



Presidential Dialogues

THREE

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Making Difficult Decisions



By

Amit Mrig | President | Academic Impressions

Patrick Sanaghan | President | The Sanaghan Group

In dialogue with:

David Angel, President, Clark University (Worcester, MA)

Stephen Jordan, President, Metropolitan State University of Denver (Denver, CO)

Elizabeth Kiss, President, Agnes Scott College (Decatur, GA)

Robert Kustra, President, Boise State University (Boise, ID)

Steve Titus, President, Iowa Wesleyan University (Mount Pleasant, IA)

Karen Whitney, President, Clarion University (Clarion, PA)

Edited by

Daniel Fusch, Director of Research and Publications, Academic Impressions



Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.

- Harry S. Truman

Today's challenges facing higher education are immense and well-documented. With fewer students attending college, stagnant completion rates, fundamental questions about quality and value, and expenses continuing to outpace revenues, leaders in higher education are under significant pressure to reimagine their business models and create a more sustainable path forward.

Each institution is responding to these challenges in its own way. Some are making difficult cuts to academic programs to balance the budget; others are revamping the curriculum and creating new programs and offerings; some are creating bold new partnerships with their community; and still others are repositioning their brands to more clearly convey what makes them unique.

Regardless of the path taken, the circumstances are always complex, the decisions always difficult, and the outcomes always uncertain. And no matter how successful the result, the ultimate action will be unpopular with some stakeholders, on- or off-campus. So how do leaders operate in these situations?

That is the subject of the third event in our series, [*Presidential Dialogues: Focus on the Future*](#). We convened six leaders from very different institutions, and with different leadership styles and approaches. These leaders proved to be highly credible, thoughtful, and strategic in how they navigate and endure the hard work of leading an institution.

Making effective decisions is difficult under any circumstance and for any leader. When you are the president of a college or university, all of the easy decisions have been made by other people. So how do presidents operate in today's environment? How do they

make important decisions with imperfect information? How do they proceed when even great ideas will meet with resistance? What concerns them and what excites them about the future of higher education? These are some of the questions that guided our conversation.

What emerged is an informal model that we hope is helpful for leaders—at any level of the institution—for making difficult decisions when the stakes are high. We hope their experiences and insights are useful to you.

An Informal Model for Making Difficult Decisions

Our current models of leadership tend to place a higher value on leaders who are decisive, but making good decisions, especially difficult ones, is not an innate skill. It is honed over time, and through practice, seasoning, and reflection. Effective leaders know that indecision is still a decision, one that usually makes matters worse. And yet these same leaders know that even with the best information and intentions, their decisions will still be flawed. So how, then, do leaders make good decisions?

In our conversations with these six presidents, a simple and informal, but powerful model evolved. To make difficult decisions, leaders need the courage to act, a relational skillset, and a keen understanding of their operating environment. We will unpack these three dimensions of decision making below.

Acting Courageously

When you think of courage, you usually think of a hero's actions: a fireman going into a burning building to save someone, or a police officer risking her life for the safety of another. In these matters of life and death, courage is about bravery, heroism, and is usually an individualized action.

In organizational life, courage means something different. It is about a willingness to persist against the odds. It comes from a place of deep reflection and sense of purpose. Courage in a leadership context is about being willing to act for the greater good. Our presidents all understood and embraced the broader mission, vision, and values of the institution's work. This framework was critical in allowing them to elevate the conversation and ensured that the institution fulfilled its noblest aspirations, even when that required difficult decisions to be made.

Taking on the most important issues (playing the long game)

Each of the institutions represented had a unique and rich history, beset with numerous contradictions and complications. A few examples: a founding member of the [AAU](#) with a liberal arts mission, a women's college operating in a post-Sweet Briar world, an institution serving a growing student population with whom it has a challenging history.

