

An Interview with Federico Zaragoza

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Federico Zaragoza, President of College of Southern Nevada, and was conducted on 10/21/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with F. Zaragoza (CSN President)

Date: 10-21-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Federico Zaragoza, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio

Magdalena Martinez [00:02]

All right. So we are here with Dr. Federico Zaragoza from CSN. Today is October 21st, 2022. And just to confirm Dr. Zaragoza, you consent to be recorded, and if we use any of your quotes, have them attributed to you.

Federico Zaragoza [00:18]

Absolutely.

Magdalena Martinez [00:19]

All right. Thank you so much. Well, let's start off by talking about what – if you could describe your role during the pandemic, and what you saw as your role at CSN during the pandemic.

Federico Zaragoza [00:31]

Sure. So I was the president of the college at the time of the pandemic. And I can tell you that I saw my role as kind of the "conductor" if you will for a very complex shift in operations at the college that really shifted the nature of higher education totally. And like many other presidents, we were trying to figure out the best way to continue to provide quality instruction at a time when our environment was really shifting. And for all of the assumptions that we had about higher education and learning were put to the test. So, you know, again, there was one word that I think reflected what a lot of us felt we were doing, as we were providing leadership in a very uncertain environment.

Magdalena Martinez [01:28]

Could you talk a little bit more about that leadership? How is it different from the leadership you typically provide as a college president?

Federico Zaragoza [01:35]

In most cases, as a leader, you've got a clear vision. You've done your SWOT analysis. You're pretty intentional about how to move forward. And throwing leadership in that environment, while difficult, has an anchor, and it has a frame of reference when you're providing leadership in an uncertain environment. Where the assumptions and what is fact are constantly changing, when the policies under which you operate are changing and controlled by others. It's a totally different environment to provide leadership.

And so, the ability to instill confidence in the institution, our faculty, and students in that period, I would say it was much more difficult and required different kinds of tactics. We felt it was extremely important to be transparent. We instituted bi-weekly town hall meetings. We provided, if not weekly, bi-weekly messages from the office of the president, related to what we knew of the COVID environment – the health and the science of the disease itself, but also, the policy

consequences. And with NSHE, and with UNLV, the board of regents was also involved, as you know. And then the governing structure was highly complex. That created significant challenges for us.

And then you also had, as part of the challenges of COVID, the mental anxiety and consequences of your workforce. Not only your students but your workforce as well. And I can tell you that we had some suicides where we lost some people in this process. We lost some people to the illness. So it was a very different type of institution that you had to lead in those types of circumstances. Then kind of the traditional leadership mantra that we all follow, in terms of inspiring, and moving on to Best Practices, etc. There was a very different shift that we all had to make.

Magdalena Martinez [04:02]

And Dr. Zaragoza, community colleges typically serve low-income, first-generation students of color. Who would you say were some of the most difficult, hardest-hit during the pandemic, given that the majority of the population of CSN falls under one of those categories?

Federico Zaragoza [04:23]

Magdalena, there's a lot of national literature on this, specifically for CSN, that validates the impact that COVID had on the community. And then, consequently, by extension to community colleges.

But let's talk about southern Nevada, where basically the hospitality industry shut down. Seventy percent of our students were part-time, I mean, they're employed. They come to us on a part-time basis because they're looking for mobility and they're basically to upgrade their employability status. So when they were unemployed, the consequence was that we lost a great majority of students. Community colleges lost 21% of their students between the beginning of COVID and the end of COVID, and we're still trying to recover. For us, this semester we were flat, but we haven't gotten back to pre-COVID levels.

So I think it's very important that we understand that community college students were disproportionately impacted. Secondly, if you look at the profile of those CSN students, typically, we are a minority-majority institution. So the vast majority of our students were students of color, and then more than half of our students are on PELL, so they're low-income students. If you look at the national data, it's community colleges and low-income that were most impacted, and that's very true for us at the College of Nevada. That impacted their ability to continue in their classes, so we saw a drastic kind of reduction.

We're still trying to analyze those that stayed. The aggregate data suggests that they're succeeding at pre-COVID levels, so it didn't necessarily impact graduation rates. In fact, our graduation rates stayed constant and actually increased during COVID. But that doesn't speak to how certain groups were impacted, and I think that that's part of what we're looking at. Also, we migrated to a totally online environment, and we know that many community colleges don't do well in that environment. So, in addition to the economy, modality was another one of those factors, where some students just didn't feel that online was for them.

And then the third area for community colleges is that about a third of our programs have lab requirements, hands-on type projects, and courses. And those hands-on labs were closed; so there was no way the welders could go to their labs to work on welding, auto mechanics, or all of the other programs that were impacted. So, kind of, put yourselves in our place with all these moving parts. Universities, typically, they're making adjustments to the academic model. We have embedded in what we do academic transfer, but then we've got the workforce side, and it becomes much, much more complex.

And then, also, you've got the dynamics of the profiles of students that are enrolled in these different types of modalities. So we have to basically factor all of those considerations in terms of responding to your question, in terms of what the impact might have been for the students that we serve. Certainly, the national data were validated and probably was much more intense in CSN because we are so driven by hospitality because so many of our students were directly impacted by the shutdown.

Magdalena Martinez [08:12]

Given all those challenges you've just outlined, were there any innovative ways that CSN responded to or dealt with these challenges during the pandemic and even now?

