



Presidential Dialogues

FOUR

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Leading in Complex Times

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Introduction

Leaders in higher education today are grappling with a series of complex and inter-related challenges. It is not only the funding model or the educational model that isn't sustainable for most institutions, it's a combination of both. And very few institutions are immune to these uncertainties. Leaders at both public and private institutions, at both selective and open-access institutions, are dealing with many of the same questions, including:

- How do we produce lifelong learners who are agile and adaptable?
- How can we remake professional and graduate education?
- How do we fully utilize online learning?
- What does the current political climate mean for our roles as institutions?
- How do we confront complex societal problems when problems don't live in single disciplines?
- Where will the money come from? How do we use the funds we have?

These questions are but a small sample of what is on the minds of college and university presidents today. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these questions. And yet they loom large over our institutions. Leaders know they cannot stand still—in fact, leaders across our nation's campuses feel a sense of urgency to re-imagine and remake their institutions to create a sustainable path forward.

In many ways, the challenges facing institutional leaders are similar to the challenges famed explorers Lewis and Clark encountered during their expedition across the Western half of the United States (Pollak and Wakid, 2010). Today's leaders are traversing unknown territory without a map and, in many ways, are racing against the clock. How then do you lead—when the journey ahead is filled with ambiguity, complexity and pervasive change?

This was the backdrop to the fourth conversation in our series, [Presidential Dialogues: Focus on the Future](#). We gathered five leaders from very different institutions to discuss these issues in-depth. We wanted to know how these leaders confront tradition-bound institutions that are often organized in ways that perpetuate the status quo. We know change on any scale is difficult, so how do these leaders motivate and mobilize their campuses to move forward, especially knowing that change comes slowly? What inspires them and what makes them nervous?

Out of a wide-ranging and robust conversation, a set of five common and core principles emerged. Whether they were in their first year of being a president, or on their third presidency, each leader emphasized the importance of:

1. Focusing on your institution's core purpose and values
2. Investing in your institution's distributed leadership
3. Creating a culture of authentic engagement and ownership
4. Collaborating with campus stakeholders to set a strategic direction
5. Nurturing trust and building relational capital

Leadership matters, especially in complex and trying times. We hope their advice will be useful to you.

1. Focusing on your institution's core purpose and values

Effective leaders are able to inspire and build a coalition around positive change not because of their personal intelligence, drive, or ego, but because they position their goals or initiatives to be in service of something bigger than themselves. Being guided by this broader purpose and by a corresponding set of institutional values enabled the presidents in our group to differentiate between trends and fads, and pursue truly worthwhile work.

Note that these leaders spoke of purpose as opposed to mission. Most mission statements in higher education are notoriously unhelpful for providing a clear grid to measure decisions against. Leaders that take on the unenviable task of revising an institutional mission often find themselves in a logjam of politics, competing goals, elaborate wordsmithing, and turf wars. Processes to establish or refine an institutional mission can take years and often result in no meaningful improvement or clarity. The presidents in our group were keenly aware of these pitfalls; instead they chose to focus on articulating institutional values and purpose.

Purpose drives everything

During a visit to NASA in 1962, John F. Kennedy stopped his tour to speak with a janitor. He said to him, "Hi, I'm Jack Kennedy. What's your job here?" The man thought for a moment and replied, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." This anecdote captures the essence and power of a clear and compelling purpose, where everyone throughout the organization understands that they meaningfully contribute to something aspirational, even ennobling.

One of the presidents in our conversation articulated it so clearly. He said, "Your purpose needs to be focused, authentic, and specific. Your purpose should *differentiate* you. There are lots of strategic plans that all look the same: they will have a focus on academic excellence, research, having an international presence

or commitment to globalization, and something around being innovative with new technology in education." This president wasn't being cynical; he was trying to convey the point that the purposes and goals have to inspire the commitment of those who will work to achieve them. As an example, this president had reframed a goal from "increase retention and graduation" to "level the playing field so all students succeed." The new language speaks more directly to the broader purpose and warrants real commitment and action.

This is a critical point. When confronted with declining enrollment or bigger budget deficits, it's quite common to double down on a data-driven approach: identify key performance metrics, measure everything, focus more on the mechanics of what's not working. The idea of purposeful leadership is to focus on the bigger picture. What are we actually trying to achieve and why is it worthwhile? What difference do we make? What contribution do we add? If we didn't exist, what would be lost? When the goals are aligned with core purposes that are truly worth of pursuit, leaders can generate more momentum and create more organizational resilience than any set of metrics ever can.

