

# 7 From Hardships to Possibilities

## Dissertation Writing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Juan Manuel Niño and Onésimo M. Martínez II*

### **Abstract**

In an attempt to mitigate community spread of COVID-19, many universities canceled face-to-face sessions and shifted to online instruction. For advanced doctoral students, this sudden shift welcomed new hardships as they began to collect data for their qualitative dissertation studies. This change called for students and their supervising professor to revisit IRB (Institutional Research Board) protocols as interviews, focus groups and observations techniques were now impossible. In this chapter, we discuss how social distancing measures created new possible ways for students to gather rich, quality data from communication technology platforms. This new digital approach of engaging participants in meaningful discussions welcomed new possibilities for doctoral students to recruit participants for a more global context. This chapter will offer strengths, challenges, and new ways of knowing for future studies.

### **Keywords**

dissertation, education, interviews, qualitative studies, technology, social distancing

### **Introduction**

With the onset of Covid-19, new protocols for interactions between people were set in place as this virus increased in mortality rates. This novel virus forced the world to rethink how humans were to continue with their everyday lives. Unfortunately, there has been an unfamiliar shift in life due to the safe practices that were adopted because of the transmission of this virus. For the world, it invited us to be more creative in how we were going to continue living a life within the safety measures established by the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control. Much of their recommendations offered some hope to continue living a normal lifestyle, with some degree of physical distancing. For schools, this approach of learning was something new. A new practice that many schools would be needing to adjust in order to find ways

to help students continue their learning experience. In higher education, more specifically, doctoral students seeking to begin a qualitative dissertation proposal, some adjustments would be needed to help them navigate the journey.

This chapter highlights the experiences of doctoral students who are in their final year of coursework as they develop their dissertation proposals in the Winter Garden program. A unique feature of this doctoral program is the notion of being an off-campus program offered by the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at The University of Texas at San Antonio. As such, this study highlights the experiences of students who matriculated in the program and are now preparing their proposal for collecting data for their qualitative dissertations.

A sense of belonging creates a form of social capital in that it highlights students' feelings about their connection with the college or university they attend (Nunez, 2009). The quality of social interactions within that community cannot be ignored. The impression that the faculty have taken an interest in students' growth and development is among the highest positive predictors of a sense of belonging, along with a "sense of obligation to community," and "engagement in community service activities" (Nunez, 2009). Latina(o) students who feel more connected with or engaged in their college or university are more likely to perceive an exclusionary environment (Nunez, 2009). Latina(o) students who have more familiarity with diversity issues, and report more academic connection and social engagement, are also more likely to experience an increased sense of belonging, even in hostile campus climates (Nunez, 2009).

Latinas(os) have experiences and understandings that have accumulated after years of family, school, work, and community roles (Wilson & Meyer, 2011). A doctoral program should insert into the curriculum an emphasis on diversity theories and research; use service-learning opportunities to make the theories real, and consciously use reflection to encourage acceptance of others who are different from us, and to self-understand (Wilson & Meyer, 2011). A doctoral program for all students can be a time and place to deepen, expand, and/or develop an understanding of social justice; where cultural awareness grows; where understanding and acceptance of others flourishes; and where equity and fairness are cultivated (Wilson & Meyer, 2011). In this study, participants have been asked to describe their personal and educational experiences during COVID times as they prepare their proposal for collecting data for their dissertation.

## **Literature Review**

Despite representing the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the United States, Latinas/os remain dramatically underrepresented in higher education (Ramirez, 2017). Although Latinas/os have recently experienced increasing rates of college attendance, they represented just 6.3% of all doctorates in 2011, whereas Whites accounted for 74% (Ramirez, 2017). Latinas/os are

also the most underrepresented major racial/ethnic group among college/university faculty (Ramirez, 2017).

A relatively small, albeit growing, body of empirical literature has documented the experiences of Latinas/os in doctoral programs, collectively stating that in addition to customary difficulties experienced by most doctoral students, Latinas/os experience barriers stemming from clashes with traditional academic cultures and/or institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism. Furthermore, attrition rates for women, first-generation, low-income, and historically underrepresented doctoral students are higher than for dominant group students.