These presidents could have operated on the margins—making incremental changes that would preserve the status quo and appease the most people. Rather, they have embraced the uniqueness of their institutions and have fought to ensure that their institutions would endure for decades to come. Indeed, they are finding ways to manage competing priorities and tensions, grow in an unfavorable environment, and improve decades of strained town-gown relations.

For one president, this meant asking two pivotal questions: *Are we good? Are we relevant?* When considered, these are incredibly powerful questions. When answered with honesty, these answers may not reveal what everyone wants to hear. “We’re more concerned with the second question,” the president commented. “The liberal arts are relevant to society as long as we’re willing to adapt and reinvent liberal arts education. If our vision for education hasn’t changed in fifty years, then we’re not relevant.” That may be a controversial statement to some, but elevating the conversation in this way puts the most important issue front and center and creates the space for discussion, debate, and action.

To further illustrate this point, one president spoke of responding to a local need and seeing an “imperative” to act. This president told a powerful story of an institution serving an inner-city and strongly Hispanic demographic, a local community that had been wounded in past town/gown interactions, as much of the local historic neighborhood had been replaced by the campus a few decades before. When this president began his tenure at the institution, he noted this history, the rapidly changing demographics of the area, and the fact that there was no [Hispanic Serving Institution \(HSI\)](#) in the state. Becoming an HSI would simultaneously help close a significant achievement gap and begin to repair and rebuild town/gown relationships.

The president could have stopped there--after all, the goal is a win-win, serving the local and regional community and creating a sustainable student pipeline for years to come. But in this community, as in many across our country, undocumented students were a numerous and neglected segment of an already underserved population. So this president made it a mission to serve them. This decision was especially courageous in light of multiple consecutive years of the state legislature (the same one his institution is dependent on) defeating a local version of the DREAM Act.

At significant risk to his employment and to the institution's short-term standing with the local legislature, this president determined to pursue the long game in terms of his institution's service to its city and region. He didn't walk in blindly. The institution prepared by producing a sophisticated financial, political, and legal analysis of the decision's likely impact, after which the board backed a plan to serve undocumented students. The political pushback was significant, immediate, and included thousands of articles of hate mail and hate email daily, as well as public investigations into the legality of the institution's plan.

In the face of all that opposition, the institution enrolled 235 undocumented students that summer, offering them a reduced tuition achieved not via a subsidy, but by calculating the cost and setting the rate accordingly. The local business community rallied behind the institution, and when the next legislative session passed the bill, the institution was credited with having led the way. Today, the institution enrolls 390 undocumented students—60% of the undocumented students in the state. This took courage, persistence, thoughtful planning, and a moral stance, asking “what's the right thing to do here?”

What enables courage?

When we asked *How did you do it? How did you keep going in the face of sustained and powerful opposition?* — the responses from that president and the other five were striking. “To be a good president, you have to be willing to be fired at any time,” several of the presidents insisted, speaking to both the need to honor what's best for the institution, not what's best for the president's

individual job security, and the need to separate one's own identity from the job. “There's a big difference between being the president and doing the presidency. A lot of people want to be the president. There's a big difference. This is real work. You are not the presidency; the presidency is something that you *do*.”

The presidents emphasized two things that enabled them to bring that kind of focus and courage (as well as the necessary detachment) to their work: personal support and time away for reflection.

Personal support

“These things are huge,” one president told us, “and we don't talk about them. Let's be candid: how often do we hear about one of our colleagues committing suicide? You need to have someone to talk to, someone to give advice or just listen. I see a “swim buddy” about how to keep my head straight and to be honest and caring with me, when I've done something that is unpopular, but right and I'm getting raked over the coals for it on social media.”

Other presidents spoke about turning to utilizing therapists or executive coaches—individuals who are objective and impartial and can provide a sounding board and counsel when the president needs to share the emotional frustration of swimming against the current. “We've used executive coaches,” two presidents told us. “Successful presidents use executive coaches. You want someone who is really neutral and detached to walk with you over the course of a year—this has a profound impact. It's the common practice in corporate America; we need to get it into our sector.”

