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COMMENTARY

Cogs, COVID, and Care: The Role of an Anthropologist and Administrator during the Pandemic

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Abstract

This commentary serves as a reflection on the impact of COVID-19 and other current events that have coincided with the pandemic from my perspective as an anthropologist and faculty administrator. With consideration of the multiple levels of decision-making involved in the pandemic response, the pedagogical implications of this current moment, and the significance of care within our academic spaces, I point to the use of anthropological approaches for sustaining the resilience of institutions of higher education despite our recent challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19; faculty administrator; higher education; resilience

Introduction

As a faculty administrator in the College of Education at a public university in the Southeastern United States, I relish opportunities to incorporate anthropological concepts into my work with students, faculty, and staff. Because I was not currently teaching during the Spring 2021 semester, I was excited to participate as a guest lecturer for a newly-developed course in the History, Anthropology, and Philosophy department. Along with another anthropologist colleague, I was asked to present two lectures on a topic of my choosing that would contribute to this *Diversity and Difference in World History* course; the course is focused on various aspects of global diversity and includes historical perspectives on race, racism, and oppression. After discussing potential topics with my colleagues, I settled on "Race/Racism in Anthropology" and "Race in the U.S. Education System" and selected dates during the same weeks as my fellow anthropologist. In late January 2021, the instructor of record for the course reached out to both of us to provide details about the class meetings – the number of students, the classroom location, and the Zoom link we could use if we chose virtual presentations rather than meeting face-to-face. My colleague and I proceeded to email the instructor with additional questions regarding the available equipment, potential use of a microphone, and the expected number of students in the classroom versus those attending online.

The instructor's response indicated the stark contrast between this and previous pre-pandemic class visits: she gave us a count of the number of students currently in quarantine, how many had provided notifications of positive COVID-19 tests, and how many had been online for the previous class period. To prepare for the lectures, I created PowerPoint presentations that could be shared in the classroom and via Zoom, I dismissed the idea of using handouts and included all relevant information on the slides, and I structured the instructional time to include whole-class discussions rather than breakout groups. The email chain was a reminder of the situation at our institution and, more broadly, that of our state university system. As students, faculty, administrators, and staff, we were navigating the perils of keeping an academic institution running during a pandemic while attempting to practice pedagogical harm reduction. Since the summer of 2020, efforts to minimize harm from the pandemic have also coincided with the goal of maximizing opportunities for teaching and learning about racialized violence against Black and Asian American citizens, and with an emphasis on the significance of education in our current historical moment.

This piece serves as a reflection on my roles as an applied anthropologist, educator, and faculty administrator navigating academic spaces throughout the pandemic. Much of the recent published work on the impacts of COVID-19 in higher education focuses on challenges faced by students and faculty as we struggle to adapt institutional policies and practices. I offer a perspective based on my position among the leadership within one college of our public university. As a liaison between students, faculty, staff, and the university cabinet, my work has a direct impact on communication between various actors within the system. I also consider that, as a faculty administrator, there are various levels of decision-making to which I am not privy. My work is most important as it relates to the engagement of faculty and students who are ultimately most affected. Here, I strive to make meaning of the tumult that has affected multiple semesters of our academic calendar and to highlight the importance of harm reduction, critical pedagogy, and the prioritization of care over the last year in higher education.

Decisions, Decisions

Numerous articles published by the U.S. popular media, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Inside Higher Education* addressed the challenges and general confusion surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact throughout most of 2020. Public and private academic institutions seemed to reel from the initial response to the pandemic, as they received conflicting messages from public health experts and the White House. Several issues were the frequent subject of these news stories: the range of responses of various institutions, the social behaviors of college-aged youth, and how the shift to online learning affected faculty and students. After the initial shutdown of most U.S. colleges and universities during the Spring 2020 semester, staggered campus reopenings during the summer and fall revealed distinct policy developments at the institutional and state levels. For the Fall 2020 semester, according to the College Crisis Initiative, 44% of institutions

utilized fully or primarily online instruction, 21% used a hybrid model, and 27% offered fully or primarily in-person instruction (College Crisis Initiative, n.d.). News stories pointed to the lack of consistency within and between academic institutions, even those located within the same state (Redden 2020; Seltzer 2020; *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 2020). Policy changes combined with the availability of COVID-19 testing led to delayed campus return dates for employees and students. Additional concerns arose in August 2020 as news outlets and observers shifted their focus to students socializing unmasked and un-distanced in college towns (see St. Amour 2020). College and university presidents issued emails and warnings asking students to discontinue large parties and gatherings that would trigger super-spreader events prior to starting the fall semester. Meanwhile, faculty who were already impacted by the abrupt shift to online learning during the spring worked to adapt their courses again and to incorporate new or unfamiliar technology (Crawford et al. 2020).

