

LEAD



ERSHIP

IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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NEW STRATEGIES WILL BE NEEDED for higher education leaders to successfully respond to the types, magnitudes, and concurrent impacts and mutual amplification of crises they will face in the years ahead, the so-called post-pandemic era. This point was driven home in the 2020 and 2021 academic years as higher education institutions and their leaders faced multiple challenges rising to the level of crises. What made this period so challenging was not the global pandemic on its own (although this was perhaps the single greatest challenge U.S. colleges and universities have faced in history), but the concurrence of multiple crises, more than one of which might even be considered a pandemic.

Considered together, the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis of democracy in our country, the financial crisis, racial tensions and awakenings characterized by the Black Lives Movement and the killing of Black people by police, and myriad other social justice issues that appeared to be coming to a head at the same time made these two years incomparable for our institutions and placed extraordinary demands (and expectations) on leaders. The impacts of these challenges/crises were not isolated, nor were they independent. They were occurring simultaneously, they were entwined, and in many cases, amplified one another's impacts.

This article explores strategies for effective higher education leadership in five key areas: (1) reaffirming and reframing governance for efficiency, action, and agility; (2) rethinking financial models; (3) building institutional resilience; (4) accelerating toward opportunity; and (5) paying closer attention to public sentiment. We pay particular attention to the various ways that the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated challenges in higher education in each of these five areas. By identifying some key lessons that have been learned within the higher education sphere that have resulted from multiple stressors to the system, our aim was to offer insights in terms of how to better align the value of what public institutions deliver to what the public expects from higher education.

TAKEAWAYS

- Higher education leaders need to adopt new strategies to successfully navigate future crises in the so-called post-pandemic era.
- Crises of the post-pandemic era will be greater, more complicated, and more intersectional than ever before. Therefore, higher education leadership will require new thinking, new skill sets, and new strategies to effectively tackle future crises.
- This article explores strategies for effective higher education leadership in five key areas: (1) reaffirming and reframing governance for efficiency, action, and agility; (2) rethinking financial models; (3) building institutional resilience; (4) accelerating toward opportunity; and (5) paying closer attention to public sentiment.
- Challenges to institutions and demands on their leaders—including trustees, faculty senators, presidents, provosts, and other senior administrators—will be greater, more complicated, and more intersectional.

Reaffirming and Reframing Governance for Efficiency, Action, and Agility

Universities are messy places. And, very often, those who come from the outside of academia, either as members of the governing board or as new members of the university faculty or staff, find it unerringly frustrating. Who truly is in charge? Who can make decisions about direction, changes and identify opportunities? The truth of the matter is that a university is unlike anything that you would experience in the wider world.

For example, if the president of General Motors decides to close an assembly plant, they probably get approval from the board, but then announce the closure and it happens. On the other hand, if a university president decides to close a college, department, or program, they wisely have conversations with the governing board and, also, with the various constituents—faculty, staff, and students—who will be impacted either directly or indirectly by this decision. The university president must go through an extended campaign that requires a tremendous amount of time and energy. In the end, because universities are like guilds, closure may not take place unless it is under the guise of financial distress, because members of the guild will support each other, even to their detriment on many occasions. Therefore, the notion of reframing governance for efficiency, action, and agility within universities could well be an oxymoron.

Thus, we start with two axiomatic statements, both of which undergird not only this section but the sections that follow. Our first declaration is that shared governance at colleges and universities often does not live up to the ideals of the model nor does it serve the needs of the institution very well. Our second proclamation is that our higher ed institutions are, in both absolute terms and by comparison to other industry sectors, not very agile. They are generally slow to respond, bogged down by self-imposed (or at least tolerated) structures

and processes and, for a variety of reasons (several of which are explored in this article), are resistant to change.

Shared governance must first be understood to mean shared responsibility. This does not mean shared final decision-making authority, but rather is thought to imply that there is collective opportunity and obligation to participate constructively in the decision-making process, to provide timely input, and to enable (or at least not hinder) the institution's operation and progress. The role of shared governance, for a variety of reasons, over the years has expanded (at least in self-perception and expectation) at many colleges and universities. What once was focused exclusively on academic matters such as curricula, academic calendar, and academic policies, has expanded to include an expansive array of university functions, including budget and finance, research and scholarship, reappointment and tenure, institutional strategy, and even senior administrative leadership hiring (academic or otherwise).

With the passage of time, the failure to define the scope and specific authority of faculty and administrators (and perhaps arising from the desire to reduce growing tensions between these two parties) has been reinforced by institutional practices that now normalize those inflated expectations. For example, it is now common to see governance groups specifically represented on search committees for senior administrative leaders, even those far afield from the academic mission. This expansion of operational (if not authorized) roles has had the negative effects of both (a) blurring the lines between advisory and decision-making roles of governance groups; and (b) distracting faculty from their primary roles of teaching, research, and the provision of services to various stakeholders.