Previous studies reveal that Latinas/os are influenced by several factors in their selection of a doctoral program, including: location (proximity to home), faculty influences, financial considerations, campus climate concerns, and circumscribed choices (Ramirez, 2013). In essence, Latinas/os' graduate school choice process is mediated by class, race, and gender inequalities (Ramirez, 2013). When focusing on Latinas specifically, of the 40,744 doctoral degrees conferred in 2001, Latinas represented 3.5% out of the 45% of women who graduated with doctorates (Gonzalez, 2006). Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel devalued, misinterpreted, and omitted from formal academic environments, especially when focusing on their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008). It has also revealed that researchers have found the academy to be conservative, restrictive, and racist toward Latinas/os (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008). Latinas/os have often experienced self-doubt, survivor guilt, imposter syndrome, and invisibility as they journeyed through their graduate process (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### ***Importance and Influence of Study***

The majority of the population representing the Winter Garden are Latina/o. Although there is a misconception that Latinas/os only live in the city or urban areas, the participants in this study live in the Winter Garden. The majority of available jobs are within education, small business, and manual labor. This study can influence program development in other universities, which could lead to policies, practices, and programs becoming more student-centered, with the focus being on providing an authentic learning environment for their students, especially students of color.

Geography and place are among the most significant factors determining opportunity in America (Chetty et al., 2014; Hillman, 2016). For students of color who work full-time, have close social ties to their local communities, and/or care for dependents, the proximity of home to college is an important factor in considering college attendance and in shaping educational opportunities (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). Unfortunately, not all communities have access to colleges or universities nearby. Educational deserts, like the Winter Garden, are disproportionately allocated in the United States's poorest and most racially minoritized communities (Hillman, 2016). The location of colleges

and universities is likely to be especially significant for socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Turley, 2009). Although socioeconomically disadvantaged families qualify for financial aid, tuition and fees have been rising at a significantly faster rate than financial aid or inflation, highlighting the fact that living at home would allow students to save money on rent, utilities, food, and travel (Turley, 2009).

Whether or not students choose to apply to and attend a given college depends in part on how close they live to it (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). The “predisposition mechanism” (visibility of local colleges) and the “convenience mechanism” (living close to college) increase students’ likelihood of attending higher education institutions (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). Also, 82% of non-traditional older students both work and attend school at the same time, which emphasizes the impact distance plays in a students’ decision to attend higher education institutions (Roszkowski & Reilly, 2006). Research projections have even stated that there will be three types of universities in the future: brick universities (traditional residential institutions), click universities (virtual universities), and brick and click universities (a combination of the two) (Roszkowski & Reilly, 2006; Terry, 2001). Because this research study focused on the educational experiences of the participants, we better understand their perspectives of the UTSA Winter Garden Doctoral Program. This doctoral program was travel-sensitive, with both faculty and students traveling almost equal distances. However, like many higher educational programs, COVID-19 forced changes to this program. As a result, no longer were students able to create a sense of community, and commute to the classroom ceased.

### ***Student Voice***

The Winter Garden doctoral program focuses on social justice, equity, cultural awareness, and student voice (Niño et al., 2018). Student voice is imperative to the success of a truly authentic educational program (Monzo, 2016). Students need to feel welcomed, acknowledged, valued, respected, protected, and accepted (Niño et al., 2018). Latina/o students and their voices, individually and culturally, have historically been ignored (Monzo, 2016). Allowing the students to speak their truth will fundamentally alter the education landscape, which is why this study is important. It would be interesting to find out if this program was life-changing and/or transformational for its doctoral students.

### ***Transformative Learning***

The theory of transformative learning was introduced to the field of adult education in the late 1970s (Ross-Gordon et al., 2015). Academic programs in higher institutions should include trust and support building, democratic decision-making, critical reflection, experimentation and risk-taking, inquiry, collaborative work, and ongoing dialogue (Ross-Gordon et al.,

2015). Implementation of transformative learning can also correlate with the recognition of student identity (Ross-Gordon et al., 2015).

