

This year has already proved to be the most eventful in my nearly 30 year career working in higher education and its only week four of the fall semester. Amid all of the work we have done this year to carry out our mission during the coronavirus epidemic, an old story came to mind about the Great Wall of China.

The Great Wall of China took on many forms over 22 centuries but the one that most think of is the one you have seen pictures of, with its stone towers and “troop highway.” It was completed over a 200 year period during the Ming Dynasty. The Great Wall was built at great expense and long periods of time mostly to keep out invaders. And yet, even after it was complete, China was invaded numerous times. Did the invaders manage to scale the wall or knock holes in it?

No. They bribed the gatekeepers. All those hundreds of years of complex planning, extensive resources, and lengthy construction, just to be undone by a relatively simple, cheap, and quick bribe.

As we made plans to create a safer environment on our campuses to lessen the chance of exposure to COVID-19 we tried to balance a number of items. We knew we wanted to be open for face-to-face classes if possible. We knew we wanted to keep students, visitors, and employees as safe as we could, given the circumstances. We knew we wanted education to go on no matter if the buildings had to close. We knew we were going to need extra resources from grants to pull off all of the changes. We knew we would have to ask everyone to do some uncomfortable and unnatural things like wear masks, stay six feet or more away from each other, and wash their hands all the time. We would have to install air purifiers, provide masks, add hand sanitizing stations, create clear barriers, add technology, form partnerships with the counties and hospitals, train people in numerous items, change class counts and room assignments, change move-in days, add self-isolation spaces, change meetings, limit visitors to campus, schedule dining space, change the way food is served, and on and on.

And we also knew that we were not always going to be successful, that, despite all of our best efforts, extensive planning, and added resources, occasionally we would fail and virus would spread on campus.

Why did we know this? Because we know that if we chose to be open whatever system we created would result in folks getting exposed from time to time. Like the Great Wall of China, no matter how good our system is, it would rely on a few simple factors we couldn't fully control, chief among those factors – Shared Responsibility.

Shared Responsibility is the idea that while we can provide a potentially safer environment, everyone has to do their part as well to keep safe. No amount of COVID testing, Lexan, and masks can keep one from getting the virus if they, say, travel to an outbreak area and start licking doorknobs, or kissing strangers on the street. (And if one did those things, besides getting COVID-19, they would probably get a night or two in the Gray Bar Hotel and free trip to court.)

Everyone has to do their part to keep themselves safe. While a majority of people will do this, there are always a few who don't or won't.

“Student Shaming” is in the news right now. It usually consists of pictures or videos of huge off-campus college parties with no social distancing and no masks in sight. Colleges and universities blame the students for their lack of Shared Responsibility which, in turn, created an outbreak. Then people stick up for the students saying that the institution should never had expected students to act any other way. Asking a college student not to party is like asking the sun not to shine. So, some college students do get

the virus from failing their test of Shared Responsibility, but it was a test that some feel they were destined to fail.

However, it also might just be bad luck, which is yet another of those factors we just couldn't control in our planning. I'll give you a more personal example.

My daughter is away at university and she too was just released from self-isolation. She has a small "pod" of friends she hangs out, just a handful of people. She thought by keeping her contacts to just a few she was upholding her part of Shared Responsibility. But it didn't work out that way. One of those people in her small pod has a roommate, and that roommate has a sibling, and that sibling went on vacation and came back with the virus as a souvenir. So the sibling gave it to their family member, who gave it to their roommate, who exposed my daughter to the virus, which resulted in her being in self-isolation for two weeks. (Why did that last sentence remind me of the book "The House that Jack Built"?) Luckily, she never tested positive for COVID-19, but she did very much hate self-isolation.

We knew some students and maybe a few employees and visitors would not uphold their part of Shared Responsibility, while others would just be victims of happenstance. We realized that our grand plan with all of its components would fail, probably weekly, and people would get the virus or at the very least be exposed to it.

So the real question for our team then is how we would respond and accept this reality - "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness. That is life." (This quote is not from the Ming Dynasty. It's from Star Trek, but frequent readers know I watch too much TV and movies and mistakenly try to apply what I learn as life-lessons.)

Shared Responsibility then would take a different form – a Shared Responsibility to carry out the mission despite the situation. All over the institution there are stories of employees, departments, and divisions adapting as the situation changes, adding new capabilities, and going that extra mile to help. Stories of the maintenance department installing hundreds of ionizers to clean the air, erecting Lexan barriers, and preparing classrooms. Stories of the IT department creating Zoom telecommunication stations for students, deploying hundreds of cameras, and helping with connectivity.

Our custodians cleaning and disinfecting everywhere all the time over and over again. Our student services adapting by meeting with students over live teleconferencing and telephone. Our housing staff helping students while they are self-isolated, keeping them fed and supported through-out the ordeal. And certainly our faculty who have adapted, often with very little notice, to students who have been self-isolated so that they can continue in the class uninterrupted.

I am very proud that all departments of the college have upheld their Shared Responsibility to help students continue their education and be successful, virus be damned.

My great grandmother died in 1918 when my grandfather was just 5 years old, one of the estimated 675,000 Americans who died from the flu pandemic. My father tells me that his dad talked about the loss of his mother often. For my Dad, he understands what is at stake and just how long the impact of a single death can have on a family, and he has passed that understanding on to me.

We will do all we can to uphold our end of the Shared Responsibility to both carry out our mission and to keep students as safe as we can. We know what is at stake if we fail. But we respectfully ask everyone on campus and off to uphold their Shared Responsibility as well.