Given the sudden shock to our system by the pandemic, and the clear and present urgency to make changes at all levels of our institutions, the time also is right to revisit the roles and responsibilities of shared

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governance, with an eye toward reestablishment of functional roles for both faculty and administrators. Simply put, we will need the goodwill, shared commitment, and willingness of all university citizens to become more responsive and adaptive in fulfilling our clearly defined governance roles to make the changes demanded by our present and future circumstances.

At the root of present challenges to our shared governance model is a profound sense of mistrust by both faculty and administrators. The faculty do not trust the intentions nor the actions of senior administrators and, in turn, the administration does not trust the faculty to be receptive to and engaged in making real change. There is entrenchment in positions and long-standing archetypes, on both sides. Two of us (Gavazzi and Rosowsky, with another coauthor) wrote about these archetypes in a recent satirical piece for *Inside Higher Ed*, which will be discussed in more detail below. For now, however, we note that the main objective of this sardonic article was that rebuilding trust between faculty and administration must be a byproduct of this review and reaffirmation process.

Reaffirmation starts with a close look at the bylaws of the faculty shared governance unit, typically a faculty senate. Likely the needed framing of responsibilities and scope are clearly spelled out in that document. This can start a productive conversation around refocusing responsibilities, including acknowledgement of “mission creep.” The challenges ahead require that leaders be enabled to lead, governance units be expected to engage productively and in accordance with their authorized roles, and institutions be allowed to implement needed change without undue resistance. This may fly in the face of what some believe is the role of the faculty or the purpose of having shared governance. But a careful and unbiased review of bylaws can tell a different story.

Supporters and defenders of shared governance in higher education assert that the process enables fair, inclusive, and authentic governance that recognizes the shared input and values of faculty members. Supporters say it is a necessary structure to ensure all voices are heard and the will of the many wins out. Detractors say it inhibits progress, needed responsive change, and the ability of leaders to shape and guide the institution. Regardless, shared governance is as much a part of U.S. higher education as tenure, academic freedom, and even the academic calendar. Most of those within higher education agree that shared governance is a core value and foundational concept worth preserving.

That said, it seems clear from media reports that both the frequency and intensity of disagreements between these groups have increased in recent years. And in the wake of the COVID-19

pandemic, that has had profound impacts on colleges and universities. This may not be unexpected given the very serious financial challenges schools now find themselves facing, and the need for leaders to make difficult and unpopular decisions affecting programs and personnel. But the question has been asked, why is this crisis driving wedges rather than bringing people together? Why are colleges and universities not rallying behind their leaders and their institution to find a pathway that ensures a sustainable future, that preserves the institution and its ability to deliver on its mission, and that best serves the needs of its students? When times are toughest, why does this system devolve into one of partisanship rather than one of partnership?

Many have written on this topic but some of the best, and certainly most comprehensive, writings have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. A series of articles on university boards—their membership and their charge—appeared in late 2020, shedding light on national trends on board oversight, decision, and presidential direction (selection, oversight, and decisions not to renew or demands to step down). As expected, there are strong political overtones. The study makes clear that these political motivations and decisions are increasing in many states. Beyond the obvious partisanship on display, this has the potential to profoundly impact higher educational institutions in these states in both the short and long term.

This gives rise to the “perfect storm” analogy that appears to be playing out in several states and universities around the country, the confluence and intertwining of three phenomena. First, colleges and universities are facing enormous financial pressure in the wake of, and ongoing response to, the COVID-19 crisis. Some of these pressures may relax over time, but others are likely to present challenges for many years to come, especially as enrollment patterns, mixes of instructional modalities, and even the use and types of on-campus housing may be forever altered for many schools. These pressures, both responding in real time to the crisis and planning for the new future necessarily will result, are requiring university senior leaders to weigh difficult choices, make and communicate difficult decisions, and affect painful changes.

Second, faculty are increasingly worried about their future. At one level, some are concerned that their disciplines may be marginalized, combined, or even eliminated in favor of those that attract greater student interest, graduate more students, and prepare students for successful careers. At another level, they are worried about their colleagues’ or their own job security. Faculty have long been afforded levels of job security not seen in any other

industry sector. For many faculty members, these concerns have never been experienced before.

And third is the matter of board composition and, as a result, how institutional (or system) priorities are defined and executed upon—particularly in the case of public boards, as described in the recent series in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Partisanship is as evident in the appointment and agendas of some of these boards as it is in our national political landscape today.

