BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY'S EMPOWERED RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

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"*Change is never painful, only resistance to change is painful.*" - Buddha

POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN A PANDEMIC

The traumatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was fast and furious in higher education. As institutions scrambled to transition from face to face to fully online, with students returning home (if they were fortunate enough to be able to) and campuses closing, uncertainty about the future, an urgent need to bridge the digital divide for under-served students, and financial decline seemed to be the only constants (DePietro, 2020). Suddenly, the resistance to online education was replaced with a "black swan" moment for distance learning as all instructors and students (from early education through higher education) ventured into "academic cyberspace" (Lederman, 2020).

While traditional institutions experienced significant challenges, nontraditional institutions, such as our institution Brandman University (a Chapman University system), were able to pivot quickly and move forward successfully with little to no down time. In fact, due to its infrastructure, technology, training resources, and mindset, Brandman University experienced a season of posttraumatic growth even with shelter in place, social distancing, and other mandated precautions. Psychologists define posttraumatic growth as a "positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity and other challenges in order to rise to a higher level of functioning" (Lees, 2019). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun's inventory, the positive changes associated with posttraumatic growth can be measured in five areas:

- Appreciation of life
- Relationships with others
- New possibilities in life
- Personal strength
- Spiritual change

(Collier, 2016)

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY

To understand how Brandman University was able to thrive in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand its history as an institution. Brandman University is a private, nonprofit institution regionally accredited by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). Brandman University was originally established in 1861 by Chapman University to provide high-quality education at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. The mission of Brandman University is to provide students with a dynamic education based on excellence and flexibility that creates lasting value and relevance for evolving careers. Brandman offers undergraduate, graduate, credential and certificate programs across its five schools in the areas of arts and sciences, business, education, nursing and health (Brandman University, 2020).

About Brandman Students

The mission of Brandman University is to provide students with a dynamic education based on excellence and flexibility that creates lasting value and relevance for evolving careers. Through a variety of blended and online course offerings, Brandman serves a large and diverse student population, including active military and veterans and adult learners who are seeking a career transition.

- 90% of students work while completing program
- The average age of a Brandman student is 36
- 58% graduate with one or more dependents while attending classes

(Brandman University, 2020)

Brandman's IDEAL Model

Brandman's student centric philosophy is a driving force of the institution. As a result, because an overwhelming majority of our students are adult learners, we have adopted the IDEAL philosophy for instruction. IDEAL stands for Instructional Design for Engaged Adult Learners. This model positions the instructor as a guide or coach (instead of an authority figure) who creates a learning community that engages the learner in the "generative process of learning" (Brandman University, 2011). The three key characteristics of the IDEAL model are the following:

- Learning-centered rather than teacher-centered.
- Using technology to enhance and activate the learning experience.
- Combining synchronous (face-to-face or virtual) and asynchronous instructional opportunities with independent and collaborative online learning.

(Brandman University, 2011)

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: STUDENT IMPACT

The overall impact of COVID-19 has spread throughout all levels of the educational system. In particular, there has been a substantial impact on students. Students are now working to balance out multiple demands within their lives. These demands include working on their educational studies while also attending to the needs of their occupation and doing so with children and/or family members at home. Other students are ill or caring for individuals that are ill. In addition, there has been an overall increase in mental health concerns as a result of the added layers of stress within their lives. Some students have lost their jobs, permanently or temporarily, leaving students to work through additional financial concerns. With all of these difficulties, students are struggling to focus on their studies as they are navigating their new current reality, a reality which seems to shift from day to day.

The psychological impact can be quite diverse. Students may be struggling with a trauma-related reaction, sorting through grief and loss related concerns or working to manage levels of anxiety or depression. Or students may be swinging from one experience to the next, without gaining an accurate understanding of what is occurring in their internalized and externalized emotional reactions and responses. It is essential for those who are working with students to gain an understanding of these responses in order to accurately understand the experience of their students, and provide necessary support as needed.

