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Resilience and Adaption During the Pandemic



Edited by Adam Hoffer, PhD, and Matthew Style

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
LA CROSSE **UW** 

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Introduction: Resilience and Adaption during the Pandemic

Matthew Style and Adam Hoffer, PhD

Meaningful change is often required at the least convenient time. Predictability creates comfort, and the past two years have been anything but predictable and comfortable. Events in 2020 uprooted our predictable pattern of life and created a new normal.

As we struggled to adapt to life in the aftermath of the pandemic, one certainty persisted: the resilient and innovative spirit of individuals and communities in the Coulee Region. In last year's MFI Briefs we covered the stories of many different community members who quickly adapted in an all-hands-on-deck manner as the community slowly reopened. We were able to showcase the innovations of local households, schools, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.¹

Our 2021 MFI Briefs showcase the resilience of local individuals and organizations as they found ways to provide goods, services, and community aid in the new, post-pandemic environment. *Merriam-Webster* defines a *resilient* object as one that is “able to return to an original shape after being pulled, stretched, pressed, bent, etc.”² The individuals and organizations showcased in these briefs exemplified resilience as they resumed operation after a pandemic that had pulled, stretched, pressed, and bent the lives of many.

A. CANDia, assistant teaching professor of global cultures and languages at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse (UWL), reflects on teaching adaptations in her courses. She uses the lessons of boxing to identify how resilient adaptation occurs when

¹ Adam Hoffer, ed., *Innovation during Crisis: Response to COVID-19 in the Coulee Region*, MFI Briefs: Menard Family Initiative Brief Economic Articles (Menard Family Midwest Initiative for Economic Engagement and Research, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, July 2020).

² *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “resilient,” accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilient>.

we face a strong “punch” that seems to come from nowhere, like a boxer who gets knocked down in the ring.

Of course, the virtual classroom environment was new to students as well. UWL student Katrina Mleziva details how the temporary shift to virtual learning encouraged Generation Z students to gain new skills and prepare to enter a dynamic workforce where remote work may be here to stay.

Dr. Stephen Mann, associate professor of English at UWL, was the president of the La Crosse Concert Band during the pandemic. Dr. Mann describes the tough decision to cancel the band’s 2020 concert season and details the steps the band took to make a grand, safe return to action in the summer of 2021.

Kahya Fox, executive director of Habitat for Humanity La Crosse Area, describes how Habitat for Humanity struggled early in the pandemic to find new ways of providing services to members of the community in need. She details specific lessons about safety, communication, adaptation, diversification, and refocusing that led to a strong resurgence in 2021.

While many organizations struggled to survive, others thrived. The year 2020 saw the greatest demand for outdoor recreation on record. Dr. Jan Wellik, associate lecturer in environmental studies at UWL, details how WisCorps and the Outdoor Recreation Alliance added to their portfolio of programs and expanded their missions to meet the newfound interest that many developed for the outdoors.

Finally, Dr. Andrew Stapleton, professor of operations and supply chain management at UWL, explores the how location-specific events, such as a worker lockdown in a single city or a port closure, cause massive ripples in a globally interconnected supply chain. Dr. Stapleton describes how Wisconsin manufacturers can overcome current challenges to build a much more resilient system in the future—one that is better protected against future disruptions.

While the past two years have been challenging, individuals and organizations have displayed remarkable resilience and innovation to meet new challenges. To paraphrase the economist Julian Simon, *the ultimate resource is the human mind*.

Resilience in the Corner

A. CANdia

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With a handshake, one of my Spanish 103 students said goodbye at the start of spring break. “See you soon,” I replied. However, the longing and uncertainty in his eyes burrowed into my heart and my head as he said, “Well, we don’t really know if we’ll be back in a week; this seems very serious.” My optimistic spirit was paralyzed in seconds.

That spring break in 2020 was just the prelude to a new era in which we had to reinvent ourselves in every way. Social networks spread uncertainty and fear rather than peace and solutions. The isolation, at least for me, was like that of the boxer who trains hard without knowing whether there will be a fight soon. Since 2014 I have studied the world of boxing, and while I only practice boxing in the privacy of my garage, I understood that feeling, given the situation we were experiencing. I could only keep my guard up, looking for the necessary energy through my boxing gloves on each punch against the bag.

Though the sport of fists is usually thought of as violent, it is also a way to improve oneself. Hundreds of stories from the ring that I was able to enjoy as a journalist and language teacher have provided me with a conviction that resilience is the only way to rise from defeat, weather adversity, and overcome challenges. Muhammad Ali declared, “In the locker room of the loser nobody says anything.” Actually, after a loss, *more* questions are asked to find out what can be done better next time. So many of us were wondering how we would survive the pandemic. The deaths of thousands of people put us in that state of silence and reflection. There were days when I wondered what I should do because I had no relatives in town and my friends had their own families to take care of. I understood that the best thing to do was to take care of myself the best way to continue in the fight of life.

We all had to immigrate to electronic communication, soak up technology, and reinvent ourselves every day to continue giving KOs that effectively overcame challenges. For me, each class was an opportunity to prove that this technological age can be combined with empathy, solidarity, and respect to form strong communities of support and companionship. Many times, the confusion was present around everyone, but the time was a factor that put through his paces the efficiency. In just 55 minutes, I had to describe an aspect of culture, explain its linguistic implications, give students an opportunity to participate, and answer questions. In an in-person class I need to do the same things, but the interaction is different. The speed at which the class develops allows the instructor to react to unforeseen events more effectively. By contrast, when you do not have direct contact with the whole group, you cannot observe the entire situation. You must trust that the content presented has the tactics and strategy, the same way as the boxer does during the fight for which he has prepared many months in advance. For me, the preparation of my class was related on the result of the day before, even though I prepared the class at least three months in advance, but things can change each day. I had to reinvent how to make sure that each class session was a round won.