Being able to check opposing views and their own moments of self-doubt against an objective sounding board helped these presidents hold fast to their sense of purpose.

Time for reflection

Just as important to these presidents was the idea of time away—to recharge, reflect, and reaffirm that sense of purpose. One president cited the principle of devoting one hour a day, one day a week, one week a month, and one month a year to reflection. “That much time away is never going to happen,” the president acknowledged, “but we can start.”

Most of the presidents in the room had a location outside their cities—sometimes outside their states—that they could retreat to for time alone, time for thinking. This might be a cottage on a lake, or a town where no one knows them by sight. “When I’m there,” one president remarked, “I’m all in, no guilt for taking time for myself.” Having that complete, though temporary, separation from campus and public life provides both the refreshment and the serious reflection time needed to empower a courageous president in pushing forward.

Is this the Hill You Want to Die On? (Choosing Your Battles)

What also set these presidents apart—and allowed them to proceed with such courage and fortitude—was that they knew they had to choose their battles carefully. They couldn’t pursue everything they needed or wanted to; they had to engage in deep reflection and “soul-searching” at the outset of taking action. They had considered the need, the opportunity, and the cost (personal, political, and professional) of the decisions they faced.

One president, describing himself as a “very cognitive decision maker,” shared three questions that he asked when he first saw the need to act, and his answers to those questions gave him the will to pursue the changes needed at his institution. Those questions were:

- Is what we’re doing important?
- Even if what we’re going to do is worthy, is it *worth* it?
- Can we actually get it done?

This president led an extensive curriculum redesign after a series of conversations with regional employers revealed that these employers were often finding that they had to “de-educate” college graduates. These employers shared that they were now looking to recruit from colleges and universities that prepared graduates not just with specialized skills and knowledge, but with fortitude, courage, critical thinking, and with the ability, when placed in challenging situations, to make decisions that reflected their organization’s ethics and values. This precipitated an effort to revise and revitalize the undergraduate curriculum around those competencies.

But though many of the curricular changes this president pushed for were *worthy*, he reflected that it was important to decide which changes were *worth* it. Some were; some weren’t. For example, he recalled closing a particular academic program. “I used up 95% of my relational and psychic capital doing it. In the end, I saved the institution a minor sum of money. We got it done, but it wasn’t the best decision. It used up so much energy and political capital that could have been spent on more essential changes. Now, I do this gut-check first: Is it important? Is it worth it? Can I get it done?”

These presidents persisted in driving change by focusing on the long game, beginning with that gut-check and proceeding with an awareness of the cost, and using reflection and counsel from personal confidants to help stay focused and energized over the long haul.

Developing a Relational Skillset

There is no roadmap for navigating declining funding and increasing expectations, and there is no instruction manual for preserving the academic history of an institution while making it more relevant to today’s demands. The operating environment in higher education is too complex for a leader to simply be “smart enough” to know the right answer in each situation.

Our presidents were keenly aware of this, and were each not only courageous, but very skillful in their approaches. They needed unfiltered information and diverse points of view, so they invested the time to create trustful relationships with others across campus. This was not an episodic technique; they led and continue to lead through relationships.

Four important relational skills emerged as these six presidents spoke:

- Building trust and relational capital
- Acting as a convener
- Leveraging the senior team’s insights and feedback
- Seeking multiple perspectives

Building trust and relational capital

If the president has courage, but no skill in building trust and relational capital, he or she will be fighting an uphill battle alone. Trust is hard to earn and easy to lose, but these six presidents had concrete suggestions for managing it. “Don’t do anything without making sure the faculty know it’s coming,” one president advised. “You don’t want them to read about it in the morning paper.” Investing the time in keeping everyone informed, proactively, is critical.

While one president described the tribulations of wrestling with a long-standing faculty union, another described a scenario in which the faculty led transformative change. “Faculty are portrayed in the media as intransigent and reluctant to change,” this president noted, “but, they can be change agents in the right context and the right culture, and the president’s role is to create that right context and foster the right culture.”

