Transforming Higher Education Post COVID-19

By Sasha Taner

Sasha Taner is Program Director and Research Coordinator at the Institute for Women's Leadership at Rutgers University. Sasha is a Ph.D. candidate, ABD, in Global Affairs and her expertise includes immigration and globalization, women's leadership education and development, oral history research and multimedia knowledge production. Sasha has worked for over twenty years in the field of education and her contributions to the community include aiding resettlement processes of asylum seekers and refugees, and serving women and children survivors of domestic violence.

Ushering in a period of intensified global precarity, the COVID-19 era continues to expose existing vulnerabilities of marginalized populations everywhere. At this current socio-historic juncture where disparities are widened, borders are tightened, and nation-state centric policies are implemented, the decisions that universities make now may determine their future existence. While the global health crisis has most higher education institutions (HEIs) hinged on logistical factors of budgets, admissions, public health, and safety of the university community, some institutions are declaring fiscal crisis and initiating acute funding reforms to close financial gaps in an effort to survive. These circumstances further exacerbate pressures on families and young people who are seeking post-secondary educational achievement as part of their road to success (Guarnaccia, 2019). With all of the additional challenges, first generation college students, immigrant and other underserved populations are at risk for unequal educational opportunities and professional development.

The ways in which the pandemic has impacted those seeking higher education are still uncertain. The digital divide, housing and food insecurity are a few of the realities we know are affecting vulnerable student populations. Trends toward corporatization in higher education are hard to deny. Alarmingly, the commodification of HEIs weakens our ability to cultivate knowledge as a public good. This creates a context that steers us further away from inclusive and equitable structures, factors that can determine educational outcomes and meeting student needs for continued admission and retention. Intellectual leaders warn of the long-term risks of academic capitalism and HEIs operating as an export industry, questioning what role higher education will play in the future (DasGupta, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2010; Qi, 2016). Predictions of falling enrollments and the shuttering of more HEIs are sobering trajectories that urge us to revisit and reconsider priorities and purpose.

Now more than ever, it is evident that significant societal transitions are taking place and alternative models for education are needed. Developing leaders for social transformation, committing to equity and social justice, and aligning with Sustainable Development Goals can be critical factors to develop our capacity to transgress the challenges of our times. The complexities posed by the COVID-19 outbreak require a nuanced set of interconnected visions for mapping the way forward. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are poised to support such aspirations, defining an accessible path toward the practical application of a paradigm shift in education and leadership. The United Nations' Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) acknowledges that universities, through, "sustainability strategies, research, teaching, pedagogy, and campus practices, [...are…] key drivers for achieving the SDGs.

Even though SDGs present an accessible and relevant framework, the majority of HEIs have yet to put them at the forefront of their strategic plans. Flexible enough to inform local anchor missions while bridging to global goals, SDGs envelops the kind of depth and breadth of sustainable strategies and action plans to ensure resources thrive. Josep M. Vilalta, director of the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) states that, "despite a certain resurgence of nation-states (retreating, nationalistic and inward-looking), it is inevitable that the politics and management of collective affairs will be approached from increasingly more global and local spheres. The old aphorism of 'thinking globally and acting locally' will take on more strength and meaning (2020)." Aligning with the SDGs and embracing HEIs as "communities of practice based on principles of accountability, civic engagement, [and] cultural humility," we are better positioned to nurture academic integrity and build channels for mutual and reciprocal community relationships while operating within larger neoliberal globalization forces (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

On the ground, educators and administrators continue to seek out ways to adapt by learning new technologies and ways of being in a virtual world while drawing upon existing models with future-forward possibilities. For example, we can deepen high touch, relational based approaches to learning and teaching in a high tech and digital environment (Sayem, 2012; Edmunds, Gicheva, & Thrift, et al., 2019). Oral history and participatory qualitative methods offer ways of conducting community-engaged research across disciplines, which can apply well to remote contexts (Nielsen, ed., 2019; Srigley, Zembrzycki, & Iacovetta, 2018). Transformational and feminist informed models of education can be tapped to respond to the needs of our students and to develop a pipeline for socially responsible leadership (Batliwala, 2011; Taner, 2019). Integrating social justice approaches to teaching and research can expand dominant narratives allowing us to reflect on history in a more holistic, inclusive, and intersectional manner. For instance, a feminist orientation to learning often centers marginalized and underrepresented individuals in our queries. A wider adoption of this model can help bring lifelines to disciplines that are often siloed and traditional in their training, and more importantly, can become that basis for meaningful and connected student work that can inspire calls to action. Researching the lived experiences of a wider scope of diverse individuals, we can uncover and re-narrate histories often untold. Through teaching active listening and narrative work with a social justice lens, we can transform the ways research is seen and valued at the university.

Graça Machel and other global leaders came together virtually on July 18, 2020 to commemorate her late husband on Mandela Day, and to encourage a global social compact that harnesses the disruptions brought forth by COVID-19 to reexamine and rebuild structures that are currently built on exclusivity and unjust ethical practices. With this charge, HEIs, too, can continue to operate with existing capitalist market ideologies, or commit to a "deep transformation process" (Knobel, 2020). HEIs, in choosing the latter, would be able to create more momentum for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, and aid in ushering forth what economist Winona LaDuke coined, a *Just Transition.*

Students and young people have always been a shaping force in politics and social change and are demanding access, accountability and equity across structures, including their institutions of learning. If we don't respond now to uplift and embrace a new understanding of how we learn, teach, and grow together we can miss out on one of the greatest opportunities the university has been afforded. If we do not validate and support universities as social change drivers, we are missing an opportunity to shape what comes next.

References

Batliwala, S. (2010, May). Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud. https://www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/feminist-leadership-clearing-conceptual-cloud-srilatha-batliwala.pdf

Srigley, K., Zembrzycki, S., & Iacovetta, F. (2018). *Beyond Women's Words* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Dasgupta, R. (2018, April). Demise of the Nation State. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/05/demise-of-the-nation-state-rana-dasgupta

J. Edmunds, D. Gicheva, B. Thrift, et al. (2019). High tech, high touch: The impact of an online course intervention on academic performance and persistence in higher education, *The Internet and Higher Education.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2020.100790

Guarnaccia, P. J. (2019). *Immigration, diversity and student journeys to higher education.* New York: Peter Lang.

Knobel, M. (2018, June 20). Universities in a World in Rapid Transformation: Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/universities-world-rapid-transformation

Nair, A., & Thomas, C. (2018, January 02). A Social Justice Approach to Building Community in Higher Education Today. https://www.insightintodiversity.com/a-social-justice-approach-to-building-community-in-higher-education-today/

Nielsen, J., ed. (2019). *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences.* Routledge.

Qi, X. (2016, January). Globalized Higher Education. In Turner, B. & Holton, R. (Eds.), The Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies. 2nd edition. Page.328-343. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297124928_Globalized_Higher_Education

Sayem, A. (2012). High Tech vs High Touch: are Language Teachers Leading the Way with Education Technology?. *International Journal of Literature, Linguistics & Interdisciplinary Studies.* Volume 1. Page 79-93.

Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2010). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state and higher education.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Taner, S. (2019). Feminist Leadership Interviewing as a Tool for Social Transformation. In Alonso, A, and Langle De Paz, T. (Eds.), *The Time is Now: Feminist Leadership for a New Era.* Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Gender. https://www.catunescomujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Ebook-The-Time-is-Now-Definitivo_compressed.pdf

Vilalta, J. M. (2020, April 6). After Covid-19 (I): Either we swim together or we drown. http://www.guninetwork.org/articles/after-covid-19-i-either-we-swim-together-or-we-drown