Trauma

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; 5th ed. - *DSM-5)* created a new diagnostic category for trauma-related disorders upon the revision in 2013. This change shifted the focus upon the trauma-related event, and not the various

symptoms connected to these diagnoses (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). Included within this trauma-related disorders categorization system is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder. The main criteria for diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder include

1) Exposure to a traumatic event;
2) Intrusive symptoms;
3) Avoidance;
4) Negative Alterations in Mood/Cognition, and
5) Marked Alterations in Arousal and Reactivity
                                                        (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

To receive a diagnosis of Acute Stress Disorder, there are several overlapping criteria as within PTSD; however, the duration and intensity of the symptoms is less. Mucci *et al.* (2020) suggest that there will be a long-term impact upon the overall well-being of individuals which could indicate an increase in these trauma-related disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder.

The trauma response will look differently in each individual. There are a few key components and considerations when considering the trauma reaction within students. As previously established there are multiple competing demands within the students' lives. The student is working to fulfill multiple roles and responsibilities, without refueling their "tank." All of these responsibilities will lead the student to override their own coping resources, while at the same time feeling the need to continue to appear competent and confident (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). This combination is the recipe for trauma.

Students may also be directly threatened by COVID, or there may be a direct threat within their family, friends, or other support networks. As a result, the student may be directly experiencing trauma or vicariously witnessing trauma. The media is also continually providing images, stories and information which could elicit a trauma response. Throughout each of these situations, students are isolated while experiencing their own internalized responses and that of those around them.

In addition, traumatic stress can lead to avoidance, emotional numbness and shame (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). In the classroom, students may start to disappear or appear unresponsive, uncaring or void of emotion. It may be challenging to take note of these reactions as a result of the remote experience of learning. Students may not recognize this shift or may not be able to label the change. However, these symptoms are some of the key defining features within a trauma-related response.

Grief / Loss

Grief is an individualized experience and one that may be triggered by a wide multitude of situations (O'Malley, 2017). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a tremendous wave of loss for every single individual. This type of loss is referred to as collective sorrow (Weir, 2020). Then, there are individual losses. Individual losses included illness, death, financial security, jobs, predictability, control, justice, health, future goals and so on. There is a component of communal grief as the world is watching a wide multitude of systems which have been seen as pillars of safety, support and stability (healthcare, education, economic systems) all become destabilized (Weir, 2020). As a result, individuals start to lose faith in systems and their overall understanding of the world. Additional concerns related to threats to our safety and difficulties with protecting our own are present as well.

The process of grief and loss goes beyond the physical to our own sense of self and our attachments that have been built into our lives. As humans we are attached to places, projects, possessions, professions and protections (Weir, 2020). It is this sense of attachment that can make the grieving process so incredibly difficult (O'Malley, 2017). Each attachment serves a unique need and component to the core being of each individual. When these losses are apparent or the attachments no longer seem to exist, a sense of safety and freedom is also missing. As a result, individuals may struggle with their own sense of self and identity. Major components of well-being and identity are missing, leaving most to feel lost.

All of these processes can become quite overwhelming. However, once again, everyone is experiencing these threats and these losses. The process of normalization is required to provide a framework of understanding. Grief is a natural experience with these changes and unknown elements (Weir, 2020).

Anxiety

Anxiety seems to be the core defining feature of most psychological journals. The *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has one section related to Anxiety Disorders. Anxiety disorders share "features of excessive fear and anxiety" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 189). Fear is referred to as the emotional response, reviewing the potential imminent threat which can include elements of hopelessness, helplessness and catastrophizing (Porcelli, 2020), whereas anxiety is focused on the anticipation of the future threat and tends to encapsulate most of the cognitive components of the situation.