How does a president do that? Three strategies surfaced during our conversation:

- 1. Recognize that fear of change is really about fear of loss, and be attentive to how that fear is impacting people.** One president described a scenario in which a consultant presented findings to the faculty that the president and the faculty had already discussed for months. The findings should have come as no surprise. “But all hell broke loose,” the president recalled. “It was all emotion. The very same people were saying ‘We are already doing this’ and ‘We could never do this.’ Reflecting on it later, I realized: The need for change was finally *real*. People now knew we had a limited time to actually redesign the curriculum. I realized that what they needed now was care.” In higher education—and particularly for faculty—one’s profession is often tied very closely to one’s identity. This can heighten the fear of loss. Some presidents make the early mistake of charging ahead into change without first providing space for their community to work through that fear.
- 2. Deploy your home and personal life strategically.** The president in the scenario above launched a “Wine and Cheese” initiative. Over the course of several weeks, the president hosted every faculty

member at home, in small groups. In that more relaxed and informal environment, the president asked questions that mattered: *How are you feeling about these changes? What scares you the most?* Several weeks later, the faculty were ready to schedule their own retreat to plan how to implement the change needed. What made the difference was the personal outreach to provide time and a safe space where constituents could voice and work through their fear of loss.

- 3. Younger faculty are closer to the future.** One president we spoke with has made it a regular practice to identify younger faculty who believe in the institution’s future and desire change. A few times a year, this president holds an informal luncheon with seven junior faculty. “I get amazing intelligence from these faculty,” the president remarked, “rather than waiting for information to trickle up to me through the traditional channels. As a president, I need to rely on the people on the ground—both faculty and staff—who will tell me the truth.” One mistake some presidents make is to listen to and learn from only members of the institution’s cabinet. In one case, a president told the story of one dysfunctional division that persisted for years until a front-line staff-person wrote an email to the president, prompting an investigation. “I would have found out about the issue much sooner,” the president recalled, “if I’d been listening to and learning from staff closer to the ground.” A president needs to be trusted by not only the top leadership of the institution, but also the faculty and staff who work with students every day. Being visible, and more importantly, accessible, is important for any president. They need to be proactive in seeking others’ perspectives and aspirations and considering them appropriately.

Acting as a convener

A president with a lot of relational capital to draw on can achieve momentous and difficult changes — often only by convening the right people to drive those changes. There is risk involved in doing so, but it is essential for tackling adaptive challenges — the challenges that don’t have easy or clear answers, and for which there is no “playbook” (e.g. lowering costs, while simultaneously improving quality).

The president's position is unique: this is a leader who can look across campus, break down silos, and bring people together to discuss the institution's future — especially people who otherwise would never meet in dialogue.

One president of a liberal arts college, suggesting that “sometimes you have to do something risky,” described a series of retreats during which faculty and trustees met for serious deliberation about the future of the institution. “Connecting these two perspectives was incredibly important for us,” she recalled. Convening different groups is not without risk, but is the best way to create an informed and shared picture of the future; and it can engender the necessary trust to move forward. This is essential to fostering the creativity and risk tolerance that will be necessary to tackle the adaptive challenges facing higher education.

This is not to suggest that every such conversation will be scripted and led by the president; often, the president's role is simply to commission the right process and start the conversation. “You can harness shared governance in the service of institutional transformation,” one president advised, describing the process used to undergo a rapid undergraduate curriculum redesign. In that case, rather than appoint a committee to oversee the redesign, the president established a process whereby faculty nominated and elected six representatives who manifested credibility and trust. “Five of these six actually matched who I had wanted to choose,” the president recalled. The difference was that the faculty had elected their own representatives.

