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COVID-19 and Basic Need Insecurities: How Administrators Addressed BNI During and Beyond the Pandemic

Dayna Prochaska, EdD and Robert J. Exley, PhD

Introduction

When Abraham Maslow published his ideas on human motivation in 1943, little did he anticipate the staying power of his work over the subsequent 80 years. He posits a simple yet powerful view of human motivation based on human needs. The foundational tiers of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy serve as a bedrock upon which higher-order needs can be met. These bedrock needs include one's physiological needs (food, water, warmth and rest) and safety needs (security and safety). If this bedrock is suspect or shaken, then basic needs insecurities—or BNI—grow. The resultant impact is increasing difficulty in meeting one's psychological and attainment needs. The COVID-19 pandemic seriously eroded and undermined confidence that meeting one's basic needs was assured. When the basic needs are not sufficiently being met, then the higher order motivations—like the significant desire to achieve academically and excel personally—suffer equally at a minimum.

Basic need insecurities often impact the ability of community college students to persist and complete their goals. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated BNI for students, forcing administrators to respond to and address BNI (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This study will highlight administrators' responses to BNI issues and focus on the competencies needed and the changes and/or services administrators implemented to support students and address BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides insight into how community college leaders can implement changes and/or services that will support students holistically during times of crisis.

Literature Review

COVID-19 changed students' lives throughout higher education and substantially disrupted their education practically overnight (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Additionally, BNI increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic due to students not being on campus (Holdera et al., 2022). Outreach and support became a significant issue, and collecting student data was much more complex and time-consuming. According to U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona (2022), "In speaking with students from across the country at all different types of higher education institutions, I have heard consistently that the pandemic has exacerbated challenges in meeting students' basic needs, from housing to food to transportation and more" (p. 1). While basic needs have always been a concern for students, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these concerns and resulted in the need for leaders to address them at an accelerated rate.

From March 6, 2020 to March 13, 2020, colleges and universities closed their doors to students and went strictly to online learning. The closing of institutions led to students losing access to food and housing provided on campus as well as essential support services (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). According to The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021), in Texas,

community college students were affected by BNI during the pandemic at an even higher rate than the overall college student population. Sixty-four percent of community college students faced BNI compared to 61% in the overall student population, 42% faced food insecurity compared to 39% overall, 55% faced housing insecurity compared to 52% overall, and 15% faced homelessness as opposed to 14% overall.

During the pandemic, previously unidentified basic needs came to the forefront. The Pew Research Center discovered that approximately one-quarter of American adults do not have access to broadband internet (Anderson, 2019). COVID-19 turned homes into classrooms overnight. Due to the digital divide, students who lost access to the internet and technology on campus were left behind. Many students used restaurants with free internet access to complete homework and attend classes. According to Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020), 11% of community college students had no functioning laptop, and 13% had insufficient access to affordable technology.

Additionally, the mental health struggles of so many came to light. Research shows that young adults in college are susceptible to increased rates of mental health challenges resulting from psychological distress (Liu et al., 2019). COVID-19 exacerbated those mental health issues. According to a survey conducted by Rise, a college affordability advocacy group, "75% of college students reported feeling higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress during the pandemic" (Lui et al., 2019, p. 7). COVID-19 has had substantial psychological impacts on the mental health of university faculty, staff, and students, including increased depression, anxiety, perceived stress, and loneliness. According to Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020), 24% of students experienced none to minimal anxiety during the pandemic, 27% experienced mild anxiety, 20% experienced moderate anxiety, and 29% of students experienced severe anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating mental health challenges were a significant issue for many students during this time.

As mentioned before, although BNI have always been an issue on community college campuses, shutting down institutions of higher education in the middle of the semester due to COVID-19 brought BNI to the forefront for many community colleges, because services like food pantries typically available to students were shut down. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs was used to provide a foundation for understanding student needs in this research. Additionally, Kotter's (1995) Eight-Step Process of Change and the Crisis Leadership Model was used to further understand the needs of students during the pandemic and how leaders responded.

