

Why your education matters so much now
April 10, 2020

Dear Students,

I've spent a lot of time recently reading the news (as many of us probably have) and thinking about how various leaders are responding to this challenge of the coronavirus. It's an interesting test of leadership because literally no one in power today has faced a challenge like this in their lifetime. Experience, which is usually so important in leadership, suddenly doesn't matter very much because so few people have experienced something similar to the challenge that this virus presents.

So I've been wondering, if experience is less important in shaping how different people respond to the spread of the coronavirus, then what is important? Here are three values that I believe shape the success or failure of the global response to the virus: 1) open and honest communication, 2) confident yet humble judgment, and 3) trust and willingness to work with others.

First is open and honest communication. The best leaders I have seen in the last few weeks are the ones who tell their people clearly what the problems are and are honest about the fact that solutions will be difficult. They aren't trying to calm people today with false reassurances, because they know that this breaks down trust tomorrow when events don't turn out as well as they had promised. They let people know that they feel the pain as well by sharing bits about their own struggle and experience, but they are careful not to do it too much, because they aren't the ones who are suffering the most. And they give regular updates, knowing that people look to them for information.

Once they have communicated the problem, anyone in leadership then takes responsibility for solving it. This is where judgment comes in. It's easy to think judgment is the ability of one person to see the solutions when others don't, but this is far from the truth I believe. Using good judgment is mostly about your ability to search through information to find what is important - and this is especially true when solving problems, like the coronavirus one, in which experience isn't as much of a factor.

Leaders who show good judgment are often the ones asking the most questions. They know that they can't solve the problem alone, so they rely on experts. They trust scientists and facts, and rely on data. They encourage an environment in which people can disagree with one another, because they know this will be the best way of getting to the truth and covering any blind spots. And they can tell who is being honest with them and who is changing their opinion in order to be on the side of the person in charge.

And finally, there is trust and cooperation. Already, some leaders, even in the highest positions of government, are starting to blame China - or even worse, to blame all Chinese people. When there is suffering around and no solution in sight, it's always tempting to simply distract from the suffering by passing blame. Perhaps that even scores some short-term points, but it always erodes trust, leaving us less able to deal with this crisis and less prepared for the next one. Alliances matter, because years of having one another's backs leads to confidence that we can count on support this time. We need to trust that people are making decisions to save lives and not score political points, that they're representing their data honestly and correctly, that they're following through on the promises that they make.

This is a global problem that cannot be solved by individual nations. And that is exactly the kind of problem that your education is setting you up to work on.

It's why - as useful as online learning has been during this crisis - it is so vitally important that we all go back to schools after this, because learning how to solve problems with other people is as important as anything you'll learn in your textbook. I hope you'll each go on to university and be surrounded by people

from many different countries, cultures and religions. You'll learn from them just as you'll learn from your professors, and when the time comes again to solve a problem like the coronavirus, you'll be able to work with them, and even understand a bit about where they come from and what they're experiencing. And from your experience at USAPCS, as well as before and after, you'll have been educated in a system that values science and data, and teaches you to find information and use it properly to make informed decisions.

Perhaps going back home makes our school, and the work we do there, seem far away, or even less important. But I hope that, when you look at the world around you, you'll see how urgent your own education is. You can make such a difference, not just improving your life and your family's, but becoming someone who can participate in solving the problems that you see around you. From hearing about your Research Methods projects, I know many of you are already thinking in this way. I look forward to seeing what will come from that, both in the next months, and in the years to come.

Sincerely,
James