The past three semesters have been a time of continuous training: conferences, courses, certifications, workshops, webinars, roundtables, and no respite from the constant modifications and observations that the whole world has had. I found myself speaking in front of a screen even to obtain the most basic resources for everyday life. Sometimes it seemed as if the bell would never sound to mark the end of a round, but, as in boxing, the breaks between activities often seemed more whipping than the fight itself. When you went to “the corner”—the place where the bench is—to rest, they were waiting for you with more resources to attend to. At the end of each class, the hard work began again: reviewing what we did during the session and preparing content for the next class to connect it for next class. Many times, I wondered how my colleagues with children and partners were dealing with the same situation I was facing. At the end of the day, I would go to the garage, put my glove on, and work out for a few minutes to find strength to keep going the next day.

In boxing, “the corner” is also the entourage that accompanies a boxer before, during, and after a fight. During the lockdown, my corner was my students, and I was part of theirs. I managed to make the glass screen, which connected us and at the same time separated us, one more element of the corner that allowed us to be in communication. When the bell rang for the next round—the next class—I wondered how I could put up a better fight, get better results: How could I make sure that my next class would have good impacts that would be counted on the judges’ card? I had the opportunity to hear the opinions of my judges at the end of the brawl. My students evaluated my classes, allowing me to recognize the successes and take the errors into the preparation for the next fight, which, semester by semester, inspires me to continue renewing myself.

This era has undoubtedly had resilience as its main ingredient. I see the results in my professional life but even more in my personal life. As an immigrant who is single, I found that experiencing silence and solitude helped me understand that being alone is a good way to find myself. It also motivates us to find effective solutions to make communication a source of continuous training—as if the ring were waiting for us to continue fighting. We have to keep our guard up; we have to continue training in the ways life let us live and be aware that even though the first rounds have passed with good results, the fight continues. As in bare-knuckle times, right now there are no limits to the number of rounds. However, unlike the spectators of those fights, we hope that the contestants—all of them—end up with a healthy life to continue enjoying the sun, the moon, the air, and the water of this planet we live on.

Altogether, from our corner, we can give an accurate KO to this era with strong resilience.

Generation Z Acquires New Job Application Techniques amid COVID-19

Katrina Mleziva

Student, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse

Matthew Style

Researcher, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

For years US the workforce has been transitioning. Now the wave of people born between 1997 and 2012, referred to as Generation Z, is making its debut into new job positions. For decades, a job interview meant walking into an office, introducing yourself, and having a face-to-face meeting. Candidates who received and accepted job offers often moved to different towns, cities, states, and even countries, relocating for their new roles. However, because of COVID-19, the demand for virtual interactions and “take home” digital work has increased. As a result, many companies have adapted to a virtual work space by conducting their interview processes online, providing employees with take-home work equipment such as computers, and holding events online.

A majority of the students currently enrolled in college fall into the Generation Z category. Recent college graduates found themselves confused about how they were going to get an entry-level job if they were not able to be interviewed in person owing to COVID-19. Universities and businesses responded by embracing younger generations’ reputation for being online: video calls, messaging, and shared documents became the new forms of communication and collaboration.

The University of Wisconsin–La Crosse (UWL) has enhanced student interactions online by providing several platforms for students and teachers to work on. Microsoft Teams and the video-meeting platform Zoom have positively affected how students and teachers communicate with each other remotely through classes, meetings, and group-project presentations. Although COVID-19 restricted face-to-face interactions, it has improved students’ online social interactions. Students often choose to attend UWL for

exceptional in-person learning. While in-person formats of learning were on-hold for most of the pandemic, students were able to spend that time improving their technical communication skills. Now that students are once again able to return to the classroom, they are also able to show those new skills learned.

One positive impact that the pandemic has had on both students and faculty is that it has increased the technological skills that both universities and the work force have today. Currently at UWL students have found a happy medium between online classes and in-person classes. While adapting to the new virtual environment has been beneficial, to maintain in-person interactions the university requires masks for everyone's safety, along with assigned seating charts implemented in all classes. These precautions help reduce the chance of an outbreak if a member of the UWL community gets sick. The university has access to all seating charts, and if a member of the community reports that they may be sick, students and faculty exposed to the student in their classes will get notified that they may have been in contact with the virus and should take precautionary actions. If there is an outbreak, classes will be online for a two-week quarantine period and teachers will transition their coursework online.

Since COVID-19 moved classes online for more than a year, schools have gained the new skills to flexibly hold classes online when need be. For example, snow days for elementary, middle, and high school, as well as college, will be reduced because students can now attend classes virtually during inclement weather. COVID-19 has proved that classes can be held online and now students do not have to miss classes anymore because of weather. Students will no longer have to halt their education and see extra school days added to the year. However, students will not be the only ones who no longer have to worry about postponing meetings and collaboration, because businesses have been able to transition various jobs online as well.

Web meetings are one of the newest tools that human resources staff use to recruit new hires. Virtual interviews allow businesses to interview potential candidates from all over the world. No longer do applicants need to worry that geography will hold them back from job opportunities, because remote jobs have become a by-product of COVID-19 regulations. Companies and schools have not only allowed people to stay six feet apart,

they have also allowed people to stay thousands of miles apart. Remote work and virtual classes allow workers and students to complete tasks anywhere reception can reach. A remote job or class can create a new type of work environment as well.

Another change that businesses are encountering is requests for stay-at-home jobs. People are pushing to work from home because dress codes often become more relaxed, employees are less supervised, and workers swap an office desk for the comfort of their own couch. Also, workers (and students) who stay home save gas money and time thanks to reduced driving. Some commutes to work were more than an hour. When people are saving two hours a day five days a week, they have an extra ten hours of time to enjoy themselves during the week.