Clear purposes and goals must also articulate what an institution will not do. This is an incredibly difficult task, especially for institutions with broad missions and mandates. When you strive to make a difference in the world, saying no is counterintuitive. But the five presidents agreed it's essential to provide real focus. Institutions simply cannot be everything to everybody. For one president that meant a focus on student success: "People want to be there for the students. Start every conversation there. People will have more faith in what's possible, if you start there."

Your values can't be aspirational, they must be lived

When we hear the term "values," many of us become quickly cynical. We're all too familiar with the laundry lists of empty words ("respect," "communication," "excellence") that seem more oriented toward informing marketing materials than guiding actual behavior. We also know that organizations like Enron and institutions like Penn State touted values that were

horribly violated; in these cases, having a set of values that are for “show” purposes only does more harm than good. Leaders that don’t live their organization’s values lose credibility and authority, and damage trust throughout the system.

The presidents in our group had a fair bit of energy around the notion of lived values. They drew an important distinction between the real norms and values—and a set of aspirational values or even basic qualities that should simply be your ticket in the door for being employed in the first place (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, etc.). One president advised, “You have to look at the difference between the paper that says what your values are and what your institution is actually living. What are the three to four values that you’re *really* living?”

Patrick Lencioni wrote an excellent article on this subject, “Make Your Values Mean Something” (2002), which we strongly recommend reading. He offers powerful insights and examples of how values can be a force for good or can highlight major disconnects between what an organization says and what it actually does.

One participant summed it up by saying, “We have to live our values in a more vigorous way; they have to guide every decision, or else what are they there for? Are they just a text on your website, or do they actually guide your decisions? Does your campus live them?”

Purpose and values can enable leaders to make the tough calls

The presidents spoke at length about how purpose and values must be used to drive critical decisions and priorities for the institution. This was especially relevant for the decisions that were most difficult or even controversial. When leaders know there will be push back or disaffected groups, or when the outcomes of a decision are uncertain or involve fair bit of risk, how do they still have the courage to make the tough call?

Data is critical but one president, a self-described “big data-driven person,” said: “It’s not always just the data. You have to know your institution’s lived values and history, and what the sacred cows are. You have to know what the ‘we tried that before, it didn’t work’ objections will be.”

Another said, “It’s a values thing. I pick the hills I am going to die on and it’s always the hill of your values. If you’re worried about protecting your job, you’re probably in the wrong position.” The group echoed this sentiment. At the end of the day leaders must feel that they have done everything they could do for their institutions.

This commitment to “doing good” went beyond simply making the critical decisions and seizing opportunities that emerged. One participant said, “We often think only of making the tough decision, winning the battle. We need to think of winning the peace, too – what are the consequences and aftermath?” To that end, another president added, “I think it’s important to bring everyone into the discussion. I like to draw input from everyone prior to reaching the difficult decision. I will have to deal with their reaction anyway, so I might as well discuss it before. But I will make the hard call.”

Scanning for Opportunities

One president described three ways they sort opportunities:

- 1. Landscape—“The opportunities worth pursuing need to be aligned with internal strengths.”**
- 2. Effort—“Who is going to be *doing* it? Who is going to be passionate about it? That tells me what to invest in.”**
- 3. Ownership—“I’m an idea person. I may date a lot of ideas, I don’t marry them all. At some point, someone has to say, “That’s what I’ve been thinking, that’s what I want to do,” not because the president wants it, but because *they* want to own it.”**

2. Investing in their institution's distributed leadership

Changing the trajectory of an institution is a team sport; it is not a solo effort. Leaders at all levels need to surround themselves with the right people. This means having the requisite talent and a diverse set of experiences and perspectives on the team. But the leadership cannot be centralized with just a few key people; the presidents in our group spoke clearly and decisively about the importance of investing in and distributing leadership capacity throughout the organization (Spillane, 2006). Most of the decisions at an institution happen at the unit or department level, so if you don't have strong leadership at those levels that is aligned with the purpose and goals of the institution, real progress is impossible.

Perhaps most powerfully, this group of presidents were just as concerned, if not more, about the institution's ability to sustain the change beyond their tenure. They recognize their time at the helm will be limited and if they haven't truly built the organization's capacity, whatever gains they've managed to achieve will be short-lived. They recognize that the risk of business discontinuity will be too great if the whole senior administration changes over when they leave.

