



BUILDING a LEADERSHIP VISION

By Donald E. Hanna

Eleven Strategic Challenges for Higher Education

Higher education institutions around the world face the growing problem of relevance as they enter the twenty-first century. With the international economy evolving toward a global network organized around the value of knowledge, the capacity of people and organizations to use technological developments wisely, effectively, and efficiently has emerged as a critical societal concern. People and nations are relying on colleges and universities to help shape a positive future. However, to capture the advantage of this more central focus and role, higher education institutions will need to transform their structures, missions, processes, and programs in order to be both more flexible and more responsive to changing societal needs.

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A key factor in the changing societal needs is demand. Sir John Daniel, former chancellor of the Open University, United Kingdom, has argued that demand for higher education is dramatically outstripping the capabilities of nations to expand access due to already existing shortages of space in traditional colleges and universities, a growing young population in many areas of the world, and limitations on resources, both financial and human. He suggests that in order to sustain even the current level of participation in higher education globally, an average of one new major institution would need to be created somewhere in the world each week for the next thirty years.¹

The problem of access is being approached from multiple institutional perspectives.² Traditional campus-based colleges and universities are extending their boundaries and are opening up access points through technology-enhanced distance learning, while the national “mega-universities” are beginning to build in more robust mechanisms, including student-faculty interactions that are both face-to-face and supported by advanced learning technologies. In some countries, especially in the United States, for-profit colleges and universities are being established to serve working adults, and online-only institutions and strategic consortia or alliances are emerging.

Clearly, higher education institutions must change—and, indeed, are changing—to meet future needs. As they continue to do so, they will face a number of broad-based strategic challenges. Colleges and universities will need to address each of these challenges as they transform themselves to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic environment.

Strategic Challenge #1: Removing Boundaries

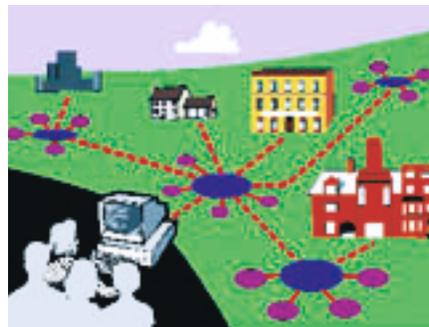
Colleges and universities are facing the challenge of removing the boundaries between higher education institutions and their external publics while at the same time protecting the fundamental values and traditions associated with free academic inquiry, independence of thought, and rights and responsibilities of the faculty. What is “on-campus” and what is not will become less and less apparent. The result is that activities and

boundaries will be increasingly blurred as a result of the greater communication and interactions made possible by increasingly powerful technologies. The ivory tower pictured below is becoming a relic of the past—of a time when knowledge was to be guarded in order to be preserved, when it served to separate those with “class” from those without, and when the primary medium for storing knowledge was physically and geographically bound books. College and universities must change their public image, from that of the protective ivory tower to one of a networked, communication-rich, and much more accessible environment.

From:



To:



Strategic Challenge #2: Establishing Interdisciplinary Programs

Sir Douglas Hague has noted that society has problems whereas colleges and universities have departments and that the two very often do not match well.³ He and many others call for institutions to provide better linkages between problems and disciplines and for academic departments to reformat and reorganize courses, programs, and structures to respond to increasingly sophisticated and market-knowledgeable students. As indi-

vidual learning becomes more connected with personal and professional experiences, learning and instruction will need to become increasingly interdisciplinary to mirror and deal with real problems and real issues, which always involve integrating the perspectives of many disciplines and approaches. This trend is amplified by the general learner's desire to know more of the whole of things, not just a specialized discipline.⁴

