

A Checklist for Transformative Leaders

 [chronicle.com/article/A-Checklist-for-Transformative/242167](https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Checklist-for-Transformative/242167)

January 7, 2018

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

Higher-education transformation, which is essential if colleges and universities are to survive in the 21st century, relies on transformative presidential leadership. Twenty-seven years ago, Judy B. Rosener, now a professor emerita in the business school at the University of California at Irvine, wrote an article in the *Harvard Business Review* that differentiated between "transactional" leadership and "transformative" leadership. The distinction is just as important today as it was then.

Transactional leaders, she wrote, view job performance "as a series of transactions with subordinates — exchanging rewards for services rendered or punishment for inadequate performance." Transformative leaders are characterized by "getting subordinates to transform their own self-interest into the interest of the group through concern for a broader goal."

Transactional leadership is, at its essence, about trade — buying and selling. Transformative leadership is about shared ownership — buy-in rather than buying. Transactional leaders tend to be more hierarchical, closed, bullying, and power-centered, while transformative leaders are more collaborative, open, communicative, and power-sharing. Transformative leadership is more focused on relationships, open to multiple interpretations, adaptable to new situations, and more flexible in adjusting to new environments. The transformative leader is readier to multitask and capable of paying attention both to goals and to the process for achieving them. Transformative leadership has the power to mold colleges and universities into 21st-century institutions.

Some politicians say that the country needs welders, not philosophers. But experienced welders are already telling us that robots are taking over manual labor.

For that to happen, higher-education leaders should consider a number of key principles: **Higher education must go beyond the dissemination of information to evaluation, connection, and application.** Twenty-first-century epistemology requires assessing the validity of information, creating knowledge through connecting disparate facts, and developing wisdom by applying knowledge to a wide variety of situations. Each curriculum, syllabus, and classroom practice should demonstrate this transformation.

Low-income, first-generation students deserve high-quality bachelor's degrees, with a strong foundation in critical thinking and communication. Preparing students for a first job is not enough. Some politicians say that the country needs welders, not philosophers. But

experienced welders are already telling us that robots are taking over manual labor, and welders must be project managers, exercising critical thinking and problem-solving to be successful. We need strategic thinkers and lifelong learners, whatever their family income or academic major.

Foundation-level courses, like freshman composition, are worthy of the intellectual energies of first-rate, full-time faculty members. This will require major changes in doctoral preparation, especially in English and other humanities disciplines. We need the nation's best scholars to take on the pedagogical and research challenges of foundational education in critical thinking and communication.

Universities can provide both a challenging four-year program and high-quality pathways from community college to university graduation. Four-year institutions should develop logical pathways and special agendas for each of the four years of undergraduate study — foundational courses, exploration of majors, focused study with career implications, and the transfer of learning to broader contexts. At the same time, they must create pathways for transfer students, especially those from community colleges. The coherence of education across more than one institution cannot be left exclusively to the community college or to the students themselves. Four-year colleges must connect with community colleges to encourage a coordinated program of study, providing incentives for students to complete an associate degree before moving on to the junior year.

Related Content

Higher education requires high-impact practices. Educational practices such as writing in all courses, student/faculty research partnerships, community service, civic engagement, and study abroad move teaching and learning away from the simple dissemination of information to the creation and application of knowledge.

Mentoring is essential to student success. "[Great Jobs/Great Lives](#)," a 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report, surveyed more than 30,000 college graduates across the country. The study found that great lives after graduation did not depend on the type of college or university that students attended — public or private, large or small. But graduates who "felt 'supported' during college (that professors cared, professors made them excited about learning, and had a mentor) are nearly three times as likely to be thriving" as those who didn't feel supported.

A strength model must replace a deficit model for assessing students. The work of Shaun Harper and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education and the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California explains the necessity of recognizing and validating students' strengths, connecting the knowledge they have with new ideas and applications. Identifying strengths is hard work, requiring breaking through barriers and instilling confidence and trust. The widely used deficit model, on the other hand, is the easy way out, based on correcting surface flaws rather than nurturing deep understanding.

Strategic planning and budget reallocation depend on transparency and inclusiveness — and can be done in a unionized environment. We must reject the argument that "we can't do this because...." Yes, budget reallocation — a huge challenge — is almost certainly required for significant change. But transformation is essential whatever the fiscal situation.

Higher education is a public good and merits generous investments at the state and federal level. Regarding higher education as a private good is remarkably shortsighted. Twenty-first century transformations will lead to improvements in the economy, community spirit, social justice, and the quality of life for all.

Enrollment is not a zero-sum game. Democracy depends on our attracting and serving students who are not now matriculating in rigorous four-year programs, or not completing them. Public regional universities are playing an important role in educating these first-generation students. Private colleges, especially those smaller and less famous than the short list of the highly selective and heavily endowed, have an unfulfilled mission to serve new student populations, including community-college transfers and returning adults.

Students can gain an outstanding college education without being saddled with crushing debt. Federal and state support is important, but colleges must also help students and their families develop financial literacy, treating a modest amount of borrowing as an investment but keeping long-term debt as low as possible.

Nothing is more powerful in higher education than an uncompromising commitment to student success. If we keep this principle at the forefront, *all* transformations are possible.

Elaine P. Maimon is president of Governors State University. This essay was adapted from her new book, Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, Transformation (Stylus Publishing, 2018).

A version of this article appeared in the [January 12, 2018 issue](#).