The result appears, at least in some cases, to be growing tensions and new levels of acrimony and dysfunction playing out in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. The governance triad is experiencing greater tension between faculty and administrators (president and other senior leaders), between boards and presidents (as evidenced by the growing number of resignations and terminations or nonreappointments), and between faculty and boards (e.g., over presidential selection and support, even over faculty protests and votes of no confidence, as well as claims of board overreach and micromanagement).

Now, more than ever, would seem an ideal time to look carefully at this dynamic and commit to its improvement. This will not only give the institution the best possible chance for successfully navigating the current crisis and emerging securely on the other side, but also can elevate the entire model of shared governance—its function, its capacity for making the best decisions for the university, and ultimately its success. In this way, shared governance can continue to define and advance U.S. higher educational institutions and ensure that U.S. colleges and universities remain among the best in the world.

So how do we become more agile, more responsive, and more strategic as institutions in the post-pandemic world? How do we break away from the binds to tradition, expanded shared governance roles (whether authorized or claimed), and an array of offices, policies, and practices that makes it nearly impossible to maneuver as an institution? Leaders must start with a clear and justified case for a new leadership model, if not structure; one that streamlines process while ensuring governance is able to be maintained. Timelines must be shortened. The decision-making process must be shortened. And while transparency and communication must be maintained, these must not become the focus of leadership. Rather, attention should be centered on the decision and the resulting actions and then move quickly onto the next challenge or opportunity. Universities must become much better by getting better with internal mechanisms. This starts with a streamlined decision-making process (fewer people, shorter time for input, clearer decision-making authority) and the elimination of pathways and mechanisms, beyond those specifically authorized in the governance unit's bylaws, that block decision-makers.

This commitment must start at the top but cannot end there. Vice presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs, and other campus leaders must be similarly committed. Without this

institution-wide leadership commitment, there will be room for and tolerance of nonproductive discourse and action, even if that action is just passive resistance. The tone is set at the top but must resonate throughout the university.

Done right, properly communicated and lived, this refocusing and reaffirmation of shared governance as a means of providing important, needed, and timely input on decisions that relate to the academic mission of the institution—and therefore their (typically board-authorized) purview and responsibility—can have significant and immediate impacts. First, faculty will feel valued, heard, and respected—not just for their input on important decisions but receiving a clear signal that the administration recognizes the value of their time. Second, a culture change will ensue that includes less acrimonious relationships between faculty and the administration, and faculty and boards. Third, fewer outlets for nonproductive dialog/action will leave more time and energy for productive engagements and both considering and implementing needed change. Finally, the university will become much more responsive, forward-looking, and strategic.

As alluded to above, one way to start this reframing/reaffirmation exercise is through a joint review of the governance unit's bylaws. For example, in the case of the faculty senate, representatives of the board, university senior leadership (president, provost, or other), and faculty senate (president, vice president, or other) should meet and review the board's statement authorizing the scope of Senate responsibilities, the Faculty Senate's own bylaws, and any other documents related to the faculty senate's composition, authority, roles, responsibilities, and obligations. The focus should be on clearly delineating the following three "buckets" of obligations: (1) those decisions for which the faculty senate has board-authorized *responsibility*; (2) those decisions for which the faculty senate is *advisory* (e.g., to the president, provost, or board); and (3) those decisions that are made by others at the university without need for faculty senate participation. This same exercise in delineation should be undertaken for each unit in the governance triad (board, executive officers, faculty). Only once there is multilateral



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understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities can the governance triad be expected to function without misunderstanding, mistrust, or misattribution of intentions. In other words, the best hope for high-functioning governance (rather than one prone to dysfunction or paralysis) is to ensure all parties understand the ground rules, all of which, in the end, are board-authorized.

A more visual way to extend the “three buckets” approach as described above is through use of the familiar three-circle Venn diagram. The intersections (overlaps) of any two circles indicates matters for which responsibility is truly shared, again as authorized by the board. The intersecting (overlapping) area of all three circles indicates matters for which all parts of the governance triad share responsibility. The three buckets approach is more straightforward, while the Venn diagram approach allows for a more nuanced discussion of shared responsibilities. The latter may only be appropriate later in the process, e.g., after there is evidence of clear and mutually understood definitions of the roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority of each group. The risk of starting with the Venn diagram approach is that there is likely to be very different assessments of which responsibilities are (or should be) shared.

Rethinking Financial Models

COVID-19 has placed enormous burdens on colleges and universities, none more serious than those financial pressures that have been added to an already strained set of fiscal realities for many institutions. A combination of rising costs (salaries and benefits; utilities; IT enhancements and upgrades, the need for new facilities; deferred maintenance; additional staff to support student success, student mental health, and institutional compliance needs; and more) are outpacing the ability to generate revenues (the largest of which come from undergraduate net tuition). The result: many institutions have been sustaining their operations through a decade or more of incremental cuts.