We need to build the capacity of future leaders

Distributed leadership depends on your ability to build the capacity of leaders throughout the organization. Most often, the senior team has had the most experience and the most opportunities for formal training—but what about the level or two below them? What about the front lines of the institution? A president in our group was very clear on this: “My fundamental issue isn't at the deans' level, but at the department chair level. That's where the action happens: at the department chair level. We also need associate dean positions filled with talent and we need people developed for those positions.”

One president lamented that “leadership is critical but at most campuses, it is an add-on. Rarely is leadership integrated into the fiber of the institution.” This honest assessment rings true when you consider that most leaders have never been trained (through formal education) in leadership. Department chairs are a great example; they are often asked to become a leader overnight. Someone who is an expert in a discipline must now also know how to directly supervise or influence without formal authority, inspire others, and manage conflict, among other responsibilities.

Leadership development starts with a mindset. Most executives cite barriers like time and money to developing leaders, but the basic components of leadership development don't cost a lot of money: meaningful performance assessment, individual learning plans, and intentional work assignments. Leadership is learned by doing. Research by the Center for Creative Leadership reinforces this; in fact, they say that most of a leader's development happens on the job. In their [70-20-10 model](#), they say 70% of leadership development should consist of challenging assignments, 20% should come from developmental relationships (coaching, mentoring), and only 10% from formal training. Supervisors play a vital role in ensuring that work assignments are designed to develop employees, and can also help facilitate connections with coaches and mentors. Institutions that want to change their culture of leadership should consider how they train and develop supervisors first and foremost.

The Skills Future Leaders Need to Succeed

Building leadership capacity is an inherently forward-looking act. The past and current leadership model that prizes vision, academic reputation and track record, charisma and eloquence, and fundraising expertise is no longer enough to meet our current and future challenges. In our latest paper, we identify a set of skills and qualities leaders will need to develop if they are to be successful in the future.

Ideally, new and challenging work assignments should be driven directly by the strategic plan. How can you plug emerging and middle-career leaders into some of the most important projects the university has? The more they can venture out of their silos and begin collaborating across units and divisions, the more holistic their experience becomes. In fact, the very process of planning can help identify these individuals. One of our presidents did just that: “The strategic planning process can help build your bench, especially if you involve young people with new perspectives. You can see who your emerging leaders are.”

The open flow of information is critical

You cannot empower others to lead if you are cut off from critical information and if you cannot forward information to those who need it. As leaders move up the hierarchy of the institution, they often have less access to their people’s concerns, suggestions, and contrary ideas. This “[seduction of the leader](#)” dynamic can fault leaders into thinking they are on the right path and that everyone is firmly behind them (Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013). One president affirmed this: “Your greatest risk is to be surrounded by people who tell you what they think you want to hear.”

People know whether the leader is open to feedback and contrary opinions, and if they sense the leader is not, they will quit providing their honest advice and perspective. This is crippling to a system because information stops flowing back and forth and those that control information have outsized influence.

At the heart of a distributed leadership mindset is the notion that leadership is an action, not a position. When everyone has access to critical information, anyone in the organization can come up with the next creative idea. When the system allows for the best ideas to be accepted, regardless of their origin, everyone is empowered to help move the organization forward.

The challenge is: How do you foster real dialogue and even disagreements among your senior team to ensure the best ideas come forward? Leaders have to build the trust in the group to enable honest and even passionate debate. Without that trust, conflict will be avoided and will not be seen as a resource that can lead to a better

outcome. One participant noted, “People need to see other people disagreeing with me. They need to see me change my mind, they need to see that those who disagree do not get punished, and they need to see me move in a different direction.”

Leaders need to invest in diverse perspectives and talents

Most leaders in higher education know intuitively that diversity on teams is a good thing. And numerous studies from the corporate world actually link diverse teams to [faster growth](#) and higher [financial returns](#). According to a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*, “teams solve problems faster when they are more cognitively diverse” (Reynolds, Lewis 2017).

Yet leaders are often more likely to fill their teams with people who look and think like them. This “comfortable cloning” makes out-of-the-box thinking or the pursuit of novel ideas unlikely. In our conversation, the presidents agreed that this pursuit of novel ideas is precisely the kind of thinking we need right now in higher education.

One president in our group spoke of their own personal commitment to this idea: “Diversity in your staff makes a huge difference. We had to make significant transitions in our senior team. If your team doesn’t think like you, you can avoid comfortable cloning. You can’t stop there; you have to do regular training sessions, bring in outside people, and invest in training on collaborative leadership.”

