

## **More Pivots than a Centipede on Ice Skates: Reflections on Shared Leadership in a Post-Secondary Institution During COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a case study describing the University College of the North's (UCN) response to the COVID-19 pandemic, outlining pandemic planning and management processes at UCN from March 11, 2020, to September 30, 2021. UCN's planning processes evolved from a top-down approach led by administration to an approach that saw greater shared leadership in the crisis. Shared leadership included senior leaders, middle management, faculty, and staff who both addressed the immediate crisis and engaged in post-pandemic planning. Lessons learned may help post-secondary institutions gain greater resiliency and sustainability as the post-COVID environment emerges.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, crisis management, leadership, higher education

### **Introduction**

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID-19 was a global pandemic. In Canada, March 11, 2020, was also when Laurentian University announced that it had ended all its face-to-face instruction and transitioned its courses online – the first Canadian institution to do so – sending shock waves across the country (Forbes & Clark, 2020; Laurentian University, n.d.; UCN, 2020g). By Friday, March 13, nearly all universities and colleges in Canada had taken similar steps, and many, including University College of the North (UCN), declared a break in classes to allow faculty members to retool their courses for alternatives to face-to-face instruction (Smith, 2020a; UCN, 2020h). Colleges and universities since have made myriad decisions to respond to the realities of the pandemic.

This article explores UCN's leadership response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the article examines the leadership and decision-making processes at UCN during the nineteen months between March 2020 and September 2021. The author describes decisions taken in response to the pandemic as UCN's institutional leadership evolved. UCN's leadership approach began as one that was highly centralized but evolved to engage faculty and staff more broadly throughout the institution. Inquiry is structured by the following questions: (i) what management processes did UCN use to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? (ii) how did those processes evolve over time? (iii) has the approach been successful to date? and (iv) what does this evolution tell us about leadership at UCN? After exploring the background, including describing UCN, and examining crisis management literature, the methodology is outlined, and findings are presented. Conclusions support collaborative approaches and shared leadership when adapting to major environmental changes.

## Background

### *About UCN*

Established in 2004 from the former Keewatin Community College, UCN is in northern Manitoba on Treaty 5 territory, and offers adult learning, apprenticeship, certificate, diploma, degree, and workforce training programs to 2,500 – 3,000 students annually. UCN operates two main campuses in Thompson and The Pas, 14 other permanent teaching sites, and several itinerant sites in a sparsely populated region that is approximately the size of France. Similar to other degree-granting institutions, UCN's governance structure includes a Governing Council and a senate-like body called the Learning Council. A Council of Elders was also established to provide advice to the institution on Indigenous matters.

### *Crises in Post-Secondary Education*

Crisis is no stranger to higher education. One might include on the list of crises that any college or university may experience fires, floods, blizzards, tornados or other extreme weather events, labour unrest, loss of IT infrastructure, workplace hazards, data breaches, deaths of students or staff, violence, including sexual violence, to name but a few (Moerschell & Novak, 2020). Some events, for example, Hurricane Katrina, present extreme crises that can severely test an institution. Boin (2004) defined a crisis as “a state of flux during which the institutional structures in a social system become uprooted,” suggesting that for any event that is defined as a crisis, the problem to be overcome is one of legitimacy (p. 167). Boin contended that during a crisis:

[w]ithin a relatively short time, political and societal trust will diminish regarding how well the social system is operating. At the heart of the crisis is an unremitting discrepancy between external expectations and perceived performance of the system... External stakeholders suddenly consider routines and outcomes that used to be satisfactory, unacceptable, or inappropriate... (p. 168)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis, and the model of post-secondary education, or as Boin (2004) termed it, the “institutional structure in a social system” (p. 167), became untenable. During the pandemic, it was no longer acceptable for students, instructors, or researchers to gather as they had done for centuries, and academic events, such as conferences or convocations, were no longer viable in the face of a communicable disease. Colleges and universities – like all other parts of society – faced a situation that demanded a rapid implementation of new ways of doing things.

While different terms have been used in the literature, reaction to crises generally follows three phases, (1) the preparation phase, (2) the response phase, and (3) the recovery phase (Alpaslan et al., 2009; Boin, 2004; Moerschell & Novak, 2000; Thomas, 2020). During preparation, “organizations aim to identify and interact with stakeholders and/or potential victims to prevent crises from happening” (Alpaslan et al., 2009, p. 40). Further, leaders prepare for the unknown and seek the resources and support necessary for activities that do not appear to generate organizational ‘wins’ when that organization is not currently in crisis (Boin, 2004). In short, organizations must find the time, resources, and personnel to prepare for those things that no one wants to have happen, and/or may not wish to believe will ever happen.

In the response phase of a crisis, organizations seek to minimize loss by reacting to events, making decisions, and taking steps to protect life, facilities, and to ensure business continuity (Alpaslan et al., 2009). During the response phase, organizational leaders seek to make “the right decisions under circumstances of uncertainty, time pressure, and extreme threat” and to “ensure rapid and effective implementation of their decisions” (Boin, 2004, p. 168). Finally, Boin (2004) included a phase he terms “back to normal” (p. 168), or ‘recovery.’ In this phase, leaders seek to return the system to normalcy and look to implement lessons learned to prepare better for future crises (Boin, 2004). These basic elements of crisis management help to establish a useful framework within which to analyze UCN's reaction to the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021, and UCN's reaction to the COVID-19 will be presented within these three phases.

### *Leadership in a Crisis*

Leadership significantly impacts how an organization's reaction to a crisis unfolds during all three phases (Jaques, 2012; Thomas, 2020). Despite its importance, however, the empirical literature on crisis leadership in the developed world is slim (Jacques, 2012). Gurr and Drysdale (2020) argued that, in a crisis, leaders must establish a clear sense of direction, yet ensure sufficient flexibility to adjust as the situation changes. Dunn (2020) agreed, noting that setting a clear goal and having the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is critical to success when facing ambiguity. Helsloot and Groenendaal (2017) summarized Boin's (2004) five core tasks of leadership in a crisis as (1) sense-making, or understanding what is going on; (2) decision-making, often in an environment of uncertainty and tight timeframes; (3) meaning-making to help reduce uncertainty, clarify what is happening, and describe what needs to be done; (4) transitioning back to non-emergency operations once the crisis has passed, and (5) learning lessons. These align well with the phases of a crisis – the first three core tasks are associated with the response phase, and the last two with the recovery phase.