## **Research Method**

For this chapter, data were collected from the perspectives of nine advanced doctoral students who are in their final year of academic work. The doctoral students are finalizing their proposal development on their intended topic of study. Through class reflection, class discussions via zoom, and students' journals, the voices of the students are shared and heard to highlight their struggles and new practices for completing their studies.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study were advanced Latina/o doctoral students from the Winter Garden area. The Winter Garden "forms a triangle that extends from San Antonio, west to Del Rio, south to Crystal City, and back to San Antonio" (Niño et al., 2018, p. 41). Along with Del Rio, Eagle Pass, and Uvalde, other major cities include Carrizo Springs, Crystal City, and Pearsall (Niño et al., 2018). Smaller communities include Asherton, Brackettville, Comstock, Cotulla, Dilley, Knippa, La Pryor, and Sabinal, along with others (Niño et al., 2018).

While the cities of Eagle Pass, Del Rio, and Uvalde do offer a junior college (freshmen and sophomore coursework) and a two-year university (junior and senior coursework), the university does not offer a huge selection of bachelor and master degrees and fails to offer a doctoral program. The closest cities are Laredo and San Antonio. While San Antonio does offer multiple universities with many degree opportunities, it is two to three hours from the cities that represent the Winter Garden. Laredo, also two to three hours away, has one university but it only offers doctoral programs in business, education, and Hispanic studies.

## **Results**

There are many hidden opportunities to be found amidst this pandemic. Students are now forced to examine new ways for navigating the personal, professional, and collegiate lives. Due to the inability to safely conduct in-person interviews or on-site observations, students would have opportunities in their research that would have been unheard of before the pandemic.

Now, interviews could be done virtually. Just this alone expands the potential participant pool exponentially. These interviews could be live via a teleconferencing platform, the interviews (with participant permission) could be recorded for further review and analysis. This is a blessing for someone who struggles with mobility.

However, challenges and obstacles will always be present. A huge obstacle many students see is the lack of on-campus student interaction with the professors and classmates. Nonetheless, the students in this study were candid

in expressing and sharing their thoughts on how they were navigating the dissertation process. The following themes were commonly shared and expressed by students as they completed their proposals.

### ***Challenges in Interviews and Observations***

Most students shared an interest in conducting qualitative studies for their dissertations. Due to the pandemic, the traditional modes of data collection will be difficult to conduct.

Amand shared her concerns regarding her intended study,

If students are learning remotely, it will be extremely difficult to observe leadership in action in the traditional setting. However, new opportunities have arisen to study leadership in unprecedented and non-traditional realities. Our school leaders are experiencing “never before” scenarios daily, and are having to make hard decisions in response. This pandemic provides each of us an opportunity to learn from this process.

However, Sam shared a different perspective,

Research depends on analyzing social interactions and these methods typically involve proximity to human subjects which will be difficult to impossible under active social distancing. One of the concepts relating to social interactions is the value theory when discussing values, virtues, and character. These are the natural observations of character traits a researcher can collect during an in-person interview or observations. The social piece of the interviews becomes limited and less productive.

In a similar vein, Sandy shared her thinking,

I think just getting access to traditional academic settings for observations or in-person interviews will be difficult as many campuses are closed to their staff and students much less additional visitors. I also think it will be difficult to get people who are willing to fully commit to participate simply because people are just exhausted from the stress COVID has brought about as well as fear of the virus spreading.

Ben shared how this new form of interacting with people, many times strangers, can be limiting to the authentic experience of collecting qualitative data. He expressed,

With the onset of Covid-19 and new protocols for interactions between people, there has definitely been an unfamiliar shift in life. Some of the changes we may see to our qualitative studies could be the close personal interactions with participants. For example, if interviews are conducted virtually I feel people may be more guarded and less relatable.

For TJ, the pandemic has him questioning the relevancy of his study amid the pandemic. He was thinking about changing his topic due to the limited amount of data he might be able to collect due to the limited interaction.