Abraham Maslow began studying the theory of human motivation in the 1940s and fully developed Maslow's hierarchy of needs by 1943. Maslow believed motivation is determined by both internal and external factors. He held a holistic view of human motivation and considered an individual as more than the sum of its parts (Maslow, 1943). Human motivation is a complex construct that is not easily understood; however, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a solid framework to investigate why understanding basic human needs is essential to this study's development.

According to Maslow, five goals fall under basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. These five goals are interrelated and dependent on each other but are

categorized and arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency. The most prepotent means the most powerful or influential goal will monopolize the person's consciousness and limit the person's ability to focus on anything else (Maslow, 1943).

Kotter's (1995) Eight-Steps were cultivated over four decades from observations of countless leaders and organizations trying to transform or execute their strategies. Kotter's Eight-Steps of creating significant change are: 1) Establishing a sense of urgency—examining the market and competitive realities and identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities; 2) Creating the guiding coalition—putting together a group with enough power to lead the change and getting the group to work together like a team; 3) Developing a vision and strategy—creating a vision to help direct the change effort and developing strategies for achieving that vision; 4) Communicating the change vision—using every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategies and having the guiding coalition role model the behavior expected of employees; 5) Empowering broad-based action—getting rid of obstacles, changing systems or structures that undermine the change vision, and encouraging risk-taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions; 6) Generating short-term wins—planning for visible performance improvements, or “wins,” creating those wins, and visibly recognizing and rewarding people who made the wins possible; 7) Consolidating gains and producing more change—using increased credibility to change all systems, structures, and policies that do not fit together and do not fit the transformation vision, hiring, promoting, and developing people who can implement the change vision, and reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents; and, 8) Anchoring new approaches in the culture—creating better performance through customer- and productivity-oriented behavior, more and better leadership, and more effective management, articulating the connections between new behaviors and organizational success, and developing means to ensure leadership development and succession.

There is no available and widely recognized theoretical framework or measurement model of crisis leadership. For this research, the Crisis Leadership Model developed by a study completed by Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) was used. This model provided a framework based on the COVID-19 pandemic to follow. The framework provides seven crisis leadership competencies: compassion and care, openness and communication, adaptiveness, resilience and courage, decisiveness, consultation and collaboration, and empowerment. The authors utilized this model to come to a deeper understanding on what competencies leaders used to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This qualitative multi-case study focused on leadership competencies that contributed to how administrators responded to BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic and what changes and/or services leaders implemented to address students' needs during this time. According to Patton (2002), qualitative research facilitates an in-depth, detailed study of an issue. Creswell (2013) stated, "This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in literature" (p. 48). Qualitative research produces detailed descriptions of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences and provides an interpretation of their actions

and their meanings (Denzin, 1989). A multi-case study method was chosen to provide a more compelling and overall robust study (Herriot & Firestone, 1983).

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership competencies that contributed to how administrators responded to BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify changes and/or services that were implemented to support students during this time. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What leadership competencies contributed to how administrators responded to BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What changes and/or services did administrators implement to address BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Purposeful sampling was used to collect data for this study. Four administrators from each of three different community colleges in Texas—who participated in implementing changes and services to meet student BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic—were selected. This allowed 12 administrators to be interviewed. Administrative positions interviewed ranged from the president to vice presidents and deans, and they were involved in the decision-making about BNI at various levels and times throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

To look more closely at students' BNI and how community college leaders addressed them during the pandemic and beyond, this work utilized two different data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were conducted using a video-conferencing platform. The document analysis was conducted by reviewing and analyzing public documents, including email correspondence, memorandums, agendas, written reports, archival materials, board minutes, policies, social media, and websites (Yin, 2009). This allowed unexpected themes to emerge as data were collected and analyzed.

Findings

The findings are divided between the Crisis Leadership Competencies and the Process for Managing Change.

