The Skills Future Higher-Ed Leaders Need to Succeed

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ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

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How do you lead when there is no map? When the territory is unknown? What different skills are needed?

Overview

The swift pace of change and the complexity of the challenges facing our colleges and universities is immense, and is testing the abilities of our institutions' leaders. The playbook of the past does not offer a sustainable path forward for all institutions. Continually finding new revenue sources, discounting tuition to increase enrollment or improve the academic profile of the student body, investing in new facilities to attract faculty and students, etc.—these will not be enough.

Changing demographics, new technologies, fundamental shifts in public funding models, and declining financial support have created a tipping point for the industry. Institutions are facing massive and complex challenges with no clear solutions. These are *adaptive* challenges as defined by Harvard's Heifetz & Linsky (2005)—challenges that require innovation, risk taking, and continuous learning; challenges that the skill sets and traditional strategies of the past are not sufficient to address. There are many of these challenges in higher education:

- Finding the resources to grow while trimming programs and budgets.
- Lowering costs while improving quality.
- Ensuring the liberal arts remain both relevant *and* financially sustainable.
- Expanding into new markets without losing focus, and without chasing opportunities that create mission creep.
- Increasing public trust and support during a time of declining funding.
- Shifting our education models and support systems to serve a changing student demographic.

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

The purpose of this paper is to begin a robust conversation with leaders throughout our campuses. We believe that building the leadership capacity of our institutions is the greatest challenge facing higher education. This is not mere hyperbole. If many of our institutions are to thrive in a complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing world, we will need the very best leaders possible. This will not be easy to achieve, but we want to begin the conversation here. We do not propose that this skillset is an exhaustive list; we hope to build on this work in the future, and we hope you will be interested in contributing as well. If you are interested in becoming involved in this work, please reach out to Amit Mrig at amit@academicimpressions.com.

Heifetz and Linsky highlight the difference between technical and "adaptive" challenges, and this distinction has important implications for leaders in higher education. *Technical* challenges are situations we have encountered before, and we can apply our current knowledge, expertise, and resources to deal with them effectively. What makes a problem or challenge technical is not that it is trivial, but that its solution already lies within the organization's repertoire.

With *adaptive* challenges, there are no clear answers as to how leaders and organizations can effectively respond to the challenge or crisis. These challenges require experimentation, risk taking, a "tolerance for failure" (Farson, 2002), and creative, innovative thinking. They also require significant change—and we know that most people are uncomfortable with change (Kanter, 2012).

The problem is that we often treat adaptive challenges like technical ones, and we apply tried and true strategies and methods that have worked in the past to these adaptive challenges with little success (Sanaghan & Jurow, 2011).

Heifetz and Linsky are not alone in their thinking about adaptive challenges. In their article "Thriving in Ambiguity" (2010), authors Pollak and Wakid use the phrase "Lewis and Clark problems" to describe these ill-defined, complex challenges facing leaders today. They see Lewis and Clark-type challenges as ambiguous situations that have a myriad of variables that can't be solved by data, analysis, or past experience. They require exploration, experimentation, curiosity, and learning.

Given the prevalence of these adaptive challenges, we need a different kind of leader in higher education—leaders who can build bridges from the past to the future, taking the best of our industry and making it more relevant, competitive, and sustainable. The past and current leadership model that prizes vision, academic reputation and track record, communication and charisma, and fundraising expertise is no longer enough to meet our current and future challenges.

3 Reasons We Need a New Skillset

Before we go further in our case for a new leadership skillset, it's worth taking a moment to address the skepticism with which some might greet this idea: Do we really need a fundamentally different leadership stance if we are to succeed in the future? Aren't the calls about the demise of higher education overblown?

Having met thousands of leaders in the tumultuous last decade, the two co-authors are well-versed in the pushback to these new ideas. Let's look at the three most significant reasons that we think a new skillset is indeed necessary to lead institutions through the twenty-first century.

1. We need leaders with the courage to focus on the factors that are within our control.

Many in higher education point to external factors to describe the core of higher education's current challenges—particularly the long-term decline in state funding. It is true that funding on a per-student basis is down 18% after adjusting for inflation, and this has certainly pressured state institutions. But additional funding will likely only address who pays for college (the State or students themselves), not how much it costs to provide the education—that is the real issue.

Increasing the expenditures on education doesn't necessarily lead to better outcomes, and a quick scan of national graduation rates will drive that point home better than any other single metric. Nationally, six-year graduation rates have barely budged in the last 20 years, despite institutions investing huge sums of money and personnel in technology to track students, counselors and advisors, new academic support services, and financial aid.

We cannot continue to do business the same way and expect different outcomes. Innovation in higher education has historically been additive—throwing people and technology at our challenges. That is no longer a sustainable model. As revenue slows, but expenses rise, institutions must wholly re-examine their business models; incremental change will not suffice. In fact, a study by EY Parthenon identified that 800 institutions are at significant risk of not being able to continue their operations (EY Parthenon, 2016).

To reimagine our institutions, we will need leaders who are disciplined and honest in their assessments of their institutions, and who can engage the campus community in honest and invigorating conversations about the future. We will need leaders who are willing to make tough decisions, re-examine whether old ways of doing business will still be relevant in the future, adopt an "opportunity" rather than a "scarcity" mindset, and foster creativity and innovation to blaze a new path forward.

2. We need leaders who aren't just going to "wait it out."

There may be some in higher education with the attitude that "this too shall pass"; proponents of this view point to an improving economy, falling interest in MOOCs, and sharp enrollment declines in the for-profit sector. These individuals may feel that the rhetoric about "disruption" is overblown and that higher ed will continue to tread forward as it has for generations.

It is true that institutions are incredibly resilient—they have been in the past, and we think they will continue to be so in the future. However, we are already seeing the writing on the wall with institutional closures and mergers. Now is not the time for complacency.

Looking back, it's much easier to lead when enrollments are trending up, government funding is stable or growing, and public support is overwhelmingly on your side. Leaders in higher education have benefited from those tailwinds for most of the last century. In this historical context, presidents and chancellors judge their success by how many students they deny admission, how many buildings they build, and how many academic programs they add.

Unfortunately, the higher education enterprise finds itself in a very different state today. For reasons already well documented, colleges and universities find themselves trapped by a large, costly, and aging infrastructure, inherited organizational structures that prevent innovative thinking, deeply held traditions and values that are being challenged, and increasing numbers of competitors unbound by these same anchors (not just the for-profits).

While the mode and means of delivering education remained relatively stable from decade to decade, and while the market for higher education was consistently expanding, institutional leaders could plan in a conservative fashion. But as Clayton Christensen (2011, 2013) and many others have pointed out, this history of relative stability and steady growth puts incumbents in any industry at the greatest risk of disruption.

Nearly one in five college and university chief business officers are worried their institutions are at risk of shutting down in the foreseeable future, according to a 2015 survey by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup.

In the survey, 64 percent of business officers this year strongly agreed or agreed that their financial model is sustainable over the next five years, compared to 62 percent the previous year. That confidence drops to 42 percent over 10 years, roughly similar to the previous year's response of 40 percent.

We believe that Peter Vaill's evocative metaphor "living in permanent whitewater" (1996) applies directly to higher education today. There was a time when things would slow down, and leaders could relax a little. Those days are gone and will never return. Now the admissions season is year-round and every bit of downtime is used to raise more funds, advance the institution's mission, lobby for support, pursue partnerships with industry and community, and get an "edge" on the competition.

In the end, leaders must be conscious of the "confirming evidence trap" (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 2006), where we seek information that confirms our original thinking. We can look far and wide for examples, information, and evidence that tell us "things aren't so bad." But powerful and irreversible trends are pushing us to a new normal, whether we like it or not. This will not simply "pass"; it will only get tougher and more complex to deal with. Hope is not a strategy. We need leaders who are looking for opportunities to invest in their institution's future, not only its present—leaders who aren't content to "wait it out."

3. The old paradigm of the "visionary" president is not enough, given the complexity of today's challenges.

We need more than vision; we need the ability to execute our vision. We need leaders who can create a *shared* vision that is benefited both by the meaningful contributions and authentic buy-in of various institutional stakeholders. The lone visionary is mostly a myth, often perpetuated by trustees who seek presidents who will create a singular vision that "will take our breaths away" (Sanaghan 2014).