I have been debating the idea of changing my topic from the GPC process and student retention to analyzing the effectiveness of alternative certification programs because of the pandemic. I worried about the disruption in state testing, and related waiving of the retention of students, may make the study irrelevant or outdated by the time I got to the data collection process. Potentially I could be discussing a process with administrators they had not really dealt with for nearly two years. By contrast, the pandemic has forced a lot of teachers out of the field over concerns about personal health, and a wave of alt cert teachers often come in to fill that employment gap. Studying the lack of preparation in these programs would not be limited by COVID, and if anything, give me a large potential sample of participants to interview.

### ***Creative Approaches to Data Collection***

In finding the challenges, students were looking forward to enacting creative practices as a way to seek participants and data for their dissertations. As the students shared in their reflections, many were optimistic in using COVID times to help them advance and reach larger pools of participants for their studies as traveling was minimal.

Amanda reflected on the effect of the pandemic and the possibilities for change in her practice and study. She shared,

Due to the inability to safely conduct in-person interviews or on-site observations, I would have opportunities in my research that would have been unheard of prior to the pandemic. Now, interviews could be done virtually. Just this alone expands the potential participant pool exponentially. These interviews could be live via a teleconferencing platform, the interviews (with participant permission) could be recorded for further review and analysis. This is a blessing for someone who struggles with mobility.

TJ shared in his reflection, he was looking forward to using the virtual space as an opportunity so that participants would feel their contributions would be confidential.

I think technology has given us an opportunity to still generally move forward with data collection. Regardless of my topic, I could still conduct interviews in person following social distancing guidelines, or better yet, via video conferencing. If I pursue the Alt Cert topic, the process of more “anonymous” interviews might be better. For example, after

screening potential participants to meet eligibility criteria for the study, I could arrange for online interviews that allowed for a higher level of anonymity which may allow the participants to speak more freely about their experiences and deficiencies in their respective programs.

In order to overcome some of the challenges that come with the new way of life, researchers will be forced to innovate. They will have to be creative in their methods and overcome the distance that is being put between human interactions. New methods may include virtual interviews. However, this may serve as an advantage in that the researcher may be able to interview a broader group of people who are further away.

Sandy shared,

Data collection may have to take place primarily through virtual applications and platforms. This is definitely an area I have not really thought about but will need to have some sort of game plan to start with and then adjust as the following months progress.

Sam reflected,

Qualitative research typically relies on face-to-face interaction for data collection through interviews and fieldwork. Creative approaches would be embracing the conference video resources such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to coordinate live video conferencing.

For most students, these new COVID methods to collect data via zoom do provide convenience and flexibility depending on the individuals' schedule for work; however ethical guidelines and communication with the committee review board regarding approval for these methods must be taken into consideration. Aside from the video conferencing the other mediums that come to mind are social media, online forums, and pre-records speeches however I do speculate that concerns over validity from a research perspective may be an issue.

Eleazar shared his perspective in embracing new approaches during COVID as a way to embrace much of the learning concepts he had been introduced during his doctoral program. He credits the class format and the reflective nature of the learning process to help embrace the data collection journey.

Building relationships for data entries will need to be established before any data can be collected. This is due to the required use of technology and the imitating forces and resource availability. The knowledge gained here I feel will help shape the way education is delivered and considered for the future that includes all levels of education from K through 12 through higher education. This data collected will highlight to the



forefront the importance of the data retrieved through these critical times in our society utilized to enhance education as it has been viewed in the past and delivered to students.

### ***Strengths and New Possibilities***

While COVID has brought about many challenges, students think there are a number of topics that people will want to know about in the near future in regards to COVID. Some students shared ideas that researchers and doctoral students can focus on to better understand the COVID effect on schools.

Sandy shared some of the new research topics she has seen as a district administrator,

Due to COVID, I have been thinking of the many topics to study such as adaptability of teachers in a hybrid teaching setting almost overnight; administrators adapting and leading down a path where no one has navigated previously, etc...and the list goes on. There are so many uncertainties of these times that will afford many learning opportunities in the near future.

