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## The Guiding Principles of Leading and Living Through a Pandemic

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# The Guiding Principles of Leading and Living Through a Pandemic

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**A. Gabriel Esteban, Ph.D.**  
*President, DePaul University*

## BIO

**A. GABRIEL ESTEBAN, PHD**, is the twelfth president of DePaul University. He assumed the presidency on 1 July 2017, as the first lay leader in DePaul's history. Dr. Esteban oversees a \$570 million budget, nearly 22,000 students on two major Chicago campuses, and about 3,300 full-time and part-time faculty and staff. Under his leadership, DePaul developed its current strategic plan, ["Grounded in Mission: The Plan for DePaul 2024."](#) It calls for deepening the university's commitment to its Catholic, Vincentian, and urban mission; ensuring an inclusive campus environment; preparing all students for global citizenship and success; expanding access to high quality, affordable academic programs; elevating academic excellence and embracing a culture of creativity and discovery; and employing bold approaches to ensure DePaul's continued fiscal strength for future generations. Dr. Esteban's priorities include accessibility and transparency and enhancing the student experience. He is a member of the Economic Club, Chicago Club, and Commercial Club of Chicago. Locally, he serves on the Chicago History Museum board and the Archdiocese of Chicago Catholic School board. Nationally, he serves on the board of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, NCAA Division I Presidential Forum Conference, and the Big East Conference. Dr. Esteban holds a PhD in business administration from the Graduate School of Management of the University of California, Irvine, and a master's

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in Japanese business studies from Chaminade University in Honolulu. He earned his bachelor's degree in mathematics and an MBA from the University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. Dr. Esteban has served American higher education in a number of national roles, including past membership on the Accreditation Review Council of the Higher Learning Commission and chairing numerous accreditation visits. He is an emeritus board member of Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education. A celebrated leader and advocate for minorities, Dr. Esteban has received multiple honors throughout his career. His alma mater, the University of California, Irvine, named him one of its top fifty graduate and postdoctoral alumni. The Carnegie Corporation of New York recognized him as a "Great Immigrant" in 2015, and New Jersey's leading business journal, NJBIZ, included him on its list of the 100 most powerful state leaders in 2016 for a second time. Dr. Esteban met Josephine at the University of the Philippines, where she earned a master's in economics and a bachelor's in business economics. She holds an MBA from the University of California, Riverside. Both their daughter, Ysabella, and their son-in-law, Matthew, are medical doctors.



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***The statues in Saint Vincent's Circle are decorated with protective face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. April 30, 2020, on the Lincoln Park Campus.***

*Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion*

**“Never betray His principles for any reason whatsoever, and take great care not to spoil God’s affairs by too much haste in them.”<sup>1</sup>**

**T**he 2020–2021 academic year was like no other. As it concludes, I find myself reflecting on the experience of leading and living through a global pandemic. Has it been extremely challenging? The answer, of course, is yes. While we continue to grieve for the lives lost and the immense pain this pandemic continues to inflict upon individuals around the world, we must also embrace the knowledge and perspective gained from this past year.

When faced with a great challenge, I turn to guiding principles. What do we value most as an institution? What is most important? To put it simply, what must be done?

Early on in the pandemic, we asked ourselves these questions, and our answers guided every decision moving forward. From shutting down the campus to opening up again, our guiding principles served as our beacon for navigating the storm. They not only kept us on course, but also gave us faith we would be stronger on the other side.

### **Take care of our community**

The first guiding principle—and our primary one throughout the pandemic—was simple: take care of our community. That included our immediate community—our students, faculty, and staff—as well as the community in which we live and operate.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 1020, “To Charles Nacquart, in Richelieu,” 22 March 1648, in Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al., vols. 1–14 (New York: New City Press, 1985–2014), 3:280.

Despite the fact we were remote, we decided early on to pay all our student workers throughout the spring quarter in 2020. We continued to pay part-time staff until June 30, 2020. We also worked to find alternative duties and tasks for the staff members who could not complete their work remotely. In April 2020, we were among one of the first institutions to announce that we would not increase tuition or fees for the 2020–2021 academic year. Even though we had previously made the decision to increase tuition and fees, we knew this was no longer an option because of the pandemic and its impact on our students.

These decisions had financial implications, but it meant we were taking care of our community. “Take care, DePaul” became our mantra. As a guiding principle, it made the decision to shut down in spring 2020 easy. Determining what to do later that year in fall was much more challenging. We knew continuing to teach and operate remotely would have significant financial implications. But our people came first.

