National and institutional responses –
Reimagined Operations - Pandemic Disruptions and Academic Continuity for a Global University

Teboho Moja
New York University, USA and University of Pretoria, South Africa
Email: teboho.moja@nyu.edu

Abstract

The 2019/2020 academic year started well with no anticipation of what was in store for the second semester and how the year would end. New students were welcomed on campus and included international students and international faculty members. It was business as usual, a beautiful and colorful fall semester that transitioned into a cold winter season. Spring arrived after a long winter season and it was off to a good start as well until the pandemic hit.

This paper reflects on how an institution with multiple sites responded to the pandemic and what the impact of those disruptions were on the core activities of a university. As a university with the largest number of international students and a footprint on every continent, the university had to coordinate its activities around the world to complete the academic year and start another one. The university is the largest private employer in the city with over 50,000 students and more than 19, 000 employees. The main focus of this reflection paper is the New York city campus where the author is based and key areas of this reflections include the impact of the pandemic on international students, teaching, research and funding related issues. Activities were normalized through central command instructions and guidance that were sometimes helpful and at other times overwhelming, but the work continued and the academic year was completed. The new academic year started with minor variations on the start dates. For example, the portal campuses at Abu Dhabi started on Sunday September 06 and New York city campus started on Wednesday September 02, whilst the Shanghai campus started on Monday the 14th. Reflections include personal impact and experiences within the academic setting.

KEYWORDS: Higher education; internationalization; universities; leadership;disruptions

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the common factor in the confluence of several international crises such as global warming, the economic slowdown, disruptions of education systems and national crises such as Black Lives Matter in the USA and the Move One Million protest in South Africa. The latter movement is against corruption and has received support beyond national borders and played a role connecting the global society over social justice issues. The pandemic has caused major unprecedented disruptions to society and higher education institutions as the sector was not spared from that. From December 16, 2019 when the first cases of COVID-19 were admitted to the hospital in Wuhan to January 15, 2020 (Perano 2020) when the first case

was confirmed in Washington state in the U.S. there was panic and confusion as to what steps to take to protect the global society. According to the New York Times (Schaff 2020), President Trump was warned by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar about the deadly virus on January 18th , but chose to downplay the threat.

When the pandemic hit many countries and their higher education systems, daily activities such as teaching, learning and research had to be reimagined as institutional leadership tried to save the academic year that was half way to the end. Emergency measures were put in place that were different from regular fire drills at the beginning of the semester. This was the real deal – we were ordered to leave campus but continue to teach from home. Television reports added more to the message that this was not business as usual as the New York state governor and the New York city mayor did their daily briefings focussed on updates on the number of people infected, numbers of those that died and the enhancement of medical facilities that included building a field hospital in Central Park, in the Javits Centre[1] - a Manhattan convention centre, assisted by the National Guard. Then there was the arrival on March 30th of the United States Navy Ship – Comfort, the Navy hospital ship with one of its crew members having already tested positive and had to be put in isolation.

My colleagues in my program on higher education decided that we should have a "community check-in" on Zoom with all our students and faculty, including the adjunct faculty. Never before had we ever had a meeting with so many members of our community attending it, which was an indicator of how people needed to connect with each after being sent off campus. Students were unsettled by the fact that they would not celebrate their achievements nor find jobs in a market that had become unstable. Students made requests for workshops to help them in marketing themselves in the time of the pandemic and were clearly in need of emotional support. With all necessary systems in place, the academic activities continued and the year ended. Country wide reimagined graduation ceremonies were conducted that ranged from virtual celebrations to drive through celebrations with students jumping out to collect their diplomas as they drove past the stage to ceremonies held in open stadiums with social distancing. My university never held the graduation ceremony but each school organized some form of celebration. My school, the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, sent out mortar boards to all graduating students and invited them and their families to a Zoom toast.

Summer activities were filled with preparations for the new academic year, as institutions oscillated between offering online, hybrid, or in-person classes. Presidential declarations that tried to stop international students from returning to the US as well as an attempt to get others to leave the country if all their courses were going to be offered online, threw a spinner into planning. New courses had to be put on the roster for in-person learning so that international students would not be forced to leave the country. There were threats by the dreaded

---

[1] A conference center that the USA Army Coprs of Engineering converted it to a 3,000-bed medical facility. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/javits-center-coronavirus-field-hospital/2020/04/04/50bdbf32-75b2-11ea-87da-77a8136c1a6d_story.html

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency that students will be identified and targeted for deportations if they do not leave on their own[2]. It was only when Harvard and Yale filed a lawsuit against the government and later joined by many other institutions indicating the implications that internationalization programs would be disrupted that a settlement was reached and the declaration withdrawn(Redden 2020).