For Larry, COVID has given him a sense of relaxation to conduct his dissertation study. He comments,

Value theory provides the opportunity to use the approach that best fits the situation. It encourages and facilitates change and reform when current practices and habits have become obsolete and ineffective. The COVID environment has now forced us to transition and adapt to move beyond the standard practices. Live video provides many of the same benefits as in-person interviews, with the additional ability to switch between group and one-on-one interactions. Now, I can also use targeted social media recruiting to find harder-to-reach audiences.

In a similar context, Emily also shares how COVID and the use of the internet can be a helpful resource in conducting her dissertation. She shared,

This is certainly an interesting time to be a doctoral student. I hadn't really thought about how the pandemic might affect my dissertation and research. I suppose it could be because a part of me is still in denial that the dissertation portion of this program is so near. I think interviews can be done by Zoom and Google Meets. COVID could allow for some innovative dissertation methods. I know a student from Cohort III utilized Twitter for their dissertation, perhaps that is just the tip of the iceberg? Even Facebook has group rooms where you can meet with specific people all together just invite them to that room. Our growing familiarity with technology is definitely a strength during and post COVID. Before, if you

were meeting with people in different areas, those interviews would be scheduled on different days. Now, they could be scheduled back-to-back and multiple interviews could take days as opposed to weeks.

TJ also shared the same sentiment with embracing technology to widen his scope of the study. He acknowledges the benefits of relying on technology to conduct interviews with participants. He expressed,

With a likely shift in more qualitative studies having data collection being done through electronic means due to health concerns, does it matter where your participants are? For example, if I do interviews via Zoom, I would be able to interview not only Alt Cert teachers in the Winter Garden region but in other rural Texas areas, such as the Panhandle. This could add more unique perspectives while allowing a quicker turnaround time as there would be no traveling involved.

Larry, also shared the same positionality, “you can meet with someone you may have not been able to previously for a face-to-face due to scheduling, now you can meet in virtual space from the comfort of each person’s home.” In the same thinking, Ben looks forward to the new possibilities of conducting his study during COVID. He stated, “As I spoke of virtual interviews, that may be the preferred method at this time. This will reduce travel time, it may include recorded videos and the possibility of access to a greater number of sites.” In the same way, he also shared how technology has made the learning process still accessible. Ben continued, “Some of the strengths in conducting research during COVID are having access to a broader range of participants. It may also reduce the cost of travel involved with research.”

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

When schools were shut down, everyone understood there would be student regression and the learning experience would be slowed or perhaps even stopped. However, now more than ever qualitative studies can be beneficial in targeting and closing these academic gaps. However, the qualitative studies that provide insight into the how and why behind the numerical data we find will tell a much deeper story. Oftentimes, it is the feelings and emotions that are expressed in qualitative studies that help us to understand a situation more clearly in order to move forward constructively.

During the COVID period, the digital platform brings people from across the world into the comforts of our homes; therefore, we might be able to better understand communities and educational organizations at the macro level. Most communication for interviews is likely to be via video conference. Since the video interview captures and records participants’ screens, the quality and integrity of the research process will continue. In most cases, the researcher

can transcribe and note time-stamps within the video, making the data collection experience more authentic and meaningful for all.

Furthermore, aligning research activities with remotely conducted research methodology has the potential benefits of reducing time and cost for conducting the study, improving ease of participation for many individuals, enhancing the transferability of findings, and perhaps increasing the speed of publication of study findings, especially for students in rural areas where resource and populations may be a challenge.

## **Implications**

The Mexican-American population, particularly in the southwest, is the fastest-growing racial group with an estimated 33 million individuals (65% of the Latina/o population) (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). While those numbers are encouraging, Mexican-Americans struggle to complete academic degrees, with Mexican-American women being underrepresented when compared with all other female doctoral recipients (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). The perspectives of Mexican-American graduate students and faculty have not been fully studied, and more in-depth exploration is needed, especially perspectives of Mexican-American women in doctoral programs (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

Students of color, in rural communities, have unique perspectives of the world we live in. It is important to note that COVID, while bringing the world to a standstill, has the potential to create a new normal to reconnect the world virtually. It is through the perspectives of these students, as they engage in their dissertations, that we look forward to opportunities to revisit the dissertation experience through a different lens. No longer can we be conditioned to a one format, one size, one approach for master learning. As we continue to envision a new experience for the doctoral journey, this study can help other Latinas/os identify and/or create capital and space that will lead them to their versions of success and knowledge.