Hurricane Katrina offers an example of leadership during a crisis. In 2005, Katrina bore down on New Orleans and nearly destroyed Tulane University. Tulane's then-president, Scott Cowen (2007), argued that three major decisions taken early helped to ensure Tulane's recovery. First, a decision was taken to reopen Tulane in time for the start of the term in January 2006. When the decision was taken, there was no plan, no real idea, as to how to be ready to reopen, but the decision created a clear planning focus, and helped to establish confidence that the institution would indeed recover (Cowen, 2007). Second, for as long as was possible, Tulane continued to pay faculty and staff, and third, the university called on other higher education institutions to help students continue their studies (Cowen, 2007). These last two decisions helped to support continuity of activity as recovery planning took place. Successful leadership in a crisis requires a clear goal and a willingness to change as circumstances warrant.

Unlike retail outlets or other types of entities, leadership in post-secondary institutions is more likely to benefit from a more comprehensive set of support systems, such as counselling, financial assistance, housing, etc., offering a greater ability to respond to crises (Moerschell & Novak, 2020). This makes leading crises at a post-secondary institution unique in that, while the institution has many resources, there is also a complex system of activity that must be considered when responding to crises. For instance, leadership can succeed or fail depending on how leaders respond, and indeed, "the best-laid crisis preparation plans can be thwarted if the voice of leadership collapses into a dialogue of blame or denial" (Moerschell & Novak, 2020, p. 38). In a crisis, people want to hear from their leaders for a variety of reasons, including getting information about the crisis, helping to control fear, making them feel safe, gaining confidence in the face of confusion and ambiguity, and getting guidance as to what to do (Gigliotti, 2019; Koehn, 2020). Accordingly, leaders must communicate honestly, acknowledge errors, learn as they go, and pivot away from solutions that do not work while at the same time establishing a vision for the post-crisis period (Koehn, 2020; Moerschell & Novak, 2020).

In pursuing these objectives, a challenge that post-secondary leaders face is the fact that, often, college or university

leadership is widely distributed, decision-making remains shared among various actors and governing bodies, and change often occurs at a slow pace – all of which run to counter to the agile, nimble, and swift response to crisis that is widely expected. (Gigliotti, 2019, p. 138)

On this point, during the Katrina crisis, Tulane University president Scott Cowen (as cited in Gigliotti, 2019) observed the importance of shared governance:

I used to say that when Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed Tulane University, in the fall of 2005, it was the temporary suspension of shared governance that allowed us to recover. Our renewal plan, which involved tremendous institutional restructuring in a short time, precluded the lengthy deliberations prescribed by normal governance procedures. But with the benefit of hindsight and another decade of experience in university leadership, I've come to realize that what occurred after Katrina was not, in fact, the suspension of shared governance, but rather the emergence of a more effective and unencumbered version of shared governance. (pp. 129-130)

Gigliotti (2019) concluded that shared governance is an advantage and not an impediment for post-secondary institutions. Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ramlo (2021) argued that shared governance has an important place in crisis management and suggested that it contributes to adaptation, innovation, and improved performance. Similar benefits have been observed with shared leadership. Kezar and Holcombe (2016) defined shared leadership as:

moving away from the leader/follower binary; capitalizing on the importance of leaders throughout the organization, not just those in positions of authority; and creating an infrastructure so that organizations can benefit from the leadership of multiple people. Shared leadership is different from shared governance. Shared governance is based on the principles of faculty and administration having distinct areas of delegated authority and decision making. Shared leadership, by contrast, is more flexible and identifies various individuals on campus with relevant expertise. This allows multiple perspectives rather than those of a single decision-making body; for example, only faculty or administration. (p. v).

Shared leadership has been consistently important in campuses that have successfully adapted and innovated in a crisis (Dunn, 2020; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Marshall et al., 2020). The success of shared leadership is achieved through creating institutional memory and generating buy-in through local decision-making and collaboration in the face of instability (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). This article addresses both shared leadership and shared governance in crisis management. While shared governance embodies qualities of shared leadership, findings demonstrated that shared governance and shared leadership at UCN each played out differently in the 19 months under study.

## Method

This is a case study of UCN's organizational response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A case study approach was appropriate in the context of UCN's organizational structure, culture, and history. Case study is a preferred approach for situations dealing with contemporary matters (Yin, 2017) and was preferred in studying UCN's response to the pandemic.

Participant observation was key to the analysis. As a member of the President's Council, I found myself deeply involved in almost all internal discussions at UCN, and I engaged often with other colleges and universities in Manitoba and elsewhere, as well as with government, communities, health authorities, and other stakeholders. Additionally, I was directly involved in establishing, leading, or co-leading pandemic working groups that were populated by exceptionally dedicated faculty and staff members who undertook the heavy lifting of pandemic planning. Furthermore, I am also an action-researcher, and was directly responsible for helping to reify and communicate response plans, considered the impact and effectiveness of those plans, and adjusted accordingly.

I also relied on publicly available documentation associated with pandemic planning at UCN, including meeting minutes, planning and strategy documents, town hall meetings, etc. which were shared using a variety of different communication channels. In addition to my own notes, these sources helped me to compile evidence of decisions made and directions taken. I organized these various data sources by date and applied a simple system of counting the number of days from the start of the pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Day "0") for a clear and linear sense of the progression of events and decisions as the pandemic unfolded. I drew on various sources to recount the events of the 19-months in question to construct the trajectory of UCN's pandemic response during the period under review. This trajectory is outlined below.

## Findings

### *Nineteen Months at UCN: March 2020 to September 2021*

Beginning on March 11, 2020 ("Day 0" of the pandemic), UCN, like all other colleges and universities in Canada and around the world, began to manage the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching, learning, research, and all other institutional activity (UCN, 2020g). The situation faced by UCN's senior executive team in mid-March was unprecedented. In March 2020, UCN's senior management team, called the President's Council, included seven direct reports to the President – a Vice-President Aca-

demical and Research, a Chief Administrative Officer, a Chief Financial Officer, an Executive Director of Indigenous Initiatives and Engagement, a Director of Communications, a Director of Human Resources, and a Chairperson of the Thompson Campus Committee. However, this configuration of the President's Council was in transition, with two members – the Chief Financial Officer, and the Executive Director of Indigenous Initiatives and Engagement – retiring in April 2020. Additionally, the Director of Human Resources unexpectedly retired later, in fall 2020. In the immediate term, these positions were not being replaced, and their duties were redistributed within the institution.

Thus, by April 2020, the President's Council was a smaller group that included the Vice-President Academic and Research, the Chief Administrative Officer, the Director of Communications, the Director of Human Resources (until fall, 2020), and the Chairperson of the Thompson Campus Committee, a structure that continued beyond the end of September 2021. Additionally, the Director of Communications was hired in the fall of 2019, and the Chief Administrative Officer started in January 2020. Furthermore, the President himself was first appointed in 2017, and the VP Academic and Research in 2015. Accordingly, the senior executive team at UCN was in significant transition, with a reconfigured President's Council that saw long-serving members departing, new members joining who, by March 2020, had served in their roles for a relatively short period of time.