Linda Hill, a professor at Harvard Business School, discusses the idea of “stylistic invisibles”(Hemp, 2008). She says that leaders who don’t fit our mental model of what a leader looks like (i.e., they may not take charge quickly, or make fast decisions and act decisively, etc.) are often “invisible” to us. But in many situations, these are precisely the leaders we need. One president echoed this sentiment: “There is so much talent out there that we don’t recognize immediately. I’m the person who wants to rush into the fire, but I have been well-served by people who want to work hard solving problems.” When we invest in building the leadership capacity of our organizations, diversity is not something that’s just the “right thing to do”; it’s imperative for the success and sustainability of our institutions.

3. Creating a culture of ownership

While many institutions are facing significant pressures, these didn't materialize overnight. In fact, today's challenges are a product of many past failures: the hard questions that were not asked, operating assumptions that were not challenged, decisions that were delayed or never made, and opportunities that were passed up. Further, the decentralized nature of our institutions can create and reinforce a "representative" mindset rather than a "trustee mindset"—where individual leaders see themselves as representatives of their department or division rather than delegates of the institution as a whole. The essential question is: How do you instill a culture of understanding and ownership over the *institution's* challenges and goals?

The leaders in our group were swift to point out that it is their role to model ownership; they may have inherited situations rendered more difficult by the failures of past administrations, but they were careful not to assign blame. They knew they had to own the current situation and improve it, not complain about it. Take the example of one of our presidents: "In my first year, there was some complaining about the prior administration. I had to say finally say, 'I appreciate you saying that, but the past doesn't matter right now, these are my problems to fix now. I own them now.'"

Normalizing failure

One of the best ways leaders can "model the way" for others is to respond to failure in a productive way. Presidents are in a particularly unique position to normalize failure and create a learning culture. One president said, "If it didn't work, the goals are still the same goals. So admit the setback, pull people together, and discuss how we're going to hit that goal. Lay it all out. We still have that goal...this didn't get us there, so how are we going to go get it?" This is critically important. There will always be mistakes and failures along the way; if people do not feel safe making mistakes, they will never have an ownership mentality. The very best leaders understand this and use these setbacks as opportunities to learn to do things better. They are dedicated to building learning organizations (Senge, 1990).

Another president remarked, "Let people know what you learned from the failure. Communicate that." That sounds very simple but often leaders forget to communicate the lessons learned. Yet if you don't create this learning mindset, you will stifle others from taking calculated risks or making decisions. Even small decisions will get pushed up to the highest levels in the organization because no one wants to risk making a mistake.

Engage and empower others

Leaders, especially presidents, are in a unique position to see the horizon. From their elevated seat of power, they see the whole institution—and in most of their meetings with business and community leaders, high-level donors, and even other presidents, they are engaged in conversations about the future. These leaders must use their unique vantage points to create two-way dialogue about the future. The more they can share what they are seeing, hearing, and learning, and invite others on campus to do the same, the more they can make sure they are not the only ones responsible for the institution's future. Given the immense change to the very core educational and financial models of higher ed, this is critical.

One president articulated this by saying, "The challenge is changing culture, helping faculty and staff wrap their heads around the fact that it's a different world out there. We need to dialogue with faculty about what students are looking for. Are we providing the programs they need? Yes, it may be an enrollment challenge, but it's deeper than that. It's like we're still making gas guzzlers when people want a different kind of car." This is where leadership and support matters most. The leader's task is not to answer the question but to create the space for this conversation.

This is an important point. We are not proposing that we need a lot of "Steve Jobs" leaders in higher education to see into the future and craft a vision that no one knows we need yet. Leaders can empower others by setting a grand challenge, not dictating a vision (HBR, Furr and Deyer 2014). One president in our group challenged their campus by asking, "how can we level the playing field so that everyone has an equal chance of succeeding here?" This set the expectation that boundaries will have to be pushed. This individual

created the space for others to begin to answer the question and in doing so, change the trajectory for the institution.

Convene management across the organization

Many of the challenges facing institutions are fundamental and systemic. Institutions cannot just recruit an additional 100 students or raise 10% more money and create a sustainable path forward. Institutions do not face challenges that are limited to a single department or division, and thus the solutions will not come from any one department or division. We must work to create an *ownership* mindset across the institution; convening managers at all levels from across the institution is the key to pursuing successfully collaborative efforts and coherent approaches to solving our problems.