For our institution, as for many others, decisions regarding campus returns, instructional modalities, and other relevant policies during this time were made at the state level. While upper-level cabinet members at the university requested the input of deans, department heads, and other faculty, many of the ultimate procedures and processes developed were decided by governing bodies that operate at a distance from our campuses. Often, those who are making decisions within our institutions are themselves relatively distanced from the daily business of teaching and scheduling, providing support services for students, and receiving complaints and concerns from faculty, staff, and students. These same university administrators, however, contend with distinct challenges related to public safety, system-level budgetary restrictions, overall changes in personnel, and trends in student and credit-hour numbers.

For me, having changed positions from department head to assistant dean during the pandemic meant that I had to relearn the scope of these roles during a time of crisis. The leadership team of our college worked with diligence and flexibility to understand our responsibilities in relation to the wider institution and the university system. As I see it, we did our best to fully adapt as cogs in the wheel of state-wide decisions. Part of this meant realizing the desperate need for us as faculty administrators to understand that uncertainty had become the new norm. Our plans had to consider the short-term pandemic environment and the long-term, post-COVID-19 consequences of our actions simultaneously.

University faculty learned to incorporate course modifications in response to related changes and shifting directives. Issues like internet availability, access to course materials, and health-related absences required faculty and staff to develop urgent solutions that would facilitate some continuity in students' educations. Instructors adapted their attendance policies following instructions from university leadership that would preclude students from being withdrawn or from failing courses due solely to low attendance. Information was provided to encourage students to use university services, including

training on the use of virtual course tools and mental health resources. In the midst of uncertainty and academic obstacles, faculty sought to minimize the potential for increasing disparities between our students as it became apparent that low-income students and those from communities most affected by the pandemic (especially Black and Latinx communities) were most likely to experience interruptions to their academic progress. Pedagogical harm reduction as a way to better support students through the pandemic involved faculty collaboration with various offices that provide student services, the use of innovative tech tools and various forms of instruction to engage students equitably, and attention to individual students' needs and concerns throughout each semester for the purpose of early interventions. During the last academic year, faculty have had to make decisions on a regular basis that would directly impact the extent to which their virtual and hybrid classrooms provide adequate support for students struggling with the precarity of these current times.

Critical Pedagogy

The position that I occupy at the university involves supervising multiple staff members, directing several student programs, and coordinating diversity and inclusion initiatives within our college. While I transitioned between roles in July 2020, my ultimate objectives remained the same: to support students directly and to support the efforts of our faculty and staff in their work with students as effectively as possible. Initially, the goal seemed to be to communicate information, procedures, and policy changes to faculty and staff as early, as often, and as objectively as possible. Our leadership team, after all, was operating from a harm reduction standpoint. How do we share relevant and crucial information with those who need it in the college while minimizing the added stress and anxiety that it could cause? How do I request input and questions from colleagues while communicating that I can often only guess or assume the rationale behind the answers, if I even know them in the first place? Unsure of what other faculty administrators were doing to cope, I attended numerous webinars and read as many of the pandemic-related articles on higher education that I could manage. I consumed posts providing tips and suggestions for how university leaders should respond to the evolving crisis. Then, during the summer, the news cycle shifted. The killings of Black men and women were broadcast and described thoroughly through every news outlet and social media platform. As a Black woman, anthropologist, educator, and administrator, what was my role?

With the assistance of the dean of our College of Education, I planned a virtual forum where our faculty could express their perceptions and questions regarding the ongoing "racial reckoning," and where we could strategize about how to best support each other and our students. The session was well-attended and provided a way to share relevant resources with attendees. We organized a subsequent forum for students that included faculty volunteers who could provide guidance and support. We were invited to organize a similar faculty session by the dean of another college who felt it important to engage with issues that were impacting students and faculty alike. In addition, I reached out to an

anthropologist colleague who conducts research on policing and racism and asked them to conduct a lecture for our university community.

What stands out to me as I reflect on that time are the ways intersecting issues of race, gender, class, and public health collided within our academic spaces. I observed colleagues struggling to contend with their own mental health, in addition to that of their families and students. University employees with health conditions were concerned by the prospect of returning to campus and operating as “normal.” Students who were already challenged by in-person classes felt overwhelmed by online coursework, overlooked by faculty who struggled to meet the demands of virtual instruction while balancing their new realities, and anxious over the health of their family members. The special program students with whom I work are all Black and Latinx undergraduates; many are of non-traditional age, and all are working at least one part-time job. I have observed these students experiencing trauma due to their racialized, gendered, and class-based positionalities during the pandemic. When the effort of emotional investment in my interactions with colleagues seemed daunting, I considered the essential care that mentors, friends, and encouraging supervisors have provided to me throughout my time in academia. To navigate the affective elements in maintaining connectedness with students, I re-read the work of Meyers (2009) and further settled into the notion that caring is a powerful component of the role of college faculty.