These reductions often are only marginally strategic, owing to some of the governance-related pressures described in the previous section, and more often come in the form of across-the-board cuts (i.e., the “peanut butter” approach to cutbacks). In earlier years, these may have been achievable with relatively little pain. But as time went on, the cuts became more painful and resulted in forced reductions to programs and/or personnel that rendered it difficult to maintain previous program offerings, support services, and so forth.

In parallel fashion, we have witnessed little acknowledgement of differential needs resulting from changing enrollment patterns, nor has there been recognitions of disparities in the costs of

instructional delivery or program offering. Further difficulties have resulted from the lack of recognition of varying levels of engagement by departments and their faculty in making needed changes and adapting to changes in, for example, student interest, curricular relevance, and expectations of students/families/employers. And finally (and most importantly), there has been limited attention focused on the decline of available resources and thus the need for new thinking about revenue generation. As a result, these many years of incremental across-the-board cuts have had a serious negative impact on faculty morale, declining confidence in leadership, and suppressed optimism for the future of the institution itself.

Leaders need to prioritize the need to make financial model changes in the post-pandemic environment. Each campus must come to a shared understanding that “business-as-usual” is no longer a workable approach, and therefore cannot be allowed to linger on as a possible *modus operandi*. To be clear, whether or not any change to the budget model is needed is a local matter. Each campus has its own culture, its own goals, and its own governance and leadership structures. For example, sometimes a decision about which *budget model* to employ is made by the governing board, whereas in other cases the choice is made by the president and their staff. Regardless of whether a new model is implemented, the annual decisions about allocation (or rescission) of funds must be strategic, differential, data-informed, and clearly communicated. The president holds primary responsibility for the implementation of these yearly choices, and she or he must not abdicate that critical role to other leaders, or a governance group, or to some other perceived path of least resistance (e.g., across-the-board cuts).

Said slightly differently, the president must not allow these opportunities for strategic investment, disinvestment, direction, or redirection of resources to be missed. Nor should they be avoided. If they have been used in the past, annual across-the-board cuts can and should be replaced with a clearly articulated and well-understood series of annual strategic allocations.

At some campuses, this will be a heavy lift. But for many parts of these campuses, this will be a welcome and supported change. Regardless, we have reached the point at which across-the-board cuts, which (while perceived, or believed to be perceived, as equitable) were never strategic and were widely understood to be unsustainable, are no longer possible. Such “cutting around the edge” exercises have left many parts of the university both exposed and vulnerable, and further cuts along these lines would mean they would no longer be able to function. Other parts of the university that have seen significant (often year-after-year) growth in student

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enrollments and extramurally funded research, by contrast, have been demoralized by lack of recognition/support and may be at the point at which they, too, cannot deliver on their mission due to inadequate staffing or space.

While a zero-based resourcing exercise is likely not possible given the constraints under which colleges and universities function, it is nonetheless a concept that should at least guide some of the thinking needed. If we cannot be all things to all people, what will be we? If we cannot offer all programs at the highest quality, what will we offer? If we cannot support broad fields of scholarship and research, what will we support? If we cannot provide every student with an academic success program or service, which will we provide? If we cannot offer every academic major, what majors will we offer? If we cannot support graduate programs in every discipline, which will we support? If we cannot provide every amenity that students are looking for in their ideal college campus experience, which will be provide? The list goes on. But such an exercise, undertaken under the right conditions and in the right environment, can be enormously helpful to leaders, their teams, and their campuses.

Annual budget exercises, often perfunctory, need to be made more substantive and consequential. Differential allocations and cuts must become part of the new post-COVID-19 financial model and strategy, and therefore leaders throughout the organization must come to understand that inconvenient truth. For some institutions, it may require a two- to three-year “ramp up” into this new approach. But once there, leaders must avoid the pressures and the temptations to return to making across-the-board cuts. The “peanut butter approach” may be perceived to be more equitable, but in fact it is not. They disadvantage those with growing needs, opportunities, services, and impact, and they overly advantage (in relative terms) those units that have seen or realized little or no growth of any sort. In other words, it unduly protects those units that are failing or not contributing while simultaneously inflicting disproportionate hardship on precisely those units that needed to succeed and advance the mission of the institution. This is not strategic by any stretch of the imagination, and it certainly is not equitable.

Leaders must articulate a compelling vision, but that must be accompanied by an actionable strategy set that includes specific information regarding how resources will be allocated. In addition to the annual budget processes, there should be an annual statement of accountability/progress made to the broader campus. Everyone must be brought along in this work and this journey.