Crisis Leadership Competencies. To address the first research question, the authors used the Crisis Leadership Competencies identified by Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) to provide a framework for examining the competencies administrators in this study used. The number of participants and the frequency of comments representing the competencies are displayed in Table 1. Four competencies received the highest number of comments. First, consultation and collaboration with others was present on a regular basis. Second, leaders practiced openness and communicated regularly with those impacted by the situation. Third, they displayed compassion and care with staff and students alike. Fourth, leaders empowered others throughout the pandemic.

Table 1*Cross-Case Findings by Competency from Three Participating Institutions*

Crisis Leadership Model Competencies	Number of Participants That Identified Competency	Frequency Competency was Identified
Compassion and care	12	42
Openness and communication	12	44
Adaptiveness	12	24
Resilience and courage	2	2
Decisiveness	12	18
Consultation and collaboration	12	59
Empowerment	12	31

Consultation and Collaboration. Consultation and collaboration were reported to be the most valuable competencies for leaders during a crisis. All 12 participants commented on collaboration, and as noted in the above table, it was mentioned 59 times in the interviews. Many participants focused on the importance of cross-campus collaboration. Participants specifically noted that successfully addressing BNI required many departments to work together to meet the different insecurities, including financial aid to assist with financial difficulties, the IT department to garner additional laptops and hotspots, the marketing department to help manage the website and social media communication, and student services to help gather food and clothes.

Collaboration was mentioned in different contexts. One participant stated, “Collaboration was key to deciding what we needed to do and what would be best for our students and employees, which was essential to our success throughout the pandemic. Collaboration is what allowed us to help our students fully.” While another stated that the collaboration between the institution and external partners was essential, saying, “When we learned our students were struggling with health care, we quickly collaborated with our local county hospital and created a partnership; we started a clinic on campus at no cost to the college.” Participants also reported that collaborating with outside stakeholders was essential to building partnerships that would provide additional support, including funding for financial assistance and food banks to fill the pantry.

Openness and Communication. As administrators reflected on the competencies they used during the pandemic, communication was near the top of the list. All 12 administrators highlighted communication, noting it 44 times across the interviews. Every participant concentrated on the importance of communicating clearly, consistently, and constantly. One participant stated, “Everyone was involved in communication during the pandemic; when the pandemic began, we assigned everyone (faculty, staff, and administration) a list of students they were required to contact each week to determine how they were doing and what their needs were. It was a way of building that relationship, understanding what those students needed to be successful during that time, and communicating with them what we had to support them.” While another stated, “We regularly communicated through our website, emails, and text messages and had individuals call weekly to check on students and their needs.” The institutions used many modes of communication, including emails, text messages, websites, telephone calls, social media posts, and posts in the learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard).

Compassion and Care. All 12 administrators in this study reported compassion and care were essential in leading and supporting students' and employees' BNI during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compassion and care were noted 42 times across the semi-structured interviews, demonstrating their importance. During the pandemic, administrators saw a shift from focusing on students and employees completing assignments or duties to being responsive to their needs as a whole. One participant stated, "Faculty and staff took the time to listen to students and provide them care where they needed it most. For some, that was technology; for some, it was additional food to help support children at home 24 hours a day; and for some, it was providing that extra mental health support." Another stated, "Providing our students with care and compassion allowed them to navigate successfully through the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic." This focus allowed institutions to provide care to students, enabling them to overcome the overwhelming barriers they faced throughout the pandemic.

The leaders noted the overwhelming outpouring of support in donations of time and money to students' and employees' needs. It was critical to them that everyone took care of each other and were compassionate to the challenges everyone faced.

Empowerment. Throughout this study, participants emphasized that empowering employees was critical to leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. All 12 participants commented on empowerment, which was noted 31 times in the interviews, making it clear that empowering their employees with information and support to do whatever was necessary to support students and each other during the pandemic allowed the institutions to address BNI quickly and succinctly. One participant stated, "Our President sent an email stating to leave no stone unturned to help students. That email to me was a good thing. It didn't give a specific way to do it; he just said, 'Hey, do what you can to make things work.' I feel like everybody knew the urgency and responded in the best way possible." While another stated, "We were made aware of information, what tools we could offer, and what support we could offer. We were also empowered to know if something unique came up, and we needed to advocate for that student; we were permitted to advocate for that student, even if it meant bending the rules." All three institutions ensured employees that no idea was bad if it supported students.

