It’s never been easy to be a college president. This past year, with a pandemic in full swing, the job became that much harder.

Story by Grace Tatter, Ed.M.’18
Photographs by Walter Smith
IN DECEMBER 2019, DAVID KWABENA WILSON, ED.M.'84, ED.D.'87, was on a train cutting across the periphery of Wuhan Province in China. As the president of Morgan State University, he leads trips to China for other presidents of HBCUs, sometimes twice a year. One of his priorities is forging global connections for his students and faculty. As he looked forward to 2020, he was excited to finalize plans for a partnership in Ghana.

But it wasn’t long into the new year when Wilson realized everything about his job was going to change.

At the beginning of March, he was forced to make the hard decision to ask Morgan State students studying abroad — for many, a landmark experience of their college careers — to come home. That was the first of many difficult decisions that would come every day in the coming months. Within a week, the university announced the suspension of in-person instruction for all 7,000 students. The bustling Baltimore campus that had defined the past decade of his career was a ghost town.

“I realized that life for me as a university president would not be the same when I started coming to the campus almost every day, and I was the only one here,” he says.

Even in the calmest of times, the job of a college president is a juggling act. According to the most recent American College Presidency Study from the American Council on Higher Education, the top five responsibilities of college presidents nationwide are budget/finances; fundraising; managing a senior level team; building governing board relationships; and enrollment management. That’s not to mention overseeing personnel matters, academics, research, and students, from undergraduates to law and medical, and being the face of the university.

“If you look back at job descriptions for presidents, they were always looking for somebody who could do so many different things at once,” says JUDITH BLOCK MCLAUGHLIN, M.A.T.’71.
ED.D.’83, a senior lecturer on education and the educational chair of the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents.

What’s more, some of the qualities expected of a college president can even be contradictory. “We want someone who can work successfully with the academic governance of the institution and be a decisive decision-maker,” says McLaughlin. “A person might be able to do both, but they have to move between the two roles, successfully knowing when to engage with campus constituencies, and how and when to make decisive decisions. It’s not a job with a single focus.”

It’s a job that was already becoming steadily more challenging against a backdrop of mounting higher education costs, less higher education funding, and a more politically polarized nation.

“College presidents have always felt pressure, but I would argue that the pressures have become more acute” in recent years, McLaughlin says. “Many colleges around the country were already feeling quite strained and stressed. It was already getting more and more challenging. And then COVID came in.”

At the onset of the pandemic, all of the preexisting responsibilities of college presidents were significantly complicated. And one colossal, new responsibility became central to their jobs almost overnight: managing an unprecedented, ever-shifting public health crisis.

For college presidents, the decision to suspend in-person classes and operations in March was just the beginning. Every day, presidents had to make decisions about whether to plan for any sort of in-person commencement. About resource allocation for online learning. About events and initiatives that had been planned long before 2020. About personnel and layoffs. And they had to make all of these decisions with rapidly changing information about the virus, and minimal national leadership. (The Trump Department of Education never offered COVID guidelines for colleges and universities; the Biden administration released higher education guidance on January 21.)

“Decision-making in this period has to be nimble and agile,” Wilson says. “The first challenge is to make sure that you, as a president, are OK with the fact that you make a decision at 9 o’clock in the morning and you may have to revisit that at 5 o’clock that afternoon.”

And while college presidents don’t make decisions alone, relying on cabinets and experts throughout their university communities, McLaughlin says that “the person who is most visible when the decisions come out is the president.”

At Morgan State, Wilson and his leadership team ultimately decided not to welcome students back for in-person classes in the fall semester. At Lasell University in Newton, Massachusetts, President Michael Alexander made a different choice. Students were given the option to return or stay home. Those who came back to campus were asked to adhere to strict safety guidelines—which required detailed planning to implement.

“The COVID work,” Alexander says, “is not optional.

Among the top frustrations named by college presidents in the American College President Study is a resistance to change. Alexander, who completed his education doctoral coursework at HGSE, says that his career as a college president has offered few opportunities to make decisions that please students, faculty, and staff alike. And getting the entire community to act as a team was especially daunting when the pandemic necessitated distance and remote communication. But, to his surprise, he met almost no resistance to the new demands borne from strict safety procedures on campus and a mixture of teaching and learning online and in-person.

“Everyone stepped up, adjusted to new technology, wearing masks, adapting to new procedures,” he said. “As a result, we kept people learning and progressing toward their degrees. They appreciated our ability to keep people safe and keep people learning at the same time.”