Federico Zaragoza [08:22]

Yeah. And I'm very proud that CSN was just awarded – we were accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. And they have one major award that they give every year for student success – that's the Beacon Award. And this year, we won the Beacon Award for incorporating tutoring into the virtual environment. So we not only migrated towards online instruction, we had to migrate supportive services, everything from advising – and then tutoring was really important. And so, we innovated, I think, to support our students, and we did that on the curriculum side. We did that on the student support side. And to tell you the truth, I mean, we also had to do it on the workforce side. We had to balance the ability of those that would telecommute and those that would be here. There were a lot of moving parts.

But I do want to say that one of the other things that became very important for us was to be empathetic and to really understand that, hey, we didn't have all the answers. We were still trying to figure this out. And then we were going to be very transparent, and in some ways, we became very vulnerable. And some of that was good, I think, and some of that has carried forward, in terms of just the values of how we operated.

But I think the culture of pre- and post-COVID is something that will take researchers some time to analyze. It wasn't just the mechanics and the structure. It really was the cultures of the institutions that changed. And with the big retirement, you know, all of that's at play, I think the research is coming in very slowly. That, as a higher education enterprise, the work we do, and will do in the future will be much different than the work we did before.

Magdalena Martinez [10:18]

Absolutely. I think you're absolutely right about that. Can you talk a little bit more about what you feel we've learned from the pandemic and these innovative approaches? And what worked and what didn't for future crises?

Federico Zaragoza [10:33]

Yeah. I can tell you what I learned (laughs) and maybe start with that. Because institutionally, we're still gathering the data and we're still learning at that level. But I kind of learned, and I'll tell you, I was inspired by our students, the resilience of our students. We have amazing students, that even in the face of the challenges that they were facing, you know, families that were being laid off, multi-generation households, where sickness was in their households, these students persisted. They stayed connected, and they had that optimism that education was important for them to succeed and meet their goals.

So due to the resilience of higher ed, I think what it meant to them was important. But I also learned that they also started to question the value of higher education. For some students, they had to decide between work and higher education. And unfortunately, we saw some students have to step out. And in the national literature – and I talk to my students all the time – they have a need to work. And if higher education isn't value-added, then they're going to start asking, "Do I really have to go to community college, when maybe the employer will do the training, or maybe there are other alternatives?" So it's creating – related to your earlier question about the pre-post environment.

The culture has changed, and the value proposition of education is changing as well. And I think our students are very, very smart. That translates to a declining enrollment issue across the county in higher ed in general, not just community colleges. And I think that was really intensified by COVID. Clearly, living it, it kind of feels different than when you're reading it, and we kind of lived that. And I can tell you that our faculty and staff were all vulnerable. And I felt through this period the humanity side of who we are become much more prominent because we were dealing, as individuals, not necessarily just positions.

And so I think it's created, in some ways, a different relationship between the hierarchy within the College of Southern Nevada, which I think is a good thing, you know. You get to know people in different ways. So I learned a lot. I think at the institutional level, we've tried to keep in touch with the national data and the research that's emerging and try to validate it in things like impact on students. Trying to look at the focus group data and what students are saying is going on. Certainly, the curriculum side and modality.

So the institution is continuing to learn how to do our job better. But we're still getting data because I don't think the data for us was as robust as it needed to be or as intentional as it needed to be. So we're kind of looking at it – and it was too fast too. I mean this happened so quickly that even if you wanted to have that kind of cadence of information to make decisions, your systems aren't set up to do that, and so, again, we had to improvise. But again, at the end of the day, we've become a better learning organization because of that experience. And again, I think that will serve us much better in the future because we've acknowledged, I guess, that we can be better.

Magdalena Martinez [14:47]

If it's all right with you, I'd like to allow Carmen to ask any follow-up questions. And then if you can ask the final question, Carmen.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [14:57]

Yes, thank you. Dr. Zaragoza, I know that CSN has a "Ventanilla," a window of education with the consulate. Were you able to keep those programs in place during the pandemic?

Federico Zaragoza [15:09]

Yeah. So, the Ventanilla just started after the pandemic, after we came back. So it wasn't in place at the time of the pandemic. But again, the Ventanilla is much more of an educational and connectivity issue. And so, you know, moving forward, if we were to have another pandemic, I would think that they would be more important. Because I'm giving information out to a part of the community that oftentimes doesn't get the information timely. And that was the important part of the Ventanilla, recognizing that we have a growing, and, in fact, almost 38% of our students are Latino now, and the vast majority are Mexican Americans. And the consulate is a source of information for our Latino community, and we're a community college, so it's natural. And I'm just so glad we have it in place now. I wish it had been in place during the pandemic.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [16:10]

My last question is, are you hopeful about programs like that and other things? What are you hopeful for?

Federico Zaragoza [16:16]

I'm very hopeful for that, and I'm hopeful that it will lead to more innovation. Because one of the things that the Ventanilla is showing us is that we've got pockets of the community that are not being served. We don't have bilingual education programs. We don't have vocational "VESL" programs – vocational ESL programs. We don't have pathways from non-credit to credit.

And so we need to get better, and the Ventanilla reminds us, every day, you see the families and students coming. And we are a community college. We need to be that segue for higher ed and the pursuit of the American Dream, you know. It's a great opportunity for us, so I'm very encouraged. And yeah – I think it's got great potential to make us a better institution.

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [17:06]

Thank you, gracias, Dr. Zaragoza.

Magdalena Martinez [17:09]

Thank you so much, Dr. Zaragoza. I want to be respectful of your time.

Federico Zaragoza [17:13]

Thank you. And it's 10:30, so I very much appreciate it. (laughs)

Magdalena Martinez [17:16]

Have a good day.

Federico Zaragoza [17:17]

Thank you, Magdalena. And if there's anything I can do later, please don't hesitate to call me, okay?

Magdalena Martinez [17:20]
I appreciate it. Thank you.

End of audio: 17:23