It must be part of a multiyear strategy that everyone on the campus can see, they can witness, they can anticipate, and from which they can understand impact. If you do not have the right budget model, change it. If you do not have the right annual budget process, change it. If you do not have the right system of transparency, data access, and dashboards, change it. If you do not have the right leadership team, change it. The pandemic has created the urgency to make these changes. Business-as-usual will lead to certain failure as a leader in the post-pandemic world.

As noted above, failure at the institutional level was the focus of a satiric piece by two of us (Gavazzi and Rosowsky) with colleague Chuck Pezeshki (“The Path to Failure in Academe: A Tragedy in Multiple Acts”) that appeared in an early 2021 *Inside Higher Ed* article, the only major higher education periodical that publishes satire. Taking a determinedly tongue-in-cheek approach to the “getting back to business as usual” approach within leadership circles, the authors (Gavazzi et al., 2021) pointed with barbed accuracy to some of the most archetypal and unproductive faculty-administration dynamics. Through balanced viewpoints, piercing accusations, and exaggerated canards, the authors tried to shed light—with humor, where possible—on the places where many universities find themselves today, as well as identifying the barriers to moving past some of the significant challenges that the pandemic has only amplified and made more urgent.

It was the authors’ respective backgrounds and experiences that, perhaps, lent the most credibility to the satiric article (Gavazzi et al., 2021). Once readers realized that the authors, all faculty members, also served for long terms as a university dean, a university provost, and a faculty senate president, they were likely to have found the article both more intriguing and compelling. We daresay that most readers would not be surprised to learn that budgets, budget models, and fiscal matters writ large are at the core of the misinformation, misunderstanding, and mistrust that characterizes the worst of the faculty-administration dynamic. Indeed, this is the space that is most ripe for improvement and, of course, this ties into the shared governance discussion of the earlier section.

Building Institutional Resilience

We begin this section by establishing a working definition of *resilience*. Various dictionaries define resilience as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, the ability to bounce back, or the display of toughness. Generally, resilience is associated with an ability to withstand hardship and return to some original state.

While the goal of returning to a previous condition may be appropriate for some systems, it is not necessarily an appropriate or strategic goal for others. For example, it might be more appropriate to rebuild damaged homes in a hurricane-prone region to a higher standard, an *improved* state relative to its original condition. Universities, as complex infrastructure systems, may seek to return to normal operations under some circumstances (e.g., following a fire, flood, or other natural hazard event), but may seek to return to an entirely different set of operating conditions and capabilities under others (e.g., following a global pandemic).

Adaptation (of institutions and behaviors) to climate change also fall into this category. Indeed, we may well see many universities “return” to something quite different from what we had before the Coronavirus emerged. There are certainly reasons this may be advantageous, timely, and strategic beyond simply dealing with an epidemic. In fact, there have been growing pressures on colleges and universities to change in recent decades, more often met with resistance instead of support from within, resulting in a growing rift between institutions and their missions alongside a similar rupture between society’s expectations and needs for higher education.

Higher education is stagnant and history-bound compared to nearly every other aspect of modern society, which is far more fluid, nimble, agile, and evolutionary. We have been accused of fail-

ing to adapt or evolve (despite recent evidence to the contrary with the rapid, universal move to remote teaching), being out-of-touch with the needs of today’s learners, and failing to prepare graduates for employability, among other shortcomings. The crisis surrounding the pandemic has produced both challenges and opportunities that are necessary to make needed changes and to reconsider our roles and responsibilities in and for society.

Given the discussion above, and drawing on his experience as a university senior leader and perpetual student of higher education and its institutions and systems, Rosowsky [&, AGB, 2000] offered fourteen specific recommendations for building institutional resilience at colleges and universities that addressed: contingency planning, building a contingency fund, building executive leadership redundancy capability, developing contingency/emergency operations for prolonged periods, establishing clear chains of command, scenario planning, internal and external communications strategies, data management and security plans, continuity plans for research labs and facilities, IT infrastructure, campus housing emergency plan, crisis management, and addressing mental health needs during and after the crisis. These recommendations were intended for campus-based institutions. Other types of institutions may have additional or different considerations, of course. And yet, this list may serve as a central starting point for nearly all types of

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Resilience requires real and ongoing financial commitments by the institution, this coming at time of increased financial pressure on all institutions, decreased state support for public institutions, concerns over meeting net tuition revenue goals in areas where demographic trends are not favorable and/or discount rates are rising, and public perception of the value of higher education being at an all-time low.

universities when thinking about and building (physical, distributed, or virtual) institutional resiliency.

There are many dimensions of access and equity, both individual and institutional, that should be considered when building institutional resilience. At the top of the list, universities must commit to greater accessibility for their students, regardless of operating conditions or circumstances. Just as we have made great strides in everything from note-takers to readers, to accessible websites, to incorporating principles of universal design into our pedagogy, we also must consider our students' needs when their lives dictate that they operate outside what we consider "normal" conditions, whether they are on campus or off campus. This may mean extra steps, extra services, and/or extra time spent with students who have special learning needs.