The new academic year started and faced old challenges of integrating new students and continuing students back into campus life and new challenges of doing it virtually. Weeks and months were spent reimagining a new beginning for the Fall 2020 semester and decisions were made by some institutions to reopen their institutions, some opted to have blended/hybrid learning arrangements whilst others chose to stay completely remote for either a semester or the full academic year. Some institutions adjusted their schedules to end the Fall semester early, i.e around end of November to coincide with the November Thanksgiving holiday. Reasons advanced were that students are likely to travel back home and be in gatherings that might expose them to the virus once more. Concerns were heightened by the fact that the November holiday coincided with the high flu season period. My university opted to not adjust the semester schedule and instead an email from the Provost was sent encouraging students to stay at the university and not travel home for the holiday with promises of the university offering them a Thanksgiving meal without big gatherings. The alternative is for students to go back home and not return for the rest of the semester but continue remotely to the end of the year.[3] Institutional plans were also influenced by hostile political proclamations such as the one that inhibited international students from returning to the US if their Schools opted to go completely remote in teaching.

Reimagined orientation sessions were offered virtually to welcome new students to the university and to reconnect with continuing students. Students met their classmates and faculty members in the virtual space. Within weeks of resuming classes there has been a surge in infections and some universities and colleges had to change plans and opt for remote teaching whilst others opted to "pause" for a few weeks then proceed. Domestic and international higher education media has been full of reports on how the virus is impacting the sector in terms of the impact on the sector and opportunities created to re-think what the sector's role is in society and what its future might look like; negative impact on institutional finances; lack of readiness to shift to remote teaching; management of the changes and more; as well as student related matters.

Background and University Context
New York University, a Research One[4] university, is the largest not-for-profit private university in the United States that has three "portal" campuses – New York City, Shanghai-China, and

---

[2] This is the federal law agency that protects the country from illegal immigration and deports people who are found to have violated their visa status or are in the country illegally.

[3] Provost Katherine Fleming email dated September 29th, 2020. Looking Ahead to Thanksgiving.

[4] Research I university is a category that the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education uses to indicate universities in the United States that engage in the highest levels of research activity.

Abu Dhabi in the Emirates, and ten "study away" sites around the world (Accra, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Florence, London, Madrid, Paris, Prague, Sydney, Tel Aviv) and two in the U.S (Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. The university is also the largest private employer in New York city with more than 19,000 employees and over 50,000 students. Its fiscal operating budget is $13,839 billion (2020) and if the NYU Langone medical and health school is not included then the university operates a budget of $3, 493 billion. The university is heavily reliant on tuition for its revenue, supplemented by research grants. It is highly selective, receiving over 84,000 applications in 2019 with an admission rate of 15% resulting in about 13,000 spots offered for undergraduate admission. The waitlist averages 20% of the applicants resulting in over 15,000 potential students on the waitlist. This background provides a context of the huge operation that was affected by the pandemic and how the university managed it and its effect on those who are part of it.

The first sign that there was something serious heading our way that could affect the institution's operations was when the Provost and the President issued university sponsored international travel ban as well as to the two U.S based sites of all non-essential travel on March, 3, 2020 and March 09, 2020 respectively. They also discouraged all other domestic travel. At the national level government ordered travel bans to China and other countries, screenings at major international airports were introduced, and a national lockdown for visitors from selected countries. International travel that was not directly sponsored by the university, took place as I travelled to Nairobi for a Carnegie Corporation sponsored project. Carnegie Corporation did not stop its officials from traveling but later summoned its officials back to the country immediately after the meeting and did not allow further travels or extended stays out of the country. Research projects schedules were interrupted as I was on a trip to two other countries in Africa – Zambia and Botswana to collect data for a research project I am working on. My research trip and spring break travel was cut short also due to South Africa, my transit country, announcing a closure of its borders, resulting in my rushed return to New York instantly. It is my assumption that colleagues who had plans to travel for research purposes had to change their plans as well.