As an example, the University of Wisconsin–Madison has implemented the concept of interdisciplinary cluster hires for new faculty members. This hiring process requires that academic departments, through which all promotion and tenure processes must pass, come together through consortium-like structures to hire new faculty members, who by design and focus will both cross and link previously separate disciplines. The goal is to achieve broader and more diverse perspectives around research problems; however, it remains to be seen if interdisciplinary thinking, theory-building, and interaction can be sustained without significantly changing and adapting traditional, well-developed processes and understandings regarding faculty reward, recognition, and prestige.⁵

Strategic Challenge #3: Supporting Entrepreneurial Efforts and Technology

Even with the power and capacity of currently available communications technologies such as the World Wide Web and the Internet, adapting and integrating these technologies with existing institutional and departmental strategies and initiatives has not been a priority in many institutions. Furthermore, the fixed instructional budget framework in place at many colleges and universities does not support entrepreneurial activity at the curriculum, department, or unit level. Frequently within this budgeting framework, adding students, using learning technologies, and creating new paths of access simply increase the workload of the faculty without providing significant new resources to the academic unit. Even when funds are added to departmental resources, they are often at the margin. As a result, faculty and academic departments are hesitant to commit to programs that

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potentially add workload but few resources. This is especially true in research universities, where commitments toward securing research funding often return most if not all resources secured without adding to instructional workload. In many cases, the additional research dollars reduce the faculty member's instructional commitments, resulting in spreading the existing instructional commitments of the department across fewer full-time faculty members. It is little wonder that in these settings, the implementation of learning technologies to increase access has met with minimal support, if not direct resistance, from the faculty.

Strategic Challenge #4: Redesigning and Personalizing Student Support Services

College and university leaders are increasingly recognizing that to regain public support and participation, institutions will need to become more focused on customizing programs to serve students where they are—physically, economically, and academically. As this process occurs, student support services such as admissions, advising, registration, and place-

ment are being redesigned to be delivered flexibly, through multiple pathways increasingly initiated and controlled by the student. These direct and immediate personalized contacts with students are becoming more central to organizational and educational quality, as perceived by the student.

This transition is a major challenge for many higher education institutions, where the focus has historically been on the product or core program design and on the building of quality through institutional improvements in faculty, facilities, and student qualifications, rather than on the processes or the specific customization of programs designed to meet individual student needs. However, the changing audiences for higher education—including adult professionals, who frequently combine complex career requirements with family responsibilities and geographic limitations (traffic in cities and rural isolation), and more and more students who are working part-time to make ends meet—are making customization and convenience a requirement for all programs and services. This blend of approaches and services will be

critical to defining quality in the future, as illustrated in Figure 1.

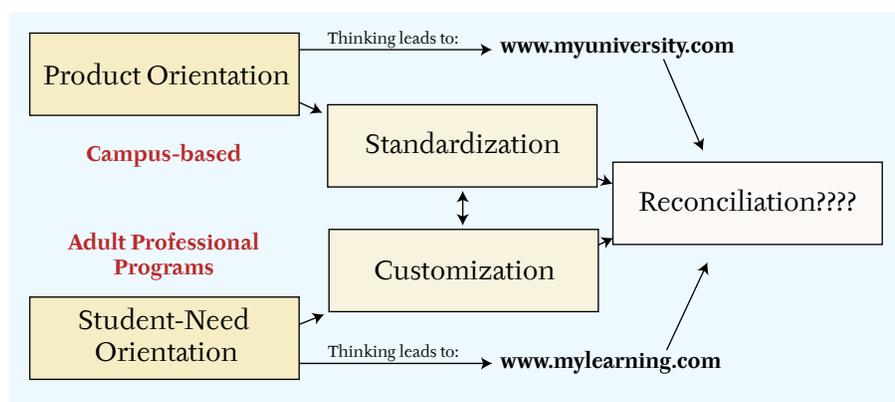
Strategic Challenge #5: Emphasizing Connected and Lifelong Learning