One president shared a really interesting and emerging practice: “I’m trying to make the vice chancellors a *leadership collective*, where once a month or so we gather and focus on a different aspect of leadership. Last month, we talked about supervision. Then we did this exercise I expected would bomb, but it worked out great. Everyone had one minute to pitch a problem, and then listened as the rest of us answered the problem. It worked really well. It is really important that people in the team begin to trust each other, and that we provide these learning opportunities that make it safe to ask for help.”

This is an excellent practice. Because organizational problems are distributed throughout an organization, senior management can never know enough to deal with all the important issues and challenges. The key is to tap the experience and ideas that are embedded everywhere. The most effective leaders encourage the participation of others in solving problems (Sanaghan & Lohndorf, 2015).

One tactic that leaders have found is to host a “[trauma clinic](#)” where managers are convened to solve real problems. Individual managers share their respective challenges and then act as consultants to one another, helping to provide advice and suggestions as to how they would go about “solving” the issue at hand.

Because someone else is solving yours, you create the psychological space that enables you to reflect on your situation differently—and because you are actively engaged in solving other people’s problems, you find new opportunities to grow as a leader.

Two presidents in our group conduct informal versions of this, saying, “If someone comes to me with a problem, I often send them to another member of the team. ‘Please work with this person and figure it out. I trust you two to work it out and come to me with the solution.’” The key is being able to step back and not micromanage the process or decision. This is especially critical when it comes to supporting roles that you may have once held. If you are the provost, you don’t need to make the dean’s decision. If you are the dean, you don’t need to make the decisions for the department chair. You have to enable others to own their successes and failures.

4. Collaborating with campus stakeholders to set a strategic direction

One of the most resonant themes in our conversation had to do with the complexity of the challenges our institutions are grappling with. The days of a visionary or exceptional leader “figuring it out” or having all the answers are gone. The leaders in our group knew they had to tap the collective intelligence of the campus (Leavitt and McKeown, 2013) and they needed to begin by creating real transparency and dispelling myths about “hidden pots of money.” These leaders were transparent about budgets, the hard choices facing the institution, and even the “sacred cows.”

Leveling the playing field of information is the first step; the next is making sure everyone had a voice in the process. To create shared understanding and commitment towards a new direction, the campus community has to influence and shape that direction. Finally and perhaps most importantly, these presidents were willing to make the tough decisions to reallocate resources toward that new direction.

Collaboration & transparency feed each other

Transparency is at the heart of effective collaboration. A few of the presidents in our group entered institutions where prior administrations had made all of the budgeting decisions and had set the priorities, and these prior administrations never shared their rationale with others. Not only did this breed mistrust, it also produced lackluster results. The presidents in our group knew instinctively that they needed to open up information, share it widely, and help everyone understand the current realities of the situation. One president remarked, “Success depends on the culture, so the president’s role is to build trust and transparency and foster that culture. Transparency and collaborative leadership are inseparable.”

Many leaders talk about collaboration without ever really defining it. It is incredibly difficult work to use collaborative practices to align people’s thinking and actions. It takes time and intentional effort but if an institution is looking for transformational change, it is the only way to truly get commitment—not just compliance—towards a new strategic direction.

Creating transparency can build trust, and trust is essential to creating the safety for people to really engage. If you want ideas that push the envelope—if you want to have contrary thinking, authentic debate and dialogue, and still have a productive outcome—trust in the group and transparency in the process is essential. The leader must lay out how he or she will gather and use the data being collected (will others have input or influence?), how decisions will be made, and how communication will be managed. Trust is fragile, and if people think the process is only for show and that the real decisions have already been made, leaders will lose credibility instantly and progress will grind to a halt.

Setting a strategic direction

One of our presidents engaged 4,000 people in their institution’s strategic planning process. We have met some presidents who would think that’s outlandish and a waste of time—and who would prevent innovative or bold ideas from surfacing. But our group felt exactly the opposite; innovative thinking does not always come from the top leader(s). As one president put it, “That full culture of collaboration throughout the institution generates ideas bubbling up from the bottom. Collaborative leadership has to be embraced at every level of the institution. Ideas don’t have to come from the top; they can come from everyone. That’s how we move the institution forward as a community.”