Overall, there were interruptions in the internationalization activities of the university, teaching and learning activities, as well as research activities. The next section elaborates on those interruptions and how the university handled the situation to ensure continuity.

Internationalization Disrupted

The first NYU campus to experience a disruption was NYU Shanghai following the December 31 , 2019 report to the World Health Organizations China Country Office that an unknown "viral pneumonia" originating in Wuhan, central China was spreading (World Health Organization, 2020). On January 28, 2020, the NYU Shanghai's senior leadership announced that NYU Shanghai was delaying the start to the spring 2020 semester. The students were given the option to study away at other NYU study sites globally. The new start date was set to be the 17th with additional instructions that some teaching will be done remotely online and offering student financial assistance if they planned to return home and learn remotely. Students were then given the options to return to their home countries with some financial assistance, whilst

others who were not on campus were given the option to study remotely. The goal posts were shifting so quick that by January 31st the campus had decided to go completely remote in teaching. It took 10 days of adjustments to finally reach a complete shutdown and offer teaching remotely.

International students at NYU make up about 24% of the enrolled students with the majority being from China and other Asian countries. An issue that emerged was the bias Asian students started experiencing mainly off campus as society was blaming China for the COVID-19 virus and the national President did not help the situation by referring to the virus as the "China Virus". However, it came as a somewhat a surprise to learn that a professor at the University of Cincinnati has referred to the COVID-19 virus as a "Chinese Virus" as well in an email to a student. The university took immediate action and put the professor on administrative leave (Miller 2020). New York University had to put resources in place to address bias towards a portion of its student population. Workshops were conducted and resources made available for reporting bias, discrimination, and harassment especially outside and inside the classroom.

To give students the experience of more than one campus, undergraduate students registered at the different portal campuses are expected and encouraged to spend one semester at another campus. The re-imagined international experience for students for the new academic year entailed offering students who could not return to their home campuses for whatever reason, be either due travel bans, logistics or other reasons, an option referred to as the "Go Local". Undergraduate students were offered a choice for in-person classes at another NYU location that students could travel to or to take their classes online. For those opting for the "Go Local", the one condition for them was that they should commit to spending the whole semester at the chosen location. The NYU Shanghai became the host for about 845 graduate students in various programs with the majority being students in the Tandon School of Engineering and the School of Professional Studies. There are also undergraduate programs offered for which data was not available to the writer. The arrangements made had to take different time zones into consideration and be inclusive of students located in different parts of the world. I was not affected by the time zone factor as the furthest students taking my courses were located on the US west coast and the time difference is three hours. Academic activities are continuing at all three campuses for the Fall semester. The Spring 2021 semester has been altered to remove the one week spring break to avoid students traveling away from campus and needing to quarantine for two weeks upon their return. Mini breaks are built inot th semester in the form of three long weekends. For my program, teaching will continue to be remote in the spring semester as it was in the fall semester.

Some of the global initiatives were disrupted but academic offerings continued. An example of one activity that was interrupted was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the University of Pretoria and New York University on the 30th of March to collaborate in the areas of (1) transformational leadership, (2) faculty exchange, (3) renewal and transformation of curricula, and (4) student leadership capacity development. The signing finally happened virtually on May 18th. Though a strategic workshop that was planned had to be

postponed indefinitely, the first activity between the two universities is planned as a webinar for November 11th to discuss the future of global higher education.

Teaching and Learning Continuity

Walking around campus on any given day in Spring 2020, the campus is not buzzing as we are used to it at this time of the year. The changes started all on March 5th when the School of Education and the university did a technology access check for faculty and students in preparations for remote teaching and learning. At the New York Campus, an instruction was issued that faculty, researchers and administrators were all to work remotely with effect from Friday March 13th. This was then brought forward to Wednesday the 10th. A quick one-hour training session was offered by my Steinhardt School in using Zoom, NYU Classes (teaching and learning platform we had been using regularly) and NYU on March 10th. Two additional sessions were offered two days later on the 12th and 13th March, with additional DIY (do it yourself) online guides and toolkits. Additional training sessions were scheduled and surveys on what works and does not work for faculty to share best practices and administrators to address challenges. Hourly paid student employees both graduate and under-graduate were also instructed to work remotely. Access to NYU buildings and offices was totally closed on the evening of Sunday March 22nd. This was in line with and informed by the Executive Order signed by Gov. Cuomo (March 20, 2020).