For the truly adaptive issues facing higher education, there are no "silver bullets." These challenges cannot be solved with a single initiative or through a single division, or by throwing money at the problem—the big challenges facing higher education today are more complex than that. We cannot recruit our way out of this. These issues are not just about better academic advising, career services, or student support initiatives. Innovative pedagogy will not be enough to put these issues to bed. Increased funding does not, by itself, provide a sustainable path forward.

The challenges are too complex to navigate and respond to alone, or to be given to the president and senior team to solve by themselves. Leaders will not be able to mandate their ideas and programs in a top-down manner, no matter how visionary their ideas appear to be. These are whole-campus challenges and they require whole-campus solutions. Identifying and actually implementing appropriate responses requires the engagement and participation of the whole campus.

Looking back at our history to learn about our future

The reality is that over the more than 300-year history of higher education in America, higher education has always adapted to reflect its times. From the selection of faculty to their role, the scope and shape of the curriculum, to which students are served and what services are provided, institutions have a history of anticipating and adapting to their respective settings and times—this is a key reason why many institutions have lasted hundreds of years. As a country, we created land-grant institutions even during a time of civil war; we significantly expanded community college education in the decades following WWII. Leaders must embrace this history of adaptation and innovation, and remember its lessons as they chart a course into the future.

Summary of Process & Findings

> ***"The organizational adaptability required to meet a relentless succession of challenges is beyond anyone's current expertise. No one in a position of authority—none of us in fact—has been here before."***
>
> (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

This quote strikes at the heart of this paper. We believe that we will explore uncharted territory over the next decade, and that there will be few signposts along the way to guide us forward. Heifetz and Linsky of Harvard tell us that "to lead is to live dangerously" (2002). How do we navigate and lead in the "permanent whitewater" (Vaill, 1996) that we find ourselves swimming in? Leaders will have to lead while not having all the answers. This kind of leadership will require courage, a willingness to take informed risks and experiment with new and unproven approaches, and an enthusiasm for continually learning *while* you are leading, in the full view of everyone!

Over the last several years, we have looked deeply into the skillset needed for this kind of leadership:

- We have engaged hundreds of leaders in higher education in discussions about future challenges and opportunities facing the industry. We have created possible future scenarios and asked: "What leadership skillset is needed to deal effectively with these complex issues?"

- We convened an "Open Space" meeting (Owen, 2008) with over 40 people from around the country—from presidents and provosts to leaders in student affairs, enrollment management, advancement, and finance—in a day-long conversation about the future of higher education leadership.

- We have held roundtables with more than 20 presidents from diverse institutions, who are wrestling with their own adaptive challenges to ask the same question.

We have also reflected on more than a dozen years of offering training and professional development to tens of thousands of leaders in higher education on the current issues facing colleges and universities. And we have drawn on our 25 years of consulting experience in higher education on over 200 campuses.

The following represents our synthesis of this learning journey and our best current thinking on the emerging leadership skillset that will be needed for higher education leaders to thrive in the future.

We believe we will need leaders who are:

1. Anticipatory thinkers.
2. Risk tolerant and supportive of creativity and innovation.
3. Effective conveners/brokers/facilitators.
4. Courageous decision makers.
5. Resilient and able to "bounce forward" after a crisis or setback.

Anticipatory thinkers

Most changes that have the potential to reshape the landscape in higher education do not arrive unannounced—innovations in online learning, dramatic shifts in demographics, even changes in the broader economy are usually preceded by multiple signals and warning signs. The key is to pay attention to these signs and, as leaders, to be equally as invested in thinking about "what's next" as we are in managing today's challenges.

The strategic challenge is: How do leaders discern what actually matters from the noise? How do they determine what is a fad versus what is really worth paying attention to? How do they manage information overload? How do they connect the dots and create a coherent picture that people can understand? Leaders will have to develop expertise in "sensemaking" and identify the essential issues and trends that require attention and action (Senge, 2007). And importantly, this sensemaking needs to be distributed throughout the institution, so that everyone on campus clearly understands the challenges, opportunities, and choices facing the institution.

Risk tolerant and supportive of creativity and innovation

No leadership quality will be more important in the future than the willingness to take intelligent risks. Leaders do not need to be free-wheeling entrepreneurs ready and willing to "bet the farm"; rather they need to know which calculated risks are worth taking and how to take those risks by piloting, iterating, and constantly learning along the way.

They need to be willing to entertain creative and new ideas and be supportive of certain "failures" and mistakes—as these will be inevitable. We cannot wait until all the evidence is in and we have a perfect plan. By then it will be too late. How then do we build institutional cultures that support innovative practices, even when the added time pressure makes everything more stressful and the stakes are so high?

Effective conveners/brokers/facilitators

Leaders must become effective facilitators of information sharing across the campus and should spend significant time understanding and engaging with the realities and challenges of their multiple stakeholders. They must let go of the notion that they alone are the "deciders" and learn how to convene diverse groups to share information and perspectives about pressing campus issues. This enables "more people to know more" about what is happening and what really matters.

As leaders serve in this "convener" role, they also become more educated about the current realities facing their institutions because they have a more holistic view of the territory, informed by multiple perspectives. This convening helps build the necessary coalitions and relational capital necessary to mobilize people toward implementing strategic priorities that they now understand more fully.

Courageous decision makers

In the future, the costs of inaction may be greater than the cost of not having the perfect approach or not having full consensus behind it. Higher education's future depends on leaders who are willing to challenge assumptions and long-standing ways of doing business, who have the courage to be honest and transparent with stakeholders, and who are willing to make the tough decisions to move the institution forward.

This does not mean that the leader needs to act as a "lone ranger" and attempt to push decisions downward or act in an autocratic manner. It does mean that after meaningful inclusion, dialogue, and discussion, leaders must be committed to using their best-informed judgment to make the tough calls. They will not please everyone—that's guaranteed—and politically they can be at risk when they act courageously. Yet, they must move forward and make the hard calls or their campus will suffer.

Resilient and able to "bounce forward"

Resilient leaders don't just bounce back from challenges or crises; they bounce forward. The adaptive challenges facing higher education will demand resiliency, because setbacks and mistakes will be made; yet, you still must move forward.

Resilient leaders understand that leading is about learning, so they build-in time and space for listening, reflection, and feedback. Leaders must be committed not only to building their own resiliency, but also to developing resilient leaders throughout their campuses. If they can accomplish this, they will be able to adapt and respond effectively to the inevitable storms and challenges that are coming.

In Detail: The Future Leadership Skillset

In the following pages, we make a case that we must identify, develop, and reward leaders who embody these five characteristics or qualities.

This is not to say that other traits of leaders are unimportant; the core leadership qualities of character, competence, compassion, and integrity will always remain. And in order to deal with the adaptive challenges facing higher education, our leaders need to be completely trustworthy, and be willing to put others' interests above their own. We know that these qualities are by no means givens, and there have been numerous leaders derailed because they lack these fundamental qualities of leadership.

But in this paper, we want to shine a light on other, less-obvious qualities of leaders, and identify the traits that are highly specific to the higher education industry and its future.

Quality #1: Leaders who are Anticipatory Thinkers

> *"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but seeing with new eyes."*
>
> – Marcel Proust

Why anticipatory thinking is needed

We believe the future of higher education will be saturated with complexity and ambiguity, and the pace of change will only increase. Anticipatory thinking is not about

"predicting" the future; no one can do that. But leaders throughout our campuses can develop the capacity to look forward in different ways, at different things, and "make sense" of fast-moving and enigmatic issues and trends.

Notionally, we define anticipatory thinking as the ability to identify trends and potential opportunities and challenges in the wider external environment, and to understand the strategic implications embedded within them. Anticipatory thinking also includes the ability to "connect the dots" across emerging trends and issues, so that leaders and stakeholders can respond to these trends coherently.

We are not talking about just periodically conducting a SWOT analysis. Anticipatory thinking requires a disciplined approach to looking at the external environment and landscape and using multiple perspectives to make sense of what you are seeing and learning. It isn't just a lot of data gathering; we often do far too much of that and then get buried by information overload.