### *The Preparation Phase, Before March 11, 2020*

The preparation phase for the pandemic at UCN can be described as minimal. Resulting from long-standing concerns expressed by the Auditor General of Manitoba regarding UCN's information technology (IT) infrastructure, (OAG, 2002), UCN had been slowly developing a disaster recovery plan and a business continuity plan that was limited in its focus to protecting against the loss of IT infrastructure (UCN, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, while UCN had emergency plans that considered other kinds of disasters such as fires, weather disasters, or loss of infrastructure, those plans did not include pandemics. Finally, while some members of President's Council recalled that a plan had been developed for the possibility of an H1N1 pandemic in the late 2000s, that plan was unavailable, and thus was not consulted. Accordingly, at the outset of the pandemic, UCN's existing emergency plans were only briefly considered before being set aside.

UCN was not entirely unprepared for a crisis. Indeed, 2020 began at UCN with what in any circumstances would be a series of significant crises. For example, in late January, the Government of Manitoba wrote to all colleges and universities in the province to signal that it would be pursuing a post-secondary administration-trimming exercise in the coming months. In early February, we learned that a ventilation problem in one of the trades shops created potential hazards for those using the shop. Then, in late February, a student leaving one of our campuses was killed in a tragic vehicle accident. Individually, each of these crises could test any leadership team. These events occurred within weeks of each other and represented a title wave of incidents to which UCN's senior management had to respond. While it is true that UCN had not prepared well for a crisis generally, the institution entered the COVID-19 pandemic with some level of preparation for the leadership team insofar as the three crises occurring in January and February 2020 had oriented them to a crisis management mindset.

### *The Response Phase: Beginning March 11, 2020*

In March 2020, UCN's senior leaders articulated an overall focus for its approach to planning, intending to "keep students, faculty, and staff safe, healthy, and engaged in education" (UCN, 2021a, p. 5). The importance of this statement should not be underplayed – it defined the broad parameters of UCN's approach: safety and health of individuals must be assured in the pandemic and should shape the approach to continuing to pursue the central purpose of the institution – delivering education, conducting research, and supporting students as they complete their studies (Lauvstad, 2020). This unifying theme of safe continuity permeated all planning considerations throughout the response phase (UCN, 2021a).

It is tempting to view crises as short-term events, and early assessments at UCN reflected a belief that the pandemic would be a short-term problem (UCN, 2020e). Indeed, nearly 60% of American colleges and universities believed that in-person classes would resume in September of 2020 (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). In the first days of the pandemic, UCN, like many institutions, made plans to manage the remainder of the winter term and to consider the spring and summer terms without looking any further ahead.

As the pandemic progressed, UCN's experience suggested that, given the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic as a long-term crisis, the response phase could be parsed into two discrete stages. First, an 'acute stage' saw the newly arrived crisis met with immediate decisions being made and implemented rapidly. Second, the 'chronic stage' saw a refinement and broadening of the initial plan established in the acute stage, shifting from rapid reaction to managing a continuing emergency. Accordingly, UCN's response phase will be examined below in two stages: acute and chronic.

### *Acute Stage of the Response Phase: March 11, 2020, to April 14, 2020*

The acute stage of UCN's pandemic response saw the development of immediate reactions to the onset of COVID-19 (UCN, 2020g). The early days of the pandemic at UCN can be described as 'disciplined chaos,' with the institution undertaking, as characterized well by the then Chair of UCN's Learning Council, Dr. Keith Hyde, "more pivots than a centipede on ice skates" (UCN, 2021b). During this stage of UCN's response, decision-making was firmly in the hands of senior administrators, and specifically President's Council. Reasons for this are rooted in UCN's context. While there has been considerable discussion regarding the growth and the influence of hierarchical administration in the management of universities with a variety of theories, including colonization and patriarchy, the more immediate and relevant factor in the present analysis is UCN's transition from a community college with a more corporate management approach, becoming a university college in 2004 – a change that saw the addition of degree programs and the adoption of more formal systems of shared governance, including a Learning Council.

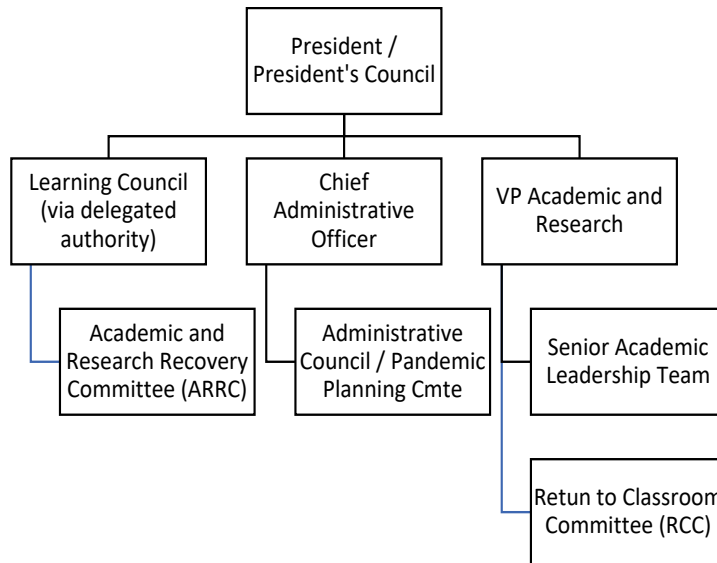
Early in UCN's existence, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) objected to the absence of legislated powers typically associated with shared governance for the Learning Council similar to those of other senates at degree-granting institutions. This gave the president and the Governing Council, in the opinion of CAUT, too much power over academic matters (CAUT, 2005; Loxley, 2009). Indeed, a 2009 retrospective review of the shared governance situation at UCN noted that academic "decisions tended to be concentrated in the hands of a couple of senior administrators" (Loxley, 2009, p. 31). The structural causes underpinning these phenomena were addressed through changes in legislation by government in 2006, ultimately resolving the matter that had so vexed CAUT (CAUT, 2006). Yet, the focus on administration-led decision-making rather than collegial structures had become, if not endemic, at least a habit at UCN. For example, the Faculty of Arts had invested in its dean's responsibilities normally held by those in department head positions in addition to the duties normally assigned to deans (Faculty of Arts and Science, 2013). Any pretense of a departmental structure had been formally abandoned in 2011 when a single steering committee was created to support the dean (Learning Council, 2015). It was only in 2015 when the Faculty of Arts, then called the Faculty of Arts, Business, and Science, adopted a more collegial style of governance, including departmentation by program area and the adoption of a faculty committee structure (Learning Council, 2015). While the adoption of structures of collegial governance has progressed, UCN's organizational history has favored corporate, hierarchical administrative structures over collegial ones.

