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Academic Leadership in the New Normal

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Academic Leadership in the New Normal

There are many reasons why referring to the current environment in higher education as “the New Normal” is a misnomer. Higher education is *always* undergoing change, and many of those changes, such as the expanding accessibility to college resulting from the G. I. Bill and the introduction of the personal computer, have had effects that are at least as significant as those brought about by the recent global pandemic. But it’s not merely COVID-19 that has produced the environment many observers refer to as “the New Normal.”

Many department chairs experienced the need to convert their programs from in-person or hybrid teaching to 100% online teaching almost overnight when the pandemic hit. But how do you maintain a program that is 100% online when the university system is shut down by ransomware (as happened at Howard University) or made inoperable by a failure of the electrical grid due to catastrophic weather (as happened in Texas)? In other words, the New Normal is not simply defined by the changes brought about due to the pandemic (as significant as those changes are) but by the uncertainty of the academic environment today. Having a Plan B isn’t enough. At times, even having Plans B, C, D, and E isn’t enough. As much as chairs have tried in recent years to be “data-driven,” how do you plan for the future when the data only really tell you about the *past* and can’t be extrapolated into the future?

Other factors also shape the New Normal. Toxic polarization is roiling our campuses. Climate change is beginning to have effects that weren’t foreseen even a few years ago. Activist boards and legislatures are attempting to specify what can and cannot be taught in the classroom. This session will engage participants in seeking to answer where academic departments and those who lead them need to go in an increasingly complex and difficult higher education environment.