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## **Bios**

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# COVID-19 AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Exploring Contemporary Issues and Challenges

Edited by **Ravichandran Ammigan | Roy Y. Chan | Krishna Bista**

Foreword by Darla K. Deardorff

 **STAR**SCHOLARS  
N E T W O R K

# Praise for this book

This book is a must-read for all university leaders and senior managers to enable them to get a better insight into the numerous challenges facing academia in the new normal, where it is not only about academic excellence but also about the human dimension through the enhanced use of technology.

—Dhanjay Jhurry, Professor and Vice-Chancellor,  
University of Mauritius, Mauritius

This thought-provoking book captures contemporary changes to higher education at the micro and macro level post-2020. Stakeholders across the sector will benefit from reading the research-driven chapters that are stimulating and insightful. The book interrogates and challenges ways in which internationalization and global mobility can be re-imagined.

—Dawn Joseph, Associate Professor,  
Deakin University, Australia

This book shows a more intensive and multi-faceted response by the higher education community to the pandemic that one might have expected. Attention is paid notably to sustain international life on campus.

—Ulrich Teichler, Professor Emeritus,  
International Centre for Higher Education Research,  
University of Kassel, Germany

This volume is a welcome addition to the literature on international Higher Education produced during the COVID-19 era. With a sensitively chosen array of topics, it shows new thinking around internationalisation, which is encouraging for all, and is exactly what is needed.

—Amanda C. Murphy, Professor and Director,  
Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation,  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

With the COVID-19 pandemic seeing no end in sight and its effects on international higher education for students around the world yet unknown, the importance of this timely book cannot be overstated. At a time when we are

literally awash in countless editorials prognosticating on *possible* implications of this health catastrophe, it is refreshing to get a carefully collected series of essays that step back, take a deep breath, and bring us back to the fundamental questions we need to be asking at this most dangerous time for humanity.

—Bernhard Streitwieser, IEP Program  
Director & Associate Professor of International  
Education & International Affairs,  
George Washington University, USA

This is a valuable addition to higher education for understanding the complexities that COVID-19 introduced into the academic landscape. This volume explores valuable topics and issues such as employability, research and mentoring, innovative teaching and learning, and emerging opportunities during the pandemic.

—Jane E. Gatewood, Vice Provost for Global  
Engagement, University of Rochester, USA

This timely book is much needed for practitioners, scholars, and policy makers who are grappling with the challenges created by the pandemic. The book is comprehensive given the depth and breath of topics. The human centric approach is refreshing.

—Fanta Aw, Vice President of Campus Life &  
Inclusive Excellence, American University, USA



# **COVID-19 and Higher Education in the Global Context: Exploring Contemporary Issues and Challenges**

*COVID-19 and Higher Education in the Global Context: Exploring Contemporary Issues and Challenges* addresses the lasting impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the higher education sector and offers insights that inform policy and practice. Framed in a global context, this timely book captures a wide variety of topics, including student mobility, global partnerships and collaboration, student health and wellbeing, enrollment management, employability, and graduate education. It is designed to serve as a resource for scholar-practitioners, policymakers, and university administrators as they reimagine their work of comparative and international higher education in times of crisis. The collection of chapters assembled in this volume calls for a critical reflection on the opportunities and challenges that have emerged as a result of the global pandemic, and provides as a basis for how tertiary education systems around the world can learn from past experiences and shared viewpoints as institutions recalibrate operations, innovate programs, and manage change on their respective campuses.