Institutions are focusing more directly on helping students to develop the skills necessary to be successful in today's economy, which values and rewards the ability to work in teams, to develop creative approaches to problem-solving, and to learn constantly. Even though colleges and universities are being pressured to be more responsive to the demand for workforce development and to the training needs of the corporate sector, many industries are finding that their core business practices and production processes are changing so rapidly that their real bottom-line need is for people who are adaptable and who know how to learn and problem-solve. Since this need corresponds directly with the historical mission of higher education, those institutions that focus on helping students know how to learn and how to apply what they learn to real situations will be increasingly valued. Those that continue to measure learning in abstract and relatively unconnected assessment processes such as class-by-class content examinations, multiple-choice tests, and other forms of memorization and recall will increasingly be at a competitive disadvantage. The industrial modern system of education will move to a post-modern perspective in which taking advantage of context, collaborating, and constructing knowledge will be valued skills.

Strategic Challenge #6: Investing in Technologically Competent Faculty

Colleges and universities will need to develop full-time faculty and staff dedicated

Figure 1. Evolution of Program Design in Higher Education





to engaging a diversity of learners with more complex learning needs. In a world dependent on technology for its communications, its economy, and, increasingly, its day-to-day organization, higher education institutions that are serious about meeting the challenges of technology will invest in faculty members who are experienced with technology and who can both model this experience and pass it on to students.

Institutions will also take seriously the need to bring other faculty members along in both using learning technologies and experimenting with learning

environments that are oriented less around the activities and responsibilities of the instructor and focused more on those of the student. Multiple modes of enabling interaction among students and teachers will be critical. Colleges and universities in which the students are leading the faculty in adopting technology are already at a significant competitive disadvantage, and without a systematic strategic planning effort, these institutions will become less and less attractive to students. Figure 2 illustrates the increasing range of instructional and learning options that faculty members

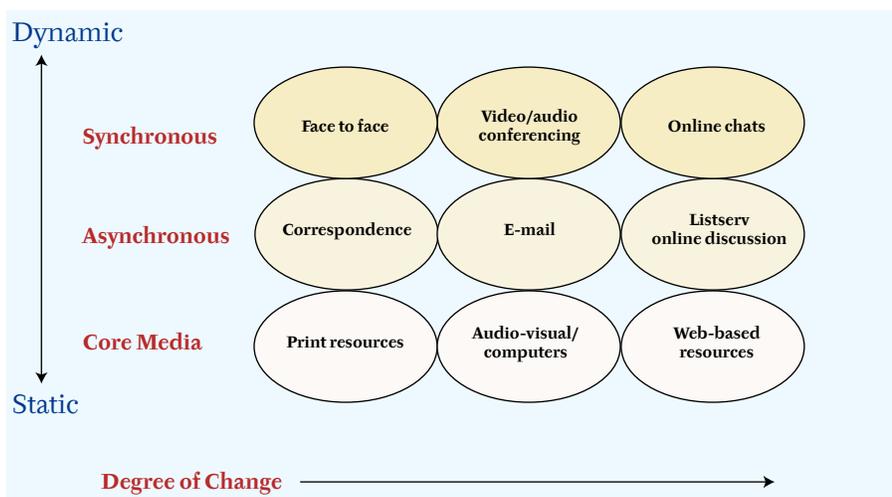
will need to be conversant with and competent in using.

As Figure 2 implies, technology support units in institutions that until recently have been concerned only with improvements in on-campus instruction in a primarily face-to-face mode are finding that their work intersects with continuing education units whose role has been to extend access to programs through the use of technology.