The flood gates of information burst open, numerous emails from various offices with links for more information became the order of the day. Sometimes there would be emails with contradictory messages on the same day from different offices which was not surprising given the balance between the central offices with their messages and the local school or department messages because the university is decentralized. Emails by the Vice Provost for Faculty Engagement and Development sent emails with links for participations in a Virtual Teaching Community and for faculty to connect with one another. Department and Program monthly scheduled meetings were moved to bi-weekly meetings. Each information email came with more links for additional information. Student emails started flooding too as they were dealing with the changes and normal activities like doctoral support work, defenses, and advising seemed to have increased as well. Socially, friends and colleagues working remotely wanted to connect, check in and talk as part of a human need to connect with other human beings. More and more hours were spent starring, working, and socializing on a computer screen.

Zoom is the video conferencing tool the university chose to use to deliver remote teaching. Faculty had to learn fast on not only how to use the tool but to use it innovatively in order to connect with their students. Workshops on how to create learning communities were offered, how to integrate different platforms and tools in teaching and learning. Students were creative too and offered more ways of engaging their classmates through the use of tools for engagement. An opportunity was created to redefine interactions and engagement across distance. Faculty and students came up with creative ways of using technology for teaching and learning, for example, the nursing students using Virtual Reality (VR), a Home-Grown App

and Telehealth for conduct simulations in learning or the drama students using the Zoom technology to rehearse and present a play[5].

Typically, summer break is a time to catch up on research, publications, and preparations for the Fall semester. Faculty members found themselves spending more time preparing their syllabi and modes of delivery for their courses because creating meaningful learning experiences is time intensive. In the past the university had offered grants for faculty members who were interested in converting their courses for online teaching, but that was not the case in this past summer as the university struggled to close the gap in the budget due to unexpected spending related to the closing of the institution and transitioning to virtual operations.

For faculty support, tenure clocks were reset in recognition that faculty on tenure tracks were not going to be able to meet their deadlines. Some faculty postponed their sabbatical leave especially in cases that included time to be spent elsewhere and travel was not possible. The annual merit assessments were suspended and faculty were told that students' assessments for the Fall semester will not be used in considering annual merits or for promotions or tenure assessments. By the end of the academic year faculty was informed that annual salary increments based on merit were not going to be offered for the 2019/2020 academic year.

Students were provided with a toolkit referred to as the "Students Remote Instructions Readiness Guide". Student support included the option that students can be given a pass or fail grade instead of the actual grade that might affect their Grade Point Average (GPA). Students were given an option to choose that option right up to the last day of classes or after submitting their final papers. This was unusual because there is usually an early deadline for that option. Faculty do not get to know which students have opted for a letter grade or pass/fail grade and as is always the case are to continue to grade the student in the regular way.

Research Continuity

NYU is a Research One (R1)[6] and does not come as a surprise that scholars joined other scholars trying to find solutions to the pandemic related issues. Research projects were disrupted, however researchers who needed to use the laboratory spaces were allowed to return to campus as long as they followed the guidelines provided. NYU Abu Dhabi prioritized research activities for those interested in returning to the campus. They state on their website that priority is given to research as they try to reduce density on campus.

Researchers working on COVID-19 related work continued being active during the lockdown as essential service. Several research projects were initiated at all three campuses and some in

---

[5] https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/nyu-responds-to-covid-19/remote-learning-gets-creative.html

[6] The classification is based on the 1994 Carnegie classification system and there are 131 institutions out of about 5,300 colleges. https://www.educationunlimited.com/blog/how-many-universities-colleges-are-in-the-us/

partnership with the private sector or other researchers from other universities as well. The research community at the university collaborated on research that was to advance the understanding of the virus and its impact on the physical, psychological, social, and economic well-being of society. An extensive list of research projects is provided on the website[7].