Businesses have learned to become flexible with both remote and in-person working styles. When some workers want to stay home and do remote work, they can. However, some workers prefer the office, so now that regulations have been lifted to a certain extent, some offices are opening their doors again. Furthermore, businesses have been able to monitor worker productivity by setting goals and requirements for employee work. COVID-19 prompted a concern about effectively supervising employees and whether work would be accounted for because companies were willing to adjust individual requirements for company positions. Instead of making their employees stay at the office for an eight-hour day, some employers discovered that when they laid out requirements and stats that needed to be met, employees became more motivated to get them done. Some employees completed tasks in less than eight hours, which gave them an incentive to finish their work day early.

COVID-19 has taught technical skills not only to the La Crosse community but also to the world. This change created the necessity for people to actively check their emails more to stay on top of projects and group work and to receive updates regarding upcoming events. Before COVID-19, the world had to keep their desks organized and clean, but now, cleanliness also means keeping your virtual desktop clean. While COVID-19 affected in-person face-to-face interactions, it also allowed people to meet face-to-face virtually and maintain a strong connection.

Making Music in Dissonant Times: Planning and Adaptability in a Community Arts Organization amid a Global Pandemic

Stephen L. Mann, PhD

Associate Professor, English Department, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse
President, La Crosse Concert Band, 2018–2020

When the gravity of COVID-19 became clear in early 2020, I was serving my second term as the elected president of the board of directors of the La Crosse Concert Band (LCCB). As an organization that produces concerts only in the summer, we were in the busiest part of our off-season: finalizing concert programs, securing concert and season sponsorships, designing marketing materials. The board assumed at the time that our 2020 season would be affected by the pandemic, but we could not yet predict our decision a few months later to cancel the entire 2020 season. Nor could we predict that we would begin planning for our 2021 season with a sense of complete uncertainty. This brief (1) addresses the unique pandemic-related challenges faced by performing arts organizations and (2) outlines the steps we took to protect our musicians, staff, and audiences while also protecting the future of an organization that has been serving the greater La Crosse area for more than 100 years.

La Crosse Concert Band

The La Crosse Concert Band had its origins in a group of musicians who began providing concerts in Pettibone Park in 1917. The band found its permanent home in La Crosse's Riverside Park with the completion of the Wendell A. Anderson bandstand in 1930. It continues to use the bandstand—which was restored in 2020 and enhanced with a new acoustic shell—to this day.

In its current format, LCCB is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization that serves the greater La Crosse community by providing free concerts of traditional and contemporary

concert band music on Wednesday nights in June and July every year. Band members include professional musicians and music educators, talented community members, and exceptional high school students, all of whom share their talents as unpaid volunteers. LCCB is unique among community concert bands because each concert is planned and led by a different conductor, and each concert is staffed by a different mix of musicians.

Canceling the 2020 Season

The board’s ultimate decision to cancel the 2020 season required risk assessment based on several factors. Any risk to the La Crosse community—especially our audience and our players—would ultimately outweigh any other risk. At first glance, we seemed to be at less risk for community spread of the virus than other organizations: our concerts are held outdoors rather than in enclosed spaces, and they take place in the summer, when respiratory spread of viruses typically wanes. That “first glance,” however, overlooks the complexity of the organization.

Wind instruments, airborne transmission, and physical distancing. A super-spreader event in Washington state that resulted in two deaths made national news in March 2020; of the 61 singers who had sung together in a choir rehearsal that month, 32 were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 at the rehearsal, with an additional 20 listed as “probable” cases.³ Research has confirmed the unsurprising fact that significantly more aerosols—one source of airborne COVID-19 transmission—are produced when singing than when speaking and breathing normally.⁴ Researchers quickly began testing the hypothesis that wind instruments would also be associated with higher aerosol emissions. They found that the answer depends on factors such as the size of the instrument, the amount of tubing, and the way in which notes are articulated.⁵ Playing the tuba results in

³ Lea Hamner et al., “High SARS-CoV-2 Attack Rate Following Exposure at a Choir Practice—Skagit County, Washington, March 2020,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 19 (May 15, 2020): 606, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6919e6>.

⁴ Dirk Mürbe et al., “Aerosol Emission in Professional Singing of Classical Music,” *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 14861 (2021): para. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-93281-x>.

⁵ Ruichen He et al., “Aerosol Generation from Different Wind Instruments,” *Journal of Aerosol Science* 151, no. 105669 (2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaerosci.2020.105669>.

fewer aerosol emissions than speaking and breathing, while playing the oboe, trumpet, or bass trombone results in significantly more. Other instruments (e.g., flute, bassoon, French horn) show no difference in risk compared to speaking and breathing. A typical LCCB concert requires approximately 85 musicians, 75 of whom play wind instruments. This band size requires full use of the stage footprint, making it impossible to adhere to six-foot physical distancing guidelines. Another concern was our indoor rehearsal space. Our audience members would be outdoors and could follow distancing guidelines, but our players would be putting themselves at risk playing wind instruments indoors in close proximity to one another.

Vulnerable populations and businesses. The band's longevity in the greater La Crosse community is due in part to the audience members and musicians who return year after year to support us, which means that a significant percentage of our audience and many of our musicians fall into the 65-plus age demographic that is especially vulnerable to COVID-19 complications. We also rely heavily on the generous sponsorships of local businesses, many of which were already feeling the negative financial impact of Governor Evers's "Safer at Home" order, issued on March 25, 2020.

Rehearsal and performance sites. The band's use of the bandstand at Riverside Park was dependent on the city's COVID-19 response, because the bandstand is managed by the City of La Crosse Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department. We could do all the planning we wanted and still not have a performance venue should the city deem the risk too high. Another consideration was weekly rehearsal. The band rehearses on Tuesday nights in the auditorium at Central High School, which also serves as our Wednesday night indoor performance site in the event of inclement weather. When the School District of La Crosse closed all school buildings and moved instruction online, our access to a rehearsal space and rain site became tenuous.