Accordingly, initial leadership and planning for the pandemic were exercised through three pre-existing standing administrative structures: the President's Council, described above; the Senior Academic Leadership Team (SALT), composed of direct reports to the VP Academic and Research; and the Administrative Council, composed of direct reports to the Chief Administrative Officer plus SALT. At first, these groups met daily, and often many times daily, in March and April 2020. (Table 1, below, shows the numbers of monthly meetings). Additionally, on March 16, the fifth day of the pandemic, UCN's Learning Council unexpectedly delegated all its powers to the President to streamline responses to the developing situation (Learning Council, 2000; UCN, 2020g). Figure 1 shows graphically the organizational structure that supported the acute stage of UCN's pandemic response.

These three pre-existing groups (i.e., the President's Council, the Administrative Council, which began to refer to itself as the 'Pandemic Planning Committee,' and SALT) addressed every kind of issue, including academic issues. This initial approach was seen as necessary given the rapid pace of the pandemic's development in its early days, by emerging requirements from public health authorities, as well as by UCN's own assessments of the actions and responses of other post-secondary institutions as learned through professional networks and from media reports.

**Figure 1**

*Response Organization in the Acute Stage: Day 0 to Day 82*



The pace of planning activity was feverish, reflected in the numerous meetings of the different planning committees that occurred throughout March. After the first 30 days or so, this initial decision-making structure began to prove itself unsustainable. Given that the President's Council had become the key focal point for decision-making and planning, the Pandemic Planning Committee had its last meeting on April 2, 2020 (day 22 of the pandemic) and did not meet again. As the main elements of the response had been put into place, the President's Council, which had been meeting multiple times daily, began to meet every other day as of April 6, 2020 (day 26).

On April 14, 2020 (day 34 of the pandemic), the Return to Classroom Committee (RCC) was created to consider decisions about future academic terms, identifying which courses would be offered using remote delivery methods and which would be offered face-to-face (see Table 2). SALT also met frequently to reflect on options, discuss the implementation of pandemic plans, and to make recommendations and decisions. Both the RCC and SALT reported to the VP Academic and Research; however, given the delegation of academic authority to the President, academic decisions of the RCC and SALT were brought to the President's Council for discussion with and ratification by the President as deemed necessary. Added to these dynamics were the expected retirements of the Chief Financial Officer and the Executive Director of Indigenous Initiatives and Engagement. As noted above, these positions were not replaced, and their duties were redistributed to other offices based on the implementation of an administrative restructuring plan established 18 months prior to the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, three moves among senior academic leaders – the expected departure of two deans, and the creation of a new associate vice presidential portfolio served to increase UCN's leadership dynamics. The situation stabilized in late spring, 2020, with the agreement of the two deans to stay on for at least the 2020/21 academic year as the crisis unfolded. As these leadership dynamics played out, a host of administrative and academic decisions were being made to respond to the pandemic.

Actions taken during the first 82 days of UCN's pandemic response included the creation of protocols for working from home, the conversion of paper-based processes to electronic systems, defining how sick leave and other types of leave would be granted when self-isolating or quarantining, options around temporary or permanent layoffs were considered, government demands for funding reductions in the face of the pandemic were discussed, decisions were made around the use of facilities and their physical configuration, and decisions regarding the needs for personal protective equipment and additional cleaning supplies, were made, etc. (Kives, 2020; UCN, 2020f, 2020g). A host of academic decisions were also made, including changes to the academic schedule, conversion of courses to online and other remote delivery, temporary changes to assessment methods and to the grading scale, temporary lifting of some admissions requirements, as well as a decision to place on hold all program reviews. Decisions were

discussed with, and ratified as necessary, by the President under his authority as delegated by Learning Council (Learning Council, 2020). Further, all decisions were discussed and shared with the UCN community through communication channels that included global emails sent to students, faculty, and staff, town hall meetings, YouTube videos recorded by the President and by the VP Academic and Research, press releases, media interviews, a website dedicated to information about UCN's COVID-19 response, and through UCN's formal, written pandemic plan called *Sharing Space Safely* (UCN, 2021a).

The disciplined chaos of the acute stage of UCN's pandemic response was defined by the focus on existing administrative structures, the delegation of academic authority from the Learning Council to the President, and the rapid evolution of planning, and changes in senior leadership, all of which occurred in the first 30 days of the pandemic. Leaders at UCN also came to accept the long-term nature of the crisis and recognized the complexities and depth required in planning to ensure a successful and sustainable long-term response to COVID-19.

### *Chronic Stage of the Response Phase: Beginning April 14, 2020*

A transition towards the use of new, formal pandemic planning bodies began in mid-April 2020, with the creation of the RCC (UCN, 2020g). The impact of these new bodies was most clearly reflected in the reduction of meetings of the President's Council, dropping from 23 meetings in March, to 11 in April, returning to its regular, pre-pandemic cycle of weekly meetings, with four meetings in May 2020. The adoption of new pandemic planning bodies represented a transition away from disciplined chaos and the top-down approach of the acute stage of UCN's pandemic response (see Table 2 for a detailed explanation of these planning committees). As the chronic stage unfolded, UCN shifted to a shared-leadership approach to crisis management characterized by the increased involvement of subordinate leaders within the institution, as well as the inclusion of technical expertise on staff.

The transition to shared decision-making evolved organically from three phenomena. The first was the recognition of the unusualness of having the President make decisions pertaining to academic matters. Similar to public degree-granting institutions, academic matters at UCN are not typically considered solely by administrators. As the response phase continued, decisions required, such as the courses that were to be offered in-person or by remote delivery, showed that the President's Council was ill-suited to decision-making in the academic domain. The President's Council was also faced with a host of decisions that were more properly within its bailiwick: interacting with government, addressing human resource issues, contemplating facilities requirements, etc. President's Council was increasingly uncomfortable with its role in academic decision-making.

The shift to shared management was also necessitated by the volume and detailed nature of the planning work required. Once initial decisions were made, for example, the shift to remote learning or the requirement to work from home, subsequent decisions focused on comprehensive matters at a very fine level of detail that was impossible for a small group of executives at the apex of the institution to handle effectively. Selecting the specific courses that would proceed face-to-face, changes in the academic schedule, issues pertaining to voluntary withdrawal, COVID protocols for dormitory, apartment-style, and family student housing units, or implications for research projects are but a few examples of the many kinds of detailed decisions that were being asked of the President's Council.