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# **COVID-19 and Higher Education in the Global Context**

Exploring Contemporary Issues and  
Challenges

**Edited by  
Ravichandran Ammigan,  
Roy Y. Chan, and Krishna Bista**



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**In memory of those who lost their lives during the  
COVID-19 pandemic worldwide**



# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>List of Editors</i>	<i>xix</i>

<b>Foreword</b>	<i>xxi</i>
DARLA K. DEARDORFF	

<b>1 The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education: Challenges and Issues</b>	1
RAVICHANDRAN AMMIGAN, ROY Y. CHAN, AND KRISHNA BISTA	

## PART I

<b>COVID-19 and Global Issues in Higher Education</b>	9
---	---

<b>2 The Evolution Revolution: The Application of a Leadership Adaptation Continuum to the Future of Global Higher Education Post COVID-19</b>	11
ALLISON SILVEUS AND LESLIE EKPE	

<b>3 Rethinking the Social Responsibilities of Universities in the light of COVID-19 Pandemic</b>	25
HÀNG TRẦN THỊ, QUY DINH LE NGUYEN, AND LUC-DIEP TRA	

<b>4 “Internationalization at Home” in the United States: Enhancing Admissions and Enrollment Practices for Marginalized Students During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic</b>	39
RAQUEL MUÑIZ AND NATALIE BORG	

- 5 Financial Ramifications of Coronavirus on  
Division I Athletic Departments** 51  
MOLLY HARRY

**PART II**

**COVID-19 and Academic Issues in Higher  
Education: Special Topics and Themes** 65

- 6 Traditional Exams, 21st Century Employability  
Skills and COVID-19: Disruptive Opportunities  
for Rethinking Assessment Design in Higher  
Education** 67  
ANDREW KELLY, CATHERINE MOORE, AND EMMA LYONS

- 7 From Hardships to Possibilities: Dissertation  
Writing during the COVID-19 Pandemic** 80  
JUAN MANUEL NIÑO AND ONÉSIMO M. MARTÍNEZ II

- 8 Disrupting Accommodations through Universal  
Design for Learning in Higher Education** 93  
CARLY D. ARMOUR

- 9 Reshaping the Landscape: Considering  
COVID-19's Uncertain Impacts on Canadian and  
U.S. International Higher Education** 107  
MICHAEL O'SHEA, YOU ZHANG, AND LEPING MOU

- 10 The Vulnerability and Opportunity of  
Privatization in Higher Education during a Pandemic** 123  
ZIYAN BAI

**PART III**

**COVID-19, Wellbeing and Humanity in Higher  
Education: International Perspectives and Experiences** 137

- 11 COVID-19 and Health Disparities: Opportunities  
for Public Health Curriculum Enhancement** 139  
ANULI NJOKU



<b>12 Internationalizing Trauma-Informed Perspectives to Address Student Trauma in Post-Pandemic Higher Education</b>	154
JOSHUA M. ANZALDÚA	
<b>13 Global Collaboration for Global Solution in Academia: Opportunities and Challenges</b>	172
EKATERINA MINAEVA AND GIORGIO MARINONI	
<b>14 Humanizing the Academic Advising Experience with Technology: An Integrative Review</b>	185
CHARLES LIU AND RAVICHANDRAN AMMIGAN	
<i>Index</i>	203



# Tables

4.1	Examples of How to Integrate Internationalization at Home in Practice During and After the Pandemic	46
10.1	Sample State and Institutional Profiles	126
10.2	Sample Program Profiles	127
10.3	Interview Participants by State, University, Program, and Role	128
13.1	Impact on teaching and learning by region, International Association of Universities, 2020	176
14.1	Search Engines, Databases, Academic Articles and Books, and Keywords Used to Synthesize Literature	188
14.2	Categorization of Reviewed Interventions involving Technology for Academic Advising	189



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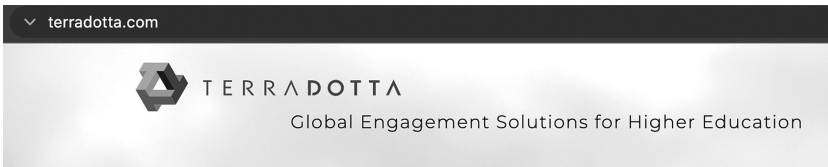
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# Foreword