Students have very different family circumstances and experiences, of course. For some students, working remotely from their home can be a relatively easy (and even welcome) situation in which to learn. They are close to parents, their pets, a well-stocked kitchen, and have ready access to a computer, printer, and reliable high-speed internet. For other students coming from very different home environments, however, it can be an entirely different story. Strained relationships (or worse) with a parent, a very crowded living space not conducive to online learning, food insecurity within the home, a lack of access to a computer and (more often) to high-speed internet all create a suboptimal learning environment. If these students are expected to engage in online learning from home—regardless of whether the university is closed—we must understand that various new equity issues immediately arise.

We also must be sensitive and responsive to the needs of our faculty and staff when they are asked to work under nonstandard conditions, especially if that includes working remotely (i.e., from home). As with students and their settings for learning, settings often are not ideal for the work we expect of faculty and staff. Many have family responsibilities that include children. Some are caring for aging parents. We have asked people to continue in their roles, to the extent possible, under less-than-ideal conditions that inevitably blur the boundaries between work and family. As a result, any concept of work-life balance may entirely disappear for some individuals. Many of the lowest salaried employees may be especially challenged during a campus closure, particularly if their hours are reduced or if they are furloughed

for any length of time. Again, a new set of equity issues arise for at least some university employees when they are forced out of normal operating conditions.

Building resilience is not cheap. Neither is maintaining it. Resilience requires real and ongoing financial commitments by the institution, this coming at time of increased financial pressure on all institutions, decreased state support for public institutions, concerns over meeting net tuition revenue goals in areas where demographic trends are not favorable and/or discount rates are rising, and public perception of the value of higher education being at an all-time low. Think of building resilience as a necessary complement to investing in deferred maintenance. Opportunity costs and trade-offs will have to be considered, as will triage/sequencing strategies, and risks of delayed investments. The explicit goal of building a resilient institution should be part of any case made for investing in deferred maintenance (reducing the backlog) or building new facilities to minimize deferred maintenance costs in the future. Investment decisions (whether in campus facilities, utilities and related infrastructure, technology infrastructure, physical or data security, or deferred maintenance on any of these) should be evaluated, triaged, and made taking a system-level view of the institution. How does investing or failing to invest in one impact the others? Which strategy has the greatest positive impact on institutional resilience? How is this being assessed, measured, and reported to, for example, the board? This is not unlike an enterprise risk management (ERM) exercise, and perhaps could be incorporated into an institution and board's existing ERM.

Colleges and universities must be willing to invest in ensuring resilience, just as they have been willing to invest in programs, personnel, facilities, and even deferred maintenance. But it may not take significant new resources or resource commitments that the institution wasn't likely to make anyhow. Rather, it may be more of shifting the leadership's mindset and decision-making processes to explicitly include consideration of institutional resilience. These would be coupled, of course, with organizational strategies (e.g., for scenario-planning, contingency-planning, response-coordination) such as those described above.

The question is not whether we can afford to build resiliency into our colleges and universities. Given all that we have experienced and are learning from the COVID-19 epidemic that is still playing out, *can we afford not to?*

Accelerating Toward Opportunity (Smashing the Rearview Mirror)

University leaders are challenged by the need to advance their institutions—often by meeting specific directives and metrics as established by their boards—while also respecting its history and culture (including affirming, consulting with, and respecting the positions of the faculty and, in some cases, alumni and major donors). This tightrope of leadership is unique to higher education. No other industry is as deferent to history, to culture, or to the will of constituents (or the voice of those most well-organized to be heard). In other sectors, leaders are hired by, charged by, and held accountable to boards. Period. Leaders set the tone and direction, set the expectations, direct their teams toward clearly articulated goals (typically set by the leadership with approval coming only from board members), and report regularly to both the organization and the board on progress. This is true even in those companies that are built around cultures of openness, transparency, inclusion, and low-hierarchy (i.e., horizontal) models.

Formal governance, as it exists in higher education, is largely absent. The dynamic tension within university leadership has become even more perilous in recent years as pressures on presidents have increased, tolerance of missteps has decreased, and timelines for delivering results have shortened. Examples of increased pressures include (though are by no means limited to) financial challenges, enrollment challenges, Title IX issues, public perception issues, and a myriad compliance and legal issues colleges and universities now regularly face. Examples of decreased tolerance for missteps can be seen every day in the mainstream media as well as social media, in increased public scrutiny of leaders and displays of no confidence on campuses, and the shortening tenure of presidencies.