Associated with the previous points, the amount of communication required of senior executives to consult, determine, refine, and communicate regarding pandemic-related decisions was overwhelming. For example, considering formally scheduled meetings of any length, as well as emails, phone calls, text messages, and messaging through Microsoft (MS) Teams, in my role as a member of the President's Council, in the 20 days from March 11 to 31, 2020, I received 2,177 discrete contacts on pandemic-related matters, an average of 103.7 contacts per 10-hour day, or one contact every 5 minutes and 40 seconds. This number of contacts does not include other, non-pandemic-related contacts of all types that I continued to receive; an amount that was roughly equal to the contacts associated with pandemic planning itself. The types of decisions and the level of detail needed, and the sheer volume of communication required to do the planning work were not sustainable by the President and a small senior executive team. The institution needed to adopt more formal structures to manage the pandemic over the longer term.



**Table 1**  
*Pandemic Planning Meetings, March 2020 – September 2021*

<b>Planning Committee</b>	<b>03/20</b>	<b>04/20</b>	<b>05/20</b>	<b>06/20</b>	<b>07/20</b>	<b>08/20</b>	<b>09/20</b>	<b>10/20</b>	<b>11/20</b>	<b>12/20</b>	<b>Sub-Total</b>
<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>03/20</b>	<b>04/20</b>	<b>05/20</b>	<b>06/20</b>	<b>07/20</b>	<b>08/20</b>	<b>09/20</b>	<b>10/20</b>	<b>11/20</b>	<b>12/20</b>	<b>Sub-Total</b>
<b>Days since 11/03/20</b>	<b>0-20</b>	<b>21-50</b>	<b>51-81</b>	<b>82-111</b>	<b>112-142</b>	<b>143-173</b>	<b>174-203</b>	<b>204-234</b>	<b>235-264</b>	<b>265-295</b>	<b>0-295</b>
<b>Standing Administrative Committees</b>											
President's Council (PC) <sup>1</sup>	23	11	4	4	1	3	3	7	4	2	62
Administrative Council (AC) <sup>2</sup>	9	1	Discontinued								10
Senior Academic Leadership Team (SALT)	9	6	3	4	2	3	1	2	2	1	35
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Formalized Pandemic Planning Committees</b>											
Return to Site Steering Committee (RSSC) <sup>3</sup>	--	--	--	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	23
Academic & Research Recovery Committee (ARRC) <sup>4</sup>	--	1	1	0	0	0	1	Discontinued			3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Standing Legislated Governance Bodies</b>											
Governing Council	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	6
Learning Council	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	5
Council of Elders	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	5
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>											
<b>2020</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>149</b>

*Notes.*

1. Includes the "COVID Update Committee" which met 23 times in March and 4 times in April. This committee was composed of the same membership as President's Council. Beginning in May, President's Council included a standing item, "Pandemic Response" along with other more typical agenda items.
2. Administrative Council renamed itself the Pandemic Planning Committee (PPC) after its 13/03/20 meeting. The PPC did not meet again after 02/04/20.
3. See Table 2 for more detail.
4. See Table 2 for a description of the ARRC. This group's work concluded after September 2020.

**Table 1**  
*Pandemic Planning Meetings, March 2020 – September 2021 (continued)*

<b>Planning Committee</b>											<b>Sub- Total</b>	<b>Total All Years</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>01/21</b>	<b>02/21</b>	<b>03/21</b>	<b>04/21</b>	<b>05/21</b>	<b>06/21</b>	<b>07/21</b>	<b>08/21</b>	<b>09/21</b>				
<b>Days since 11/03/20</b>	<b>296- 326</b>	<b>327- 354</b>	<b>355- 385</b>	<b>386- 415</b>	<b>416- 446</b>	<b>447- 476</b>	<b>447- 507</b>	<b>508- 538</b>	<b>539- 569</b>	<b>296- 569</b>	<b>0-569</b>	<b>--</b>	
<b>Standing Administrative Committees</b>													
President's Council (PC)	3	4	4	2	5	1	0	3	4	26	88	38.3%	
Administrative Council (AC)	Discontinued in March 2020										0	10	4.3%
Senior Academic Leadership Team (SALT)	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	8	43	18.7%	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>61.3%</b>	
<b>Formalized Pandemic Planning Committees</b>													
Return to Site Steering Committee (RSSC)	3	4	4	4	4	4	1	4	4	32	55	23.9%	
Academic & Research Recovery Committee (ARRC)	Discontinued in September 2020										0	3	1.3%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>25.2%</b>	
<b>Standing Legislated Governance Bodies</b>													
Governing Council	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	6	12	5.2%	
Learning Council	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	4	9	3.9%	
Council of Elders	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	5	10	4.3%	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>13.5%</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>													
<b>2021</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

Thirty-four days into the pandemic, UCN began to pivot away from planning processes that relied upon administration and towards an approach that included more faculty and staff. This helped to ensure that subject matter experts were directly engaged at an appropriate level of detail, and helped to ensure an achievable workload for planners. Once the major contours of UCN's response to the pandemic were in place, centralized control ceased to be an effective strategy.

**Table 2**  
*Formal Pandemic Planning Committees Established at UCN*

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Established (D/M/Y)</b>	<b>Days since 11/03/20</b>	<b>Purpose and Membership</b>
Return to Classroom Committee (RCC)	14/04/20	34	Chaired by a dean, the RCC planned for course delivery during the pandemic. Members were program deans, instructors and professors, scheduling, learning technology, and other technical staff. The RCC became a working group of the RSSC in June 2020 and continued to meet throughout the pandemic.
Academic and Research Recovery Committee (ARRC)	14/04/20	34	ARRC, chaired by the VP Academic and Research, was a working group of the Academic Planning Committee of Learning Council. ARRC considered issues pertaining to post-pandemic UCN. Members were the same who had prepared the Academic and Research Plan 2020-2025, approved in June of 2020 and included faculty members and staff. ARRC completed its work and was disbanded in September 2020 (UCN, 2020a).
Return to Site Steering Committee (RSSC)	01/06/20	82	Established on recognition that the RCC had insufficient breadth and authority to direct a comprehensive response to the pandemic, the RSSC, co-chaired by the VP Academic and Research and the Chief Administrative Officer, coordinated working groups, considered academic issues, facilities, student life, and remote learning locations. Communications and IT were also represented to ensure comprehensive coverage of institutional services. In late summer 2021, a Vaccine Mandate Implementation Working Group was added, co-chaired by the CAO and VP Academic and Research. Members of the RSSC consisted of the chairs of the individual working groups, as well as the Director of IT and the Director of Communications (UCN, 2021a). Individual working groups included relevant technical staff (e.g., the Facilities Working Group included workplace safety and health staff, the custodial staff supervisor, etc.). The RSSC had wide latitude to make independent decisions within the scope of authority of the co-chairs, including nearly every decision pertaining to COVID-19 protocols. Matters referred to the President were the decision to require vaccination in Fall 2021, and the decision to return to campus in January 2022.