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Still, there was a significant financial cost to the adjustments. Students who returned to campus submitted to twice-weekly testing, made possible through a partnership with the Cambridge-based Broad Institute. Lasell administered 30,000 tests over the fall semester, costing the institution millions of dollars. The university allowed students who opted not to return to campus to receive a discount on tuition — another hard decision asked of college presidents nationwide. According to a poll of college students by the study platform OneClass, 93 percent of the 13,000 students surveyed thought that tuition should be discounted for an all-online education. Lasell was one of the very few institutions to agree.

Lasell has fared better this past decade than many other small, private colleges in its region. According to August 2020 data from The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit news organization devoted to education, 30% of four-year colleges are bringing in less revenue from tuition than they did a decade ago. In New England, where the college-aged population is dwindling, competition for students is especially fierce. Eight colleges have closed or merged in Massachusetts since 2016, more than in any other state. Despite a relatively small endowment, and a commitment to serving students who often can’t afford the full tuition, Lasell has maintained a balanced budget.

But the pandemic forced even the wealthiest schools into positions of financial precarity. Public schools dealt with almost-certain budget cuts from financially strapped state governments. And nearly all colleges saw costs rise and tuition revenue fall, forcing impossible choices.

At Morgan State, Wilson pushed to invest in mental health services for students and extra technological resources, despite facing a drop in public funding.

“You have to follow the science, and sometimes when the science presents itself to you, it runs counter to some of the things that we may have learned in graduate school, like fiscal responsibility,” Wilson says. “What does it mean to be a fiduciary of your institution, and how do you embrace innovation and to do it in a way that will still enable the institution to function at a very high level?”

“There is not a campus, no matter how rich, that hasn’t been deeply affected by the financial costs associated with this,” says McLaughlin. New costs include testing, personal professional equipment, and sanitation, all paired with the loss of tuition revenue from students who decided to pause their education until a return to stability. To make budgeting even more difficult, uncertainty has ruled the day, with constantly shifting case numbers and state and local policies.

“This year, over the summer, we ended up doing five different budgets,” Alexander says. Lasell’s budget quickly became obsolete as they had to adjust expectations of how many students would be in residence on campus. And the whole summer, the possibility that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would not allow students to return at all loomed. In the end, Lasell had a worst-case budget, a best-case, and everything in between. “That’s an enormous amount of work on top of what we normally do,” says Alexander.

It still isn’t clear when that work and the associated costs will go away. Even as the vaccine becomes more widely distributed, new variants pose new threats. Students and staff will likely still require new, more expensive sanitation practices to feel safe living and working alongside one another. And some students will have become accustomed to the flexibility afforded by online classes — and perhaps less willing to pay top-dollar for the residential experience.

Questions about tuition and online education were already among the pressures on institutions before COVID. The cost of higher education in the United States has climbed at a much faster pace than the country’s median income, according to a 2019 report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In 2018, more than half of students took on some debt to go to college, according to the Federal Reserve. More and more, students and families are wondering if the price tag of the traditional American college experience is worth it — and those doubts have perhaps only been
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deepened in a school year where even much of the residential college experience has been mediated through screens.

“Many small colleges were stressed financially already, and now the pandemic has made everyone stressed,” Alexander says. “There is an interaction between the issues of cost, of access, the financing of higher education, and the pandemic, and what the policy reactions are to the pandemic.”

This only makes more urgent questions that were already monopolizing many college president’s waking hours, especially at schools like Lasell, that serve a predominately low-income student body. While the middle and upper middle class fared well economically during the pandemic, at least 8 million lower-income Americans fell into poverty, according to research this past fall from Columbia University’s Center on Poverty & Social Policy.

“We have to figure out a way to still provide high-quality education at a significantly lower cost, because what it costs today, [students] simply cannot afford,” says Alexander.

“The events of last spring and summer have created a momentum for change, or increased the speed of change, in ways that one would not have seen otherwise,” says McLaughlin.

And college presidents are the ones charged with steering their institutions through these new waters.

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The pandemic not only changed what college presidents do. It also changed how they do it. Wilson estimates that he used to spend up to 40% of his time traveling to maintain partnerships abroad, meet with board members, attend conferences, and fundraise. When he was on campus, he put a high premium on meeting in person, and putting names to faces. At a time when he needed the trust of his community like never before, the pandemic forced distance that made new relationships harder to form, and could have cooled pre-existing ones.