As an urban institution, we also were incredibly conscious about the potential impact on the communities where our students reside. If we had brought back 22,000 students, it would have affected our neighbors tremendously. Throughout the entire pandemic, we worked closely with the City of Chicago and the Chicago Department of Public Health to safeguard the health and safety of our surrounding community.

### **Inclusive decision-making**

Another important guiding principle was trust your people.

In the early days of the pandemic, I established a COVID-19 Planning and Response Task Force. I asked our executive vice president and chief financial officer to lead the group and to work closely with the provost. We charged the task force with information gathering and drafting communications and recommendations related to COVID-19. The group, which started out small and grew over time, was diverse in terms of roles and expertise. Task force members ranged from public health and safety officers, to communication and legal counsel, to faculty, and to student government representatives.

The cross-functionality of the task force allowed us to make decisions inclusively. We were quick to make certain decisions, such as switching to all remote teaching in spring 2020. When there was uncertainty, however, we were more deliberate.

The decision not to reopen our campuses in the fall of 2020 was one example. Over the spring and summer, we were constantly assessing the situation and consulting with public officials. We gave ourselves until August to make a decision, at which time, the number of cases and infection rate made it clear that it would not be safe to return to in-person learning in the fall. It was not an easy decision, but it was the right one. Deliberate and inclusive decision-making meant we didn’t have to backtrack during the pandemic.



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*A DePaul student receives a COVID-19 vaccine, April 28, 2021, in the Lincoln Park Student Center. The Moderna vaccine clinic was open to DePaul students, faculty, and staff April 27-30, 2021, and was conducted in partnership with Michigan Avenue Immediate Care.*

*Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion*

I trusted my team. That simple fact made many things easier throughout the pandemic. I trusted my senior leaders to do the right thing. If they thought a particular situation needed my opinion, they brought it to me. Leaders of institutions always face a temptation to do things themselves, but that isn't an option in a large, complex organization. They must trust the voices in the room.

### **Listen to your community**

Listening to the concerns of your entire community was another valuable guiding principle.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the social unrest that followed, we were mindful of the stress on our students. It was the end of the spring quarter, and finals were approaching. Our students were extremely upset. We worked with our faculty leadership to offer alternatives for traditional grading and final exams. We gave students flexibility, including the option of being graded on a certain percentage of their work. All they needed to do was talk with their professor.

We also added channels to make listening more effective. We surveyed our faculty, staff, and students to gauge concerns and needs. We launched a new website with updates, extensive FAQs, and the opportunity to pose questions. We hosted town halls to hear from the community, including family members of students.

We continued to listen and were deeply concerned to learn some of our marginalized students did not have access to high-speed internet or a computer. Some students were sitting in their cars where they could find a public WiFi hotspot. Some were completing their coursework on their phones.

As we planned for the fall quarter, we knew that we couldn't have the regular, pre-pandemic number of students living on campus, but we did determine that we could make exceptions. If students didn't have a safe place to stay or did not have access to WiFi or a computer, they could apply to stay in a dorm on campus. We also launched urgent campaigns to raise funds to help students pay for housing, food, and technology. When our students said they needed help, we listened and acted.

### **Keep looking forward**

Our final guiding principle was to make decisions that allow us to live our mission, not just today, but well into the future.

We knew learning remotely would have implications for student recruitment and retention. We responded by creating recruitment and retention committees in April 2020, or about a month after we created the COVID-19 Planning Task Force, to address those issues.

Teaching and working remotely also gave us the opportunity to re-evaluate how our university operates. We re-examined policies and structures to make sure they align with this new reality. We have programs that we thought could never be taught online. Now, with more than 150 Zoom-enabled and trimodal classrooms, we know they can. More than 1,000 faculty completed DePaul's award-winning Online Teaching Series, a 40-hour faculty development program. We learned to be creative in the ways we connect with each other and our students.

All those lessons will stay with us well into the future—and the innovation will continue. I'm always asking our university community, "What do you want DePaul to look like not only five years from now, but also in twenty-five years or one hundred years?" We are constantly finding ways to strengthen our university, and the pandemic only accelerated that process.

As we prepared to welcome our faculty, staff, and students back on campus in fall 2021, we continued our trajectory to be a stronger, more flexible, and more inclusive institution.

Throughout the pandemic, we never lost sight of our Catholic, Vincentian, and urban mission. We overcame obstacles. We forged ahead. We took care of each other.

Every challenge is an opportunity.

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