Financial (Re)planning

A season without concerts means a season without revenue. With no concerts to sponsor, there are no business sponsorships; with no audiences, there are no audience freewill donations. The majority of the band's annual expenses are concert-dependent, meaning

expenses are incurred only if a rehearsal or concert is held, but there remain substantial fixed costs to keep the metaphorical lights on: for instance, insurance, association fees, and staff salaries. Fortunately, smart decisions made by previous boards and the generosity of members of the community and members of our own organization allowed the band to remain financially secure.

Liquid assets. Given our reliance on sponsorships and private donors, the board is keenly aware that charitable giving in the arts is positively correlated with the strength of the economy. If unemployment is low and if consumer demand is high, individuals and businesses are more likely to support not-for-profit arts organizations. When there is a recession, individual donations are smaller and total donations are fewer. Because our concerts are outdoors, our freewill donations are also weather dependent; the better the weather, the larger the audience. The band maintains enough cash and cash equivalents to cover expenses for two full seasons to account for fluctuations in giving.

Endowment savings. The board launched an endowment campaign in 2004 to help protect the band's ability to continue providing free music to the greater La Crosse area and performance opportunities for community musicians. The band's endowment fund, managed by the La Crosse Community Foundation, provides annual interest revenue that allows the board to invest in the band's future through capital expenditures (e.g., new percussion equipment) and other expenses not tied to a single season's operating budget. For example, in 2018, the band was able to use the endowment revenue accrued over several years to contribute \$50,000 to the construction of the new band shell in Riverside Park.⁶

Unsolicited donations. Given the negative economic impact of the pandemic, the board decided to halt all fundraising in 2020. Despite receiving no official request, some of our long-time donors still continued to provide financial support to LCCB to help

⁶ Jourdan Vian, "La Crosse Concert Band Donates \$50,000 to Riverside Park Band Shell," *La Crosse Tribune*, November 13, 2018, https://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/la-crosse-concert-band-donates-50-000-to-riverside-park-band-shell/article_f14c72bf-8b75-5b23-bc22-9f2200067c64.html.

ensure the future of the organization. Additionally, some of our paid staff members donated all or part of their 2020 season stipends back to the band.

The 2021 Season

The board begins planning each summer season approximately ten months in advance. Our 2021 planning, now under the leadership of new board president John Helm, began in September 2020 with uncertainty. What would the COVID-19 case numbers look like the following summer? Would we have access to rehearsal and performance sites? Would there be a vaccine? Our only option was to remain flexible, develop contingency plans, and continue monitoring the COVID-19 data and guidance.

Personal protective equipment (PPE). By September 2020, we had a better understanding of the risks associated with wind instruments. Wind musicians around the world began using PPE specific to the unique requirements of the instrument: for example, masks with access flaps for mouthpieces, which minimize the spread of respiratory droplets and aerosols where the mouth and mouthpiece come in contact; covers over the bells of instruments, which trap respiratory emissions inside the instrument; shields for flute players, which capture respiratory emissions produced when blowing air across the head joint.

Developing and redeveloping a safety plan. The board approved the creation of an ad hoc COVID-19 task force to develop a plan that would follow recommendations from the La Crosse County Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; that would satisfy the requirements of the City of La Crosse Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department and the School District of La Crosse; and that was grounded in scientific research.⁷ In its initial release, the plan included the following list of changes and requirements:

⁷ “Colorado State University Aerosol Emissions Study,” accessed October 20, 2021, <https://smt.d.colostate.edu/reducing-bioaerosol-emissions-and-exposures-in-the-performing-arts/>; National Federation of State High School Associations, “Third Round of Performing Arts Aerosol Study Produces More Scientific Data for Return to Activities,” December 16, 2020, <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/third-round-of-performing-arts-aerosol-study-produces-more-scientific-data-for-return-to-activities/>; Mark Spede and James Weaver, “Unprecedented International Coalition Led by Performing Arts Organizations to

- The band size would be reduced to 64 musicians, the minimum number required for a balanced band with full coverage of all parts.
- Understudies would be available should any player develop COVID-19 symptoms or test positive for the virus before a rehearsal or performance.
- Vaccination would be encouraged for all players.
- PPE (masks, bell covers, flute shields) would be required for all players during rehearsals and performances. Players would be responsible for providing their own PPE, percussionists would be encouraged to provide their own sticks and mallets, and brass players would be required to use their own spit rag rather than empty their spit valves directly onto the stage.
- Players would be spaced three feet apart. To allow for this, all players would be provided with their own music folder, and no players would be permitted to share a stand.
- Players would disinfect their chairs and stands following each rehearsal and performance, and percussionists would disinfect all shared equipment.
- Audience members would be urged to wear face coverings and to practice physical distancing in Riverside Park.
- Every other row of bench seating at the park would be cordoned off.
- Printed programs would be self-serve and made available at hand sanitizer stations located throughout the park.
- There would be no refreshments available for audience purchase.

Commission COVID-19 Study,” National Federation of State High School Associations, October 27, 2021,
<https://www.nfhs.org/articles/unprecedented-international-coalition-led-by-performing-arts-organizations-to-commission-covid-19-study/>.

- The weekly Children’s March through the park would be replaced by a Children’s March-in-Place with their families: children would be physically distanced from other children taking part in the march.
- There would be no inclement weather site. If weather were to prevent a concert from being held outdoors, the concert would be canceled rather than moved.
- COVID-19 case numbers in La Crosse County would be monitored, and a revised plan would be implemented if conditions improved or worsened over the course of our season. We ultimately were able to lift many restrictions for the second half of the 2021 season.