During working meetings throughout the change effort, faculty leaders facilitated the rapid election of “pop up” task forces that would be tasked with developing one aspect of the curriculum design prior to the next meeting. This ensured that the change effort moved at a rapid clip, and when efforts threatened to derail, the strategy of electing a temporary, one-month task force to address the situation provided an alternative to direct intervention from the president, which may not have been as welcome and may have served only to exacerbate tensions.

These tactics are driven by the perspective that faculty are not the opposition, but rather that the faculty contain the knowledge and the drive to get change done. The key is to empower those who are ready to lead that change — “Create space for your people to lead,” one president advised. “Go where the energy is.” At several institutions, faculty were highly siloed within their disciplines, and mid-career and senior faculty were restricted by the requirements of tenure and promotion, so that they simply didn't have the capacity or weren't incentivized to engage in broader institutional issues. In those cases, convening a process where younger faculty were included was critical.

Sidebar in the Presidential Conversation:

Current events were top of mind for our six presidents and as we discussed the role of university leader as convener, one participant acknowledged the connection to broader societal issues. Universities are unique places where multiple views are tolerated, discussion and debate is valued, and civility and respect are prized. As one president eloquently stated, our universities must become “incubators of inclusion” where we engage in the difficult discussion of race, class, and privilege in this country. Creating these spaces for dialogue will also take courage, skill, and a deep appreciation of the multiple contexts and perspectives we each bring to this conversation.

Leveraging the senior team's insights and feedback

Besides building relational capital and convening critical conversations across campus, presidents who are preparing to make difficult decisions need to cultivate a senior team who trusts them and believes in a shared vision. If you have a senior team who trusts

you and is trusted by the institution, the university rises. This happens not only because a highly effective senior team helps ensure implementation of strategic initiatives, but also because a senior team can serve to check the president's thinking and provide honest feedback on the president's perspective. In fact, that's one of the best roles the senior team can serve, and candid feedback from a trusted team is absolutely critical to a president who has difficult decisions to make.

One president we spoke with does a 360 assessment annually, and speaks to the importance of being open, as well as humble and vulnerable, with the senior team. "Asking for help is not a weakness," another president stressed. "I tell my senior team: *I don't have to be right, but we do.* I need their input if we're to succeed in enhancing the experience for students."

Presidents can fall prey to what [Pat Sanaghan](#) calls the "seduction of the leader syndrome," meaning that the higher you advance within an institution, the less access a leader has to information about themselves. Unless a president is open in asking for help and visibly rewards the giving of feedback, it is likely that any feedback the president receives will be less than candid. If your senior team doesn't believe they can push back against your ideas and be heard, then the robust, collaborative culture you need in order to propel change efforts forward will not exist. The ability to encourage, receive, and learn from the senior team's feedback is a critical leadership skill. When you receive honest feedback and reward it quickly, you send the message that this feedback is appreciated and wanted.

Seeking multiple perspectives

In the same vein, presidents—and the institutions they lead—can run the risk of "listening to themselves too much." This theme emerged repeatedly in our conversation with the six presidents, and all of them emphasized how critical it is for the president to bring in fresh ideas from sources both internal and external to the institution. Internally, this means identifying the "pulse keepers" who see opportunities first, as well as the "cultural travelers" who can communicate these opportunities across divisions, between different constituencies.

"The most useful thing to me," one president noted, "is to have people who come at problems and think about problems differently than I do. I look to my board for some of these people; we have a lot of finance people on the board, people who are involved in hedge funds and investments. Those people think about problems in a different way than I do, because of the kind of risk analysis that they do. I need people around me who will challenge me."

Externally, seeking multiple perspectives means listening to the market. For example, one president routinely brought in employers who were interested in connecting with students—the CEO of Whole Foods, and the #2 executive of IDEO—to serve as professors of practice and as mentors for students. These external experts and others also provided the administration and the faculty with valuable insight into the kind of interdisciplinary and collaborative work graduates would participate in within their organizations, the kind of work they hope the institution will prepare students for.

