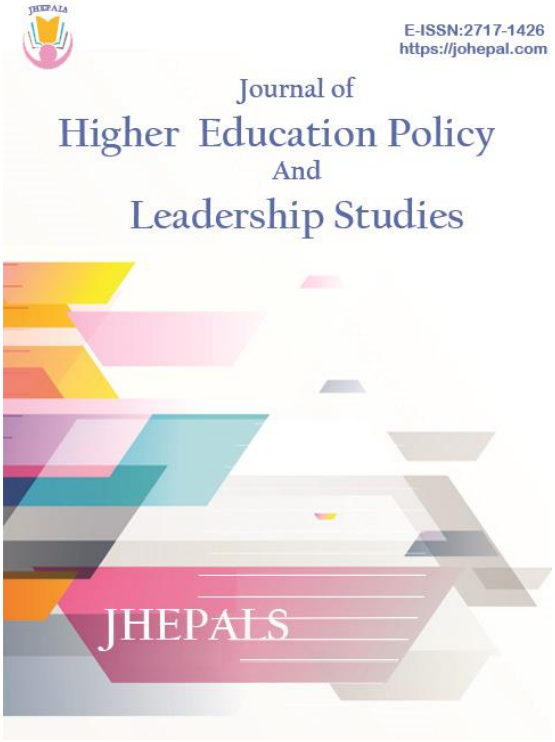
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Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education in the New Normal Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Interview with Prof. John Pijanowski

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Interview

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John Pijanowski *



John Pijanowski, Ph.D., is a professor and former administrator with over 25 years of experience as an educator. In 2018 Dr. Pijanowski served abroad as a Fulbright Scholar conducting research and teaching in Kutaisi, Georgia. Currently he holds a four year term on the Fulbright Specialist roster. He has served as an academic dean, President of the Teaching Academy, Co-Director of the Wally Cordes Center for Teaching and Faculty Support Services, and Chair of the Campus Faculty, and Chair of the Faculty Senate at the University of Arkansas. In 2010 he was honored with the college's top faculty award for outstanding service, teaching, advising and research and in 2011 honored by the university with the Charles and Nadine Baum Faculty Teaching Award - the highest teaching honor at the University of Arkansas.

Dr. Pijanowski earned his bachelor's degree in Psychology from Brown University and a master's and Ph.D. from Cornell University in Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education.

Dr. Pijanowski has authored or co-authored more than 50 publications, made over 70 presentations at international and national conferences and directed grants and gifts totaling more than $4.25 million.

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It is an honor and privilege for us to host Professor John Pijanowski as one of the globally renowned scholars and higher education leaders whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world.

We are sure that Prof. Pijanowski's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policy-makers, and leaders in Higher Education.

It is largely discussed that COVID-19 led to the emergence of a historical turning point in the global scope. As a globally recognized leader in Higher Education, we are willing to learn your feedback and response to the following question:

Question: Do you agree that COVID-19 will be a turning point in our history? What are the challenges, facilitative and debilitative issues, and threats that universities and higher education institutes experience within the continuum and era of Pre-COVID, COVID, and Post-COVID regarding their missions and strategic plans to students and staff recruitment, teaching and research processes, as well as response to the social needs? How do you comparatively analyze these three eras for our universities and higher education institutes? (Your leadership experience will be a good source of insightful ideas for global HE scholars, policymakers, and leaders).

Answer: While it is fair to say we are amidst a turning point in higher education I think many believed that a turning point was imminent even before the pandemic arrived. The demographic trough that countries across the globe have experienced at different times and in different ways has led to the same basic result – there has been a downward trend in the college going population. Combine that with the rising cost of attending college and relatively stagnant wages and the intensity of competition among colleges for students has reached a critical tipping point resulting in many college closures and consolidations. One response to these enrollment and financial pressures has been to tilt the percentage of teaching more towards adjunct or part-time faculty and to offer more online courses to reach broader audiences while also presumably reducing the cost of instruction. The pandemic accelerated these evolutions of how universities do business.

The increased reliance on online delivery of instruction is perhaps the trend that will be most quickly accelerated by the pandemic. What is changing over the next ten years?

1. Demographic dip in number of students entering higher education.
2. Vast investments in online education among larger universities.
3. Increased pressure to demonstrate that students are progressing and graduating, that higher education is affordable for students (what sort of debt are students accruing) and are they learning what employers need them to learn.
4. Increased expectations from students for robust multimedia driven courses.

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5. Increased pressure or need to recruit diverse students and make college accessible to individuals who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education.

How do universities address these challenges?