Mirroring the situation faced by many coaches of major college programs and NFL teams, the timeline for success among university presidents is getting shorter and shorter. Boards want (and perhaps need) changes and results quickly. Presidents are being asked to deliver more, and to do so more quickly, but with the least amount of collateral damage. And if there *is* collateral damage, especially if it comes with noise (e.g., protests, media coverage, bad press), presidents are often the first to be shown the door. Gone are the days, certainly for public universities, when presidents are hired and backed by their boards through periods of noise or even revolt (again, a concept rarely seen in any other industry sector, and never if you exclude unions) to take the “long view” of institutional leadership and institutional change.

There is no “long view” of university leadership anymore. Results are expected in short order and allowances for stirring the pot to the point of organized action, by even a small group of faculty members, are limited and diminishing. The reach of social media, the now easily accessible nature of once private (or largely out-of-view) information, and the media’s bias to report what sells

(even if it comes at the expense of balanced or fair reporting) all have exacerbated this new reality for college leaders.

This will need to change in the coming years, especially in a post-pandemic era when so many problems confronting institutions have been laid bare. This will require a new kind of leader and new board-president model. This, in turn, must be accompanied by a reset of the *governance triad* (board, president, faculty), as discussed earlier. It is almost as if presidents will have to smash their rearview mirrors to avoid the temptation of constantly looking backwards for signs of approval or signals of resistance.

Being respectful of history and culture does not mean abdicating leadership, losing conviction, or walking away from doing what is right. Boards must change their public stance on supporting presidents as they seek to make hard choices, unpopular decisions, and provide challenges to certain groups on campus. Presidents must feel safe and supported, neither constantly having to “check their six” nor worried for their job security if the “noise” gets too loud.

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Once this reset has taken place, the university can make the next important shift to become truly *forward-looking*. Wayne Gretzky, arguably one of the greatest hockey players to have played the game, once famously said, “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.” This quote, oft-used by CEOs and boards, and likely overused by now, is apt for our higher education industry, which itself has always seemed one or two steps behind the rest of the world. Gretzky’s message surely concerned his use of both experience and intuition, fact and feeling, and perhaps head and heart to allow him to be in the right place at the right time, seeming to read the mind of the player with the puck and the play being set up.

University presidents must adopt exactly this same sort of strategy. This means they must bring the experience, the knowledge, and the understanding of higher education to the presidency. But they also must possess a highly tuned sense of empathy and a highly developed emotional intelligence (EQ). They must possess keen intuition—honed by experience that includes successes as well as failures—and be allowed to rely on that intuition to guide decisions.

By contrast, universities are notorious for being slow to the uptake. Their noted reticence, resistance, and in some cases revulsion to change was discussed earlier, as were the causes and reasons. As a result, institutional responses to challenges and crises often are slow to emerge, crafted to accommodate all needs and all sensitivities, and appear “written by committee” rather than in authentic and emotive voice. Their often “late” emergence also can be untimely, even appearing insensitive to a more recent issue. The result is the impression of being “a day late and a dollar short”—a response that is pro forma and often tone-deaf.

Too much looking over the shoulder. Too much attention paid to would-be critics. Too much fear of being authentic, even singular, as a leader. Too much worry about how it will be heard or read by those waiting for you to stumble. Too much looking in the rearview mirror.

University leaders must see what’s coming, shine a light on it for their university to mobilize and respond, and then guide their institution toward it. This includes challenges *and* opportunities. They must trade their staid, autonomic response to challenge and crisis (real or locally fabricated) for rapid, energizing pivots toward opportunity and advantage. Presidents must become visionary leaders of action, not seeking only of the middle ground, the path of least resistance, or the bland compromise. Only then can the culture be changed in ways that will allow universities to become the more nimble, responsive, engaged, and forward-looking institutions they must be. It starts with the leader, and that individual must be fully supported by the board. It must be made clear that the board is charging the president, expecting to see results, and holding them accountable.

The success of the forward-leaning president requires both vision and extraordinary EQ. The success of a forward-leaning university depends on the ability to outrace, outpace, and outdeliver against other institutions. This means not just moving toward opportunity, but also *accelerating* toward it.

Universities have become reasonably competent in identifying opportunity, and some have become far better and moving towards it. But they move slowly, by consensus, and often arrive too late. The result is large numbers of institutions arriving at the same place at the same time, with more or less the same approach. The market is saturated, the distinctions are few, and the real impact is minimal. Accelerating towards opportunity means just that, not slowing down to allow cautions and concerns derail efforts before they have even commenced. Instead, leaders should direct energies, deploy resources, and display confidence in moving swiftly and deliberately.

