

# Crisis Prepared Foundations: Partnerships and Systems Awareness in Educational Institutions

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the role partnerships play in creating innovation during a crisis and how partnerships prepare organizations for future crises. While the COVID-19 pandemic is taken as a major backdrop for this article, the focus in this article of building lasting partnerships and systems awareness before and during crises is applicable to many other institutions. The author believes that partnerships are the foundation to thriving and innovating during the most difficult of times.

**Keywords:** *systems thinking, collaboration, leadership, management, academic libraries*



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The COVID-19 worldwide pandemic has tested every educational institution and exposed the systems, for better and worse, within which they exist. This article will examine the process of building a crisis-prepared team by nurturing strategic partnerships and by demonstrating values and expertise to partners and campus administrators at a small, rural, public university in Colorado through the experiences of the director of library services and online education. This article explores how to learn from our systems in order to better prepare for the next crisis. In the shortest possible terms, I have learned that services are replaceable, programs are replaceable, and access to certain resources is not a guarantee; however, people and partnerships are irreplaceable, especially when it comes to changing systems. I believe that nothing prepared us more for this crisis and helped us innovate more than the partnerships we built and nourished before the pandemic, and that those partnerships should persist, along with new ones, once it ends.

Before this crisis ever began, I was lucky to be working with a strong and dedicated group of professionals. My team's willingness to explore nimble services allowed us to shift quickly, our dedication to partnerships created resources that we would not have had otherwise, and our luck and ability to fill new and unique roles helped us preserve jobs, while still enabling us to protect the health and well-being of team members. Rogers (2003) described innovation as an "idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption" (p. 12). Innovation has been essential to surviving this pandemic and it is even more essential for the next potential crisis. Einstein said, "We can't solve problems with the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" (Mielach, 2012, para. 5). While we cannot end a crisis with the same thinking that got us into that crisis, we can build a framework prior to crises that enables us to survive and grow.

## Partnerships and Innovation

Although this paper will focus on some positive components of our response to a crisis, the pandemic has not been easy and it has not been without major losses. For example, some team members were furloughed for short periods of time, we have lost resources because of budget cuts, and some connections with faculty, students, and staff because of real and perceived structural and technological barriers. While many who analyze this time may choose to discuss the difficult decisions they made during these crises, I found most of our decisions were easy to make because I had decided long ago—as a leader and as a team—that I would always prioritize people, which is not always the case in educational organizations. Losses were mitigated to some extent by partnerships, for example shifting some team members to emergent Information Technology (IT) work rather than furloughing them, but people were always prioritized as the only irreplaceable resource from my perspective (below we will discuss not spending money in the moment in order to save jobs later). My team spent years integrating into programs and services to build rapport and meaningful connections. To do so we worked directly with faculty through shared governance, IT on shared projects, and individual departments on programming and resources. Our efforts are best exemplified by the integration of online education duties into the library's mission just prior to the pandemic. What happened with online education at my university is indicative of the work the library team has been doing for years; however, the timing of this innovation was propitious for both the university and library team.

Just before the pandemic, our university decided to establish a new online education team that would be a small and independent unit with support from IT and academic affairs. We successfully petitioned the provost and convinced a steering committee to let the library build the online education team, rather than create a new siloed department without deep institutional connections. Without

existing trust, the library would not have been given this particular project since our team's expertise was not necessarily a traditional fit; since, for example, we did not employ any instructional designers at the time. However, because of the provost's and the steering committee's belief in the library team, the library was awarded two new positions and the institution-wide responsibility for online education. My title was also changed from director of library services to director of library services and online education. Two months after the creation of the online education unit, the pandemic began and our university shifted to online delivery of courses literally overnight (the shift was announced at 6pm on Sunday evening and we began online instruction the next day). The library's doors were closed to traffic and many traditional services were reimaged. The library team shifted to supporting faculty and students in new environments and filled new roles.

The library team's strong relationships with IT, faculty, and students helped create a successful transition to online education. The online education team worked with IT and faculty committees to identify and deploy new technology. The library has a longstanding relationship with IT that helped shape this experience because I had an incredible amount of faith in their work and expertise. For example, I knew that they could technically deploy Zoom and Panopto mid-semester and allow us to focus our time on pedagogy and front-end usage when some articulated that it was a mistake to add new technologies. Online education worked directly with faculty to make adjustments on the fly. Without the library's reputation as a strong and open partner, transitions would have been slowed from my perspective. Groups from across campus, including our faculty technology committee and Education department faculty, harnessed resources to support the new online education department because it was a program with the support and connections of the library. While these might sound like major assumptions, faculty articulated repeatedly to me when the online education unit was created

and also when the pandemic ensued, that they were excited and felt more comfortable because online education was part of the library and not something completely new.