Financial Impact

The immediate tap to close with the lockdown was the financial stream. In addition to not giving any salary increases, spending was frozen for research grants, Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), travel, conferences and any further spending. Recruitments and new searches where offers had not been made were frozen. Scholarships for students, particularly doctoral students who had not yet signed a contract were rescinded. Some institutions opted to deal with the funding gap created, by cutting senior officials' salaries by a set percentage, laying off or furloughing staff[8] especially the administrative staff and putting a freeze on spending. Other institutions were not transparent about their strategies including mine except an occasional mention of a possibility of furloughs of staff. There are also institutions that have cut back on doctoral studies fellowships and some are only supporting targeted doctoral studies in areas that seem to address current urgent issues. An example of this is the University of Chicago's English Department that decided to prioritize graduate students who were pursuing Black studies amidst the ongoing protest and the Black Lives Matter movement for their 2021 admissions, while others like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's history department decided that there will be no admissions at all for Fall 2021 (Flaherty 2020).

Faculty were informed that we are not allowed to spend allocated Individual Development Funds (IDA) and if we needed to use them for ensuring continuity of our teaching, we had to follow a very cumbersome process of seeking permission with detailed expense items before spending the money – a change from past practice. Any expenditure that was not directly related to teaching continuity was blocked. The same continued in the Fall semester when we were informed that funds have been allocated but the same processes have to be followed, which translated to mean that we have the money but we cannot spend it unless we get prior permission. This is a major change to how IDA funds were spent in the past.

The management of department funds became centralized within the school as a way of coordinating spending in anticipation of extra spending the university as a whole was to incur in making a shift to remote teaching and learning instantly. Requests for spending had to be

---

[7] https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/nyu-responds-to-covid-19/on-the-frontline.html

[8] a **furlough** refers to a temporary leave of employees due to special needs of a company or employer, which may be due to economic conditions at the specific employer or in the economy as a whole. New York City increased their furloughed employees from 500 to 9,000 and possible layoffs to save $21 million on September 23rd, 2020 as part of dealing with a $9 billion deficit. https://www.newsday.com/news/new-york/new-york-city-workers-furloughed-mayor-bill-de-blasio-1.49705674

approved by the Instructional Technology team that had to assess if the purchases were for teaching continuity and some of the declined requests did not make sense as they crossed the line in terms of telling professors what was allowable and not such as being told you cannot print student papers and spend money on paper and printer ink. The instruction was that all grading had to be done electronically. Supervising doctoral students, reading their long documents with tables and graphs that require referencing and paging back and forth, did not make sense. What has always worked has been the ability to print out parts of the dissertation for easier references to tables. Being told to flip back and forth on a screen to go back and forth in assessing a dissertation became another hurdle in the tasks to be completed. In discussions with colleagues we realized that some of the costs were shifted to our personal budgets as colleagues bought their own paper and printer ink, suitable lighting for Zoom sessions taking place at night from home, and use of our personal spaces as offices.

Many universities started their academic year with a major budget deficit, New York Times reported that the University of Iowa reopened with a budget shortfall of $75 million (NYT September 06, 2020). My university projected a budget deficit of between 200 and 300 million US Dollars. The first department meeting when the year started was used to update us on the budget cuts that included a $10 million budget cut for the Steinhardt School of Education, Culture and Human Development and a further once off $5 million budget cut for the Departments, with implications of as much as 80% cut for our departmental operational budget. NYU operates a cost centre based budgeting where different units and schools generate funds to pay to the central administration.

Despite the financial challenges the institutions faced, attempts have been made to provide financial support to those in need. At NYU an Emergency Relief Fund was set up to receive donations and distribute them to employees as well as a Student COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund for students who needed it (NYU website 2020). This support was provided in addition to other support measures for mental and emotional health, as well as a safety and health plan put in place.

Re-starting: NYU Returns
The university reopened with a multi-layered safety and health plan in place to keep all members returning to campus safe. On the day that classes resumed at the New York City campus a new hub for COVID-19-related guidance and information was launched. The hub referred to as NYU Returns is loaded with messages that have circulated since March, support resources, and webinars for different stakeholders including international students and parents. The first step was to have everyone watch the mandatory NYU Returns video that provided guidelines on what is expected of all those returning to NYU. The plan included ongoing testing of its members. A massive testing centre was set up and lines of students formed at the centre to take the test as everyone returning was required to be tested for COVID-19.