What anticipatory thinking consists of

Thinking, not doing

Anticipatory thinking is just that—thinking. Most of us spend our days "doing." We run from meeting to meeting, from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and at the end of the day, we are not quite sure what we accomplished. To be an effective anticipatory thinker demands that we are the masters of our schedule, not the other way around. We must take disciplined steps to carve out time to think, read, reflect, and connect the dots. Whether this is one hour per day or one day a month, we cannot truly develop this skillset unless we create the time for it.

Many of our leaders think that the busier they are and the harder they work, the more value they are adding. But this is not true. Leaders who are frenetic and who are constantly fighting fires are actually not serving the institution well at all. Leaders have a responsibility to step back, reflect, think about the future, and to ensure that they are preparing for more than just meeting the institution's short-term needs and objectives.

Horizon thinking

Leaders must be careful what they take for granted, and must pay attention to the "harbingers of change" that appear faintly on the horizon. For example, the notion of a "free" college education was discussed here and there years ago, and was often summarily dismissed as "impossible." Yet, this improbable notion has become a powerful reality for many states and students.

Similarly, we have taken for granted that international students will continue to seek enrollment in the US in great numbers, and many institutions would not survive without these students. And yet, recently proposed immigration policies are causing many students to look elsewhere; what will the implications be if we lose access to these academically competitive and full-pay students?

Consider a third example: the hugely underserved market for adult students. Nonprofit institutions were content to treat these students differently—funneling them to University Colleges, Extended Education divisions, or letting the for-profit sector serve these students. Most institutions failed to see the size of the potential opportunity or the fact that the demographics of their "traditional" students would turn against them in the next decade.

These demographic shifts did not happen overnight. Nor did the demographic shifts in the Midwest and Northeast—regions that are seeing continuing decline in the number of high school graduates each year. This is true of other trends, as well. We have been witnessing the de-funding of higher education for more than 30 years. And technology and the democratization of knowledge began two decades ago with the ubiquity of the Internet.

The great recession may have accelerated or expanded these trends and opportunities, but they have been on the radar screen for many years. And yet in recent history, most institutions have been forced to cut programs, lay off faculty and staff, sell assets, and in extreme cases, close their doors. In most cases, these reductions could have been less severe had the institution created opportunities and mechanisms to:

- Identify emerging issues and trends;
- Openly discuss their implications with campus stakeholders, especially the negative implications;

- Identify and prioritize the adaptive challenges; and
- Plan strategically to address these challenges for the future.

What's more, these institutions could have done more than just mitigate cutbacks; they could have positioned themselves to take advantage of new opportunities to grow. This would have taken courage and a tolerance for risk.

Waiting for the future isn't an effective leadership strategy. As the pace of change continues to accelerate, horizon thinking becomes critical. Leaders need to anticipate trends, position against threats, and seize opportunities.

Engaging others in an ongoing discussion about the future of the industry

> *"Perspective is worth 80 I.Q. points"*
>
> – Alan Kay

Anticipatory thinkers intentionally design conversations throughout their institution to talk about the future. They know multiple perspectives are key to surfacing the most salient data points. STEM faculty are paying more attention to different trends and data than Humanities faculty are. Front-line fundraisers networking with high net-worth individuals will see different trends than admissions staff talking with prospective students. No one perspective is more or less important than others, and leaders as well as stakeholders need a broad sharing of multiple perspectives to create an integrated view of the future.

Harnessing the multiple perspectives and sharing these across and among stakeholders is key to sorting out the signal from the noise. Just seeing a lot of blips on the radar screen doesn't help much. The key is to collectively identify and prioritize the most important trends to watch. Connecting the dots across time to better understand the implications for a campus is the essence of Anticipatory Thinking.

For an example of one activity that can help bring these perspectives together, read NACUBO's description of the Future Timeline exercise and AI's article "24 Higher-Ed Leaders Look to the Future."

It's critical that these conversations are structured and designed in the right way. Are you asking a diverse set of stakeholders questions like:

1. **How will students learn in 10-15 years? How do we develop our faculty to be able to teach to these new methods?**
2. **What new technologies have the potential to transform our world (think about artificial intelligence, virtual reality) and how we will we adapt?**
3. **If we had to redesign the institution from scratch, what would we do differently?**
4. **What are the long-term impacts AND side-impacts of the decisions we are making?**
5. **What are the events, trends, and issues that will impact our institution over the next 10 years?**

Looking Outside the Academy

It's not enough to look only at higher-education data and trends. Anticipatory thinkers also have the discipline to look outside of higher education to the wider world. Healthcare has experienced many of the same challenges higher education has—changing funding models, new technologies that enable personalization, integration of care, and the push to define measurable outcomes. Media and publishing have seen their businesses completely disrupted by the Internet, democratization of information, and new entrants. Companies in these industries have made major mistakes and learned important lessons—what can we learn from them? Like our institutions today, they have had to deal with complexity, organizational culture, and rapid change in order to survive. Can their lessons learned be of service?

One of the barriers we notice in our conversations with leaders, especially academic leaders, is a real hesitation to apply anything from the corporate sector to higher education. That just doesn't make sense. We recognize that the academic culture—its objectives, motivations, incentives, and rewards—is special and unique, and that it is different for valid reasons. But academic leaders still need to deal with complexity, manage change, build trust, engage in strategic thinking, provide direction, and prioritize goals. Other organizations have the same challenges, and there are many companies worth learning from: companies that have bedrock values, environments that foster learning and innovation, collaborative cultures, and inspiring missions that go beyond quarterly profits. These companies have had much success adapting to changing conditions in the marketplace. Think of Google, WL Gore, Ideo, Starbucks, and Southwest Airlines. We can learn from others outside of higher education. Anticipatory thinkers realize these resources are out there and access them.

Smart anticipatory thinkers keep up with technology and media companies, industrial design, international events, and the current temperament of Wall Street, among other factors. Consumer preferences and behaviors are continually shaped by these trends, and the more dots you connect as an anticipatory leader, the more likely you are to distinguish real opportunities from fads.

Taking field or scouting trips

A strategic way to shift your mindset is to step outside of your everyday setting and visit other institutions and organizations, even those *outside* of higher education, to learn from their successes and mistakes and to understand: how they operate; conduct business; innovate; manage their culture effectively; and deal with problems. It's important that these field trips aren't just "dog and pony shows" where a half-day or one-day stopover shows only the wonderful, sparkling stuff. This isn't helpful to anyone and is often more of a public relations experience than anything else. Choose places you can actually learn from, and spend more than a day visiting them.

Identifying aspirational peers or companies that have successfully innovated, especially under difficult circumstances, can be a highly impactful way to see your own challenges from a different perspective. Knowing how others have dealt with their own adaptive challenges will inform and challenge your thinking; it also might give you some realistic hope that ambiguity and complexity can be dealt with effectively. Success and failure both leave clues. Adaptive leaders strive to search for the lessons and leverage what they have learned from others, rather than repeat others' mistakes.

Engaging in sense making—not just anticipating

Sensemaking is a term first coined by Karl Weick (1995) and has been further developed by Peter Senge (1996) and Deborah Ancona (2005). These thinkers describe sensemaking as a process wherein individuals and organizations attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the problems or challenges they are trying to solve. Sensemaking requires leaders to facilitate conversations between individuals and groups who hold different, even contrary, perspectives and vantage points. This might seem counterintuitive to many leaders who strive mightily to keep opposing views and stakeholders separated, in order to avoid the discomfort of conflict.

Yet sensemakers often see conflict as a *resource* to be explored, not avoided. They are curious about the different viewpoints. The key outcome of these conversations is to develop a *shared* understanding (not necessarily agreement) of what is going on in the larger environment and within the organization. This can only happen when multiple perspectives are shared in a constructive manner. We now have many methodologies that allow us to bring large and diverse groups together (e.g. Future Search, Open Space Technology, World Café, The Interview Design, Liberating Structures) to gain a widely distributed understanding of institutional issues. The primary purpose of these conversations is to help create a "map" of the world you live in, so that you can make informed, coherent choices and decisions even when things are quite fluid and changing rapidly.

Leaders need to meet with multiple layers throughout their campuses. Often, listening only to those closest to them or at their own peer level can trap them. It isn't enough. Seek the ideas and perspectives of others throughout the institution. These individuals will see different things and will see things differently. Their insights can be useful in developing both your anticipatory thinking and your sensemaking ability.