“You are not connecting with your students face-to-face. You’re not connecting with faculty. You’re not there,” he says. Wilson says he’s grateful that the pandemic happened more than a decade into his career at Morgan State. “I think for me it was much easier because the university community had gotten to know me and they trusted the decisions that I made.”

Yet meeting on Zoom rather than in person does have its advantages. Wilson expanded his cabinet from about 15 people to 60, a number of people unlikely to fit around a conference table.

“I felt that we were about to go through a period where we had to make tough decisions and resources were becoming parsimonious, because we are a state institution and the state revenues are not coming in. We have to talk about remote education and what that entails for the institution, and we have to deal with some issues of technological challenges on the part of our students, and just a lot of thorny issues. And I did not feel that the model that I had in place would be representational,” he says. “I would basically be only listening to the senior leadership and relying upon the senior leadership then to convey the way decisions were being made to others in the institution.” In a pandemic, transparency and communication are key, he says — and that meant adding leaves to the virtual table.

James Ryan, the dean of the Ed School from 2013 to 2018, had only been the president of the University of Virginia (UVA) for 18 months when the pandemic started. While he had previously served as dean of UVA’s law school, he was still meeting people across the 22,000-student institution. He could not rely on the long-standing relationships that presidents like Wilson had built over more than a decade.

“I was still getting to know people and learning how to organize the work,” he says. “[The pandemic] disrupted that.”

But, he recognized that even if he’d had more experience as president, he would still be operating without a blueprint. “The work that was facing us was not work that the university normally has to deal with.”
Like Wilson, he expanded the number of people he worked with and regularly consulted. “The tasks that were presented to us didn’t fit squarely into student affairs or communications or the COO’s office,” he says. “It required thinking about — OK, who has the relevant bits of knowledge, and who has the capacity to implement what we’re going to do? We had to create all of these cross-functional groups of people that normally didn’t work together anyway.”

He hopes that after the pandemic, it feels normal for people across the university to work together. “I hope we take that forward when we’re thinking not just about how we deal with a pandemic, but how we put together the right group if we’re thinking about a new initiative.” Ryan says. “Rather than thinking, ‘Well, we have to find the office that we assign this to,’ instead we think, ‘How do we bring the 10 best people across the university who would be the very best at figuring out how to do this and how to implement it?’”

The political and cultural context of the pandemic will also perhaps permanently change what it means to be a college president. The coronavirus pandemic put a spotlight on the country’s history of white supremacy. College and university communities were grappling with the police killing of George Floyd as well as the virus — and they looked to their leadership to partake in the conversations and represent them to the outside world.

Presidents are often viewed as the moral conscience of their universities, says McLaughlin. “When do you decide to speak on behalf of your institution, and when do you not? The one thing you can be sure of is, whatever you say, there will be some constituents who think you said the wrong thing.”

When a Black Lives Matter protest planned to cross through Morgan State’s campus this summer, Wilson put on his mask and joined it. “You have to walk the walk as well as talk the talk,” he says.

The belated national racial reckoning might also push boards selecting future college presidents to be more inclusive. The American Council on Higher Education’s American College Presidency Study shows that the profile of the American college presidents is shifting very slowly. When the data was collected in 2016, 70% of college presidents were men and 83% were white. Those numbers diverge sharply from the profile of American college students. In 2016, nearly half of American undergraduate students did not identify as white. The events of 2020 underscore the need for college presidents of all races to be prepared to address racism and racial inequity head on.

In the meantime, the college presidents of today have more storms to weather. Wilson said that a crucial lesson of leading during the pandemic has been self-care. “In very stressful situations, you have to find some time to disconnect and you’ve got to find some time to exhale. You’ve got to find some time, if you will, to laugh,” he says. At one point, he invited the university’s counseling center staff to his 60-person Zoom cabinet meeting, so they could all get a tutorial in taking time for themselves. “It was just so amazing. We needed that one hour or so of kind of basic care, of ‘here’s how you take care of yourself.’”

And while dozens of college presidents stepped down during the 2020–2021 school year, or announced plans to shortly after its conclusion, others are committed to seeing their institutions through the instability. Alexander of Lasell University had originally planned to depart next school year, but his board extended his contract to 2025.

“I — and I hear this from my colleagues—we want to see it through. We want to see it through the other end of this challenge. If things become more stable, I think there will be a lot of presidents retiring. But I think it will take years to recover from this,” he says.

“I can’t see abandoning this job.”

Grace Tatter is an associate producer for NPR’s On Point, and a former writer for Usable Knowledge and Chalkbeat.

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