Another president shared the example of "market testing" new undergraduate curricula. This president engaged consultants to model potential curricula and learning outcomes with seventeen-year-old high school students, to determine which potential directions were perceived as best meeting that demographic's life and career needs and goals.

Effective presidents are defined not only by their courage in staying the course, but by their skills at building trust, convening the cross-boundary conversations needed, cultivating the senior team and encouraging their honest feedback, and seeking a wide variety of both internal and external perspectives on the change needed.

Knowing Your Context

When making decisions, courage and skill will still not be enough unless also paired with a deep understanding of the institution's culture and operating context. Higher education is incredibly diverse; the right approach for one institution likely will not work at another. This is why the diversity of our group was so important—we wanted to hear from large institutions and small,

selective and open-access, rural and urban, and from representatives of multiple regions. So many factors contribute to the way an institution will understand and define their challenges, and the way they will seek and pursue opportunities.

The key is knowing how to take bold action in ways that are authentic to the culture of the institution and aligned with its mission and values. The president must understand several constituencies and the culture, and must be able to shape a narrative for the institution's future that speaks to the institution's unique operating context. The question the president has to find answers to is: *What can preserve the identity, history, and mission of the institution while making it more sustainable and relevant for years to come?*

Understanding your constituencies, the culture, and the needs

All six presidents spoke to the importance of listening to the institution's culture as a prerequisite step to becoming "culture shapers" or "culture shifters." "We're like mayors," one president remarked. "I once heard a president give a speech about how many constituencies he served: 28. It's an outrageous number. I don't know how he got it. But I can easily come up with 10 or 15."

Understanding the needs and demands of these varied constituencies is as crucial as it is complex—because, as Peter Drucker famously said, and as each of the presidents in this conversation reminded us, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." Another of the presidents told us, "The president has to ask smart questions. You have to recognize that an institutional culture is a really complex ecosystem. There are so many different players, each of whom can and do claim to be at the heart of the institution. Appreciate the complexity of that ecosystem and be a cultural traveler. Interact productively with these different and diverse constituencies."

Another president added that for these reasons, the president's "warrant for leadership" is something that comes not only from the governing board that hires and evaluates the president, but also from the faculty, the staff, and the community. A president needs to understand the degree of readiness for change within these constituencies, and needs to forecast how these

constituencies will respond. "All places want to change until they know what's demanded of them," one president remarked.

One president described this contextual awareness by borrowing Henry Mintzberg's metaphor of the potter's clay. As you shape the clay over time, effective leadership requires knowing how much pressure to put on the form developing from the clay. Too much, and it comes apart. Too little, and the implement you're shaping fails to take form. "You have to understand when to back off, and when to put more pressure on and drive the agenda." Patience, persistence, and compassion are key here.

Shaping the narrative

Besides shaping the "clay" of the institution's culture, the president must also be adept at communicating the need for difficult decisions in a way that speaks to the institution's specific operating context. The urgency of a crisis will make some decisions possible that would not be possible otherwise. When the institution is faced with significant headwinds (i.e. declining enrollment, dwindling state support, poor retention, etc.), the president will be focused on the institution's survival, making decisions to build the institution's resilience in order to weather the storm intact.

But in cases where no overt crisis is present—when the winds are calmer, but the president can see a storm brewing ahead—the president must still find ways to instill a sense of urgency to act. In the absence of an immediate and galvanizing emergency, how can a president shape that story?

"Our long-enduring institutions have *thick* cultures," one president advised. "That's why you need to be a good reader of the culture, history, and aspirations of the institution. Presidents who come in proposing a 90-degree change often get run out of town. More often, you can find a narrative for change that connects with the ambitions and goals laid out in the strategic plan—that harnesses those dreams already embedded in the culture to move the institution forward."

Another president gave the example of arriving at the institution and finding in the strategic plan a (largely neglected) aspiration to be an urban research university.