Just gathering information and insights from multiple stakeholders, however, is not enough. Leaders must engage these same stakeholders in a sensemaking process whereby this information is assimilated, synthesized, and prioritized. These groups must audit the institution's current strengths and challenges as they relate to these trends—because not all opportunities are the right ones for an institution to pursue.

Anticipatory Thinking in Action

We worked with one campus where the new president created a powerful and strategic "scouting trip" that began an exploration into the adaptive challenges facing his institution. The president understood that the campus would have to change in dramatic ways to deal with some of the adaptive challenges and pressing financial problems it was facing. The former leadership had "kicked the can down the road" for years, failing to conduct the tough conversations that were needed or to make any difficult decisions that would upset people. At the same time, there was more than a fair amount of denial and belief that "this too shall pass" among campus stakeholders, especially the faculty.

The president selected five highly accomplished and trusted academics (no administrators) to help the institution "Discover the Future of Higher Education." He relieved them of their teaching and service duties for a semester, and they went forward conducting research, visiting other campuses, attending conferences, and talking with their colleagues across the country. When they returned from their learning journey, they crafted a report that was shared widely across the campus, and they engaged in some difficult conversations about the implications of the report and the future of their institution.

The essential message of the report was: Their current business model was broken and some dramatic changes would be needed. The report proved to be a "game changer"; it helped highlight the strategic decisions and actions that would enable the institution to thrive in the future. It also mobilized the primary stakeholder groups (e.g., the faculty senate, the administrative council, the staff council) towards collective action. Everyone realized that this was not the "president's problem" to solve; they had to deal with it together.

The president intuitively knew that if he had provided the same dire message, it might have fallen on deaf ears, regardless of all the facts and data he could provide. But when he asked deeply respected faculty to explore the future of higher education, the faculty were able to create an informed and trusted database that allowed a very different set of conversations to take place. This also allowed for a much deeper understanding of the issues involved—because it was no longer solely the president's task to define and articulate the challenges.

There was risk attached with this "scouting" approach, and the new president was willing to take that risk. Being proactive in the face of adaptive change is an essential leadership strategy.

Quality #2: Leaders who are Tolerant of Risk and Failure

Why risk tolerance is needed

Risk tolerance, managing risk, and being tolerant of failure aren't widely discussed in higher education. Many faculty and administrators view themselves as stewards of institutions that have existed long before themselves, and will persist long after. This caretaker mentality can make bold choices that risk the future of an institution unappealing. Further, many in higher education are risk averse by nature, having been drawn to the academy in part for its stability, predictability, and security.

Yet setbacks, failures, and mistakes will be inevitable (Farson & Keyes, 2003; Gladwell, 2008) and how our leaders deal with failures and learn from them will determine their effectiveness and their ability to move their institutions forward.

What risk tolerance consists of

Willingness to learn from failure

The key to creating a culture that embraces creative ideas and approaches is to not penalize individuals for failure. In a system that values precision and accuracy, this can be a counterintuitive approach. Yet institutions need to shift their mindsets from seeing only risk to seeing opportunity. Shifting these mindsets will not be easy and will take time, and leaders need to be intentional about creating safety. Without this safety, no one will put themselves at risk, nothing will be learned, and no meaningful forward progress will be made (Farson & Keyes, 2003).

One practical recommendation is to define what a smart failure is. If leaders can define the boundaries for experimentation, what risks they are willing to accept, and what smart failure is compared to an unacceptable outcome, they can create the psychological safety for their teams to think differently.

Not every institution has the same ability to withstand missteps. We know many institutions in which the margins are razor thin, and for whom experimentation with a new enrollment strategy could—if it fails—result in 50 fewer students enrolling and seriously jeopardize the institution. In those cases, experimentation might be limited to small-scale pilots affecting only feeder schools that traditionally don't send more than 1-2 students to the institution. Whatever your institution's specific constraints are, defining smart failure leads to smart risk taking.

Incentives and motivations

Leaders need to be mindful and attentive to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Both are powerful drivers of whether individuals feel comfortable and supported taking risks. Intrinsic motivations have to do with how people are naturally wired; extrinsic motivations have more to do with incentives and rewards to encourage certain behavior.

Research shows that some people are motivated by "promotion" or "playing to win," while others are motivated by "prevention" or "playing not to lose" (Halvorson, Higgins 2013). Promoters are generally comfortable with risk and trying new things; they tend to see the positive outcomes, work quickly, are optimistic, and are highly motivated by accomplishing new things. Prevention-minded people, on the other hand, work more slowly and methodically; tend to be prepared for the worst, and are nervous about moving too quickly.

Understanding and tapping individual motivations are at the heart of effective leadership and especially so when leaders are trying to encourage more creativity and innovation. Some people might rush in quickly, ignoring obvious warning signs along the way. Others will be naturally "hard-wired" to be more skeptical, concerned, and will see the reasons why things won't work out. Increasing an individual's or organization's risk tolerance isn't about having a higher percentage of promotion-minded people. Empowering smart risk taking is about both:

- Providing encouragement, support, and incentives for those who are naturally less comfortable with risk, and
- Creating a more disciplined process for those who are already more comfortable with risk.

When it comes to extrinsic motivations, there are many instances where our words and actions don't line up, creating confusion and reinforcing the status quo. Leaders might talk about the importance of thinking differently, innovating, and taking risks, but if the incentives don't support such action, very little will actually happen. For example, an institution that wants to engage in more cross-disciplinary collaboration for the purposes of new academic programs or scholarship, must ensure that promotion and tenure criteria don't penalize faculty. This means looking at how they assign credit for such work, or how they evaluate the number of articles produced, or the quality of journals in which the work was published, etc.

Fundraising is another example—leaders might talk about the importance of a sustainable fundraising operation, but their actions may indicate otherwise. Institutions typically prioritize dollars in the door *today* over other metrics that are leading indicators of *tomorrow's* results (like alumni participation and engagement).

Such examples are numerous in higher education; the more we strictly adhere to old measures of success, or the more we hold people accountable only to short-term results, the less likely we are to create the space for bold thinking and new ways of operating our institutions.

Moving from a scarcity mindset to an opportunity mindset

Many leaders have responded unproductively to economic scarcity in recent years, often by freezing in place. By this we mean that prevailing beliefs are uninspired and self-limiting – "we're carrying too much"; "change is hard"; "it won't work"; "we never have enough resources"; "we've always done it this way"; "let's stick with the tried and true."

The danger in this thinking is operating in a passive mode (reacting to events as they occur) as opposed to a proactive mode (responding thoughtfully and opportunistically to changing conditions). We become skilled at advocating for resources, but not at creating them.

This scarcity mindset engenders powerlessness and inaction, as institutional leaders accept that their institution's destiny is driven by external factors and agents. We need to re-frame the conversation from "we need more funding from X and Y" to "here's what we can do today," and we need to ask questions like these:

- How can we achieve higher levels of quality and service through our own efforts?
- What investments can we make to create sustainable long term returns for the institution?
- How can we use our current constrained environment to re-energize and re-focus the institution?

There are opportunities that can be seized during times of constraint and scarcity, but adopting this institutional mindset requires bold, focused, visionary, and persistent leadership. It requires our leaders to counter the scarcity mindset and inspire us toward more productive and investment-oriented habits of thinking. This more productive mindset realizes that resource constraints can actually be a positive force for good that can drive the creativity and innovation needed to confront the challenges ahead.

Securing the money needed to pursue the opportunities

Creating a culture is one thing, but putting resources towards new opportunities is equally important. Not all ideas require a big investment, and institutions should think carefully about how they pilot and iterate initiatives so that risk is limited. For example, consider Bay Path University's approach to testing and then scaling up new academic programs:

- Rather than hire a full-time person for a new program or initiative, consider adding someone on a part-time or special-projects basis.
- Consider adding a minor before a major.
- Leverage online programs and adjuncts instead of adding full-time faculty for new programs.

These strategies enable institutions to start small, prove the investments will be successful, and generate a return for the institution. Starting small helps the institution innovate much more clearly.