There is a proverb that says something to the effect of “those who say it cannot be done should get out of the way of those who are doing it.” The culture shift starts when the leader is seen to accelerate, not slow down to study, when presented with a great opportunity. When this becomes the expectation, both supported and enabled by the board, and when positive outcomes/results



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affirm the president’s vision and commitment to acceleration, the university culture begins to shift. Fewer people will get in the way, fewer people will get out of the way, and more people will get on board. Receptivity, comfort, and even appetite for change all increase. And the acceleration-enabled campus rides a wave of forward-leaning momentum instead of small drips of incremental change, often resisted, often resented, and often ineffective.

Paying Closer Attention to Public Sentiment

Based on the opinions of university presidents and higher education thought leaders, two of the authors here (Gavazzi and Gee) published a book in 2018 that examined the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats faced by the modern land-grant university. As a follow-up, these same authors conducted a survey of U.S. citizens to examine how closely attuned university leaders were in terms of public opinion about higher education issues, soon to be reported out in book-length form (Gavazzi & Gee, 2021). As might be expected, there was both convergence and divergence.

Part of the problem is that, despite various efforts undertaken by higher education leaders to better understand their institutional strengths and weaknesses in the eyes of the public, these leaders often did not bother to ask community stakeholders directly what they wanted and needed from their public universities. It is not the case that senior university administrators have displayed a complete lack of engagement with the public, of course. Rather, the difficulties are based on the rather limited audiences with whom these leaders interact.

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So exactly who does have the ear of the university? Higher education leaders have access to public sentiment through the interactions they maintain with legislators, business leaders, their donor relations activities, through monitoring traditional and social media, and within those conversations they choose to have with faculty members who are regularly engaging with community members through their work. Unfortunately, these individuals by no means whatsoever can be thought of as a representative sample of the constituency served by the university. In fact, these people tend to be more affluent, more well-educated, and more technologically sophisticated, among other distinctive traits.

Because power resides in the will of the people, universities ignore the public's opinion on these and other subjects at their own peril. It is our firm belief that the leaders of our public institutions of higher learning must not only pay attention to public sentiment and become more responsive to the wants and needs of citizens. They also must go out (and send out others) to actively seek this sort of information and, in turn, organize a coordinated and ongoing response to the needs and desires expressed by those community members they are supposed to be serving.

What would this look like in practice? Polling has its limitations, of course, as we have seen through the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. There are many things that the pollsters got flat out wrong. This is not to say that public perceptions about higher education cannot be surveyed successfully, as the results discussed above indicated. Hence, we encourage universities to find out what their constituents are thinking through use of the expert talent they retain on their campuses. In addition, all the survey data and information that one can gather from an armchair or from social science, there is, and must continue to be, the most important fact gathering effort—particularly by university presidents and chancellors—and that is to leave the bubble and travel to visit those who are impacted daily by the virus, by social and racial injustice, and by other acts of defiance to the common good.

One of the authors (Gee), as a university president, consistently has traveled to the corners of the state to meet with local leaders, school superintendents, to teachers, members of the public, and, most importantly, children. The purpose of such travel is twofold. First, to gain and share knowledge about the university as an instrument of change and how that change best can be affected. Second, and more importantly, to better understand how people are thinking about the university and how it can best improve its service to the citizens of the state.

University presidents tend to live in gilded cages. The vast

majority have their special parking places, plush offices, and live-in subsidized public housing. The only way a president can truly get a sense of the dynamics that are impacting the institution, both internally and externally, is to see it through the eyes of others. No amount of reading, listening to the stories of others, nor conversations with people in one's office will substitute for the information gained in a coffee shop, restaurant, drug store, or some other meeting place where people gather, individually or collectively, to discuss the concerns of their communities and the issues of the day.

Further, when a president does make such visits, they must be done not just once, as if a box were being checked. Instead, these visits must be consistently undertaken. The first time Gee visited every county in the state of Ohio during his first stint as president of The Ohio State University, people were amused, but the general belief was that they would never see him again. The second time caused a stir, the third time a bit of bewilderment. But, by the fourth or fifth time, people believed in his seriousness about the importance of those visits and, we believe, they took him more seriously as both a leader and a listener. Without a doubt, university leadership is much richer outside the boundaries of an office, and universities are much more attuned to the needs of people when citizens are given an opportunity to talk and tell rather than listen and be preached to by university administrators.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored strategies for effective higher education leadership in five key areas spanning topics of governance, finances, resilience, opportunity, and perception. While far from representing the entire spectrum of trials and tribulations faced by colleges and universities in the third decade of the 21st century, nevertheless the issues and concerns covered here are road signs that point the way toward a path of greater and greater complexity. Challenges to institutions and demands on their leaders will be greater, more complicated, and more intersectional. And so, higher education leadership in the post-pandemic era will require new thinking, new skill sets, and new strategies to travel this ever more demanding trail. ■

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