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# Eight Ways to See Higher Education Management Differently

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Six years after the financial crisis, the economy is improving, but higher education institutions are still in jeopardy. The environment seems unrelentingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA,[1] as the Army War College abbreviates it). Leaders are caught between a rapid-change rock and a scarce-resources hard place. Strategic plans, cost cutting, fundraising, recruiting and retention initiatives, dashboards and the like have only gone so far. Do we need to rethink our options?

My work with dozens of university and college presidents and boards over the last six years has led me to the following eight suggestions.

## 1. Question the Plan

Many current plans reflect old-normal assumptions and limited recognition of new realities. Some rely on hope, for example, by failing to account for the impact of declining youth demographics, especially those who are college ready, and increased competition for the relatively smaller pool. Some plans have more detail and longer time horizons than is wise given the pace of change and potential for disruption. Plans nowadays are more use-



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The transformed, highly competitive postsecondary marketplace requires institutional leaders to rethink their approach to management.

ful for tactical than for strategic matters, and shorter rather than longer time spans.

## 2. Share the Vision

Create a very brief vision statement that sets strategic direction, inspires widespread commitment and drives decisions. Describe the point on the horizon toward which the institution will aim its efforts. An effective vision statement will guide allocation of time, dollars and other resources toward some possibilities and away from others

— even ones that receive resources now.

## 3. Focus on Mission Impact

What the institution aims to be for its clients and society is as important as — if not more than — what it aims to do for itself.[2] However, most strategic plans currently focus on the latter: “We will add new programs, grow enrollment, get more money, make our personnel happier and become more famous.”

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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Think of it this way: would you rather support a charity whose strategic plan is to attract the most donors or the one that aims to end homelessness?

## 4. Engage, Inform and Rely On Your Community

A compelling case can be made that networks are beginning to outweigh authority in both value and influence.[3] If those associated with the institution share a vision and communication among them is effective, the institution will have the “ears” to detect change, the mindset and skills to respond well and the vision and resources to anticipate potential opportunities.

## 5. Center Your Organizational Culture around VUCA

Create an organizational culture for success in a VUCA environment. For example, replace the confidence of control with the confidence of readiness. The military recommends the VUCA Prime; vision, understanding, clarity and agility. An organization with those characteristics knows where it’s going, listens intently, sees clearly what is and what is not relevant and can change quickly and effectively. Those are integrated cultural characteristics that require priorities such as transparency, leadership development, professional development, distributed authority and high-functioning communication norms and systems.

## 6. Stay True to the Mission

Enhance the institution’s value proposition by not allowing business-driven change to predominate. With support, faculty leaders can develop an optimal functional combination of academic quality, learning science, student success and efficiency (for the learner and for the institution) that fulfills the institution’s 21st-century mission.

## 7. Increase Efficiencies

Reducing the cost of doing business, while increasing the value delivered to constituencies, is a proactive way of life. Both ongoing, incremental improvements and major strategic innovations are required. Deal with it. Empower everyone to contribute with creativity, not fear.

## 8. Look for Partners in Unlikely Places

Find the win-win with competitors. [4][5] When an institution’s strategic assets were programs, geography and state/federal funding, its competitors were others going after the same domains. As those lines blur, the focus is shifting to broader dynamics such as demography, technology, pedagogy, cost and accountability. Former competitors may become new synergistic partners.

## Conclusion

The best solutions for each institution come from its leaders, personnel, culture, community and networks by focusing on mission impact, strategic thinking and hard-

nosed analysis, combined with deepening insights, collaborating and learning to create the future together.

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## References

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