On June 1, 2020 (the 82<sup>nd</sup> day of the pandemic), the Return to Site Steering Committee (RSSC) was created to provide greater structure, comprehensiveness, and stability in the planning process. Since being created, the RSSC met “regularly to share information, monitor progress, to discuss matters and

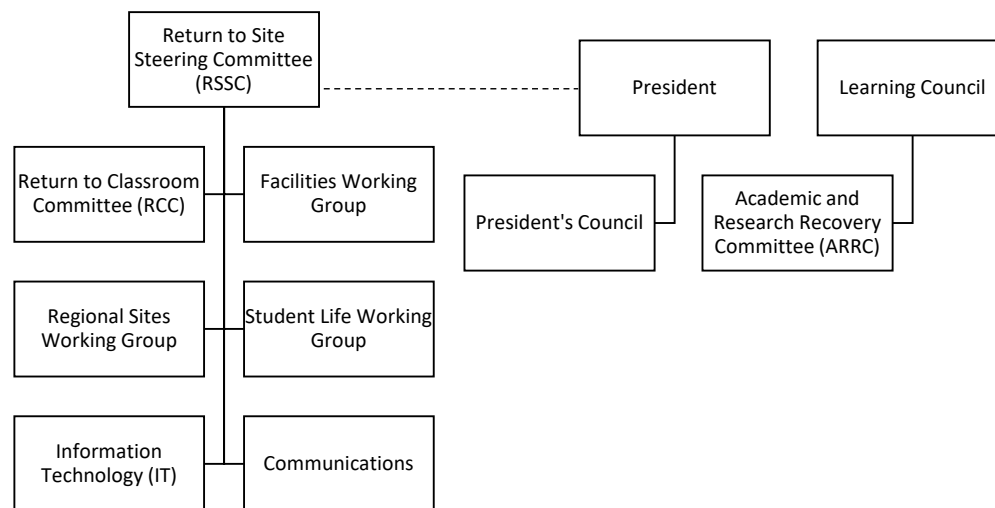
to make decisions” (UCN, 2021a, p. 58). Critical to the work of the RSSC were several working groups created to manage the details associated with pandemic planning. Indeed, the chairpersons of each working group reporting to the RSSC were members of the RSSC, plus representatives from the Information Technology department and Communications (see Figure 2 for the organizational structure used during the chronic stage of UCN’s response to the pandemic).

As part of the establishment of the RSSC, the RCC became a working group reporting to the RSSC (UCN, 2021a). The RCC played a key role in the planning process, engaging with all faculty members prior to each term to help define which classes would be offered face-to-face, and which would be offered remotely (UCN, 2021c). The recommendations of the RCC were reviewed by the RSSC and the President’s Council but were accepted by the RSSC without change. Such was the approach with all working groups, helping to ensure that leadership was “shared vertically and horizontally across teams based on relevant expertise” (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017, p. 6).

**Figure 2**

*Response Organization in the Chronic Stage: Day 82 to Day 569 (and ongoing)*

The creation of the RSSC relieved the pressure on existing leadership groups to undertake and over-



see pandemic planning. For example, the first 81 days of UCN’s pandemic response, or 14.2% into the period under review (i.e., 81 of the 569 days between March 11, 2020, and the end of September 2021), saw one-third (32.2%) of meetings occur (or 74 of 230 meetings to the end of September 2021). The beginning of June 2020 marked a decline in the number of pandemic-related meetings; a result of the start of summer when there were fewer students, faculty, and staff on site. It also reflected the beginning of the normalization of pandemic-era operations, representing the settling-in of planning processes that allowed for a more manageable tempo of operations for UCN’s planners.

The decisions taken by the RSSC were very much about the management and coordination of the day-to-day responses to the pandemic at UCN, including detailed decisions on academic activities, facilities, safety protocols, checklists, the use and content of self-screening tools, travel, and other matters that pertained to ensuring safe operations of UCN during the pandemic. The RSSC also took on the task of ensuring that UCN met the reopening requirements of the Government of Manitoba, issued in early June 2020 (UCN, 2021a). As the chronic stage continued, the RSSC became the responsible committee for all pandemic planning. The RSSC maintained a comprehensive planning document, *Sharing Space Safely*, and a website with supporting details regarding UCN’s COVID protocols and plans. Further, when UCN adopted a vaccine mandate in August 2021, the Vaccine Mandate Implementation Working Group was created by the RSSC to address the detailed policies and protocols associated with requiring vaccination for students, faculty, staff, and visitors attending a UCN facility.

In carrying out its planning duties, the RSSC focused on coordination but did not exercise executive authority or otherwise supplant UCN's existing administrative leadership structure. The final implementation of RSSC decisions was managed through the RSSC's two co-chairs, both of whom occupied positions at the vice-presidential level in UCN, led the university college's two major organizational divisions, and served on the President's Council. UCN's pandemic planning structure was thus integrated into UCN's managerial framework without supplanting that framework. The RSSC effectively managed UCN's response to the pandemic in concert with UCN's administrative structure, while engaging relevant subject matter experts in terms of student affairs, facilities, academic matters, and UCN's regional operations.

As the RSSC took responsibility for pandemic planning, the President's Council and SALT focused on more routine management issues, contributed to pandemic planning, and worked together with the RSSC to respond to events as they arose. UCN's three governing bodies – Governing Council, Learning Council, and the Council of Elders exercised oversight, continued to meet at regularly scheduled times, received reports and updates, but did not become directly involved in planning responses to the crisis (Council of Elders, 2020-21; Governing Council, 2020-21; Learning Council, 2020-21). This is not to suggest that the three Councils were disengaged in the pandemic response. The Council of Elders was directly engaged in the development of policy around mandatory vaccinations in the fall of 2021, providing advice and guidance as to the place and role of vaccination in Indigenous history, and providing their strong support and encouragement for students, faculty, and staff to get vaccinated (UCN Communications, personal communication, October 21, 2021). Further, the Learning Council was involved in long-term recovery planning (UCN, 2020a; UCN 2020e), reviewed below.

### *Preparing for Recovery at UCN*

As of the end of September 2021, it was impossible to know how the post-pandemic environment would look in Manitoba or in Canada, although UCN would be as susceptible to whatever emerges as any other Canadian institution. It is likely that most Canadian post-secondary institutions will encounter predictable challenges in the medium-term once the pandemic ends. For example, the Government of Canada and many provinces may face a fiscal reckoning as they grapple with high levels of pandemic-era spending, which, in turn, may foretell a reduction in funding for colleges, universities, and other public entities (UCN, 2020c; Usher, 2020, 2021a). Post-secondary institutions will also need to deal with the pandemic's impact on student, faculty, and staff mental health (Brown, 2020). Additionally, new students entering post-secondary institutions will have come from a K-12 system that was impacted by COVID-19 (Seltzer, 2020), with as-of-yet unclear effects on those students' success in post-secondary programming.