Additional information is provided on testing protocols and quarantine requirements based on New York State guidelines that included a requirement that members of the university

community returning from a provided list of states were to quarantine for 14 days before resuming academic activities. A set of requirements were also put in place by the university such as requiring that all members returning to campus had to be tested or submit negative COVID-19 test results and be available for continuous random testing. The continuous testing later became a requirement that all members get tested bi-weekly using the self-administered saliva test kits. The measures put in place gave the community a sense of safety. However students as one would expect did what you would expect of them – partying at a nearby park for two weekends in a row that resulted in some students suspended for the semester from participating in academic activities. Ten weeks since the start of the semester the reported cases for the university are very low at 0.35% out of 53,000 tests conducted[9].

Another measure taken is referred to as the Daily COVID-19 Screener that was launched as an APP that requires anyone who is going to enter any building should do the self-screening and get a daily authorization to enter a building or not. Student involvement has been another strategy the university used to keep the community safe. Two initiatives are worth mentioning here. To keep everyone safe, the university also appointed Public Health Ambassadors (PHA) made up of 200 students who were trained to be vigilant, visible, and present as role models to make sure students comply with safety guidelines. They also play a role of encouraging students to comply, answer questions and distribute masks and sanitizers to the university community. Faculty members and administrators were also offered the option of being trained as PHAs, but have no information as to how many took the opportunity to get involved (NYU website 2020). This is not easy on a campus that is not fenced in and is part of the city. The second initiative was informed by a survey conducted by the NYU School of Global Public Health that provided insight into how the youth were behaving amidst the pandemic. Students were then invited to produce Public Service Announcements (PSAs) of 30 – 90 seconds each. The messages are meant to inspire students to the Centre for the Disease Control(CDC) and other health recommendations. Each message had to be backed by science and vetted by NYU experts for accuracy. (NYU website)

For the undergraduate program, a total of 5,873 students enrolled at the beginning of Fall 2020. The number did not drop significantly compared to 6,500 students in Fall 2019. Students opted to continue with their studies following the guidelines and options offered. Some programs lost students who opted not to pursue their studies or deferred their enrolment by a semester or a year. My program in the department yielded almost similar numbers as in the past but other programs lost students who opted to defer their starting date as this was given as an option for them.

Participant's Perspective
In this section I reflect on the personal impact of COVID-19 as it related to my work. I returned in a rush from a research trip to pick up what I thought I would need during the lockdown to continue with my academic activities which were mainly reduced to teaching and

---

[9] https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/messages-to-the-community/taking-stock-health-safety-efforts-fall-2020.html. accessed on November 3rd 2020

administrative meetings. Living in an apartment in New York city during the pandemic was not a viable option as was the case for many people who had alternative places for temporary refuge away from a city that was shut down and ghostly. The city that never sleeps finally went to sleep. Reality hit that overnight, the virus turned us into electronic reliant mode of operation away from the offices, where we would be surrounded by scholarly books that in themselves create a motivating academic atmosphere. Laptop in hand, few books and personal stuff were packed in a car for a destination two hours out of the city. New workspace was created that allowed for settling down in time for the next class session. Working on a computer for long hours is not new to me as an academic but doing all work including teaching, advising students and attending meetings is all new. The experience has been exhausting and deliberate plans are needed to schedule time away from the computer to go for a walk, read from print, exercise, or chat with a friend, and this has become crucial to survive the new working mode.

Meeting the class for the first time on Zoom was met with faces that were familiar but looking distressed. It was not business as usual as classes started with checking in that everyone was okay and settled to continue with their studies. Students were anxious, scared, unhappy, and their faces showed many sad emotions. It was now time to take a deep dive into teaching using Zoom – few technical stumbles and all classes proceeded to the end. Talking to colleagues we shared similar experiences as well as the frustrations due to the disruptions. We touched base with each other socially but remotely to provide each other with some form of support. Being in the country side, long walks in nature helped retain sanity and weekends were reserved for trips to national parks to catch a bit of fresh air and recharge for the week.