Seeing the need and the opportunity to become a metropolitan research university, the president used the language of the strategic plan to help shape the narrative in a way that would both be embraced by and empower the institution's constituents. "They thought I was a great genius of vision," the president reflected, "but actually the idea was out of their own strategic plan—it had been buried in there and just needed to be surfaced."

Conclusion

For the six presidents in this conversation, the trifecta of courage, skill, and context proved a useful model for discussing how presidents can be informed, empowered, and effective in making difficult decisions. This represents a departure from traditional models for presidential leadership. Several presidents alluded to the fact that, culturally, we acclaim resolute decision makers or heroic, charismatic personalities. But these six presidents were diverse in leadership styles, approaches, and personalities, and all of them were skeptical of the value of decisive action unaccompanied by deep understanding of the institution's culture and deep efforts to build trust and collaboration.

In the pages that follow, you will find their advice for new presidents—advice that reflects the different personalities of these six executive leaders, but that also reflects one accord about where the priorities of the president of the twenty-first century lie and what it will take to serve those priorities. You will also find a worksheet to help guide you in the reflection and analysis needed when you are considering and preparing for a difficult decision.

Worksheet for Approaching Difficult Decisions

	Questions to Guide My Reflection & Planning	Notes
1	Sense the environment: What is it telling me? What are the signs? What are the emerging trends/issues? Is there a "storm" looming?	
2	Who are my thought partners? What do they see also? How can I involve others in the seeing and sensing? What additional information/perspectives do we need?	
3	What is my early thinking about the situation? What are my options? What's the best path forward here?	
4	How does this path align with my values? With the institution's values? With my gut? What is my intuition telling me?	
5	What's the upside of this path forward? What's the downside?	
6	Am I listening to people?	
7	Where will I get institutional support? From my senior team? From relationships with faculty?	
8	Where will I get personal support? From coaching? Therapy? Confidants? Family?	
9	If I look out a year from now, what do I hope to see? What might get in the way of that picture?	
10	Am I up for this? Can I do it, really? What do my confidants and friends say?	

Advice for New Presidents

We asked each of the six presidents what advice they would offer for presidents making the transition to a new institution.

David Angel, President, Clark University (Worcester, MA)

The leadership you need to practice is a learned and cultivated ability. You need to cultivate the trifecta of leadership, skill, and courage. This is something you have to learn in a disciplined way.

Stephen Jordan, President, Metropolitan State University of Denver (Denver, CO)

There's a saying, 'What you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say.' You are judged on your actions. Walking the talk is really important.

Elizabeth Kiss, President, Agnes Scott College (Decatur, GA)

Bring a capacious curiosity to the role. You need to be questioning. Asking smart questions, asking the right questions of your students, your colleagues, of the board—is part of the way we lead.

Robert Kustra, President, Boise State University (Boise, ID)

Don't stop listening. Keep an open spot on your calendar for lunch. If you are in your office with the door closed, having soup for lunch, that might be a problem. You could be sharing that lunch with someone. So have a rule in your office: "Get me out of my office." *Do* reserve time for reflecting and thinking about the job, but do make time for people, too.

Steve Titus, President, Iowa Wesleyan University (Mount Pleasant, IA)

Help is the essential four-letter word a president has to embrace. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of wisdom and maturity. Your warrant for leadership will depend on your capacity to seek counsel.

Karen Whitney, President, Clarion University (Clarion, PA)

A good president is comfortable in their own skin, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and able to communicate during a stressful time what they do well, what they don't do well, and what they are going to do about that. Living it every day is the hard part. Listen, communicate, do, communicate, listen, communicate, reflect, communicate, repeat.

Continue the Conversation

We hope you enjoyed our complimentary paper *Presidential Dialogues: Making Difficult Decisions*. 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:

Amit Mrig

President, Academic Impressions

amit@academicimpressions.com

720-988-1210

About Academic Impressions

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.

Read our featured [case studies](#) to learn how college and universities are putting our trainings into action and positively impacting higher education.