Within institutions, post-secondary leaders may have to grapple with the uncertainties associated with the loss of funding, respond to possible changes in the market for skills, address demands for more flexible work arrangements from faculty and staff, adjust to a different outlook on the role of technology both in teaching and in employment destinations of graduates. The post-pandemic era may also see greater demand for colleges and universities to include more remote, online, and blended learning opportunities (Alexander, 2020; Bates, 2020; Darby, 2020; Usher, 2021b), and a greater responsiveness to the labour market and to community needs, including more flexible program options, such as micro-credentials (Fischer, 2020; Stout, 2020).

Recognizing that it is difficult for leaders to look to the horizon in the midst of a crisis (Cowen, 2020; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997), the Academic Planning Committee of UCN's Learning Council established the Academic and Research Recovery Committee (ARRC) on April 14, 2020 (day 34 of the pandemic) to consider longer-term impacts of the pandemic on UCN's academic and research activity. The Academic Planning Committee had, prior to the pandemic, completed a 12-month consultative process to develop a new Academic and Research Plan. The draft of that plan was completed on March 9, 2020, two days before WHO declared a pandemic. Instead of undertaking a full rewrite of the plan, the ARRC focused on developing a framework to interpret the new Academic and Research Plan within the unexpected context of COVID-19. Accordingly, the membership ARRC was composed of the same committee that had led the development of the Academic and Research Plan (UCN, 2020a).

In fall 2020, after several months of internal consultations led by the ARRC, Learning Council approved *A Framework for a Resilient and Sustainable Post-COVID UCN* (UCN, 2020a). This framework established a set of three principles, expressed as hoped-for outcomes: (1) learners are at the center of

all activities; (2) we are more responsive and adaptive to learners, communities, and industries; and (3) UCN is *one institution* in its operations and its outlook (UCN, 2020a). These principles were designed to help inform teaching, learning, and scholarship at UCN in the post-pandemic era. In addition, several reviews were initiated at UCN that examined future options for different aspects of UCN's operations, including student services, retention, campus space utilization, various aspects of governance, teaching and learning after the pandemic, etc. (Smith, 2021a). These reviews included consultation with students, faculty, and staff via surveys, working groups, focus groups, and other opportunities for participation. The reviews reflect the intention expressed by UCN's president, to define and pursue a more innovative, creative, and engaged effort in doing UCN's work in the post-pandemic environment (Lauvstad, 2021).

### *Assessing UCN's Success: So Far, So Good*

The ultimate success of UCN's work in the response phase to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be categorically defined at this point. During the writing of this article, the pandemic was still a going concern, and the Province of Manitoba had experienced severe second and third waves, and a fourth wave was underway (Manitoba, 2021; Unger, 2021). While perhaps uncomfortable for some to consider, it is reasonable to include health outcomes of individuals as measures of success. For the 19 months under review, UCN was fortunate that there were no COVID-related deaths among students and staff. Further, between March 2020 and the end of September 2021, UCN reported a total of 38 cases of COVID-19 (Smith, 2021d), representing approximately 1.5% of all students, faculty, and staff at the institution. Additionally, UCN did not become aware of a positive case of COVID among students until October 12, 2020, day 215 of the pandemic (UCN, 2020d). Its first known positive case among staff was on October 22, 2020 (day 225). Further, in just two cases did transmission of the illness occur at UCN, and then only in late May 2021, on day 441 (Smith, 2021b). While we should not discount the importance of luck, such outcomes help to validate UCN's management of the pandemic to date. While some of UCN's outcomes reflect the late arrival of COVID-19 to Manitoba's north in 2020, outcomes also reflect the thoroughness of UCN's planning, as confirmed by public health officials (Smith, 2020b, 2020c). This important news was shared with all staff: "Manitoba Public Health periodically visits facilities to do COVID-19 compliance checks. We got a thumbs up on how we are continuing to serve students and stay as safe as possible at the same time" (UCN Communications, all-staff email, February 25, 2021).

Additionally, a staff survey conducted in the fall of 2020 found that UCN employees had confidence in UCN's pandemic planning. Findings showed that 81% of staff were confident in UCN's plans to keep students, faculty, and staff safe during the pandemic, while 78% felt that UCN was headed in the right direction (UCN, 2020f). However, not every faculty and staff member were enthusiastic supporters of UCN's plans, and some expressed only minimal confidence. One staff member indicated that "I believe once staff and students return, that's when we'll see what we need to do better" (UCN, 2020f, p. 18). A faculty member wrote that UCN should be "enforcing the use of hand sanitizer when entering the building, and when entering a classroom, bookstore, library, and study space. This should not be optional but mandatory" (UCN, 2020f, p. 18). Another faculty member counselled that UCN must be attentive to what other post-secondary education institutions are doing in relation to face-to-face teaching, suggesting that "if they are allowed face-to-face instruction, we should also be allowed the same" (UCN, 2020f, p.17).

A year later, a second survey revealed that there was still a majority of faculty and staff (55%) who felt that UCN's COVID plans were excellent or very good (UCN, 2021d), noticeably lower than the 81% reported a year earlier. However, faculty and staff reported feeling that UCN's plans kept them safe whether they were working from home (as were 53% of respondents) or working on campus (as were 47% of respondents) at a rate of 86% and 78% respectively (UCN, 2021d). The announcements in mid-to-late November 2020 that a number of vaccines were to become available in 2021 created a reason for optimism, and that optimism continued to grow as the months went by, albeit tempered by another severe wave in spring, 2021.

The adoption by UCN of a vaccine mandate in August 2021 helped to create the potential for a more general return to campus for the January 2022 Winter Term. The arrival of vaccinations placed a greater focus on planning for recovery, and supported a September 29, 2021, announcement of the return to face-to-face classes in UCN's January 2022 Winter Term (UCN Communications, all-staff email, September 29, 2021). While there was a general sense that UCN was continuing to do the right things, not all individuals were satisfied. Some faculty members made the decision to leave UCN once the requirement to

be vaccinated was announced. UCN's Fall 2021 survey revealed that 15% of faculty and staff felt that a mandatory vaccination policy was the wrong direction for UCN (UCN, 2021d). While there was a sense at UCN at the end of September 2021 that the end of COVID-19 was near, it was clear that the pandemic had not ended. The health outcomes of students, faculty, and staff, and the confidence expressed by public health officials and by employees suggested that UCN could, 19 months into the crisis, claim success in its response to the pandemic.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The pandemic created an unprecedented crisis with little forewarning. UCN's approach to managing this crisis evolved as the pandemic progressed. Reliance on existing administrative structures during the acute stage of UCN's response gave way to dedicated planning structures with broader participation to manage detailed planning as the pandemic became chronic. Consideration of the post-pandemic state at UCN was led by Learning Council, with additional impacts considered through a variety of future-oriented reviews undertaken in 2020 and 2021 that involved consultation within the institution. The establishment of a central planning principle – to “keep students, faculty, and staff safe, healthy, and engaged in education” (UCN, 2021a, p. 5) – provided “strategic clarity” (De Smet et al., 2021, p. 5) that unified activity, provided coherence, and created a clear link to business continuity regardless of changes in planning structures or changes of individual leaders within the organization. Clear direction was provided, and a response organization was created to manage adaptation as the situation warranted.