Through the work of supporting our university students and colleagues, it became apparent that my responsibility as a faculty administrator had to adapt to the times. Leaving an open tab with Whitaker’s (2020) brief yet impactful *Chronicle* article outlining suggestions for department chairs during COVID-19, I embraced the notion of being vulnerable and human. This meant channeling my energy into efforts that would provide faculty and students with useful resources for their own sense-making processes while considering their individual roles during the pandemic. This also meant sharing with colleagues during our faculty forum that I was barely keeping it together despite the comfort of my dining room-turned-office. Most heart-wrenchingly, this also meant informing students experiencing the loss of family members due to COVID-19 that they were not alone.

With this vulnerability has also come an understanding that my colleagues and I are still replaceable parts of the whole within our institutions. We are expendable from the vantage points of the universities and the wider higher education system; our students are not. Because of this, the work that we do to engage, guide, and facilitate learning for our students has to involve critical pedagogy that remains relevant to our sociocultural present. Our opportunities to leave lasting imprints depend on it. As Giroux states in his timely 2019 work:

Pedagogy is never innocent, and if it is to be understood and problematized as a form of academic labor, educators have the obligation not only to critically question and register their own subjective involvement in how and what they teach, but also

to resist all calls to depoliticize pedagogy through appeals to either scientific objectivity or ideological dogmatism. This suggests the need for educators to rethink the cultural and ideological baggage they bring to each educational encounter; it also highlights the necessity of making educators ethically and politically accountable and self-reflective for the stories they produce, the claims they make upon public memory, and the images of the future they deem legitimate (Giroux 2019, 44).

For university faculty teaching during a pandemic, incorporating critical pedagogy means narrowing the gap between real-world encounters and the content presented in our courses. For instructors of anthropology more specifically, this is a call to further encourage critical thinking, reflection, and the holistic perspectives embedded in the discipline to engage students in understanding our sociopolitical present. In order to effectively facilitate learning in our courses, we have to fully grasp the levels of privilege, experience, knowledge gaps, and vulnerability that we bring into our classroom spaces.

Resilience and Survival

On January 20, 2021, my colleague and I skipped a virtual meeting to watch the U.S. presidential inauguration on computer screens in our adjacent offices. Shortly after experiencing the celebratory nature of the historic event in real time, I became decidedly irritated that a meeting had been scheduled at that time to begin with. The university higher-ups who had scheduled the meeting had undoubtedly noticed the overlap but decided that the faculty administrators in attendance had university matters to attend to that took priority over marking the start of the Biden-Harris administration. I was confronted by the notion that, in our positions, we are expected to be dutiful servant leaders. Or, perhaps, robots. In spite of the expectations set, I see it as my role to resist indiscriminate compliance with insensitive procedures and to question policies that counter the greater goals of our work in academia. For anthropologists doing the work of social justice pedagogy, engaging issues of race and gender in our teaching and in our scholarship, this was a historic moment worth marking. For me, a Black woman from Baltimore, it was soul-stirring.

Another significant aspect of teaching anthropology during uncertain times is the need to prioritize care both in and outside of our classrooms. At times, we may be called to shield our students from policies and procedures that fail to account for their lived experiences during times of hardship. Recent research has demonstrated the impact of the pandemic on our university students, including effects on sleep quality (Marelli et al. 2020) and mental health (Odriozola-González et al. 2020; Sahu 2020). Faculty are expected to address student needs and to support students despite the fact that they might be lacking crucial support from their administrators and institutions themselves. Contending with the shift to online instruction while struggling with childcare, social isolation, and physical and emotional health during the pandemic has proven challenging for even the most

experienced educators. It is imperative that faculty share information on mental health resources with students, as well as invest time and energy into self-care and wellness for ourselves. We should use our classroom spaces to make human connections that will alleviate some of the disconnect experienced within our institutions as a result of physical isolation, thinking critically about our roles as educators and the ultimate goals of our education system.

As other researchers have noted, anthropology provides us with the precise tools needed to use holistic approaches to analyze the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact within our academic institutions (Higgins, Martin, and Vesperi 2020), as well as to address the racial reckoning of 2020 and the profound significance of the 2021 inauguration. Anthropology as a discipline provides us the language for naming the behaviors and dynamics that we find within these institutions at multiple levels, from the classroom to the conference rooms where those in power are making decisions that impact the whole. At this time, the role of anthropologist/educators in these spaces is to validate and value the knowledge and experiences that our students bring to our campuses, and to model the types of resilience and resistance that shape the educational experiences of these students. It is more important now than ever to utilize the humanistic, holistic elements of the discipline to connect with each other and to connect our content with the broader context of this sociocultural and political moment.

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