On many campuses, and certainly for a couple of the presidents in our group, people were excited to be asked. That was not something they were used to. The same president remarked, “We would hold a town hall, and people poured out. They had never been asked before.” Others agreed and noted the importance of allowing faculty to drive the process. One president added, “We engaged faculty in strategic planning from square one; *they* are driving it forward.”

Note that we are using the term collaboration and *not* consensus—these are two very different concepts. The egalitarian nature of higher education has made consensus-driven decision making a popular approach at many institutions. But if the term consensus is not carefully defined, leaders run the risk of endless discussions and debates that don't result in anything. Such large-scale collaborative practices need to be intentionally *designed* and planned, to ensure that the outcome is reflective of the input received but also that the outcome is realized and moved forward (Sanaghan, 2009).

One president articulated a very simple but powerful set of guiding principles that they laid out at the beginning of the planning process. The plan must be:

- Focused—no more than 5 priorities.
- Authentic to who we are as an institution.
- Able to differentiate our campus from others. Distinctiveness is key.

Follow the money

Many campuses follow a collaborative planning model but have an entirely disconnected budgeting process. As the old adage goes, if you want to know what an institution's priorities and values are, look at the budget, not the strategic plan. As one president stated clearly and powerfully, "Done well, the strategic plan can be more valuable than the mission statement, but you have to live it. The money has to follow the plan. If a department chair or dean requests new funds, it needs to fit with your strategic goals."

One president had a particularly powerful metaphor to describe how planning used to be done at their institution and how the new approach has created more discipline and focus, especially when it comes to allocating scarce resources. "In our old model, the strategic plan was like a Christmas tree and everyone got an ornament. But there weren't enough resources to go around, so no one got a present."

Our presidents use different approaches to funding their plan. In one case, deans engage in scenario planning to force themselves to think about multiple funding scenarios; what would they cut if enrollments dropped by 10%? This type of forced exercise, while difficult at first, can help to truly differentiate the highest priorities, and this exercise usually surfaces creative and new approaches to doing the core work of the college. In another example, everyone's budget is cut by 1-1.5% a year and there is a forced reallocation of resources. The monies are all allocated according to the strategic priorities so some departments receive significant increases, if their work ties directly to the strategic plan.

There are numerous methods to funding a strategic plan but what was particularly noteworthy in our conversation was that the group focused first and foremost on how *existing* funds were being used. New monies are always sought to support priorities, but if existing resources aren't aligned with the most important initiatives, most external funders see that and can become skeptical very quickly.

As progress is made, it's important that initiatives are retired and new ones added, but the same discipline must be used: "When retiring initiatives that had been completed, we had a rule that you couldn't add in more initiatives than you took out. We didn't want to give everyone ornaments."

5. Nurturing trust and building relational capital

The one constant across the group was the recognition that if you don't have trust, you cannot lead. As we have seen in the first four sections of this paper, trust is the thread that weaves together the stories of these leaders. In our discussion, we kept returning to the ways that the presidents built and nurtured trust on their campuses. The singular lesson was that trust is not a given, even for leaders who are inherently trustworthy.

In an excellent *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Enemies of Trust," Galford and Drapeau (2003) identify three levels of trust: *strategic, personal, and organizational*.

Personal trust refers to a leader's level of honesty and transparency. Even if as a leader you are considered to be personally trustworthy (i.e. you keep your word, are consistent, and treat your people fairly), your institution may not have embedded organizational or strategic trust.

Organizational trust is often determined by how past failures were managed. Did people get punished for failures? Have there been incidents where people have been mistreated, demoted, or passed over? Policies that don't seem fair or fairly applied can all erode organizational trust.

Strategic trust refers to the faith that people have that their leaders are making good decisions for their organization. What is their track record for making good decisions? Are the decisions coherent and effective? Do leaders seek multiple perspectives when making their decisions? What are the outcomes of the big decisions they have made? Effective decision making builds faith and trust in the senior leadership.

Building relational capital

The leaders in our group recognized the fragile nature of trust but also the strategic value of it. They knew

they had to work for it, that it was not a given. This is especially true with the turnover in the presidency. In 2-year institutions, the average tenure for a president is less than three years. Estimates at 4-year institutions put the tenure between five and seven years. Either way, it's not uncommon for the majority of the faculty and staff to be cautious, if not skeptical, of a new leader and his or her intentions. As one of our presidents said, "In higher-ed you start with a culture of distrust and you have to build trust. Faculty start by thinking that they have needs and the president isn't going to care."

