase, *Issue Identification*, provides alignment with the literature, as it promotes self-awareness and personal assessment to gain clarity on the needs facing individuals, organizations, and communities. This allows for the identification of social vulnerability and creates a foundation for addressing it accordingly.

This becomes essential for higher education institutions to consider, as decision-making that affects mission and vision is often centralized in the upper administrative offices of the university environment. However, this can potentially lead to myopic decisions that fail to account for fundamental variables. It is recommended that universities utilize a broad scope of methodologies to collect critical data

for understanding the issues facing their students, staff, faculty, and administration. Questions like "What do you see?" and "How can that impact our ability to achieve our mission and vision?" should become commonplace, as universities facilitate broad-based listening sessions and conduct focus groups. This process extends understanding beyond quantitative and descriptive surveys to qualitative and sequential explanatory methods that provide depth for the issues facing critical university populations and their families. Additionally, this can create value for students, staff, faculty, and administrators that reduces fatigue, increases emotional wellness, and creates communities of inclusion and support across the departments and offices within higher education environments.

The second phase, Internal Capacity, creates a trickle-down effect through train-the-trainer programs that extend capacity of the mental health professionals attempting to identify, support, and treat those suffering from emotional wellness challenges. However, it goes well-beyond this. It creates a foundation for increased and sustainable emotional wellness in the service personnel. The USCG Personnel (personal communication, December, 23, 2020; personal communication, December, 29, 2020) noted that through a specific investment in skill building, the USCG effectively enhances the overall emotional intelligence and personal hardiness of its personnel. Specifically, the increased self-awareness and training of service personnel to identify those in need has the potential to lead to greater overall emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005; Weisinger, 1998), including increased empathy, motivation, self-regulation, and social awareness for service personnel and those they serve. Further, the training and culture of inclusivity and relationship building has the potential to increase personal hardiness and elevate individuals' capacity for commitment, control, and challenge (Maddi, 2002; Popa 2012).

The implementation of this phase within higher education settings has tremendous potential to address social vulnerability, emotional wellness concerns, and promote organizational productivity and student learning. Currently, many faculty and staff lack the emotional intelligence and/or counseling capacity to assist vulnerable students. Additionally, universities are often siloed preventing staff and faculty from knowing what resources may exist across campus. This increases the probability that student concerns will go unnoticed. This is problematic, as the chaos of our world increases, and the emotional wellness of our students decreases. However, through the implementation of train-the-trainer programs focused on the development of emotional intelligence and personal hardiness in staff, faculty, and administrators, students will begin to find student-focused environments where they can feel vulnerable and build their own capacity for emotional intelligence and personal hardiness. Further, administrators can begin to build more adaptive practices that leverage the strengths of their faculty and staff, practice shared governance, and promote healthy workload and balance. This modifies what it means to be an educator and expands the definition of what is needed beyond just content knowledge or platform skills.

Currently, many faculty and staff lack the emotional intelligence and/or counseling capacity to assist vulnerable students. Additionally, universities are often siloed preventing staff and faculty from knowing what resources may exist across campus.

Finally, the third phase, *External Partnerships Development*, creates a foundation for sustainability and extends the critical work of internal capacity building with the world through strategic partnerships. These strategic partnerships advance the USCG's organizational mission, vision, and commitment to serve. This aligns well with the large majority of universities nationally who have core values and/or mission/vision statements espousing their desire to meaningfully contribute value to our world. Agency and local partnerships would allow universities to work with communities to address challenges such as food scarcity and under-resourced educational environments through community grant projects and programmatic initiatives. Students could engage in the outcomes of these relationships, fostering service and leadership through programs within the community, while gaining intrinsic clarity of purpose and contributing to community sustainability. Ultimately this could elevate their consciousness, promote self-worth, and lead to higher levels of personal hardiness and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

Adoption of this phased approach within higher education institutions could provide a powerful tool in addressing the pervasive issues stemming from the COVID-19 global pandemic, increased civil unrest, disparity of global polarization, political dichotomization, and the global economic downturn. The proposed model calls for an investment in faculty and staff capacity that builds a decentralized approach to serving those that need it most. More simply, through the development of those that serve, higher education environments can support and develop vulnerable populations more effectively and intentionally. Ultimately, the investment higher education institutions make in their human capital today will inform the institutional impact of the challenges they will face tomorrow. While difficulties and resource limitations will inevitably exist in the future, higher education institutions' ability to be adaptive and implement integrative frameworks for the development of emotional intelligence, personal hardiness, and subsequently organizational resilience, will determine if they will be successful and sustainable amidst the backdrop of the foreseeable adversity to come.

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