However, there are occasions when starting small and then scaling up is not always possible. New software packages that can help with student retention and certain academic programs like nursing or speech language pathology can entail large start-up costs. Institutions need to have the

funds available when opportunities present themselves. Leaders should be disciplined in their budgeting process so that every year they allocate a certain percentage of the budget (usually 2-5%) for a special initiatives fund. This can be allocated at the president's or senior cabinet's discretion. We know of one institution where each unit's budget is cut by 1-1.5% a year and there is a forced reallocation of resources. The funds are reallocated according to the strategic priorities so some departments receive significant increases, if their work ties directly to the institution's strategic objectives.

Another strategy for securing these dollars is to secure donor support for a "president's fund" that can be used opportunistically to enhance the institution. What's critical is that this type of innovation is budgeted for consistently and in advance.

Risk Taking in Action

We spoke at length with one president who turned around a small, at-risk private university in 1997. At the time, the institution was facing an incrementally shrinking budget; the faculty were not paid well compared to their peers at other institutions; and the university had a tremendous deferred maintenance backlog. Facing the prospect of continued decline if the institution remained mired in "how we have always done things," the president looked for opportunities for new growth. Both an anticipatory thinker and a risk taker, the new president approached the board with the proposal to reallocate $600,000 out of a $26 million operating budget to invest in launching online programs.

This was a calculated, but significant risk. After all, the roofs were leaking. And in 1997, there was widespread skepticism about the credibility and sustainability of online education. However, this president saw an opportunity to open the doors of the institution to under-served students and to grow enrollment and revenue. The decision paid off. Though the new online programs generated less than $90,000 in revenue the first year, today those programs exceed $85 million, accounting for half the institution's total revenue.

What set this leader apart from his predecessors was his opportunistic mindset and his adherence to Peter Drucker's budgeting discipline, whereby organizations regularly abandon activities that are not deemed productive enough in order to free up resources for growth. Every year since 1997, that institution has set aside 2-3% of the budget to invest in growth initiatives. The president knew that this ongoing discipline—as well as the initial risk—would be necessary if his university was to not only survive, but thrive in the decades ahead.

He also knew that he needed to shift the entire campus' mindset towards taking initiative and learning from risk and failure; sustaining the institution's new growth trajectory would require more than just one opportunistic thinker at the top. He had inherited a culture that was content to limp along, that wanted to avoid taking big risks and making mistakes. To turn the rudder on that culture, he began with a thorough mission review and conducting surveys and focus groups, and involved the campus in drafting a set of core values that could actually be lived at the institution. They used the Organizational Culture Inventory® to measure their progress, and they invested in leadership retreats and leadership development programs based on these core values. Over 150 managers have gone through the program and remain with that university today.

Quality #3: Leaders who are Effective Conveners and Facilitators

Why effective conveners are needed

We tend to have a very singular definition of leadership, celebrating and crediting individual figures for organizations' successes. To be sure, Steve Jobs, Henry Ford, and many others are notable for their brilliance, vision, and ability to bring their visions to life. But the reality is that these are rare, if not exceptional, cases. In most organizational settings, we need leaders who can engage the collective minds and will of the organization's stakeholders to set and achieve strategic priorities.

The notion that the leader is paid to set the vision is a fallacy that is still accepted by scores of institutions and their boards. For example, many trustees ask potential presidents to describe their vision for the institution as part of the hiring process and then push new presidents to create a strategic plan as quickly as possible. But without a deep understanding of the campus culture and community, and without the support, buy-in, and contributions from the campus community, the president's ability to effect meaningful change or progress is significantly diminished.

Leaders who are conveners, who take a more facilitative approach to leadership, resist this urge and bring stakeholders (including the board) together to create alignment, shared understanding, and action.

What being an effective convener consists of

These leaders are defined by several common traits, including:

Humility

If your operating assumption is that you have all the answers, you're more likely to think that involving others slows the process and dilutes the outcome. Leaders who are effective conveners realize that it's not a question of how smart you are. All leaders are smart, but not all smart people are leaders. There is a big difference between leadership and "smartship," and we need a lot more of the former and less of the latter. The challenges facing institutions are too complex and are changing too quickly for one person to figure it all out alone. And even if you did figure it all out, conveners recognize that they are only one person and that to move an entire institution requires the support, buy-in, and commitment of the whole campus (Badaracco, 2002).

A willingness to trust others

To lead collaboratively as a facilitator or convener means wielding influence, not authority. Conveners' natural orientation is to trust others. They are okay with relinquishing some control of the ultimate outcome because they genuinely believe in the value that others bring to the table.

They can and must influence the direction of the institution—their unique vantage point gives them insights that others won't have—but they know they cannot mandate it, even if they have positional authority. They know that the collective direction, even if it's not exactly their own, will be a better outcome because that direction has the buy-in and support of their constituents. These leaders seek commitment and not just compliance from those with whom they work.

A commitment to go beyond the usual suspects

Every campus has a common set of constituents who regularly volunteer or who are regularly appointed to important task forces and committees, but a facilitative approach to leadership requires going beyond bouncing ideas off of the "usual suspects."

True collaboration comes from inviting all stakeholders to the table, even the curmudgeons who operate with a great deal of skepticism. When you only engage the usual suspects, you risk groupthink and you most likely miss those who have valuable ideas to contribute, but who aren't likely to volunteer (Janis, 1972).

Bringing diverse groups together is the only way to truly address the adaptive challenges we face in higher education. Only when we can learn from one another, having healthy discussion, debate, and even some positive

conflict, can we begin to see new ways of tackling our challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2005; Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009).

This will take some courage, because often when people have not previously been invited to participate meaningfully, they can be suspicious about intent and can prove difficult to deal with. Conflict between groups can emerge quickly, and trust can be diminished. How these challenging interactions and conversations are managed will set the tone for the openness and honesty of the discussions.

An ability to connect with and across other cultures

Leaders who are effective at convening multiple stakeholder groups, especially those that cross boundaries like academic disciplines, or the faculty/administrative divide, have the opportunity to learn and connect with the multiple cultures across campus. Most universities, especially highly decentralized ones, have multiple cultures. Leaders who can either become or identify and engage with "cultural travelers" who communicate regularly across these boundaries (Sanaghan, Goldstein & Jurow, 2001) are more likely to lead effectively. Leaders who can mentor across boundaries, encourage collaboration on projects, and build cross-divisional teams that spearhead the implementation of the strategic plan and important initiatives can model what it means to be an effective convener and collaborator.

Creating alignment

Collaborative leaders who recognize and tap the value of multiple teams are better at creating the necessary alignment to move a campus forward. The key is bringing together people from multiple departments and divisions; too often collaboration is limited to your team or division. Very few institutions collaborate across silos effectively. Here are a few examples:

Student affairs divisions are often very large, with multiple departments each "owning" a piece of the student lifecycle or the student experience. There are well-intentioned teams working towards the same purpose, but not necessarily in sync with one another. Quite often these teams don't get together to troubleshoot issues meaningfully and effectively, to share best practices, and to ensure alignment and synchronicity across their efforts. How effectively do they collaborate with academic advising and other front-line teams that may report through other divisions?

Nowhere is decentralization and lack of alignment more obvious than across academic departments. Within the same institution, you can find certain departments, schools, or colleges that excel at online learning, while others struggle mightily. The quality and effectiveness of teaching and research varies widely within an institution. How institutions design and deliver programs, craft developmental education programs, and balance teaching with scholarship also varies—these institutions could be exceptionally well-served by convening conversations across disciplines and across departments to share information and practices.

Leaders who are effective facilitators and collaborators see the power of this type of information sharing; they know that with the increasing complexity and ambiguity, individuals can't have all the answers, and must rely on the skills and ideas of others to solve thorny, complicated issues. They will have to craft processes that gather multiple perspectives; help facilitate discussion, debate, and dialogue about campus issues; and act as a collaborative broker of cross-boundary information and problem solving (Sanaghan & Lohndorf, 2015).

Challenging assumptions

Many leaders avoid bringing large groups together because they think they can't possibly "get anything done" with large groups. The conventional wisdom is that if you want to move an agenda forward, smaller groups are better than larger ones. The problem is that the smaller the group, the more limited the collective knowledge is, the more likely it is that biases will influence decisions, and the more likely it is that you will rely on tried and true solutions versus creative and "outside the box" ideas.