Collaborative grant writing. Implementation of the safety plan was not without cost. Fortunately, LCCB is not the sole user of the bandstand at Riverside Park. LCCB holds concerts there on Wednesday nights, Moon Tunes uses the space on Thursday nights, and the La Crosse Jazz Orchestra swings in on Sunday nights. The leadership of each organization co-developed a plan for sharing supplies, thereby reducing the overall cost considerably. The three organizations then coauthored a successful grant application and received grand funding from the La Crosse Community Foundation to cover the cost of implementing our respective COVID-19 safety protocols.

Conclusion

Community arts organizations faced and continue to face unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, which threaten our ability to entertain and educate through music, theater, and dance. The La Crosse Concert Band was unexpectedly silenced in 2020, but we returned to the park in 2021—to a restored bandstand and a breathtaking new band shell—to remind anyone listening that there is joy in live music, which is unmatched and which has a positive impact on musicians and nonmusicians alike. The band’s ability to face and overcome the challenges in our 2020 and 2021 seasons—through band members’ flexibility and willingness to adapt to changing requirements; through collaboration and long-standing relationships with other arts organizations, local businesses, private donors, and the City of La Crosse; and through careful attention to published research findings and guidance from public health officials—highlights an important fact about the arts: creativity lies at the core of who we are and what we do.

A Mission of Giving and Pandemic-Related Effects on Nonprofits

Kahya Fox

Executive Director, Habitat for Humanity La Crosse Area

At Habitat for Humanity La Crosse Area, the pandemic has brought stark attention to the importance of our mission of providing a safe, affordable place to call home. As so many of us found sanctity in our homes, the pandemic also highlighted the desperate need of many families living in substandard housing or facing the reality of being one rent payment away from homelessness. This pandemic has not only shifted how we operate day to day but also reaffirmed the importance of the work we do for our communities. These lessons carry us forward.

Lessons on Safety

The pandemic is scary. It sits at the top of our minds as individuals, but for members of a nonprofit or business, the responsibility of keeping the people around you safe has become a constant worry. Over the past year and a half, we have placed the safety of our staff, volunteers, and clients at the top of our agenda in everything that we do. With 15 staff, more than 1,000 volunteers, more than 24,000 shoppers, and more than 500 clients who connect with us each year, we *must* make their health and safety our No. 1 priority in every decision we make. We are a service-based organization whose staff, volunteers, shoppers, and clients believe in and count on the work that we do each and every day, so some of the decisions we have had to make over the past year have been very difficult. They have been heart-wrenching. But they have been necessary.

For example, at the beginning of the pandemic last year, our staff met to discuss whether we wanted to move forward with our Neighbors Day program, which brings more than 400 volunteers together to help more than 200 elderly and disabled residents of the City of La Crosse at the end of April every year. This program has been a cornerstone of

the La Crosse community for over 25 years. When we made the decision to cancel the event, we all cried. We knew we were making the right decision for the vulnerable population that this program serves, but it didn't make the decision easy. We knew how the community counted on this program. We knew how disappointed they would be. We tried to brainstorm every option we could think of to provide these services safely to our community. But ultimately, we had to make a difficult decision that protected the health and the very lives of the people we serve. We have made many such decisions since then. They have not gotten easier.

Lessons on Communication

We have learned to navigate uncharted territory, acquiring new skills and new ways of communicating. Staff have taken countless online courses on how to host virtual events, how to communicate through virtual means, and how to support staff through the myriad stressors that employees have been facing during the pandemic.

We have learned the importance of maintaining connections with those around us even when we can't be together face to face. This has required us to develop broader outreach and communication plans, allowing us to connect with a larger audience, providing greater access to our programs. This is a *very* important lesson to carry forward. So many new, beautiful, unique, and innovative ways to communicate have emerged during the pandemic. We must find ways to maintain and incorporate them into our world post-pandemic. We owe it to our mission. We owe it to our communities.

Lessons on Adaptation

I think we have all grown weary of the word *pivot*. We use the word as a badge of resilience and outside-the-box thinking, but it also connotes the unknown, risk, and potential failure. And just when you think you've had to "pivot" for the last time, something brand new and unexpected emerges that requires a new shift. Despite this weariness, looking back over the past year and a half, this dreaded word *has* led to greater resilience and new ways of approaching day-to-day operations. We have learned to find creative ways to

connect with our supporters, including hosting online and livestreamed fundraisers, creating an online ReStore, teaching virtual “Habitat How-To” classes, conducting home dedications via Facebook Live, hosting virtual volunteer recognition events, and creating Construction from Home kits so supporters can still build at home if they can no longer build by our sides. Mailing handwritten letters of thanks and support has become more meaningful. We all miss the human contact, the in-person events, and the day-to-day connections we normally take for granted, but we are happy and content to know that through it all, we made decisions that kept those around us safe. They will still be there with us and for us as our community slowly reopens.

Lessons on Diversification

We all get complacent. Nonprofits are no different. We count on the same revenue streams to move our mission forward year after year. At Habitat for Humanity, we were smug. Unlike most other nonprofits, we operate a retail store and use revenue from the sale of donated items to help fund our operations and mission. You stop being so smug when you need to close that retail space for more than two months. Sleepless nights and unending worry meant that something needed to change.

Some pivots come fast and easy. Others take a lot more time and bring much more painful lessons. Diversifying our revenue streams has been a yearlong endeavor. From shifting our fundraising messaging to a broader market to spotlighting individual programming at Habitat in order to find meaningful connections with more people to creating more digital content in order to highlight our mission, we are finding ways to move away from reliance on ReStore revenue. Management staff are paying closer attention to budgets. We have tightened our belts. We are researching and applying for grants we have never applied for before. But the biggest investment we made in diversification was to hire a full-time development manager to help secure and expand a broad funder, donor, and sponsor base. As with any disaster, you never think you will be affected by a global pandemic. Our complacency caught us unawares, but we have worked hard to shake it off and put systems in place that will allow us to be nimbler in the future.