On the administrative side, meetings and more meetings were scheduled for planning, touching base with each other and managing the situation from a department as well as a program level. More memos flowed from different offices in the university in addition to numerous workshops that were put in place to provide support for us. Due to my international involvement in various projects and activities, more meetings were also set up from that angle that put more demands on one's time and adjustments to the schedule due to different time zones that other colleagues were in. This coincided with the need to plan for our summer course offerings which for me involve taking students on a study abroad course to South Africa. Since there was no travel, we had to re-imagine our international offerings to be virtual and more planning and work was added to our load. Plans went ahead and we had interactions with students that had already signed up for the international study abroad experiences, explaining the changes and assuring them that there was still benefit to doing the virtual courses. Students were not convinced that this was what they wanted to pursue and there were some that dropped out and new ones who were interested in a virtual global experience signed on. Numbers dropped and some courses were cancelled including mine. All this culminated in more hours in front of the computer screen.

Cancellation of the summer course offering was a blessing in disguise as I needed more time to focus on my research, writing and journal editing work. New tasks landed on my table as calls were made for COVID-19 grants to support research that needed to address broader social issues related to the impact of the virus on different societies. One such call came from The

Social Sciences Research Council in the US but not limited to applicants in the US only. The other was from the Journal I am involved with covering the whole African continent. These activities included reading and recommending proposals to be accepted, mostly using the Zoom technology. There were instances where I had to download a different conference platform because colleagues outside my university were using a different platform and learn how to use it as well. I still had presentations for conference, seminars and webinars I had committed to that went ahead. I also had my research project to work on that was ready for data collection and had to cancel appointments and try to reschedule them for Zoom interviews. The summer break was spent redesigning course materials for delivery online because we now knew that our courses were going to be online and the transition was not going to be similar to the sudden transition where we merely carried over the work we were doing to online teaching. More workshops and summer camps to prepare us for teaching remotely were offered, international and domestic webinars became the order of the day and topics were interesting enough not to want to miss them especially as they were addressing issues that we were all grappling with. "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) became the order of the day in uncertain times. Request were received with invitations to be a panelists and continued to come through for various events. Time was also spent catching up a bit with writing but not much due to competing demands and a need for a short break to recharge.

Conclusion:
Literature on reforms often refers to a need for disruptions to bring about change. The pandemic is a disruption that we did not systematically plan to bring about change but it has happened. We are wading through unchartered waters as learners. In higher education institutions learners include all from the leadership to students and workers. Every aspect of the institutions and those involved have become aware of the weak links in our society that have highlighted the socio-economic disparities in society that are mirrored in institutions. For the continuity of academic activities, there has been different levels of preparedness to switch over to remote learning, exacerbated by inequities in access to technology, internet, and access to personal and private space for teaching, learning and working. With regard to teaching it has been hard to balance a need to see students on the screen with their need for privacy of their living spaces and still manage to teaching effectively sometimes with no one showing their faces on the screen.

Major conferences that were scheduled got cancelled or put online for continuity. The experience has not been the same as part of attending conferences is for the sake of networking and meeting new professional colleagues. This has not been possible at conferences hosted online. Being in office at work also creates an opportunity to stop by a colleague's office and catch up or share interesting information without making a formal appointment. Replacement of those activities via Zoom does not create the same space that provides informal professional support.

My institution is doing its best to stay open for the rest of the semester given the State guideline for institutions, that should there be a minimum of hundred new infections or 5% of their population infected, then an institution should close down and go remote for two weeks.

All returning members of the university had to take a COVID_19 test or submit test results if taken elsewhere as well as quarantine for two weeks if they came from any of the States that were designated to have high infections rates. Currently, there are 35 states on the list and are included because they have an infection rate of about 10% or more over a seven-day rolling average. The university has created a testing dashboard that records the results data. Currently, the percentage of infection cases amongst the university that has returned to campus since August 01, 2020 is 0.35%, i.e. 193 cases out of 53, 528 people tested thus far[10]. There is ongoing mandatory testing using the saliva test that is self-administered for the university community on a bi-weekly schedule and participants are scheduled on a rotational basis to cover the entire community.

The core operations on my institution takes place around Washington Square which is the rallying point for daily protests and brings together masses of people to the campus as well as the surrounding faculty and student housing. The park has been the home for protest since about 1834 for protestors against injustice[11]. Students and faculty at New York University often join the protests as well. For the times I have joined the protests or walked through the park during protest, I observed the adherence to mask wearing and volunteers distributing free masks. There has not been transparency as to how many colleagues have been lost to COVID-19 at the university. To date we know the state lost over 32, 000 people to the virus and of those numbers, over 23, 000 are from New York city[12]. The website of the Professional Staff Congress at for the City of New York University (CUNY)reported a loss of 44 members whose data was captured[13]. Academic activities are reimagined and continue.