This is a critical point. If your people know you genuinely care about them, their work, and their well-being, you have a chance at leading them. Higher education is a people-to-people business. Relationships are the currency of the presidency. When you invest time in others, you are much more likely to be able to build the capacity of your leaders, create a culture of ownership, and set a strategic plan that has a chance of being implemented.

All five presidents spoke at length about the importance of dedicating time to get out of their office, walk around campus, sit in on classes and department meetings, and meet their people on their own turf. The president cannot be stuck in his or her office. They will miss critical information and the "pulse" of the campus, and they will be seen "more as a figurehead than a real person," as one president remarked.

Another president added, "Small decencies matter too. You have to show care with your faculty, notice their successes and thank them, and remember the things they tell you about their family and their lives."

Listening is more important than talking

How leaders listen and acknowledge others was another prevailing theme in the discussion. Leadership expert Ronald Heifetz says that "most leaders die with their mouths open." Most of the time, leaders are not good listeners; they think it is their responsibility to know the answers and do most of the talking. And in most organizations, multiple dynamics perpetuate this pattern: deference to hierarchy, the ways our meetings are organized, and leaders' own egos, among

other factors. But these presidents acknowledged an important truth: if people feel listened to, they are more likely to trust you. With trust, you can move mountains. Trust is strong. But it's fragile too, and easy to lose.

In order to build trust, our presidents knew they first had to extend it. They had to invest the time in others, build relationships, and listen with curiosity and sincerity. It sounds easy to listen but to listen *well* is hard. One president remarked, "Be aware of your nonverbal cues. Do you show that you're listening? People are watching you all the time." Another added, "Ask questions of your quiet staff; let them know you're paying attention." Heifetz talks about the difference between listening analytically versus listening musically. When you listen analytically you pay attention just to the content of the message, the facts and objective perspectives. When you listen musically, you pay attention to the context and subtext, recognizing that tone, passion, and intent are all critical components to how the messages are sent and received.

It's also critical to reflect back what you are learning, whether that's an individual conversation or as part of a larger effort. This is especially important for new presidents who routinely spend the first several months in town halls and listening sessions. As you are meeting multiple groups, make sure to reflect back what you are hearing—honestly and transparently—so the campus knows this is more than just a PR tour.

Know when and how to elevate the issues

Our presidents knew that if they could build trust throughout the organization, over time they could more easily build coalitions around new ideas, experiment and take risks, bounce back from mistakes, and instill hope instead of fear about the future. These presidents spoke a lot about their hope and optimism for the future, and this optimism wasn't about platitudes. They were keenly aware of the challenges facing institutions and that the public narrative about higher education is severely skewed to the negative. They know that an important part of their role is to show how the future can be better than the past, and that creating hope enables the necessary commitment to make that future happen (Rath, Conchie, 2009).

As we've already said, when times are tough, it's natural to dig in, become more operationally focused, and try to do more with less. The presidents in our group knew they had to elevate the issues facing their institution: to not talk about incremental progress in graduation rates but instead about "leveling the playing field." Their orientation wasn't to hide from the divisive political climate but to wrestle with how their campuses can become places of dialogue, respect, and inclusivity. They didn't talk about chasing revenues through adding new programs but about solving regional problems and making an impact.

Even in day-to-day decisions, the leader must make decisions that serve the institution, not themselves. In almost every remark, the leaders were cognizant that they were serving a purpose bigger and more important than themselves. One of our presidents put it best by saying, "You have to carry the moral integrity of the institution. If you make leadership a moral action, they respect and trust you even if they disagree with you." Another added, "When you make a decision, make it and convey that you are making it not because you have the power to do so, but because you have the responsibility to do so."

Conclusion

Leading in the “enduring whitewater” of higher education will only become *more* challenging and complex—everyone knows this now. The tough question then is: How do you actually lead others when there is pervasive ambiguity and complexity, without becoming overwhelmed by these challenges?

The presidents we spoke with understand deeply the “givens” of leadership: the need for integrity above all, modeling the way for others, showing compassion and care, moving forward courageously when others are fearful—but these essentials are no longer enough by themselves. Our conversation with these five presidents revealed other factors that are key to their ability to lead our institutions into the future, including the need to:

- Truly *live* their institutions’ values, especially during difficult times, and be disciplined about what they say yes and no to;
- Build the leadership capacity of others throughout the campus;
- Create a culture of engagement and ownership;
- Engage in meaningful inclusion, collaboration, and transparency; and
- Nurture authentic trust and relational capital.

