Leadership in Brazilian public universities: initiatives conducted by three state universities of São Paulo in the context of COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the role of aspects related to public leadership in the actions developed by three state universities in São Paulo (Brazil) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the University of Campinas (Unicamp), University of São Paulo (USP) and São Paulo State University (Unesp).

Design/methodology/approach – Since this is a viewpoint article, part of the information presented is characterized by the authors’ points of view. It should be highlighted, however, that the information provided is based on searches in scientific bases, institutional websites and published press reports.

Findings – According to the authors, aspects of public leadership are being properly employed by the public servants of the analyzed universities, resulting in the positive actions that have been implemented.

Originality/value – There is no existing literature on public leadership in these Brazilian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Brazilian public universities, Public leadership, COVID-19 pandemic

Paper type Viewpoint

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the dynamics of the world economy and people's lives (Tisdell, 2020). Suddenly, companies were forced to adopt the kind of work known as WFH (Work From Home); educational and research institutions, when possible, changed their activities from classroom-based learning to a remote learning format (Krishnamurthy, 2020); and even moments of leisure are no longer experienced in favor of...
public health, to reduce the possibility of generalized contamination (Bartsch et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2020).

The social distancing applied in most countries, forced people to develop new skills, whether virtual or not, to reconcile the tasks of professional and personal life in the same environment and to pay greater attention to their own mental health due to drastic changes. Although the real consequences of these changes will be really understood in a few years, Jacob et al. (2020) argue that the negative consequences for people’s mental health, such as depression and anxiety, can already be perceived. Vindegaard and Benros (2020) estimate that these negative effects may be more evidenced in the long-term.

The way countries have been facing the COVID-19 pandemic is directly related to the positioning of their public leaders. An interesting example of public leadership at national level is the role played by the prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. The contamination rates of COVID-19 in New Zealand are drastically lower than in other countries (BBC News, 2020), as a result of the proactive role of Ardern in dealing with the pandemic. Another positive example of public leaders’ actions to deal with the pandemic is presented by Nemec (2020). According to the author, the low number of deaths related to COVID-19 in Slovakia can be attributed to its public leaders, who prioritized combating the pandemic over political disputes. Glenn et al. (2020) analyzed the public leadership of Chile, France and United States during the pandemic, highlighting the need for public health professionals to be better prepared to engage in the political process to benefit this field. The debates in the literature also considered differences in public leaders within countries. Plaček et al. (2020), for example, analyzed different strategies (active and passive) taken by municipal leaders in the Czech Republic and emphasized the lack of a proper central management of the crisis in the country.

Despite the relevance of government officials for public leadership, it is important to highlight that the concept of “public leadership” is not associated only with public decision-makers in high-visibility positions in government. Public leadership is also observed in the performance of street-level bureaucrats (health professionals who are at the forefront of combating the pandemic, police and teachers, among others), who exercise administrative leadership. Leadership, whether in the context of COVID-19 or not, is associated with the ability to integrate a team in order to achieve a synergistic result, understanding how each person can do his or her best with the available resources (Mutonyi et al., 2020).

Focusing on the academic environment, universities worldwide are playing an important role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic not only by generating scientific research (which is an essential and expected contribution by universities) but mainly by assuming a leadership role and being a catalyst for scientific and technological networks that involve national, international and supranational institutions. Although this role is not recent, some universities have assumed a unique role in the context of the pandemic. Their notoriety as an authority of technical and scientific knowledge, their capacity for inter-institutional action, their insertion in international networks and their access to scientific information gave them the ability to mobilize stakeholders to achieve a common goal, namely combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some universities – based on their political leadership (rectors, provosts and deans) and technical staff (professors/researchers, health workers, etc.) – quickly organized themselves to provide scientific advice with respect to the decision-making of government officials (city mayors and state governors) and also supporting the community, whether promoting debates, disseminating knowledge for people to minimize damage resulting from the pandemic, updating information and increasing awareness of the real existing risks. These activities are in line with the arguments presented by Dewar (2020), mentioning that each university must discuss ways to enhance its contribution to the fight against the pandemic.