Process for Managing Change. The second research question, relating to Kotter's (1995) Eight-step Process for Managing Change, was also examined through the interview process. In Table 2 below, developed from participant interviews and the document review, the authors identified three main steps that leaders utilized during the pandemic to implement change and provide services. These were communicating the change, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. These steps were vital to the institution's ability to provide support quickly and enabled them to ensure the support for BNI would continue after the pandemic subsided.

Table 2*Cross-Case Findings by Kotter's (1995) Eight-Step Process from the Three Institutions*

Eight-step process of change model	Number of participants who identified step	Documentation
Establishing a sense of urgency	12	Emails Text messages Social media
Creating a guiding coalition	8	Emails Committee meeting minutes
Developing a vision and strategy	10	Emails Survey
Communicating the change	12	Emails Social media Website Flyers Text messages
Empowering broad-based change	12	Emails
Generating short-term wins	12	Social media Call logs
Consolidating gains and producing more change	12	Website Syllabi Flyers Job descriptions
Anchoring new approaches in the culture	12	Emails Flyers Syllabi Website Board meeting minutes

Communicating the Change. All 12 participants discussed how they successfully communicated the changes, supports, and procedures implemented to address BNI during the pandemic. The interviews and document analysis demonstrated communication was two-way and distributed using various avenues (e.g., email, social media, syllabi, text messages, college websites). This communication enabled the organizations to quickly implement changes and support students' BNI.

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change. Gains and producing change looked different at each institution. All 12 participant interviews and the document analysis supported consolidating gains and producing change as key to successfully implementing institutional change. Changes brought to the forefront of all three institutions' plans included providing mental health support and wrap-around services to students. Providing laptops was "low-hanging fruit" that allowed the institutions to support students' initial BNI. However, finding ways to help students with additional BNI (e.g., food and housing insecurity, mental health support) was critical to ensuring students' success during the pandemic.

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture. Interviews and document analysis from all three institutions supported the idea that change had been anchored within their culture and institution. Many participants described how institutional culture had changed to be more open and centered around students' needs more holistically.

Although no participants specifically noted Kotter's (1995) model as their framework for making changes, the findings revealed that all three institutions' approaches aligned with Kotter's steps. Some institutions took the steps out of order, but all of them were taken. No other additional steps taken by the institutions were identified in the data. Addressing BNI during the pandemic was unavoidable, and the data demonstrated that the steps of Kotter's (1995) change model were accelerated due to the urgency created by the pandemic. While the leaders did nothing of substance to create a sense of urgency; they did, however, capitalize on the crisis to emphasize the urgency.

Discussion

Several leadership competencies critical to leading institutions through a crisis were highlighted in this research. The four most prominent competencies necessary to successfully lead an institution during a crisis (i.e., care and compassion, openness and communication, consultation and collaboration, and empowerment) are all centered around building relationships.

Addressing challenges in a crisis requires leaders to be collective and inclusive when making decisions (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). It is critical to establish collaborative roles across stakeholders. Collaboration works well when a leadership team guides the work and committees implement the work (National Education Association, 2020). The leaders in this research relied heavily on collaboration, not only among their teams and with faculty and students, but also with external stakeholders. These findings support the research of Ulmer (2012), who emphasized that collaboration with stakeholders is essential to leading successfully during a crisis.

According to Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022), a well-honed communication strategy is essential and critical to any organization before, during, and after a crisis. Communication during a crisis needs to be clear and consistent, but it also needs to be quickly adaptable to the situations that arise. Klann (2003) wrote, "Leaders can also sharpen personal communication skills to make themselves more effective in those situations" (p. 13). These leaders also stressed communication using a variety of means to spread the message and hear from faculty and students. Communication is also highlighted by the American Association of Community Colleges (2018) in their competencies for community college leaders.