That said, it is also possible to overdo collaboration. Well-intentioned leaders can get stuck in endless meetings, endless process, and endless debate. They don't make decisions and don't act quickly or effectively on new information. They mistakenly focus on consensus and making everyone happy with the decision and outcome.

A better approach is to ensure the process is fair—that everyone is heard, that the process followed has integrity, and that clear criteria for decisions and actions are established and communicated—and then ultimately to

make a decision (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). The goal has to be to take action, not to avoid making a tough decision using the guise of consensus and collaboration.

Rather than overreliance on committees, consider forming task forces and work groups with explicit charters, missions, and deadlines. These groups are formed for a specific and timely purpose and are then disbanded when the work is complete. These groups should have clear purposes and mandates, and the resources needed to do the job.

Treating conflict as a resource

Even though it may not feel comfortable, conflict is not something to be avoided or suppressed at all costs. Effective leaders know that when you bring groups together, especially mixed groups, you will have different viewpoints. If you've assembled the right groups with the right mix of people, you will have impassioned arguments, and will likely hear more than one option or recommendation that has merit. This is a good thing, and conflicting views can be a resource in these cases.

The leader must normalize the idea of conflict being healthy for his or her group. When occurring in a culture of respect and integrity, conflict can help build relationships across the team as team members come to understand each other's perspectives. Conflict can help create open-mindedness, critical and independent thought, and an ownership mentality for the group's work. And because it forces us to look at issues from a perspective other than our own, conflict—when managed well—often will produce a better overall outcome.

Effective Convening in Action

In 2014, we had the pleasure to be involved in and witness the turnaround of a community college facing financial challenges. The incoming president brought a commitment to collaborative leadership and initiated a process during which he convened hundreds of faculty to discuss the institution's financial realities and its future. He knew that the new strategic plan would be shallower than it could be if it didn't tap the brainpower of the whole institution, and that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement if the faculty had little part in development and felt no ownership of it. He also knew that there were powerful ideas and information already present on campus that simply hadn't been tapped in previous planning and budgeting cycles.

As part of the process, the president convened over 200 faculty for an all-day planning activity. To create meaningful conversations and solicit ideas and feedback from 200+ faculty is a real, if not daunting, challenge. The leader knew that the event had to be well organized, the activity designs had to be powerful and efficient, and the faculty had to be reassured that the process was of vital importance, and therefore worth their time and effort. The strategic planning task force planned the day in detail: the president personally welcomed the faculty and conveyed the importance of their contributions, and the faculty then engaged in a SWOT analysis, a future timeline activity, and a sensemaking activity after lunch. The design of these activities emphasized idea-gathering and transparency, and every individual present had the opportunity to contribute ideas and questions, so that no individual or group could dominate the planning day. This one day got the campus community on the same page and helped to develop a roadmap for moving forward. In a short time, the planning task force was able to gather, synthesize, and report back the opportunities for moving forward that the faculty were able to identify.

The transparency and inclusion of the planning process built trust, and convening all stakeholders to help chart the future has since become a regular part of the institution's planning and budgeting activities. Applying this same approach to the budgeting process has helped the institution bring consistency to the budget and reinvest surplus funds strategically in its academic programs.

Key to the success of this approach was the leaders' willingness to trust others and that they were not afraid of involving large groups in the planning process; they knew that as long as the forum was designed and facilitated well, there would be incredible brainpower that would be tapped. There are a lot of proven methodologies for leveraging the brainstorming power of large groups: Open Space, World Café, Future Search.

Quality #4: Leaders who are Courageous Decision Makers

"Inability to make decisions is one of the principal reasons executives fail."

– John C. Maxwell

Why courageous decision making is needed

In order to make substantive and positive change, leaders will inevitably confront resistance from multiple sources including: the heavy weight of tradition, the embedded structures and policies of the organization, stakeholders who fear what they may lose as a result, the economic realities of how the institution is currently funded, among others. These barriers to change make even the smallest movements difficult, let alone sweeping decisions that offer the chance of reshaping an institution.

As we've shared in this paper, there are a number of strategies a leader can and must employ to ensure they work collaboratively with stakeholders to arrive at the best strategy and direction for the institution. But *knowing* what to do isn't the hardest part about leadership. The hardest part about leadership is *doing* what you need to do. In the end, leaders must have the courage to act—to make the tough decisions even in the face of incomplete information or conflicting perspectives.

What courageous decision making consists of

Disrupting the status quo

In any organization and certainly in higher education, there are numerous forces at work to reinforce the status quo, and frankly it's much easier to go along with these established norms and "ways of doing things." Institutions have multiple stakeholders, and leaders often find themselves in a delicate balancing act, trying to negotiate the needs and wants of competing interests. Shared governance often becomes an excuse for divided governance, with each "side" representing their constituents and doing the best they can to "win."

This politically-charged environment perpetuates the status quo because the fear is that any change or new idea will result in winners and losers. To please all parties, leaders compromise and favor across-the-board solutions or incremental change that will disaffect the least number of people. Yet this approach results in mediocrity—a push to the mean or sameness across the institution—the exact opposite of what's required to pursue excellence. Courageous leaders don't strive for equality, but do strive for fairness.

Often leaders avoid taking a stand on critical issues. Which academic programs are more core to the institution? Which strategic initiative is the most important? Which is the least? The irony is that the best amongst us won't stand for mediocrity and will migrate to other institutions that are willing to invest in areas of excellence, and are willing to own both what they are good at, and *not* good at.

What is courage?

Leaders must have the courage to make the tough decisions, but where does this courage come from?

In our society, we often think of courage in individual actions; we celebrate one person's actions to overcome difficult circumstances or odds. "Courage" summons up stories of someone acting instinctively and immediately to save his or her own life or someone else's.

In organizational life, courage is anything but *instinctive*. And courage isn't about any one action—it's about persisting over time. Leaders who make difficult decisions don't make them instinctively or immediately at all. They include others in the process; they check their thinking with trusted colleagues; they carve out space for reflection; ultimately, they are clear about the purpose and what's at stake. The decision-making process doesn't have to be scientific and is rarely formulaic, but it is thoughtful and rigorous.

Time and timing

Courage isn't about acting *immediately*, either; making courageous decisions isn't about speed or impulse. It is the exception, not the rule, when leaders are forced to make

high stakes choices on the fly. Too often, leaders create the illusion of urgency because they themselves might be uncomfortable. There is danger in rushing to closure and jumping to solutions in order to relieve our own anxiety, before understanding the complexity of the problem or the potentially negative implications. Rushing major decisions is not a courageous act.

Courageous leaders are willing to ask: when do we need to make this decision? Their interest isn't in delay, but rather in assessing the pros and cons of making the decision too quickly or missing an opportunity as it passes by. These leaders recognize the importance of creating the time and space to think. They use this space to improve their odds of success by calculating what could go right (not just what could go wrong), coming up with contingency plans, and asking what they might be missing. If possible, it's ideal for leaders to sit with the truly high stakes decisions a few days before announcing the decision to see if it passes the "gut test." This isn't to say intuition is more important than conscience, but that both are needed.

Honing the ability to make decisions

Decision-making is not something that is innate, it is learned and honed over time.

The best decision makers keep a habit of evaluating the effectiveness of their most important decisions, and they learn from both successes and failures. This is not an easy process to follow; it requires discipline and commitment to learn from the past. We recommend engaging in After Action Reviews (AAR). These are not after action "reports" where lessons learned are documented, but never internalized; these are honest reviews of what worked and what didn't. The goal isn't blame, but accountability. The goal isn't to move past a bad decision, but to move forward with new knowledge and information.

Over time, this reflection and learning helps leaders make good decisions on a more consistent basis, and that in turn provides greater confidence to take on the tougher issues.

The military has long perfected the ways to conduct After Action Reviews (AAR). It's important to note these are not informal meetings held after a major project or decision, but disciplined processes that include before-action planning. We recommend the HBR article, "Learning in the Thick of It," for a thorough description of how to actually conduct this process in a meaningful way.

They are in service to the institution, not the other way around

Courage in a leadership context is about being willing to act for the greater good. Making tough decisions is first and foremost about putting the institution above any personal interests. Courageous leaders have a trustee mindset, not a delegate mindset. They are not thinking only about what is at stake for them, their department, or any stakeholder group they represent. They act as trustees and make decisions that are in the best interest of the whole institution. This stance of trusteeship is especially necessary when the decisions may be politically unpopular or have difficult consequences.