It has been a learning and a tough challenge as institutional leadership tried to ensure that quality education is offered, while keeping the institutional community safe, and making sure that the institutional finances are not negatively affected. It was twelve days after the academic year had started that the Provost at New York University sent out an email acknowledging the inequities within the university community and amongst universities that has compelled institutions like mine to offer in-person operations to avoid revenue losses that would result in large scale layoff or furloughs.[14] We are all challenged to sustain our institutions, to confront issues within our communities and the broader society, and to be ready for future crises. Challenges offer opportunities to assess what we do, how we do it, for what purpose we do what we do and to chart a new path forward. Numerous seminars and publications are

---

[10] Data gets updated often on the Dashboard. This was retrieved on September 29, 2020. https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/nyc-covid-19-testing-data.html

[11] https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-york/new-york-city/articles/why-washington-square-park-is-new-yorks-rallying-point-for-resistance/ retrieved September 29, 2020.

[12] https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&mid=%2Fm%2F059rby&gl=US&ceid=US%3Aen retrieved on September 29, 2020. The data get updated daily.

[13] Professional Staff Congress - https://psc-cuny.org/about-us

[14] Email from the Provost to the New York University faculty. September 09, 2020.

presenting reflections on the future of higher education and calling for the rethinking of higher education to address the changing needs of the broader society. We are in limbo as to when operations will return to a new normal, however defined. Planning for the spring semester continues with the hope that we will be back in regular classes, but at the back of our minds we know that it might be long before we get back to what we were used to. The crisis was not wasted as an opportunity to reimagine how we could do things differently.

References:
Flaherty, C. (2020): Wanted: Black Studies Scholars (Only). Published and Retrieved September 16, 2020.
https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/16/university-chicago-english-faculty-prioritizes-black-studies-graduate-students-2021

Fuller, G (2018): Why Washington Square Park is New York's Rallying Point for Resistance. 21 November 2018.
https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-york/new-york-city/articles/why-washington-square-park-is-new-yorks-rallying-point-for-resistance/

Miller, J.R. (2020): University of Cincinnati professor on leave for Calling the COVID-19 'Chinese Virus'. *New York Post*, September 23, 2020 https://nypost.com/2020/09/23/professor-on-leave-for-calling-covid-19-the-chinese-virus/

New York State (2020): Governor Cuomo Signs the 'New York State in PAUSE' Executive Order. Retrieved September 20, 2020.
https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-new-york-state-pause-executive-order
New York University (2020): Support for Faculty, Researchers, and Employees. Retrieved September 20, 2020.
https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/covid-19-support.html#employees

New York University (2020): NYU Students Create COVID-19 PSAs Aimed at Gen Z.
https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2020/july/nyu-students-create-shareable--research-backed-covid-19-psas.html

New York University (2020): Public Health Ambassadors
https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/coronavirus-information/safety-and-health/public-health-ambassadors.html

Perano, U. (2020): 10 times Trump and his administration were warned about coronavirus. April 12, 2020.
https://www.axios.com/trump-coronavirus-warnings-46ea8006-2e19-4810-82c1-0f10f4f9aa97.html

Redden, E. (2020): An 'Untenable Situation'. Inside Higher Education. July 09, 2020.
https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/09/harvard-and-mit-sue-block-new-rule-international-students-and-online-enrollment

Schaff, E. (2020): He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure on the Virus. New York Times. April 11, 20202 and updated May 04, 2020.
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html

Watson, S. Hubler, S. Ivory, D. and Gebeloff, R.(2020): A New Front in America's Pandemic: College Towns. New York Times. September 06, 2020.
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/06/us/colleges-coronavirus-students.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20200906&instance_id=21955&nl=todaysheadlines&regi_id=32495299&segment_id=37531&user_id=6b135f55284c35b26717c8a99a1661d6

Schaff, E. (2020): He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure on the Virus. New York Times. April 11, 20202 and updated May 04, 2020.
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html

World Health Organization (2020): Pneumonia of unknown cause – China. January 05, 2020.
https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unkown-cause-china/en/