While a pre-existing emergency plan certainly would have helped to guide the acute stage of UCN's response, its absence was not fatal, although the first 30 days were more chaotic. The reliance on pre-existing administrative leadership committees brought a more disciplined approach to early planning. Additionally, the three crises that preceded the pandemic helped shape a crisis mindset among the senior leaders at UCN. These previous crises also brought together a transitioning leadership team of individuals who had recently joined UCN and those whose retirement was imminent. While there is no substitute for formal preparation, and representing perverse luck, these three crises helped to orient leaders to the frantic pace and other rigors of managing a crisis.

The transition from top-down to shared leadership was largely completed on June 1, 2020, the 82<sup>nd</sup> day of the pandemic, when the RSSC was established and a team approach was taken, giving technical experts greater autonomy to contribute to pandemic management, and provided flexibility to address new situations as they arose (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017), such as when a new working group was struck to define and implement a vaccine mandate. This, and when Learning Council reclaimed its authority from the President later in June 2020, helped to ensure that the complex planning that was required in every sphere of UCN's operations received attention by the right individuals and groups at the right time, and helped to manage the associated volume of work.

One of the more interesting dynamics that emerged at UCN was the role and place of the system of shared governance. UCN's Learning Council exercises, like other such bodies, legislated authority pertaining to all aspects of teaching, learning, research, and other academic affairs, and thus UCN's Learning Council should have been involved in any aspect of planning that related to how teaching, learning, and research changed with the pandemic. Yet, this was not the case, and Learning Council delegated all its powers to the President early in the crisis to allow for a more efficient institutional response. This move had the unintended effect of removing the Learning Council from the decision-making process, and Learning Council was eclipsed by other bodies that took the lead in pandemic response planning throughout the period under study. Early decisions by the Learning Council to defer to administration meant that it was excluded as a shared leadership approach to the crisis emerged.

Similar patterns in terms of academic governance were seen in the United States (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2021) and in Ontario. In Ontario, 73% of institutional senates, faculty associations, contract faculty, and student unions were not included in committees that were created to lead the pandemic response – indeed, 88% of these planning structures were led by administration in a top-down approach (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations [OCUFA], 2020b). The OCUFA itself suggested that an administration-led response to the crisis was justified given the extreme nature of the changes that had to happen in a short time, however, the OCUFA expressed concerns in terms of the status of collegial governance (OCUFA, 2020b). At UCN, the faculty's union expressed no opinion with respect to the role of collegial governance in the pandemic. Additionally,

surveys of faculty and staff showed reasonably high levels of confidence – albeit diminishing over time – in UCN’s approach (UCN, 2020f, 2021d), suggesting that UCN’s faculty and staff were content with the approach taken. Collegial bodies at universities and colleges, including at UCN, were absent from pandemic planning.

This state of affairs is not expected to persist, and there are clear signs that UCN’s system of collegial governance will play an important role in defining the post-pandemic environment at UCN during the recovery phase. As UCN began to shift to the chronic stage of its response, the creation of the ARRC on day 34 of the pandemic signaled a collegial approach to defining UCN’s activity after the pandemic. UCN continued this trend of inclusion in post-pandemic planning through the various reviews that were undertaken throughout 2020 and 2021. While the implementation process for this work has not yet fully developed, optimism is warranted that UCN’s system of shared governance will have a major hand in defining the future of UCN once fully into the recovery phase. At the outset, fewer than 10 individuals were involved in making formal decisions pertaining to UCN’s pandemic response. By the end of the 19-month period under review, leadership in pandemic planning was distributed throughout the institution, helping to ensure that the right people were involved at the right time and at the right level of detail. It is at least ironic to note that, while UCN’s pandemic planning experience transitioned to, and benefited from, shared decision-making, a major governance structure within the institution that is intended to share in decision-making – the Learning Council – played a minor role in UCN’s response.

Noted early in UCN’s pandemic response, it is a biological truism that systems that do not adapt to environmental change are doomed to extinction (UCN, 2020a); the importance of flexibility cannot be overstated. Whether shifting to remote delivery methods, allowing (and in some instances, requiring) faculty and staff to work from home, severely restricting travel, or changing planning structures as circumstances warrant, adaptability has been critical to the successes that UCN has enjoyed in its response to COVID-19. The shared leadership that developed at UCN throughout the 19-month period helped to contribute to faculty and staff satisfaction with pandemic planning as assessed by surveys, and effective planning as measured by low case counts, no deaths at the institution, and general approval of public health authorities in the first 19 months of the pandemic. Such positive outcomes are consistent with other observations regarding shared leadership in challenging situations (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

During the pandemic, most post-secondary institutions learned that they could adapt quickly, pivoting to remote and online learning within a matter of days (Kim, 2021). The caricature of the university as an inflexible organization was smashed as new ways of doing things were implemented in short periods of time. Further research could explore the limited roles that were played by academic governance systems and how those systems may have been affected in the long term by the pandemic (AAUP, 2021). The pandemic will undoubtedly be viewed as a unique moment in the history of post-secondary education. COVID-19 was disruptive for colleges and universities, yet this does not necessarily mean that the pandemic represents a disruption. It is important not to confuse the temporary shift of instruction to remote and online delivery as a reinvention of higher education (Gigliotti, 2020). More research, as well as the perspective that perhaps only time can provide, is required to better understand the meaning of this unique moment for colleges and universities around the world. The end of the pandemic will not necessarily lead to a new reality for colleges and universities (Doku, 2020), and the post-pandemic reality may be fraught with challenges emerging from choices that have been made and have yet to be made by many internal and external stakeholders. UCN’s experiences in the pandemic showed that successful adaptation can be achieved in crises with a shared approach to leadership. Such lessons may serve colleges and universities well as they seek to become more resilient and sustainable in the face of whatever challenges may be presented to them in the pandemic’s aftermath.

## Authors Note

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