Lessons on Refocusing

This leads me to our final and most important lesson. Halting some of our programming gave us time to take a step back as an organization and focus on broader issues within our community, especially as we've watched the increasing effect the pandemic has had on access to safe, affordable housing for low-income families. From the pandemic emerged a fervent focus on housing advocacy.

The Housing Advocacy Committee was formed in 2019 and represents a grassroots collaboration of local stakeholders committed to safe and affordable housing. Throughout 2020, the committee connected with local organizations and groups that represent protected classes and traditionally marginalized populations. Participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions on housing in the La Crosse area to provide input on ways to better understand the challenges, learn what resources are missing, and celebrate the services that are working. The committee felt that it was important to hear from people with lived experiences who have faced challenges regarding safe and affordable housing. We understand that we cannot begin to make productive changes unless we can get at the heart of what is and isn't working in a community.

After the surveys were gathered, Habitat partnered with University of Wisconsin-La Crosse associate professor of math Dr. Song Chen and one of his data sciences students, Douglas Krouth, to conduct a quantitative analysis of the survey answers. After the data were compiled, Ava Beaudot, a student majoring in social justice at the university, in partnership with professor of sociology Dr. Carol Miller, reviewed the information and created a list of recommendations to help address the challenges highlighted in the survey responses. Habitat for Humanity and members of the Housing Advocacy Committee then partnered with UW-Madison Division of UW-Extension-La Crosse County at the end of April for an extended goal-setting meeting to review the reports and statistics and share concerns.

The information gathered at this meeting led to the development of both short-term and long-term goals aimed at protecting, promoting, and expanding safe and affordable housing in the La Crosse area. The committee has moved into the boots-on-

the-ground stage of action, which will bring attention to the challenges of safe, affordable housing—from homelessness to tenant rights to access to homeownership; from education and outreach to advocating for legislation and policy changes at the state and local levels, as well as spotlighting racial housing disparities that exist in our community.

All these amazing partnerships and efforts occurred without a single face-to-face meeting. This did not feel possible at the beginning of the pandemic, but now look what we can do. As Maya Angelou wrote in *Letter to My Daughter*, “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

In wrapping this up, the overall lessons seem trite: Nonprofit faces adversity. Nonprofit struggles to move forward amid change. Nonprofit rallies and overcomes. Nonprofit is now better because of lessons learned through adversity. Though largely clichéd and true, this wide-angle view fails to capture the reality of our collective and individual experiences. There was no guarantee that this story would take us to the happily-ever-after ending, because this story was painfully real. It was boring at times. It was terrifying at times. But this story does not get wrapped up in a nice little bow, because this story has yet to end—because we have so much yet to do.

Getting Outside More During the Pandemic: Outdoor Education and Conservation in the La Crosse Region

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Getting outside during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a safe alternative to staying indoors for all ages. Being outdoors in nature has many health benefits, including reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, according to academic researchers.⁸ In the La Crosse area, conservation organizations such as the Outdoor Recreation Alliance and outdoor education organizations such as WisCorps have adapted to help families use outdoor space for learning and physical activity.

Trail work at the Outdoor Recreation Alliance

“The pandemic put more people outside and in the woods than previously,” said Jed Olson, executive director of the Outdoor Recreation Alliance, based in La Crosse.⁹ This created an increase in demand for recreational space and equipment. “Everyone says there is a shortage on bikes, tennis rackets, and other outdoor gear . . . because the outdoors existed as a place to go [during the pandemic],” he said.



⁸ Michelle Ma, “Dose of Nature at Home Could Help Mental Health, Well-Being during COVID-19,” *UW News* (University of Washington), April 16, 2020, <https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/04/16/dose-of-nature-at-home-could-help-mental-health-well-being-during-covid-19/>.

⁹ Jed Olson, interview by the author, **September 10, 2021**. The following quotations of Olson all come from this interview.

Although many nonprofit organizations struggled to host events and maintain funding during the pandemic, some outdoor nonprofits actually thrived, including the Outdoor Recreation Alliance, which added more staff to accommodate the increased interest from communities. “We saw an opportunity and went from a half-time staff person to three full-time staff,” Olson said. “We knew a half-time person couldn’t fill that void.” He explained, “The community was asking us how to figure out how to do this [trail work] in other communities,” he said. “Now with staff, we can outreach more and unify the voice and widen the reach.”

Conducting trail work in the community was limited when COVID-19 first appeared, according to Olson. “Now we take the proper precautions, but can be more open,” he said. Other changes in how the organization is run include holding meetings for public input virtually or outdoors and limiting the number of people at board meetings.

In terms of near future changes, “I hope to see more unification,” Olson said. “People are very passionate about outdoor spaces and in the past that has caused some divides.” He explained, “We see a benefit to diversity and everyone has a different experience of using spaces—it’s our focus moving forward.”

Over the past two years, Olson has noticed some changes in who is using outdoor spaces. “So many folks started looking at things differently” because of the pandemic, he said. “I’m noticing a difference that folks are stepping into a new activity in their 60s and 70s, not just in their 20s. Some folks have said they never hiked until this year...We are seeing lots of positive impact in our community,” he said. “It’s inspiring.”