The importance of leading with compassion and care during a crisis is supported by the research of Wooten and James (2008), who found relationships and caring are critical to leading during a crisis, and Gardner (2009), who concluded successful leaders need to possess the ability to understand their constituents and their needs. These leaders demonstrated care for their students without basic needs. According to Klann (2003), "A sincere interest and genuine concern for others go a long way toward meeting the emotional needs of people experiencing a crisis" (p.

15). During a crisis, employers should not focus on employees' mistakes, but rather provide extra support and care to instill confidence and empower them (Kaul et al., 2020). Leaders can be more effective when their decisions and policies are seen to be made with empathy and understanding (Haslam et al., 2021).

Employee empowerment is critical to the effectiveness of an institution (Said, 2015). Empowering employees and promoting creative thinking is critical to implementing problem-solving quickly and effectively during a crisis (Forster et al., 2020). By empowering their employees, these leaders were able to quickly address the issues experienced by BNI students. Empowering employees and team members relates to many of the literature findings, including Hayward's (1997) and Coleman's (1996) research emphasizing the importance of providing employees the tools to communicate and collaborate effectively to build trust and feel empowered to act during a crisis.

Leading during a crisis can be challenging, but possessing certain competencies can lessen the challenge and help leaders successfully guide their institutions through difficult times. The authors discovered that four out of seven competencies emerged more frequently across the 12 participants' interviews, these include compassion and care, openness and communication, consultation and collaboration, and empowerment.

Change is difficult and complex and usually takes a substantial amount of time. The COVID-19 pandemic assisted institutions in making changes at an accelerated rate. Leaders who successfully lead change use all existing communication channels to communicate the strategy and transformation or change (Kotter, 1995). Aligning people by communicating the future direction through words and deeds and gaining acceptance and commitment helps move an institution forward (Goin, 2011).

Findings from this study also provided insight into how community college leaders can implement changes and/or services during a crisis that will support students holistically and enable the institution to anchor that change after the crisis has subsided. The pandemic itself created an urgency that participants could capitalize on to find ways to change services to address students' BNI. Leaders accomplished this by communicating quickly and often throughout the pandemic about the BNI students were facing. According to Kotter (1995), "Leaders of successful efforts use the credibility afforded by short-term wins to tackle even more significant problems. They go after systems and structures inconsistent with the transformation vision and have not been confronted before" (p.139).

Leaders also focused on the gains made during the pandemic to aid the attempt to institutionalize supporting BNI. Gains included—but were not limited to—providing technology to students without access to computers or Wi-Fi, establishing food pantries and clothing closets, and providing mental health support. The strategies to institutionalize change included applying for and receiving grants to fund the BNI initiatives and developing one-stop shops to provide wrap-around services to all students. According to Kotter (1995), "Change sticks when it becomes 'the way we do things around here,' when it seeps into the bloodstream of the institution" (p. 18). Leaders must personify the change they want to make.

Anchoring change must be rooted in the institution's shared values and embedded in the culture (Kotter, 2012).

Conclusion

Many competencies and services had to be utilized and implemented throughout the pandemic to successfully support students. Participants reported that demonstrating compassion and care was critical to supporting students during the pandemic. Creating open communication that was clear, concise, and constant while also encouraging collaboration was vital to successfully leading and supporting the meeting of students' BNI. Empowering employees with the knowledge and tools necessary to support students during the pandemic also proved to be an essential leadership competency to reduce students' BNI during the pandemic.

Many changes and services were implemented during the pandemic to support students' BNI, most revolved around adding BNI services, including food pantries, mental health support, and emergency aid. The most impactful implementation, however, was adding a one-stop shop to provide wrap-around services to address BNI, including mental health, food pantries, clothes closets, personal hygiene products, childcare, transportation, emergency aid, and housing assistance.

This study provides a starting point for understanding leadership competencies critical to leading during a crisis. It provides a framework for fostering effective change that institutions could utilize as they strive to address students' BNI during and after a crisis. Future studies on whether BNI will remain a permanent fixture in community college culture would be most valuable to the community college arena as well as all of higher education. Further research and interviews are needed to reveal the complete picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on BNI and how institutions can more fully support students during times like these.

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