*Darla K. Deardorff*

The COVID-19 pandemic has represented a unifying challenge globally, providing a defining era in human existence as the pandemic upended life as we know it. *COVID-19 and Higher Education in the Global Context: Exploring Contemporary Issues and Challenges*, edited by Ammigan, Chan, and Bista, delves into the pandemic's impact on higher education around the world. Such an exploration empowers “educators, administrators, practitioners, policy makers, and families” with ideas and guidance that not only can be applied in the current context but also in the post-COVID future.

As the world emerges from the COVID pandemic, it is good to remember the signs of hope that have been there all along from the small gestures of kindness to the heroic efforts of those on the frontlines, from strangers lifting their voices together in song across balconies as the pandemic began with the later Jerusalema dance challenge that swept around the world, even as the pandemic was raging. This pandemic has shown us that we are all truly interconnected, for better or for worse. Desmond Tutu reminds us that we are all in this together and that our humanity is bound up together. We are members of one human family, and when some members are hurting, we all are hurt. He goes on to say, “For us to engage in the practices that will ensure that we all prosper, we must come to know that each of us is linked in the chain of our common humanity.”

As we move into the light of a new day, there is radical hope in truly embracing our shared humanity. Let's seek to see ourselves in others. Let's seek to see the whole picture through discovering others' perspectives beyond our own. Let's seek to see the invisible among us and to remember the power of being seen and heard. As we do so, we can reflect on some of the following questions:

- What do I know about my neighbors?
- Do I make an effort to learn more?
- What are others' perspectives and can I articulate those?
- What are the connections I see in others to my own experiences?
- How much do I really listen for understanding and seek first to understand?

Higher education provides opportunities for students to explore these and other questions, as universities seek to educate global citizens. As we have come to understand more poignantly over the last year that we are indeed part of one global community, we need to remember that education is more than employment or even graduating global citizens—in the end, it is about how we come together as neighbors both locally and globally, to build a better future together. We can make choices every day that help make the world better for all. As Tutu noted, “When we step into our neighborhoods, we can engage in the practices of good neighborliness or we can choose not to. The quality of life on our planet now and in the future will be determined by the small daily choices that we make as much as by the big decisions in the corridors of power.” As we move forward into a post-pandemic era, we must remember that actions matter and what we do impacts others. What daily actions will we take to support the most vulnerable among us? To improve the quality of life for others? How will we uphold justice and dignity for all in the human family? In the end, how will we be good neighbors to each other?

Let us commit to taking action to address the racial injustices and inequities faced by our neighbors. Let us commit to being a good neighbor, as we live in authentic solidarity with each other, aspiring to be compassionate, generous, and kind, knowing that we can find our greatest joy in showing love to all and that in doing so, we are embracing the oneness of our humanity.

## **Bio**

Darla K. Deardorff is the Executive Director of the Association of International Education Administrators, a national professional organization based in Durham, North Carolina, USA. She is also a research scholar with the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University, where she has been an adjunct faculty member in the Program in Education and a faculty affiliate with International/Comparative Studies. In addition, she is an Adjunct Professor at North Carolina State University, a Visiting Research Professor at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa, and at Meiji University Research Institute of International Education (RIIE) in Japan as well as visiting faculty at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) in China. Dr. Deardorff has served on faculty of Harvard University’s Future of Learning Institute as well as Harvard University’s Global Education Think Tank, in addition to being on faculty at the Summer Institute of Intercultural Communication in Portland, Oregon. She has also been an affiliated faculty at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, and Leeds Beckett University (formerly Leeds Metropolitan) in the United Kingdom and taught at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. She receives numerous invitations from around the world (in over 30 countries including in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Australia, and Asia) to speak on her research and work on intercultural competence and international education assessment, and is a noted expert on these topics, being named a Senior Fulbright Specialist (to South Africa and to Japan).

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