We need to have an eye on new market and workforce needs and opportunities, and adapt quickly. Sometimes adapting quickly is a challenge for larger organizations. Higher education is not known for being nimble. It takes at least a full year for a new program to go through all the approvals once it is designed and submitted for review. Add to that the time to do the market analysis, conduct the needs assessment, evaluate resource needs, get buy-in from all stakeholders (especially faculty) and you are often talking about 2-3 years from inception to offering a new academic program.

Fully online campuses often can do it faster. So, for universities that are relatively new to online delivery on a more significant scale it means:

1. Being as tightly focused on every single aspect of the program development and student service pipeline as possible.
2. Investing in regional and local recruiting will become more the norm.
3. Continually seeking data to understand how students are learning and progressing differently and share "what works."

I believe successful universities will be built on trust, pedagogical and technological expertise, a collaborative approach with the academic units and stakeholders, and an orientation towards quality. There will be a lot of competitors in the market that are built for speed and numbers at the cost of quality and that path risks alienating faculty. They may experience short term gains in their market share but I would advise university administrators to design their programs to be built to last, built as a model for others to follow, and built to create a teaching and learning product that all of the faculty on their campus will be proud of.

I can't emphasize the importance of those points enough. This work is not about generating FTEs (although we will all continue to count FTEs) - it is ultimately about access to education. It is about reaching people that would otherwise not have the opportunity to get a degree, or that boost they need to be successful in their job, or that promotion they have been dreaming about. Every student is more than a number - they are a story - a dream that would not be possible, but for the work that happens in college. All of that said, one of the most difficult things for a person or an organization to do is to put aside our own success and be willing to challenge the assumptions we have about what will work in the future and not be afraid to reinvent ourselves when necessary. I don't have a crystal ball about what those course corrections will look like for higher education, but I know that we must be willing to always be taking deep investigations into how we do business and be guided by asking ourselves:

1. What goals are we ultimately trying to achieve?
2. What problems are we trying to solve?

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Each academic unit in a university will have different goals and problems - whether it is the liberal arts trying to create flexibility in scheduling that helps students navigate a bottleneck in general education requirements or a nursing program serving a population of working adults with non-traditional shifts that would make a traditional face to face course impossible. I am thinking about access (demographics of who takes online courses) as well as how we represent ourselves to that audience – we can much more easily represent the broad range of human diversity online if we are intentional about doing that.

I do think online learning is largely about access – the single mom who wants to get a job or an executive who wants to get an MBA to advance their career. It's our obligation not to offer a product that is any less than what we do for our more traditional face to face students. Internationalizing their experience is another example of that - in both linear (videos for example) ways and social ways with guest speakers on Zoom or other experiences with people in all parts of the world.

Question: What are the questions and concerns which COVID-19 raised for universities, higher education institutes, as well as knowledge community worldwide? With numerous years of HE leadership experience, do you believe that the COVID-19 crisis improves the universities' performances or it further weakens their performance and works as a threat?

Answer: This is a great question without a singular answer. Many of those universities that were struggling to attract students before the pandemic and those that were skirting the edges of successful accreditation reviews will simply close or be partially consolidated by other universities. The market simply won't sustain them any longer and, in some cases, more rigorous government oversight will lead to their demise. For those that remain there will be increased pressure to articulate the value proposition to students and funders (both private and public). In these ways there will be a sort of market correction across higher education. However, there is also a risk that some of the practices in delivering instruction that were born out of the necessity of the pandemic will continue without refining those practices. This is particularly true for the use of technology to deliver instruction. It is fair, I think, to refer to most of the remote teaching we saw in 2020-21 as triage education. The online pedagogy was largely put together quickly, with little opportunity to plan the transition, and little formal training. So, while many instructors and administrators truly rose to the occasion to continue working with students during this moment of crisis, I think it would be a mistake to look at pandemic remote teaching and draw many conclusions about what that means for the quality and potential of well thought out, intentionally executed, and highly trained online delivery. Higher education leaders would be wise to take a step back and separate these two online teaching experiences (triage vs. planned) and focus on the quality of those online programs once students are reliably returning to face to face instruction.

On the research side of the operation this is a time to take a hard look at the disparities among faculty during these two years – especially gender differences in how demands at

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home during the pandemic caused largely by traditional gender roles regarding childcare, has affected the career trajectory of junior faculty. Although many institutions attempted to address this by offering opportunities to add "COVID statements" in annual reviews and in some cases pausing tenure and promotion clocks by a year, for many the productivity gap will be long lasting. This is particularly true for fields where labs were essentially shut down and must be rebuilt or in case where longitudinal data was disrupted in irrecoverable ways. These concerns are not new to the pandemic, but they have been considerably exacerbated by it.