It's important to recognize that the office you serve—whether that is the presidency, a deanship, academic advising, or the office of institutional advancement—is more important that the individual who holds that office.

Identifying the hills they are willing to die on (choosing their battles)

Not all decisions carry the same weight or the same potential impact on the institution. Leaders need to identify what hills they are willing to die on, meaning which decisions are of such significant importance that they are willing to stake their positions or reputations on them. Successful leaders will carefully consider the need, opportunity, and cost (personal, political, and professional) of the decisions they make.

One president we know uses three questions before acting:

1. Is what we're attempting to do important?
2. Even if it is important, is it worth the cost?
3. Can we actually get it done?

This simple, but powerful set of questions can help you filter and prioritize the battles that are truly worth fighting and can give you the confidence to go forward.

Courageous Decision Making in Action

The year was 1994, and the setting was a (then) relatively unknown liberal arts institution in a crowded market. The institution appeared to be dying a slow death: enrollment was down to just 400 students and was continuing to decline each year. There was no "cushion" in the operational budget; if enrollment was even two students fewer than projected, the institution had to scramble.

Seeing the writing on the wall, the incoming president approached the board with a bold proposal. She asked for $10 million of the institution's $14 million endowment (70%) to invest over the course of five years in strategic initiatives. She recognized that the institution was in this position because of the inertia of years of underinvestment and the lack of bold thinking. Now, they needed to be honest about where they were. If they kept on their current trajectory, the institution would close its doors in a matter of years. If they were to have a future that would be worthy of their history and their people, they would need to do something bold.

This wasn't just about taking a shot in the dark. Those $10 million would be invested in a measured way, and not just at the whim of a creative leader. They needed to make smart and informed choices on how to spend it, and they needed to ensure enrollment increases each year to begin returning an annual budget surplus.

The new president called together a team of ten faculty and staff and gave them the scenario: You have $10 million to create the most innovative college in our market over the next five years; let's "muse about the future." Out of that five-year visioning came specific recommendations to launch the institution's first graduate programs, reach out to a new student demographic, invest in the faculty, grow the institution's marketing and branding, and launch the institution's first fundraising campaign.

The president prepared a financial plan for the five years, with the board committing $2 million each year. One of the conditions of the plan was that if they couldn't balance the budget each year, the board could pull the plug.

But because they made smart choices on where to invest, each year the institution was able to increase its enrollment and bring in surplus tuition revenue. In the years since, the institution has continued to invest in growing new academic programs and has fed some of that surplus revenue back into the endowment each year. What was a $14 million endowment in 1994 is a $50 million endowment today. The residential full-time enrollment today is nearly 800 students, and the institution benefits from graduate and online enrollment that increases each year.

Twenty years ago, that president brought energy, passion, and courageous decision making to bear on confronting a hard reality. She was willing to own the situation the institution was in and do something about it. Investing 70% of the endowment—that took courage.

Quality #5: Leaders who are Resilient

Why resilience is needed

Because of the complexity of the adaptive challenges leaders will face in the future of higher education, mistakes and failures will be inevitable. The ability to not only "bounce back" (Zolli, 2012), but "bounce forward" from adversity, crisis, and challenge will be one of the primary differentiators of effective leaders. How can leaders encounter challenge after challenge and still remain steadfast and positive? How can they use these incidents as springboards for change and renewal, and not become overwhelmed by them?

Strategic Note

In Jim Collins' famous book, *Good to Great*, he interviewed Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was one of the most decorated soldiers in modern military history, and who endured many years of torture by the Vietcong in the infamous Hotel Hilton. Stockdale spoke movingly about this "paradox" of having the courage to face the most brutal facts of your current situation, and never lose faith that you will prevail in the end (Collins, 2001).

What resilience consists of

Resilience will be one of the very most important capacities a leader can develop and possess, but how does one become a resilient leader? Diane Coutu (2002), a leading academic in the field of leadership resilience, identifies three essential characteristics of resilient individuals and leaders who might help us gain insight into this invaluable capacity. Coutu found that resilient leaders have the following:

1. A staunch acceptance of reality.
2. A clear sense of purpose and meaning.
3. An uncanny ability to improvise.

A staunch acceptance of reality

Resilient leaders look at challenges and crises head-on, and don't sugarcoat the situation with platitudes like "never lose the opportunity of a crisis." They don't try and explain things away. Yet, even under very difficult circumstances, they have a realistic faith that things will get better over time and that they will endure and come out the other end whole. This deep and realistic faith creates a powerful touchstone for these leaders that enables them to keep moving forward, even amid incredibly difficult situations.

A clear sense of purpose and meaning

Resilient leaders believe that they are serving something much bigger than themselves, a noble purpose that adds meaning to the hardships they endure. When they meet difficult challenges, circumstances, and crises, their suffering is not meaningless or in vain, because they believe these events have lessons embedded in them. These lessons often reveal the leaders' "lived" values and core principles (Pulley and Wakefield, 2001) and enable them to act on the courage of their convictions (Sanaghan, 2016). These leaders are clear about who they are and what they are here to accomplish—and they usually view their accomplishments in the context of service to others. Their lives become—as Victor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, put it—a "search for meaning."

An uncanny ability to improvise

Resilient leaders make do with what they have and don't complain or focus on what's missing (e.g. money, people, resources, or technology). They possess a kind of inventiveness and improvisation that few leaders ever have. They don't succumb to a "scarcity mindset" in which a lack of resources prevents intelligent action. Instead, they use their own creativity and that of others to take risks, try new things, and meet challenges in unconventional ways.

Resilient leaders have a great deal of curiosity. They don't let barriers or blockages prevent them from exploring possibilities. They do not deny the challenges; they just don't let the challenges overwhelm them or cause them to give up hope. They are good at "focusing on the road and not the walls" (Horowitz, 2014) and they keep their eyes "on the prize" to get through difficult times.

Strategic Note

Andrew Zolli's wonderful book, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (2013), is a great resource for any leader who wants to learn how to be a more resilient individual.

Resilience in Action

A few years ago, one president we know took the helm at a teaching institution that had recently taken on the debt load of significant expansion of multiple campuses to support a strong growth strategy for its teaching education programs. Then, the state changed the credentialing requirements and the institution's enrollment imploded, to the extent that the operating budget saw a $10 million/year deficit. The institution's survival was threatened.

The president undertook a rigorous prioritization process, trying to be transparent with the faculty at each step about the decisions—tough decisions—that needed to be made. In the midst of the process, however, several faculty filed complaints with the AAUP and spread unfounded stories of what the institution was doing and how the institution was doing it. The stories were lies, but they created a firestorm of controversy on campus.

The president proved resilient, showing both an uncompromising honesty about the current situation and an optimism about the long-term outcome. She opened up her home to regular dinner meetings with small groups of faculty, heard their concerns, and built her relational capital with members of her campus community who were deeply fearful about the institution's future. The president realized that what many of the faculty were most fearful about was that she might not stay for the long haul and see the institution through this incredibly difficult period. She communicated in these dinner meetings that she was here to stay and that though they faced hard work together and a long uphill battle, they would get through it together.

They did. Under the president's leadership, the institution balanced its budget by staying focused on the factors within their control. In a tough market, they knew they would have to innovate, so they opened innovation spaces on campus, created a highly effective pathways program to serve the needs of a disadvantaged population, and found new opportunities to grow enrollment. Importantly, the president not only took the institution from the lowest of lows back to the middle, but she also pushed: "We're not done. We're going to continue to grow."

As a result, today there is excitement and trust on campus, and a sense of shared and hard-earned community.

This president lived the paradoxical stance articulated by James Stockdale that makes perseverance over the long haul and resilience after crisis possible: to hold both an uncompromising honesty about the tough realities faced, and an unswerving faith in the long-term outcome.

Being actively proactive: developing the capacity for resilience

It is important to actively build your resilience "muscles" and not wait for a crisis, challenge, or failure to come to you. Leaders need to create a "resilience readiness" *before* crises happen. The good news is that resilience isn't "fixed"; it can be developed over time with deliberate and conscious actions on the part of the leader.