Many individuals are experiencing both components of fear and anxiety when working to sort out their present experience. As a result of the ongoing changes within our world, there is not current understanding or clear time boundary that is present. Individuals are working to sort emotions related to an ongoing state of risk (IDMH, 2020). Within this ongoing state of risk, individuals are "staying braced" within this state of threat. This general hypervigilance can take a toll on our bodies and minds. There are general fears about the unknown, uncertainty in a time where there is a continual bombardment of information from media and news sources. All of these difficulties can lead to anxiety and potentially depression. Depression and anxiety tend to go hand in hand; however, it is important to recognize feelings of isolation, difficulties with finding purpose and/or motivation and the feeling of being overwhelmed.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: UNIVERSITY IMPACT

On March 19, 2020, as Governor Newsom issued the shelter in place order for California, Brandman took swift action. Although a majority of Brandman's classes are fully online, those that were running as blended offerings were moved to online. Brandman's 25+ campuses were closed and all staff began working fully remotely. With this quick and drastic change, there was an increased need for technology, an increased need for training (especially for instructors who had never taught fully online), and a need to provide alternative assignments and modify procedures for various programs.

While the changes were certainly impactful, Brandman was fortunate to possess the infrastructure, the technology, the training resources, and the mindset to support this sudden transition to 100% remote learning. Instead of letting the pandemic limit our performance, the Brandman team stepped up university-wide and took advantage of the opportunity to become better.

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY'S EMPOWERED RESPONSE

Consistent communication from leadership: From the onset of the pandemic, our Chancellor, Gary Brahm, hosted weekly 10-minute webinars to provide updates for the community about Brandman's response and to provide support. Additionally, daily "In the News" emails were distributed which synthesized important news related to the pandemic and the university's response. Town hall webinars were organized with the Chancellor, Provost, and faculty to address concerns.

Personalized the message: Brandman's student-centered philosophy was at the forefront during the onset of the pandemic. It was important to leadership, faculty, and staff to actively reach out to students and provide support and resources as needed. For example, Advisors and One Stop Specialists collaborated with marketing staff to create the video "To Our Hardworking Walmart Students: Brandman Thanks You!" to thank our students who work at Walmart and have been putting themselves at risk to serve their community (Brandman University, 2020). Additionally, the psychology curriculum team, among others, hosted town hall meetings to support students and discuss concerns.

Focused attention on the important things: To begin with, faculty sprang into action modifying assignments and requirements to accommodate the shelter in place order. For the teaching credential program, field assignments needed to be adjusted so that students could conduct virtual observations that aligned with the guidelines provided by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. For the psychology program, practicum placements and the required therapy hours were moved to telehealth. Brandman's Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) went above and beyond, working after hours and on the weekends to ensure that students and faculty had the training to attend and/or host meetings effectively in Zoom. The goal was to keep moving forward and ensure the best possible experience for students.

Take care of our own: While there were many advantages to having little to no down time during the transition, there was also a toll as many Brandman employees had to take on additional responsibilities with K-12 emergency distance learning, caring for sick family members, etc. As a result, faculty recognized the importance of taking care of each other and prioritized opportunities to do so. From mindfulness sessions to town hall meetings, faculty were encouraged to not neglect self-care. In addition, Human Resources initiated a "Well Traveled Program," which helped to promote physical activity and camaraderie university wide. Leadership even encouraged faculty and staff to make sure they were still using vacation time to stay healthy and sane.

Served our community: Service to our community (not just within Brandman) is an important priority for all of us at Brandman. As a result, Brandman began immediately creating content that would help meet the needs of our communities. Whether it was showcasing various free webinars Brandman faculty hosted related to coping with pandemic on social media, posting helpful articles to social media related to career development in the pandemic, or publishing resources to support K-12 emergency distance learning, Brandman sought to share our expertise and to support our community throughout the onset of the pandemic.

BRANDMAN STRONG

For higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a watershed moment. At Brandman, we leveraged the opportunity to grow stronger. Brandman Strong (Steinberg *et*

al, 2020) has become a mantra for faculty, and as we look to the future, we feel empowered as a community. Student satisfaction is as high as it has ever been, and even with the effects of the pandemic, enrollment has stayed steady. Innovation is brewing as we look to the future and brainstorm new approaches to ensure that, even in uncertain times, our students have the skills to thrive. Rather than resist, we have embraced the opportunity to change for the better. For Brandman, 2020 isn't cancelled. It's become "the most important year of them all" (Dwight, 2020).

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