Question: What are the convergence requirements for Human Capital (Intellectual Capital, Social Capital, and Organizational Capital) Efficiency during the COVID-19 crisis? How do the universities balance between the theoretical challenges of sciences and their urgent practical convergence?

Answer: I think there is a danger in both under-reacting and over-reacting to how the world has changed. I like the phrase "new normal" over "return to normal" because we are moving into a world that will have changed dramatically in a short period of time. How we work, relate to each other, communicate, and spend our money has all experienced seismic shifts over the last 2 years and that will have a lasting effect. The pull to return to the way things used to be will be just as strong as the pull to lean into leveraging new skills, ideas, and emerging opportunities that were born out of the COVID-19 crisis. Those competing tensions have the potential to create organizational drift – chasing the ideas of the day until institutions have lost their identity and organizational culture. In my opinion the best way to stave that off is by universities using this moment to reify their core values within the three pillars of teaching, research, and service to the greater communities they serve. In practice this ranges from basic tenets of what they believe makes for a supportive and positive workplace, how the institution makes decisions within a shared governance structure, to what fundamental scholarly questions guide research and creative productivity of individual faculty. From that place of a shared understanding of their core values they will be better positioned to embrace new workplace efficiencies, pursue new market needs and opportunities, and strengthen relationships with government, private sector, and non-profit partners.

Question: What are the effects of COVID-19 on Capitalism specifically with the excessive use of social media?
We are willing to learn if the leisure phenomenon (caused by COVID-19) led to new definition of modern human beings in terms of work condition and job market! If it leads to increase/ decrease in working hours, work pressure, and weakening hardworking and job performance. If yes, what are your suggestions/ advice to the universities and higher education institutes?

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Answer: The growing prominence of social media as the way people communicate is in many ways a natural progression of other forms of social isolation that was emerging prior to the pandemic. Suburban neighborhoods have been morphing for years from "front porch" communities to "back deck" communities and universities have experienced a long steady decline of communal spaces where faculty spend time together. Moreover, there has been a steady strengthening of silos that isolate faculty from each other. That history makes it more likely that faculty will grow even further isolated in the new normal and more likely to work in intellectual and social bubbles that are less likely to challenge prevailing wisdom and dominant lenses.

As for the workforce in general that universities help prepare graduates to enter, it will be interesting to see how companies and workers adjust back to more traditional ways of measuring performance. I think there is much we have not learned yet about how the freedom of remote learning affected different types of jobs and individual workers in those jobs. In my own university I have seen many examples of productivity increasing during the pandemic and yet, among those who found themselves working throughout the week in flexible ways there is a different concern – that of boundaries between home life and work life blurring in ways that create unmanageable stress and conflict. Much like online teaching during the pandemic, I would urge caution in interpreting what we have learned about how people work remotely during the pandemic. It has provided a lot of interesting examples we can use to start conversations, but remote working happened suddenly, without forethought and planning, and ultimately is more an example of how people responded in a crisis than how it might look if it was executed with careful planning.

And as a final Question:

In the context of commodification of education and within the discourse of neo-liberalism, how can higher education leadership deal with educational inequalities and injustices in academia?

Answer: This is a great way to end the interview because I think this issue hits right at the core of a lot of how we will think about addressing the other issues we have discussed here. There are broader social reasons to promote more equitable access to education but there are also pragmatic, fiscal reasons to find ways to expand access to a college degree. When scholars write of the enrollment trough brought on by a drop in birth rates, they are more specifically talking about a decline in the traditional college going demographics. One obvious way to address the enrollment crisis is to make college more accessible and desirable for those who in the past have been less likely to attend college. Obviously, there are financial implications to that, as affordability is a major barrier for many.

So, while universities have little power to reverse decades of erosion in public financial support in the short term, they can make equitable access to opportunity a priority of the various funding streams available to them. However, in the long term there is much more that universities can do to effectively tell their story and promote the value of higher education as a public good and the critical role it plays in promoting a more just society. But

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all of that is geared towards the unwinding of a trend towards the commodification of higher education – what about how universities work within that paradigm to promote equity and social justice? This is the hard work of deep and continually dives into the ways inequity and prejudice are rooted in the systems managed directly by universities. Equity audits of admissions, hiring, on-boarding, tenure and promotion, curriculum, pedagogy, budgeting, and fundraising priorities, as well as the ways in which the university administration messages their priorities and values can promote more equitable practices when they are then leveraged to direct resources and construct systems through a social justice lens. As for the broader question of whether universities are, or should be, a public good or an individual commodity – I think they are, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future - both, but I think in both cases rooting out systemic inequities and broadening access to higher education can, and should, be a priority both within the organization and in the way universities relate to the larger society they serve.

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