Resilient individuals and leaders have some shared characteristics that enable them to persevere. This list of factors can provide a "scorecard" for leaders as they assess their capacity for developing resilience (Coutu, 2002; Southwick and Charney, 2012; Zolli, 2013; Sanaghan, 2016).

Strategic Note

Some of our colleagues have written a great book, *Navigating an Organizational Crisis: When Leadership Matters Most (2016)*, which describes how leaders can deal with unforeseen, powerful crises, and make it out alive. The authors, Hutson & Johnson, talk about the importance of "Preresilience," and provide some strategies to build your personal resilience. It is a great read.

Resilient people:

1. Tend to be optimistic about the future. This does not mean a "Pollyanna" optimism in denial of the facts, but a realistic and hopeful view of the future.

2. Are naturally curious about a lot of things and continue to learn throughout their lives.

3. Have a healthy "tolerance for failure" and see that there are lessons to be learned from mistakes.

4. Are good at asking for help. Most leaders are not good at this, but resilient leaders are confident enough to say that they don't know something and actively seek the support of others when facing challenges.

5. Have self-awareness, mindfulness, and strong emotional intelligence. They believe that they are the authors of their lives, not the victims of their circumstances.

6. Often have a religious or spiritual connection and see their faith as both an anchor and a beacon of light that supports them through trying times.

7. Are great problem solvers who actively search for solutions and try different and creative approaches when confronted with challenges.

Leaders can use these seven factors to identify where they are resilient and where they may have areas of needed development to build their capacity for resilience. This is important—resilience will be sorely needed as we encounter the adaptive challenges facing higher education.

Drawn from our paper Building Leadership Resilience in Higher Education (Sanaghan, 2016), here are three priority suggestions to help leaders build their resilience "muscles":

1. Build time to reflect into your daily and weekly schedule. This is not easy to do, given the enduring whitewater in which we all live. Keeping some kind of journal can help you develop a reflective practice that will prove useful when times are challenging.

2. Find at least two "confidants" (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001) who are individuals you respect and trust deeply, and who care about you as a person. These are "authentic allies" who will listen carefully, and will provide honest feedback and wise counsel. They can act as harbors and sanctuaries when the storm hits and you feel lost and confused. They are a gift in any leader's life.

3. Build a great team around you so that you can leverage their talents, lighten the load, and have a positive support system when things get tough. Creating a high functioning team is not easy, but it is an important undertaking if a leader is going to build a resilient organization. One person at the top making all the decisions just doesn't work, and makes the organization fragile. For a deep read on

this topic, see our paper 6 Powerful ideas for Building a First-Class Team on Campus. If we are going to deal effectively with the many challenges that await us, building "distributed" resilience throughout our campuses will be a strategic priority for senior leaders everywhere.

Besides the strategies mentioned above, we recommend seeking out work with people with whom you don't normally interact, actively seeking intelligent challenges, and cultivating diverse thought partners who will constructively test your thinking.

Taking care of yourself physically is also an important element of leadership resilience: getting enough exercise, meditating, healthy eating, losing weight. These are all things that we know about, but that we struggle to actually do on a regular basis. But they are important: these commonsense practices help get your resilience "in shape."

Conclusion

As we have laid out in this paper, our current and future challenges demand that we think differently about the kinds of leaders we need in higher education. Functional expertise or sheer intelligence is not the same as knowing how to lead. To be a leader is to be a learner. Both individuals and institutions must make leadership development a priority.

We strongly encourage leaders to begin identifying and cultivating future leaders who show potential. This must be a proactive endeavor. Too often in higher education we draw our leaders from outside the institution. We don't invest nearly enough in our own people's professional and leadership development, and this change must begin at the highest levels of the organization. Leaders must be dedicated to building the resourcefulness, adaptability, and capacity of their people. No institution can rise above its leadership.

Senior leaders will need to give people at all levels the opportunity to lead, thereby tapping the intelligence and talent of campus stakeholders. If they cannot do this, they will never be able to manage the adaptive challenges that are coming at them at an accelerated rate. As we have discussed, adaptive challenges don't wait for a campus to be "ready"; they show up uninvited, complicated, and ambiguous.

We also strongly encourage readers of this paper to continue their own leadership journey. Build your skills through attending programs, staying up to date with literature, and networking with others outside your department or division.

Would You Like to Continue the Conversation?

We welcome you to share your reactions to this paper and its ideas. In particular, we invite you to:

- **Chat with us about how we can help**
  We would love to explore how we can help you develop leadership programs on your campus, or invite you to our leadership development workshops to learn more.

- **Bring us to your campus**
  Would you like us to meet with your board, leadership academy, or deans, and provide a presentation or class on the new leadership skills?

- **Contribute to our offerings**
  We welcome your contribution to Academic Impressions' leadership development efforts through writing or speaking on a particular topic.

To continue the conversation, please contact Amit Mrig at amit@academicimpressions.com. We look forward to talking with you!

Amit Mrig
President and CEO
Academic Impressions

Appendix: What Board Members Need to Know

If leaders are to cultivate these future skills, the active participation and support of their boards will be essential. The board plays a critical role in setting tone for the culture and enabling leaders with these new skill sets to thrive—by hiring, cultivating, and supporting leaders who are developing these skills. In our example of courageous decision making earlier in this paper, the president of that small liberal arts university credited her board with setting the right tone for the institution's leadership and with being willing to both face the tough questions and entertain new opportunities. "If we allowed you to invest this much," the board asked, "how would you double the enrollment?"

It's in the board's power to promote and instill either a culture of innovation or risk aversion. If the president doesn't feel supported by the board or is actively dissuaded from thinking big or thinking creatively, he or she will set a very conservative climate with the cabinet that will funnel down through the entire institution. More immediately, boards may have direct responsibility for approving new and bold decisions (such as acquiring a nearby institution or asset, resetting tuition, or creating a new school or college).

This is why the entire board, not simply the executive committee, must be actively engaged with leadership and engaged in conversations about current and future challenges and opportunities. The board must be involved in the anticipatory thinking and sensemaking for the campus, from the very beginning and on an ongoing basis. They bring a unique *external* perspective to the table that must be tapped if we are to create holistic solutions to the adaptive challenges we face. They should not be just "debriefed" about challenges and emerging issues by the president at board meetings and then solicited for some "advice." This is a minimal expectation. The board needs to participate with the other campus stakeholders, *especially* faculty, in informing the anticipatory thinking of the campus and developing their own sensemaking skills.

In our work on campuses, we have often experienced barriers between the board and faculty. For example, they often: use different language; have different standards about "excellence"; have different interpretations of the same information; don't really understand each other's "worlds", and haven't built the relational capital necessary to have courageous and difficult conversations together concerning strategic issues facing the institution.

There are few better ways to address all these barriers than having the Board collaboratively build the anticipatory thinking, sensemaking, and resilience of the institutions they govern. They need to help scan the external environment of which they are a significant part. There are powerful trends and issues impacting their own organizations that they must deal with quickly and effectively if they are to remain competitive in the marketplace. What are those issues and how might they impact or influence the campus, or higher education in general?

When we think about sensemaking, one of the greatest dangers is "listening to yourself too much" and becoming too insular or self-confirming. The board's external perspective can illuminate "blind spots" (Banaji, 2013) that insiders simply cannot see. This is a strategic contribution almost every board can provide. However, it's important that board members don't offer these insights from an "expert" position, where they tell campus stakeholders what they think is best for the institution; that won't work well. But in a joint inquiry with faculty into what's going on in the external landscape, board members can share their experiences and advice, and most importantly, how they as leaders are responding to the external events, trends, and issues that keep them up at night. This would be a strategic gift for any campus, and would begin to lower the "barriers" that often set up negative dynamics between the faculty and the board. By focusing on a real task (that joint inquiry) in service of the institution's mission and vision, relational bridges and understanding can be created that will be an investment in the campus' future.

Finally, the board needs to support courageous and thoughtful decision making to ensure the health of their institution. Some of these decisions will be hard, with results that may not be realized for a long time, and some stakeholders will not be happy with whatever happens. The board must support innovation and creativity anyway. If the board can work collaboratively with other campus stakeholders and especially the president, they can play a key role in creating a resilient institution.

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