It is also worth noting that Mitroff et al. (2006) identified the “serious outbreaks of illness” (p. 62) among the most probable reasons for crises in universities. According to the authors, university leaders should support multi-departmental crises-management teams, which
should exist continuously and not only during crises periods. In this sense, leaders should maintain crises management programs, in order to be prepared to handle crises. Wang and Hutchins (2010) also emphasize the importance of universities presenting crisis management programs. In their research, the crisis analyzed at Virginia Polytechnic Institute was caused by campus shootings.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, three of the state universities in São Paulo, Brazil (University of Campinas (Unicamp), University of São Paulo (USP) and São Paulo State University (Unesp) have been debating ways to enhance their contributions to the community, which is in line with the arguments of Dewar (2020). The status of the pandemic in Brazil is worrying, as can be verified from the data presented by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), but in this viewpoint article, we aim to emphasize the public leadership exercised within the academic environment, whether in the position of provosts, deans, or other post-secondary officials.

The three analyzed universities have didactic-scientific and budgetary-financial autonomy to develop their actions. Their budgetary resources come from the Treasury of the State of São Paulo, based on the percentage of a tax called ICMS (Tax on the Circulation of Goods and Services). Together the three universities receive 9.57% of this tax collected (Pesquisa Fapesp, 2019). Regarding their quality, they stand out among the top ten universities in Latin America (THE, 2020), presenting significant contributions regarding research outputs and student training. The global representativeness of these universities can be also verified with respect to their scientific production in the context of COVID-19: considering their combined scientific production on this subject, if they were a country, it would be ranked 22nd in volume of scientific production in the world (Folha de São Paulo, 2020). Some of their contributions can be highlighted, including the analysis (identification and sequencing) of the virus, the development of low cost respirators in Brazil and the development of diagnostic tests among others (Souza Filho and Alves, 2020).

In the beginning of the pandemic, Unicamp was the first Brazilian university to consider that continuing their activities in a face-to-face environment could compromise the health of their students and employees and, as far as possible, most actions converged to a virtual modality. Consequently, the Council of Rectors of the São Paulo State Universities (CRUESP), comprising the rectors of the three universities, together with the State Government of São Paulo, decided to suspend most of the presentational activities. CRUESP’s decision-making agility and security demonstrated its leadership in relation to other universities, which subsequently suspended their on-site activities; these actions are in line with what Wooldridge (2011) argued about the managerial decision-making in universities.

Considering various authorities’ health recommendations since the beginning of the pandemic, São Paulo universities have sought to monitor its evolution and contribute to minimizing its effects by examining different areas of knowledge and spheres of management. At first, the initiatives were structured according to the magnitude of the events. According to these events, the universities’ leaders were able to adapt these initiatives to improve results. For these to succeed, the participation of leaders at different hierarchical levels of the universities was essential.

At the municipal level, the Unicamp leaders’ actions were used as a basis, for example, for the Sports Department of the Municipality of Campinas to cancel all sports and cultural activities, as well as endorsed the decision to suspend public hearings by the Public Ministry of District of Campinas and Campinas City Council. In addition, some schools located in the Metropolitan Region of Campinas followed the concern of the University and considered the attendance of children and adolescents to be optional, until the State Government officially suspended classes.

In an extreme situation of a health crisis, such as the current pandemic, it is worth mentioning the leadership (institutional and administrative) exercised by the deans, unit
directors and other leaders at Unicamp, USP and Unesp, in their respective university environments. The characteristics of public leadership displayed by the senior administrators at these universities reflect the profile of public higher education institutions, which are based on autonomy and the academic freedom of the professoriate. Thus, to some extent, the skills and abilities of the leaders (political or administrative) are even more required as a mobilizing element of the community (in this instance higher educational institutions) in which the leader is inserted (Mintzberg, 1998).

The engagement and mobilization of the university community were visible in several areas. There were in the structuring of work groups, the process of coordination, articulation and integration of strategies that would make remote teaching feasible, initiatives to help professors and students in virtual learning environments and the allocation of technological and budgetary resources, among others.