Strategic Challenge #7: Building Strategic Alliances with Others

Over the past decade, higher education institutions of all types have built expanded alliances with each other and with the corporate sector. These alliances are essential business strategies, and all colleges and universities will seek to expand their web of alliances with others in the future. Whereas demand for learning is growing and access to higher education is improving, competition is also increasing. This competition will cause campuses and corporations alike to focus on their unique programmatic and delivery advantages. Cooperate to compete, identified by William Graves as a strategy of “collabotition,” will increasingly be a critical strategy for colleges and universities in the future.⁶ Hague has suggested that for higher education institutions, the key is permeability, and that with respect to

Figure 2. Modes of Teaching and Learning Interactions



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the question of whether or not to form alliances, the choice for many will be “alliance or annihilation.”⁷

Corporate universities are beginning to broaden their mission to include certification and degree options for employees. Although in some cases, these corporations are developing and offering such programs internally, they are also forming new strategic alliances with colleges and universities. The corporation with hundreds of learning strategic alliances is becoming commonplace, as is the higher education institution with many partnerships and alliances, both with each other and with business and industry. And in the United States, a number of for-profit universities are engaged in experimenting with new assumptions about the possibilities and roles of enterprise in higher education.

Strategic Challenge #8: Incorporating Learning Technologies into Strategic Thinking

Higher education institutions will need to integrate learning technologies into their strategic planning and their setting of institutional priorities just as they currently integrate the planning of facilities, administrative processes, library support, and student services. Learning technologies are no longer the sole responsibility of the units responsible for computing, information technology, or telecommunications. They permeate the entire institution, and how they are utilized, implemented, and evaluated can significantly advance or retard the overall development and progress of an institution. This integration will need broad-based participation by the faculty and staff of the institution in order to be sustained and will also require a significant effort on the part of institutional leaders.

Strategic Challenge #9: Measuring Program Quality

Educational programs are being measured more and more often based on outcomes that matter to students and employers rather than on inputs that matter to faculty and administrators. Graves frames this dilemma as a tension between the view of education as operating for the “public good” (the traditional model) and the view of education as operating for the private “individual good” or “employer good.”⁸

Major change in this perspective means a dramatic shift in how quality is measured—with flexibility, responsiveness, timeliness, efficiency, and applicability becoming new, important measures of quality. Criteria for institutional accreditation and program quality assessment are changing to reflect more specific measurements of learning. Some accrediting associations are already revamping their criteria and processes. For example, in the United States, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (one of the six regional institutional accreditation organizations) has systematically engaged in reviewing and restructuring its criteria for awarding institutional accreditation through a comprehensively planned process for updating standards for and expectations of accredited institutions. Establishment of the new criteria has involved representatives from member institutions from across the North Central region, and an entirely new framework for accrediting institutions is expected to be in place by 2004.⁹ In addition, a few institutions in the United States have begun to adopt and follow planning processes suggested by the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, which emphasizes results-

oriented goals and activities that focus on customers and markets, leadership, and strategic planning. In 2001, the University of Wisconsin–Stout became the first institution of higher education to receive this award.

Active engagement between learners, teachers, and content, between students and faculty, and between customers and institutions is increasingly an important element of measurement for accrediting associations. However, it is the performance of students in developing diverse perspectives and approaches to problem-solving, in gaining critical thinking skills, in honing the ability to work effectively in teams, and in establishing a pattern of continued learning in and out of the workplace that will define successful academic programs in the future.

Strategic Challenge #10: Achieving Institutional Advantage

For some colleges and universities, the new digital environment suggests focusing resources on just a few unique or particularly outstanding programs and delivering them globally. For others, it means organizing programs differently to take advantage of a combination of programmatic strengths. And for still others, it means developing the right partnerships to shore up weaknesses in programs, delivery, service to students, or other areas important to offering high-quality programs. The abundance of opportunities demands greater focus and clarity about purposes and competitive strengths as institutions compete in a larger, more complex marketplace. All colleges and universities operate within this larger environment, and even elite institutions are entering the competitive environment and are being challenged to adapt programs, structures, and processes.