The purpose of sharing this experience is not to say it was perfect, or even smooth, but to exemplify how the connections and partnerships of our library team were an unbreakable foundation that benefited our entire university. It has helped me to realize that I will seek perfect partners before I seek perfect programs and that these partners are key to surviving crises in an education system that does not always reward collaboration.

From my perspective, partnerships are the fundamental pillars of surviving and preparing for crises. While partnerships in and of themselves are not particularly innovative, doing things that other partners do not or would not is. For example, always asking “what we can do for them” rather than telling them what we need from them to begin with. Our library team builds partnerships first and foremost by being a reliable and thoughtful partner and knowing what we value. For example, early in the pandemic, our library and online education leadership team met and decided to immediately stop spending any uncontracted funds such as multi-year database or service contracts. We had an articulated, shared value of prioritizing people before any particular purchase. It was clear to most people that rough years were ahead, and we hoped to return as much money as possible to academic affairs and the general fund to demonstrate what we valued. As the financial year ended, we were able to discuss with the academic affairs why we returned these funds and how we hoped it would mitigate possible loss of employment or benefits in our department or across academic affairs. While we did not expect to be able to control future decisions, we did show that we were thoughtful partners, strengthening our foundation during this current crisis and for future crises. Partnerships have been the absolute key to our success.

## Systems

From my experience, the larger campus system becomes more apparent to me when I consider partnerships and the role they have played in my success. For me, partnerships are a key way to influence the system outside of one's own particular unit and two ideas from systems thinking literature have helped me to better understand librarianship, higher education, innovation, and our reactions to these current crises. First, watching local, state, federal, private, and governmental interlocking systems react over the last year has been illuminating. A key takeaway for me is that we should learn from what we experienced and believe what we saw. Of systems, Meadows (2008) wrote,

A system's function or purpose is not necessarily spoken, written, or expressed explicitly, except through the operation of the system. The best way to deduce the system's purpose is to watch for a while to see how the system behaves...Purposes are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals. (p. 14)

As we look toward future crises and innovations, we should consider how our systems functioned during this pandemic. How were we, as library professionals and teams, treated during this pandemic? How was our work valued or devalued? What were our systems' priorities and how were those evident in the outcomes? How were we essential to those outcomes? Across the country, there are stories of libraries being forced to open in suboptimal conditions, with no proper protection in place for workers (Attanasio, 2020; McLain, 2020; Peet, 2020). This is also happening in classrooms and related educational settings. While educators and librarians are being lauded for their work, some are not being protected with PPE or being prioritized for vaccines or care (Byrne, 2021; Fernandez, 2021; Sagrero, 2021). This is a system flaw that should not be ignored. Watch the system during this crisis to prepare for the next crises. We should not dismiss evidence as coincidence. There are many

comparisons in education to poor treatment of workers or students as being a function of the system, not a bug. For example, Robinson and Aronica (2015) wrote of standardized testing:

The students who feel alienated by current systems of standardization and testing may walk out the door, and it's left to them and others to pay the price... These problems are not accidental byproducts of standardized education; they are a structural feature of these systems. They were designed to process people according to particular conceptions of talent and economic need and were bound to produce winners and losers in just those terms. (p. 38)

The treatment of libraries and library workers during this crisis is not an accident; it is a feature of the system. Without strong partnerships and innovations, I have no doubt that our losses would have been greater and that we would be unlikely to influence how the system functions in the future.

To have any hope of influence, we cannot be outside our systems. As I have worked with so many others, I have heard people discussing problems and issues as though they exist for others and not for our teams. In my experience, when people situate themselves outside of the problems, they are unlikely to make meaningful changes. Systems thinking agrees. Stroh wrote,

Asking people to propose reforms to an existing system can lead them to think that they are not part of the system, and hence not part of the problem. Systems thinking enables people to see how they are part of the problem, which ironically increases their ability to develop effective solutions. (p. 83)

We must work to put ourselves deeply in the crises, even as we recommend reforms, in order to learn and build better foundations for the next crisis. We cannot enact changes in the system from the outside.

## Conclusion

My experience during this crisis has been shaped by strong partners and shared values. Innovations have flowed from those connections, beliefs, and relationships. While we may never experience a similar pandemic again, we will never be without crises, especially as we continue to explore our systems in the hopes of rooting out entrenched and recalcitrant systems of oppression and inequity. Partners can make us greater than the sum of our parts, but only if we are willing to place ourselves in those systems and to prioritize the welfare of all involved. You cannot predict what will happen next, but you can begin developing and strengthening partnerships that will help you persist.

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