Environmental Education by WisCorps

Adaptation to the pandemic has also been seen by WisCorps, an organization that focuses on engaging youth and young adults in conservation projects and nature education. Stephanie Hanna, environmental education manager at WisCorps, said that during the pandemic “we put in pandemic protocols following the county and [Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention] guidelines, and some of those programs ended up happening and some did not. We kept groups small and canceled programs if the risk was too high.”¹⁰

In fall 2020, when school groups were no longer coming for programs, due to the pandemic, WisCorps created a way for families doing online schooling at home to have outdoor education for their children. Hanna explained, “We decided to keep the summer day camps and start fall day camps. The focus is more school-like than camp-like.” They incorporate STREAM lessons (science, technology, reading, engineering, art, and math) for ages 4–6 in the day camps.

“I asked 4K, kindergarten, and first grade teachers if they thought this was a good idea,” she said. “We were not trying to replace school, but to support parents at home and teachers online. This became Nature School Day Camps in the afternoons, as many kids were doing online learning in the morning,” she said.

They incorporate 4K preschool, kindergarten, and first grade science curricula similar to those of the School District of La Crosse. Additionally, WisCorps receives a grant from AmeriCorps, so all the staff are trained AmeriCorps members.



Nature Day Camps for ages 4-6 WisCorps exploring the La Crosse River Marsh during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ Stephanie Hanna, interview by the author, September 14, 2021. The following quotations of Hanna all come from this interview.



AmeriCorps student leader Ashley

WisCorps offered the day camps every week from September to December 2020, and Hanna said that in January “we realized we might have something here and had good parent feedback, so we added a second camp for older kids.”

The organization turned some of its regular field trips into live virtual field trips via video, such as Marsh Mania, which includes marsh metaphors and taking a walk

through the La Crosse River Marsh. “We were figuring out how we can help parents and teachers and getting kids outside,” Hanna said. “One teacher asked us for a video on hydrology and the marsh. We created 15-minute videos that La Crosse School District teachers could show their students, and it was available for a certain time.” WisCorps does custom programs for teachers in the district for a fee of five dollars per student. “We do outdoor education anyway, so it’s not hard to do it outside,” she said.

In terms of its conservation crews, Hanna said that WisCorps connected with other conservation corps and talked about what they were doing for pandemic protocols with the crews. “In summer 2020 we weren’t sure if crews were going to be able to go out, but they did. We followed what other corps were doing,” she explained. “In 2020 we hired less people. But in 2021 we did have a lot of requests for conservation projects and are back up to speed.”



*Making binoculars at WisCorps
summer day camp for young children.*

WisCorps offers a variety of community programs—some are free and some cost a nominal fee. In February 2021, two programs restarted: Nature Saturdays and

EnviroWednesdays. Initially, participants were required to sign up in advance and wear masks. “But it was hard to get people to preregister,” Hanna said. “Instead, we held most of the programs outside.” Nature School Day Camps continued each week in fall 2021— “It’s something parents really like, based on the feedback,” she said.



*Exploring the La Crosse River Marsh
with ages 4-6 during the summer.*

WisCorps’s summer day camps were more popular than ever in 2021, according to Hanna, and her staff offered three sessions each week. They also started offering camps for older kids, ages 9–12. “Those are positive things we are going to continue,” she said. “I think they were so popular because parents wanted to get kids outside and have a little structure.”

Next summer, WisCorps plans to offer even more summer day camps. “So we are going to be able to connect even more kids to the outdoors,” Hanna said. In the meantime, she is hoping that the number of visiting school groups will increase again, to bring more kids outdoors to the La Crosse River Marsh.

Though the pandemic put many community events on hold and affected education systems, it may have provided more time for families and youth to be outdoors, connecting with the natural world.

Responses to Supply Chain Disruptions Plaguing Wisconsin Manufacturers

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Wisconsin remains a manufacturing economy, and its top 25 manufacturers employ over 750,000 Wisconsinites. Wisconsin is not immune to the interactions of supply and demand across the globe and must deal with the immediate impact of disruptions in supply chains. Understanding core inventory management concepts such as single-sourcing versus multi-sourcing; just-in-time inventory management and manufacturing; and “force majeure” contractual clauses for when the supplier partners cannot deliver on their obligations can help to maintain Wisconsin’s strong manufacturing economy.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many manufacturing firms were single-sourcing (from China, for instance), and dozens more were operating in a just-in-time environment, where the firm carries very little safety stock – inventory held “just in case” disruptions occur -- and its parts and components are delivered from suppliers “just in time” to join the production line. During the pandemic, supply channels were disrupted and many production lines abruptly halted. Many firms considered sourcing strategies that involve multiple US and overseas suppliers to avoid disruptions to production lines; others have considered holding greater safety stock or reconfiguring their supply chains. To date, more than 30 percent of Wisconsin manufacturers have converted to some sort of multi-sourcing of components owing to the ongoing pandemic.

Before the pandemic, Wisconsin manufacturers had followed the 1990s trend that saw firms transition from a “just-in-case” model, where firms held excess inventory both as safety stock and as work in process along the production line, to a “just-in-time” model, where firms relied on their suppliers’ ability to get parts and components to the manufacturing plant at just the right time, in just the right quantity, and of just the right

quality. This practice typically creates efficiencies in supply chains and operations and allows firms to produce their product lines at a lower cost. When a firm's costs are lower, it is more agile and can offer its products for a more competitive price than otherwise while also maintaining greater profit margins.

The main objectives of just-in-time inventory management methods are to reduce inventory holding costs and to increase inventory turnover—both of which increase the firm's financial performance. This inventory strategy has brought major advantages; however, it comes with a big risk. A rare circumstance such as an episodic event (e.g., a terror attack or a tsunami) or a global disruption (e.g., a pandemic) can bring manufacturers using the just-in-time inventory management strategy to a screeching halt. There is no “safety stock” to keep the operations running. For instance, when the 9/11 terror attacks occurred and the US government closed the borders for a week, many manufacturers in midwestern states such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan saw their suppliers' deliveries stopped at the border or unable to navigate the Great Lakes because of the mandate.