Table 1. Evolving College/University Culture

The Traditional Academic Culture	The Continuum	The Emerging Academic Culture
Leaders and staff abide by time-honored rules, policies, procedures, and protocols.		Leaders and staff draw on their knowledge and experience but take risks, often without a pre-tested methodology.
Formal academic programs drive departmental decision-making.		Learners' needs drive departmental decision-making; academic programs are responsive to the needs of the individual learner.
Tenured faculty are primary academic decision-makers.		Faculty share academic decision-making with key customers/ stakeholders.
Administrative and academic structures support the delivery of programs and courses.		Academic support structures are tailored to the needs of the learner.
People who can work within given structures are most important.		People who can anticipate market shifts are most important.
Key message is "Don't rock the boat."		Key message is "Seize the day."
Communication strategies are - internal, - vertical, - formal.		Communication strategies are - external and internal, - horizontal, - informal.
Emphasis is on systems and resources "in hand."		Emphasis is on systems and resources "in waiting."
Strategic partnerships go unrecognized and untapped.		Strategic alliances and partnerships are sought out and implemented.
Segmented, specialized organizational structures are prevalent.		Integrated, cross-functional organizational structures are reinforced.
Budgets are stable and committed to existing programs; deficit financing is avoided.		Budgets are fluid and opportunity-seeking; deficit financing is common.
New academic programs complement existing programs.		New programs create openings for new markets.
New programs must fit with existing structures.		The best structure is determined for each new program.
Actions tend to be evolutionary.		Actions tend to be revolutionary.
Risk-averse behavior seeks to minimize competition with others through regulation.		Risk-seeking behavior seeks to exploit competitive advantage over others.
Stewardship and preservation are the critical elements of leadership.		Vision and strategy are the critical elements of leadership.
Stewardship and preservation focus on assessing the impact of new activities on existing undertakings.		Strategies gravitate toward new market niches.
Change efforts focus on improving programs and activities deemed valid by competitors.		Change efforts focus on being first to develop a new program or activity.
Staff tend to work to their own agendas and act independently of their colleagues.		Staff often collaborate with each other and across disciplines in pursuit of organizational goals.
Appraisal, reward, and recognition are based primarily on individual scholarly performance.		Appraisal, reward, and recognition are based on individual and group scholarly and entrepreneurial performance.
Organizational recognition comes from interaction with, and recognition by, peers in other institutions and in terms of contribution to the discipline.		Organizational recognition may also come from interaction with, and recognition by, immediate colleagues and in terms of contribution to the organization.

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Strategic Challenge #11: Transforming Bureaucracy, Culture, and Assumptions

In what may be the most difficult challenge of all, higher education institutions are being forced to transform decision-making processes and to radically change past operating assumptions. Processes appropriate for a stable environment in which markets were clearly defined, program structures were relatively uniform, and competition was limited are no longer effective in a networked world. Colleges and universities are discovering that major changes are necessary in order

to serve students effectively and to compete with aggressive, for-profit institutions in an environment in which the concept of time-to-market for programs is becoming more critical. Table 1 identifies a number of cultural elements that are currently undergoing adaptation and evolution in many academic institutions.

The processes for achieving transformation have evolved: early efforts, in the previous two decades, focused on the strategic improvement of quality through the improvement of a variety of administrative and instructional processes, whereas current efforts emphasize the cre-

ation of more open, honest, and comprehensive assessments and the re-creation of vision, mission, culture, strategy, decision-making processes, and outcomes.

Appreciative Inquiry Leadership

Addressing these eleven strategic challenges and creating a context supportive of innovation and experimentation will clearly require committed, passionate, and visionary leadership. Such leadership can help to shape higher education institutions in ways that will make them more human, more livable, and more ethical. A. Toffler has suggested that for sig-

nificant change to occur in developed organizations, three conditions must be present: “First, there must be enormous external pressures. Second, there must be people inside who are strongly dissatisfied with the existing order. And third, there must be a coherent alternative embodied in a plan, a model, or a vision.”¹⁰ In 1999, W. G. Tierney wrote about the lack of such a plan in higher education: “We recognize that problems exist, but we have yet to enact a plan of action about how to deal with these problems as an academic community bounded by a common purpose that is socially responsive. Over the past decade, organizational changes have been around the edges of higher education’s communities rather than at the heart.”¹¹

