

Covid-19: A university experience

Based on dozens of interviews, anthropologist **Melissa Schrift** examines one university's leadership response to a panoply of challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is a university in the Appalachian highlands with approximately 13,000 students. Dr Brian Noland, who arrived as ETSU's President in 2012, was solidifying a changing senior leadership team when Covid-19 arrived. This article is based on oral history interviews highlighting the experiences of Noland and his senior leadership team during the pandemic.

Noland had been closely following the progression of the Covid-19 virus since January 2020. Early conversations included academic experts at ETSU's five health sciences colleges (ETSU Health). Initial meetings were measured, although this was sometimes contentious as everyone was navigating the pandemic. However tentative, these early exchanges provided a critical foundation as the ETSU community navigated the unfolding of the pandemic.

On March 2, administration sent the first campus-wide Covid-19 announcement, marking the beginning of the attempt among senior leadership to establish clear communication, with an emphasis on continuity. March also marked the beginning of efforts by senior leadership to tease apart the details of redefining the professional roles, learning processes and physical environments embedded in the academic psyche.

Institutions of higher education are notoriously unwieldy, they are the sum of disparate parts that move slowly and stubbornly. However, the urgency of Covid-19 subsumed the abstractions and deliberations that define the university ecosystem. Spring break offered a good punctuation point to make decisions. The team prepared to pivot, the oft-used term that implies

a breeziness at odds with the clear agonies of making decisions in a minefield of unknowns and mixed messages.

While the national news featured reckless students on spring break, the less visible story rested with the more vulnerable students who were facing displacement from their halls of residence. Former President Donald Trump's xenophobic comments aggravated the already anxiety-ridden process of helping international students who had relocated and were unable to return to their home countries. Other students simply had no home to return to. With 40 per cent of the student body consisting of first-generation students, ETSU often provides an

important respite from crowded spaces, care giving, family expectations, rigid world views and the range of household chores specific to rural households.

Safe spaces were provided for students who had nowhere to go. What could not be controlled, however, was the isolation that students experienced in the educational desert that campus became. Social distancing, occasional quarantines and the general fear of contagion created new rules of engagement. Despite the best efforts of the university to breach those gaps, the post-apocalyptic feel of the empty campus was disorientating. Vulnerable students haunted senior leadership, staff and the many faculty who mentored these students in the classroom. Small acts of heroism emerged, ranging from reaching out to students who were suffering, to adapting the virtual classroom for student learning in any environment.

Safety first approach

A competing priority in early March was establishing protocol for campus. In doing so, Noland capitalised on the myriad resources of ETSU Health to establish an early, informed and multidimensional 'safety first' approach to the university management of Covid-19. In a state where education is profoundly affected by politics, Noland's decision to 'follow the science' marked a departure from state and national rhetoric.

The President's unwavering commitment to science brought relief and affirmation to thousands of overworked and underappreciated frontline healthcare workers. Misinformation and denial had very real implications for healthcare practitioners and the levels

of public denial and non-adherence to safety measures multiplied the burdens of frontline workers.

There is little doubt that history will bear out a number of truths from the pandemic. Primary among these will be the country's general disregard for the health of the practitioners who risked their own lives to respond to the consequences of that negligence. In a particularly emotional interview, Dr Leigh Johnson compares the daily trauma of stress to deployment incurred during the pandemic. She also acknowledges the impact of a leader who sides with science and truth.

The safety first mantra was echoed unapologetically from

Despite the best efforts of the university to breach those gaps, the post-apocalyptic feel of the empty campus was disorientating



Philip Bout | Unsplash

critical corners of the university, including Quillen College of Medicine under the leadership of Dean Bill Block, and the College of Public Health, led by Dean Randy Wykoff. With a nod to Thomas Jefferson's quote that any democracy needs an informed electorate, Dr Block views medical education as a venue to teach students medicine, as well as to think critically, engage with social issues and communicate with people. For a medical college that serves as steward for the Appalachian region, Block is the kind of Dean you want.

Dean Wykoff has garnered respect across campus for his industriousness in building a college that expands the traditional boundaries of public health. In a more telling accomplishment, he is received with admiration and affection by those who work for him. It was no surprise therefore, when he was bequeathed the moniker of 'the most interesting Dean in the world'. The tongue-in-cheek take on the popular commercial aimed to communicate important realities about the pandemic. Topics that he discussed ranged from conspiracy theories to epidemiology.

