10 Challenges For College Presidents This School Year

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The role of a college president is centuries old. So it would be natural to assume that as this academic year begins, we presidents can slip into a very familiar leadership role that has precedent along with the pomp and circumstance.

Not so. In fact, this year seems to be especially rife with challenges our professional forebears would have never imagined. Like them, we will navigate through the times, but there are a few "bergs" that deserve serious respect:

1. **The "new normal" may be permanent.** In a conversation with our state's newly elected governor, Bill Haslam of Tennessee, together we concluded: "You and I may never serve through 'good times.'" We cannot count on the economic factors that have impacted higher education returning to the more prosperous time of a few years ago. Assume today's norm may be permanent.

2. **Context is everything.** Similarly, we can't long for the past and how it used to be. There are many factors we can't control -- government regulations, changes in our industry, the society in which our students have been reared, how technology defines how we deliver an education. It defines what we do, and it defines our students even down to how they think and process learning. They have grown up with Facebook, the Internet and personal technology devices. They are more comfortable reading a book online than a paper copy of a textbook. They have very different views on communication and what they want to communicate about, to and from.

3. **Can't creep. Gotta leap!** Today, we can develop degree programs much more quickly than our predecessors--our campus in Nashville has done so in as little as 90 days. We have to be nimble to respond to the new skills and knowledge demands in the work place that may require a new kind of educational "product" to prepare our students for their new world, not ours.

4. **Government defines our future.** Our 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, largely, one exit--spring graduation. And success was measured by enrollment. That no longer resonates with most of today's students--and the new standard of success is not how many students start college, but how many complete it. Many states, including Tennessee, no longer award funding based on enrollment, but on completion rates. We need to find creative new ways for students to access a college education but also implement data-based strategies to identify retention challenges to help our students complete their degrees. This is part of the "new normal" we must embrace.

6. **Live in the transition.** As William Bridges notes in his book, "Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change," we don't tend to have as many issues with change itself, but rather 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. For example:

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

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 instill character in our students. In our daily mission to instill knowledge, we as university leaders must also instill the "gyroscope" in our students that equips them to use 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.** Higher education today reflects the extreme polarities of our society and the deep emotional commitment inherent in advocates and adversaries on any issue. This is not unlike when presidents in the '60s were faced with the polarizing effect of the Vietnam War. The academy is a great forum in which to have these discussions and to develop common ground from which we can all work--as long as we instill principles of conflict management to create a respectful, creative, innovative learning environment.

10. **This is still an "E" Ticket ride.** As a child growing up and going to Disneyland, my most prized possession was an E Ticket used for admission to the best rides in the park. Even given all of the above, it is my absolute conviction that higher education is still one of the most desired "rides" in life! It's invigorating, stimulating, surprising, significant and a great place to invest one's life and career.

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