At Unesp for example, a “tele-reception” project was structured, through Google Meet calls, with the aim of exchanging experiences and minimizing the stress resulting from the social distance from the pandemic. Another interesting initiative was the purchase of three thousand SIM cards for students without access to the Internet or with limited and unstable Internet access at their homes. At USP and Unicamp, initiatives to support students were also developed. In addition, the rectors of the three universities and their teams used social networks and email to communicate with stakeholders about the crisis, their actions and strategies to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic. It is possible to verify the way in which leadership has been exercised by the leaders of these universities, which is in line with the leadership practices identified by Fernandez and Shaw (2020). For these authors, three practices are essential for university leaders in the current pandemic context: (1) leadership needs to consider empowerment, involvement and collaboration; (2) leadership must be spread out to leaders who work at a lower level of management and (3) communication needs to be clear and direct with all stakeholders. For the first practice, leaders need to be skilled and humble enough to share responsibilities, accept criticisms/suggestions and solve problems. For the second practice, leaders must be able to share responsibilities with their teams; besides increasing the effectiveness of the crisis management strategies, this process of empowerment helps to motivate team members. In the third practice, the focus is on the ability of leaders to communicate with all stakeholders. To ensure effective communication, leaders should be reliable and transparent regarding their actions and strategies to deal with the crisis.

Regarding empowerment, involvement and collaboration in the studied universities, practically all their employees were invited to participate in discussions about how to continue the core activities of the universities and expand their contributions through other channels. In relation to the transition from in-person classes to remote classes, it is understood that the negative or positive consequences of that decision will only be understood later; however, the complete interruption of all classes could have generated greater losses. Professors were free to conduct remote classes in the way they believed to be the most appropriate and they received support to use online educational tools; undergraduate and graduate coordinators collected feedback on the progress of classes, which were sent to the undergraduate and graduate provosts’ offices in order to better understand the outcomes.

It is also important to mention that as far as possible, much has been discussed with students in remote classes about the consequences of the pandemic at different spheres, including health, personal, professional, educational, economic and a host of others. It is worth mentioning the study by Dewar (2020), who noted that megatrends are not only about topics such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and digital disruption, but rather issues such as sustainability, changes in the work environment and global crises also need to be discussed in classes, which a number of professors in the three universities have been doing.

Regarding the diffusion of leadership since the beginning of the pandemic, it was understood that each unit presented its particularities to the universities. In this sense,
leadership was also extended to unit directors to implement and coordinate “local crisis committees” and to discuss with their communities their particular circumstances and needs.

Recently, universities have started to debate and prepare plans to resume face-to-face activities, especially those ones that need to be undertaken strictly in person (e.g. those in the health area). Examples of actions related to the plans for returning to in-person classes are the development of health and symptomatic tracking protocols and training, among others. In relation to direct and clear communication with all interested parties, this was evident by the intense exchange of emails from different hierarchical levels of the universities, with debates conducted regularly and by redesigning their homepages to include different types of information to satisfy the needs of the university stakeholders and the wider society, as well as the publication of COVID-19 bulletins [1]–[3].

Considering the information presented in this viewpoint, it is possible to note that university leaders can play an important role as public leaders not only at the universities but also for broader segments of society. Considering specifically the three analyzed universities, besides the scientific contributions provided by their research centers, their leaders were fast and firm in their decision-making and effectively managed the crisis right from the onset. The leaders showed important skills, including the ability to collaborate and work with and in groups, share responsibilities and communicate with the stakeholders. In addition, the interruption of most of the essential activities on campuses at the beginning of the pandemic and the actions taken to enable the continuity of activities done remotely are all the marks of effective leadership. The pandemic, similar to many other crises, was sudden and continues to greatly impact every society. It is observed that there are several tasks that can be performed remotely now. It is therefore suggested that for future research, a deep analysis of all the activities performed in public universities that can continue to be done remotely even after the pandemic, including an analysis of the benefits and difficulties for leadership decision needs to be undertaken.

Notes

References


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