How can we find this vision? One approach is to initiate an institution-wide conversation through a relatively new change process called “Appreciative Inquiry.”¹² More traditional problem-solving approaches to strategic planning—such as organizational redesign, restructuring, and total quality management—empha-

size identifying problems, analyzing causes and solutions, and taking action to address the problems. These approaches all begin from the perspective of a “deficit”: something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, can be viewed as a process that involves discovering organizational strengths through creating conversations that focus on what people within the organization are doing well and on how they are achieving excellence.

As D. L. Cooperrider notes, for Appreciative Inquiry to be effective, its fundamental tenets must be honored. The first and most important is that organizations spend time and energy on the areas where the conversations are centered. The second important concept underlying Appreciative Inquiry is that organizations focus on the generative potential of positive images. If organizational conversations are centered on problems, the focus of the organization will be centered on problems as well and away from those areas and activities in which the organization is successful. Moreover, focusing on

problems absorbs enormous organizational energy by unearthing seemingly unresolvable/intractable institutional roadblocks that have previously prevented change. By focusing instead on (1) the positive elements of organizational life and the broad-based sharing of organizational success stories, (2) the areas where outstanding performance and achievement can be documented, and (3) the integration of these accomplishments into organizational culture, the organization as a whole and its members will become better directed toward future success.

According to M. Mantel and J. Ludema, the experiences of organizations that have successfully used Appreciative Inquiry demonstrate that as the process becomes ingrained in organizational culture and life, time spent on dealing with organizational problems eventually diminishes and consumes much less organizational and emotional energy; the organization is able to build effectively on acknowledged successes.¹³ Evidence regarding the impact of Appreciative Inquiry within higher education settings is



largely anecdotal at this stage. A major barrier to its broader utilization seems to be leaders' difficulty in enabling the early conversations necessary to set an appropriate context envisioning a more positive future. Preliminary experiences also suggest that once people in the organization begin to have open, honest conversations that focus on positive elements within the organization, the possibilities of dreaming a new and exciting future can emerge. Thus, Appreciative Inquiry is a strategy that can enable the college or university to reach forward to a more positive future. Process participants develop a vision of a preferred future they would like to bring into reality, allowing them to think outside the box of current institutional and cultural norms and processes.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions are clearly in the midst of rapid change in response to environmental, social, economic, technological, and political transformations sweeping the globe. As a result, colleges and universities face numerous broad-based challenges. New institutional strategies and decision-making processes must be created, articulated, and adopted to enable institutions to survive and prosper. In order to be effective and sustainable, these strategies and processes must be developed in an environment offering openness, intense and honest reflection,

and opportunities for participation and action by all members of the academic community. College and university leaders cannot make these changes by themselves; they must engage the entire institution in their vision. One approach to doing so is the Appreciative Inquiry process, which starts from the perspective that the institution is already doing many things well, that knowledge of these successes is widespread among institutional members, and that a process for sharing widely and building on institutional successes is critical to engaging the entire college or university in planning for the future.

At the same time that decisions regarding the missions, structures, financing, curricula, students, pedagogy, and processes of higher education institutions are coming under constant review, the importance of colleges and universities to the well-being of nations, societies, communities, and individuals goes almost unquestioned. Addressing the eleven strategic challenges is thus critical not only for the future of institutions but also for that of the world at large. Appreciative Inquiry offers a planning framework for college and university leaders to utilize in creatively and positively meeting these challenges and in symbolically and practically shaping the vision for the higher education institution in the demanding and rapidly changing environment of the twenty-first century. *e*

Notes

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12. For a more complete review of Appreciative Inquiry processes, see D. L. Cooperrider, P. F. Sorensen Jr., T. F. Yaeger, and D. Whitney, eds., *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development* (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing, 2001).
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