As part of the move to this more efficient just-in-time strategy, firms transitioned their supplier relationship strategy as well. Before the shift, firms often had a large number of suppliers for each of their manufacturing components. When a firm put out a call for proposals, the competing suppliers would begin a cutthroat struggle to win the contract. Consequently, suppliers often cut their profit margins, skimmed on quality, or overpromised deliverables in an effort to win a contract. Encouraging suppliers to engage in a race to the bottom was not a very healthy way to build manufacturer-supplier relationships.

When firms began to shift to the just-in-time strategy, this allowed them to create long-term, win-win relationships with far fewer suppliers. This strategy ensured that their suppliers would no longer skimp on quality or overpromise deliverables. It also enabled the creation of manufacturer-supplier relationships that were mutually beneficial and profitable for all involved. That is, it gave the manufacturing firm more control while also ensuring the long-term viability of the partnerships.

Single-Sourcing

One school of thought emanating from this shift in inventory and procurement strategy became known as single-sourcing, which took this idea of achieving efficiency by cutting down on the number of suppliers and extended it to mean finding a single source for *all* parts or components of a particular product line. The extreme case of single-sourcing is when the manufacturer, in an effort to take advantage of economies of scale, passes all purchase orders for a particular product to a single supplier. Theoretically, the manufacturer can benefit from better cost structures, higher-quality parts, and higher-quality service—including favorable financial terms.

However, the risk remains: When an unplanned or episodic event—such as a supplier strike, a terror attack, or a global pandemic—occurs, the manufacturer finds itself at an immediate standstill. When the event persists—as the COVID-19 pandemic did—the cost of alternate sources of supply rises higher and higher. This uncertainty, coupled with closed ports and disrupted global supply chains, creates a lot of chaos and unpredictability, hindering the manufacturer’s efforts to continue operations and meet its obligations to its stakeholders—customers, employees, financial institutions, stockholders, and so forth.

Multi-sourcing

Multi-sourcing, on the other hand, is where the manufacturer leverages a larger pool of suppliers to satisfy its business needs. It is not a return to the pre-just-in-time environment: It is relational in nature, not cutthroat. It is not a return to holding excess stock as a safety measure: Rather, it is designed to balance the risks of shutting down and the costs of, for instance, having a backup source of domestic supply. It is a hedge against the risk of single-sourcing when the supply chain becomes disrupted.

Wisconsin manufacturers, like manufacturers around the globe, quickly realized that relying on a single source is risky. Additionally, firms whose operations came to a halt oftentimes had no legal recourse in the face of their suppliers’ nonperformance. In

fact, many firms found themselves without recourse if their supplier contracts contained a “force majeure” clause, which the manufacturer may not have fully understood.

Force Majeure

Force majeure is a provision in many supplier service contracts that describes the conditions under which a provider can be relieved of liability for nonperformance owing to events that are beyond the provider’s control. During a global pandemic, as countries begin to lock down their transportation networks, including ports and ships, the supplier cannot deliver parts or components in a timely manner, if at all. Some routes are discontinued, port workers go on lockdown, and some vessels remain quarantined in ports or docks. This means global traffic slows considerably and fulfillment of contractual obligations begins to suffer.

During pandemics, a number of antecedents may result in financial losses: lack of warehouse labor, volatilities in demand, volatilities in supply, and government edicts such as shelter-in-place orders or quarantines, for instance. Importantly, a force majeure declaration will (likely) hold up in court only if the inability to deliver is such that delivery is truly impossible. That is, it cannot be simply more difficult, more inconvenient, or more expensive for the supplier to deliver. To avoid any confusion during future pandemic-related disruptions, manufacturers and suppliers should specify “pandemics” or “supply shocks due to pandemics” in their force majeure clauses going forward.

Force majeure provisions agreed upon before 2020 may not have included the word *pandemic*, but many contracts did include more general conditions under which a pandemic would fall—namely, an “act of God” or government interference. The coronavirus presents a somewhat unusual challenge, since it has affected manufacturing both as a naturally occurring event—the virus itself and its virulent spread—and in the governmental response to it, such as quarantines and lockdowns.

Moving Forward

Wisconsin manufacturers are realizing that the blanket advice to face these declarations when they come means they must understand the exact terms of existing contracts and maintain open lines of communication with suppliers and providers. Supplier declarations of force majeure, or the likelihood that suppliers will invoke such contractual provisions, may portend further disruptions, but this situation does not cancel manufacturer-supplier contracts. A basic understanding of force majeure—and of the real reason suppliers make the declaration—may help to reduce the panic these provisions generate.

Wisconsin manufacturers are beginning to look closely at their supplier contracts and ensure that there is a clear force majeure clause, along with remedies should a supplier invoke the clause. Furthermore, manufacturers are beginning to strongly consider the benefits and costs of moving to a multisupplier strategy, especially if their current single-source partners are in countries with a low cost of labor, such as China, or in regions that are prone to chaotic disruptions caused by the continuing pandemic.

As noted earlier, 30 percent of Wisconsin manufacturers have already moved at least part of their production operations from a single-source to a multi-source approach in response to the disruptions associated with the global pandemic. It is likely that Wisconsin manufacturers will continue to adjust their supply strategies and their sourcing options in order to remain agile and keep Wisconsin's manufacturing economy vibrant for years to come.

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About the Center

About the Menard Family Initiative

The Menard Family Midwest Initiative for Economic Engagement and Research (MFI) was established in 2019 by a gift from the Menard Family. MFI's mission is to engage participants in economics through experimental research and enriching, interactive experiences to ultimately discover answers to our social, economic, political, and legal challenges. The MFI provides UWL students more opportunity to learn economics through hands-on experiences and community engagement. Through research and engagement, the Initiative's work highlights effective solutions and helps advance positive change.

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