In relation to medical response, the Appalachian region mirrored the national dynamic, lacking basic forms of PPE. The failure to produce and distribute adequate supplies at the national level spurred a grassroots movement across the United States to create, collect, and give materials to frontline workers. At ETSU, that movement came in the form of a large community of volunteers.

With entrepreneurial zeal, Dr Keith Johnson and Dr Bill Hemphill in the Department of Engineering developed and produced face shields. On the other side of campus, Victoria Stabile, a fourth-year medical student, formed a local chapter of Med Supply, a group that re-routed medical materials from businesses to frontline workers. Art Professor Dr Vanessa Mayorez intersected with Victoria Stabile when she deposited unused N95 masks from the Department of Art and Design. Her combination of interests in design and public service made her a natural candidate to join Victoria and, eventually, take the lead in designing and sewing homemade masks, as well as coordinating community members who wanted to contribute.

Steep learning curve

While the physical campus was closing, a newly expanded virtual world was opening up. Aware of the need to buttress the student experience during Covid-19, senior leadership strove for as smooth a transition as possible. Under the direction of Dr Karen King, Information Technology Services fielded the flood of calls that came with the steep learning curve among faculty, staff and students working online. The university invested in infrastructure to sustain courses, enable meetings and ensure student access.

As the remote world persevered, safety in the physical world was also a primary concern. President Noland's commitment to safety first required a serious and capable team based in Facilities Management. The team became the architect of the brave new world of a Covid-19-safe university. While this team had long been responsible for the maintenance of the physical world that the rest of the university relied upon, the pandemic amplified this responsibility in substantial ways.

The team became central to the complex campus network

of case management when people began to test positive for the virus. While healthcare teams managed the individuals, Facilities managed the spaces left behind. These spaces were neither neatly defined nor confined. While a body could be delivered to a medical practitioner, the perception and fear of contagion lurked persistently. Given the unpredictability of the virus, as well as our limited knowledge of Covid-19, safety became a game of blindfold chess.

By fall and winter of 2020, Covid-19 was ravaging the region. The President's decision to limit the opening of campus had serious financial implications that heightened anxieties across the university. When Noland decided to move to single-occupancy residence halls, he was aware of the ramifications. However, with conservative budget planning and federal funds, the team weathered the worst of the pandemic-related financial crisis. Unlike many universities, ETSU did not result in a single furlough or job loss.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Noland's leadership saved lives. The President's actions rippled through the community in less obvious ways that we are only beginning to understand. His commitment to science brought relief and affirmation to the many overworked

Misinformation and denial had very real implications for healthcare practitioners

and underappreciated frontline healthcare workers. For those who lost a loved one, the President's decisiveness offered space to grieve without competing stressors.

As we begin to understand the unfolding of the pandemic in the educational system, ETSU's clarity in mission and decisive communication will serve as an important model. The President's perseverance with safety-based decisions served as a touchstone for the university and region and will endure as part of his legacy.

As the pandemic evolved, the collective stress mutated. For some, isolation, loneliness, economic loss and depression persist. Others are facing the trauma of having lost a loved one and have not been able to memorialise them in traditional ways. Healthcare workers have dealt with the trauma of working in the face of overwhelming suffering and death and the unrelenting fear of contagion. In addition, the vaccination programme has been met by considerable scepticism and hesitancy. New and changing challenges will require a second (and third) wind among senior leadership, staff, faculty, and students.

Noland's final thoughts in an interview from 2021 continue to resonate a year later: "The whole world changed. In the end, some of these problems and issues aren't what matters. What matters is family. I think this institution is a family. It's going to be stronger when it's done. But that's the only thing that really matters. The rest of it is just noise." 

Author



DR MELISSA SCHRIFT is a Professor of Anthropology at East Tennessee State University, Tennessee, in the Appalachian highlands. She directs the Culture and Health programme and serves as the pre-health academic liaison for the College of Arts and Sciences. She is the author of three books and multiple articles. Her most recent research focuses on anatomical education and the social history of medicine. She was awarded an American Fellowship for her work on *Melungeons*