Importantly, each of these five leadership qualities can be learned and developed over time. This requires intentionality and discipline; these qualities are not something leaders are innately born with. Practicing and honing them requires the right combination of experiences, will, training, and leadership development opportunities.

Looking forward, perhaps the most critical questions for institutional leaders are:

- How are you investing in your own leadership?
- What are you doing to hone and refine these qualities and skills?

Don’t let yourself be overwhelmed by these five qualities. We recommend finding just one thing in this paper that resonates with you and asking yourself what you can do to develop that one quality further.

We welcome you to explore Academic Impressions’ [leadership development conferences, workshops, and resources](#). And we also welcome you to contribute to this growing library of resources and trainings—to get involved in these conversations, email Amit Mrig at amit@academicimpressions.com.

Appendix: What's One Thing that Makes You Nervous?

Despite the uncertainties of the landscape, all five presidents spoke with excitement about the opportunities they see on the horizon. One characteristic these diverse leaders shared was that they each had not only a willingness to climb the mountain but a *desire* to climb the mountain, to help their institutions beat the odds and achieve meaningful change.

Mark Becker (Georgia State University)

The only thing that makes me nervous is the current political environment. Populism and the “post-truth” era makes it very hard for us to do our job. In an era when Twitter is how you communicate major policies of the U.S., this is a more challenging environment to lead in. That first travel ban, I had to react to that Monday morning: I had a student on visa in Saudi Arabia who couldn't get back to the country. I kept thinking: Is this going to be the new normal? Every Monday morning, is there going to be a new political liability to deal with? Is this going to be modeled in state legislature, in city town halls? That concerns me. Everything else can be worked with.

We have a lot of room to improve and a lot of opportunity, so if you like hard problems and you like being creative in solving them, this is your time. Do you rush into the fire or run from it?

Rebecca Chopp (University of Denver)

I see the need and the opportunity to teach grit, resilience—and use your bursar's office staff to teach financial literacy. Teaching habits of mind is as important as content management. I think we will see a more Aristotelian model of learning embraced. Employers are asking for these skills: critical thinking, resilience, work ethics, communication, collaboration, ability to work with diversity. We need to teach students differently.

Kent Hanson (Anoka-Ramsey Community College and Anoka Technical College)

We also need to teach different students. How do we continue to be relevant? Are we reaching the right demographic? Are we providing access to *all* learners, regardless of socioeconomic background? How do we continue to add value, especially when budgets are tight? I am nervous about that.

Ronald Nowaczyk (Frostburg State University)

I think about the societal expectations for a school. Elites will do what they want to do. The rest of us are being graded on how many students are getting jobs, careers. But we need to make sure that our core work of educating the whole student (e.g., critical thinking, creative problem-solving) still gets done at the end of the day.

But the opportunities! There are markets out there. And there is so much opportunity to improve what we do. We need to stay focused on students and on making sure the students succeed. Sometimes we get caught up in the numbers, in the completion or retention percentage, and we need to remember to attach that to the names of real students.

Daniel Weeks (University of Northern British Columbia)

I'm excited about the opportunity to lead in the higher education environment. There has never been a greater call for leadership in the U.S. This is the time. If you like hard problems to solve and you have the faith that this doesn't need to be the new normal, this is an amazing time. We saw it in our own country—Canada. After considerable defunding of science things have started to swing back, and we have a government preparing to spend significant amounts on higher education. If you're in the U.S. it will also turn around and if leading excites you, this is the moment to lead.

Continue the Conversation

We hope you enjoyed our complimentary paper *Presidential Dialogues: Leading in Complex Times*. As we continue to conduct the Presidential Dialogues to address the issues today's higher-ed leaders face, I would love to get to know you and your institution better. If you found this paper insightful, we can share other resources for college and university leaders, and there may be further opportunities for us to build a relationship. As you look to make the difficult decisions for your campus, I'd love to find out how we can help and I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you. Please feel free to reach out to me at:

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Academic Impressions serves colleges and universities through [conferences](#), [webcasts](#), [publications](#), and our annual [AI Pro membership](#). Each year we conduct thousands of hours of research and network with hundreds of experts to uncover the most innovative and impactful practices in areas like student enrollment and learning, faculty support and engagement, alumni and donor support, and increasing organizational productivity. Our highly-focused and practical training sessions prepare and empower higher education administrators and faculty to effect meaningful change at their institutions.

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