Navigating the Waters of Higher Education

The role of a college president is centuries old. So it would be natural to assume that presidents can readily slip into a very familiar leadership role that has precedent along with pomp and circumstance.

Not so. In fact, during the last few years the field of higher education has been rife with challenges that our professional forebears would never have imagined. And the challenges are certain to continue in the future. Like our forebears, we will need to navigate through the rough waters. To help all of us in higher education find our way, I offer here ten thoughts for the journey.

1. **The “new normal” may be permanent.**
   Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam and I recently reached an unfortunate conclusion: we may never serve through good times together. We cannot count on the economy, which has directly affected higher education, returning to the more prosperous time of a few years ago. Today's norm may very well be permanent.

2. **Context is everything.**
   Similarly, those of us in higher education can't long for the past and how things used to be. There are many factors we cannot control: government regulations, changes in higher education, the society in which our students have been reared, how technology has changed our bookstores and libraries. Instead of looking back, we need to look at what's around us now and then look forward.

3. **Can't creep. Gotta leap!**
   We can develop degree programs much more quickly today: the Lipscomb University campus in Nashville has instituted programs in as little as ninety days. We have to be nimble to respond to the new workplace skills and knowledge demands, which may require a new kind of educational “product” to prepare our students for their world, not ours.

4. **Government defines our future.**
   The U.S. government is in the middle of a debt crisis that is forcing higher education to make up billions of dollars that have been lost due to state and federal budget cuts. It is a crisis we did not create. We did nothing wrong, but we must find the right answers. That means raising more funds to support scholarships and other operating costs, as well as developing more products that generate revenue.

5. **From access to completion, the game has changed.**
   Our old product was a set of classes offered on campus with roughly two entry points (September and January) and one exit: spring graduation. Success was measured by enrollment. That setup no longer resonates with most of today's students. In addition, the new standard of success is not how many students start college but how many complete it. Many states, including Tennessee, today award funding based not on enrollment but, rather, on completion rates. We need to find creative new ways for students to access a college education, and we need to implement data-driven strategies that can identify retention challenges and help our students complete their degrees. This is part of the “new normal” that we must embrace.

6. **We must live in the transition.**
   As William Bridges notes in his book *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, we tend not to have as many issues with change itself as we do with the transitions. In fact, we all live in the “in between.” A university president sets the pace for an organization, which can choose to move with transition or continually fight against it.

7. **Technology rules.**
   Changes in technology define how we deliver an education. They define us as educators and administrators, and they define our students—even down to how they think and how they process learning. Our students have grown up with Facebook, the Internet, and technology devices. They are more comfortable reading a book online than they are reading a paper copy of a textbook. They have very different views on communication and on what they want to communicate about, to, and from. Again, this is characteristic of the “new normal.”

8. **Character still counts.**
   I recently heard the president of a Big Ten university lament that we can build top research institutions but we fail to build character in our students. In our daily commitment to impart knowledge to our students, university leaders must also instill the “gyroscope” that equips them to use their knowledge well.
This is not a choice. We have been entrusted with the men and women who will one day determine the quality of our homes, schools, businesses, and country.

9. Managing polarities is key.
Higher education today reflects the extreme polarities of our society and the deep emotional commitment inherent in advocates of and adversaries to any issue. This is not unlike when college and university presidents in the 1960s were faced with the polarizing effect of the Vietnam War. The academy is an excellent forum in which to have these discussions and to develop common ground from which we all can work—as long as we teach the principles of conflict management that can create a respectful, creative, and innovative learning environment.

10. This is still an “E ticket” ride.
As a child growing up in southern California, I considered my most prized possession to be a Disneyland “E ticket,” which allowed admission to the newest and most popular rides and attractions in the park. Even given all of the above, I find higher education to be invigorating, stimulating, surprising, significant—and a great place to invest one’s career. Indeed, I believe that navigating the waters of higher education is still one of the most desired “rides” in life.

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