

# COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

The Power of Brave Hearts & Bold Action  
to Spark Change in Higher Education

A collection of personal essays from  
today's most courageous leaders

CAMPUSWORKS



# COURAGE

## To courageous leaders everywhere—

Those who dare to challenge the status quo, stand firm in the face of adversity, and lead with vision, integrity, and heart: Your bold actions and unwavering commitment inspire others to rise, creating a future where education thrives and possibilities expand.

This book is for you.







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*Editorial assistance provided by a large language model (LLM).*



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INTRODUCTION

# THE CALL to COURAGE

“Courage is not the absence of  
fear, but the triumph over it.”

**Nelson Mandela**

First Black president of South Africa,  
Nobel Peace Prize recipient

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# Courageous Leadership

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Being a courageous leader is like carrying a torch, guiding others through the uncertainties of darkness.

**INSPIRATION** is the initial spark, the moment of ignition when possibilities come to life and illuminate the path ahead. **COLLABORATION** is the passing of the torch, a courageous act that invites others to carry the light alongside you, adding their energy, ideas, and skills to make it shine even brighter.

**ACTION** is the act of lifting the torch high—bold, decisive, and essential to bring light into uncertain spaces. **ADVOCACY** is the work to protect the flame, shielding it from winds of hate, inequality, and injustice, while ensuring its glow reaches those who need it most.

**PERSEVERANCE** is the steady hand that holds the torch aloft, guiding it through storms, setbacks, and long nights. And finally, **INNOVATION** sparks new light, igniting a collective brightness that spreads far beyond the initial flame, illuminating the way forward for all.

Throughout this book, we explore these six elements—*inspiration, collaboration, action, advocacy, perseverance, and innovation*—through the lived experiences and hard-won lessons of courageous leaders who have kept the fire burning through harrowing obstacles. We hope their stories ignite your own courage as you navigate the challenges ahead.



“It has always been the courageous leaders who have driven progress in higher education.”

**Liz Murphy**  
CEO, CampusWorks



# Leading Beyond Fear

**LIZ MURPHY**  
CEO, CampusWorks (FL)

Over the course of my 40-year career in higher education, I’ve witnessed profound changes that have reshaped the academy. I recall a time when the very concept of ERP systems was new—when the processes that ran the administrative backend of institutions weren’t automated or integrated. We relied on “sneakernet” and manila envelopes to share information across departments. Enrollment pressures were minimal, and the onus was on students, rather than institutions, to secure funding and navigate their education.

As I reflect on how things have changed, one truth endures: It has always been the courageous leaders who have driven progress in higher education. These leaders have been willing to challenge the status quo, push boundaries, and make bold decisions that, while uncomfortable, were essential for advancing not just their institutions but society at large. As we navigate the complexities and pressures confronting higher education today, it is this kind of courageous leadership that is not only necessary but critical for our survival and success.

## Change and Progress

When I began my career, postsecondary education was not democratized. Community colleges were often dismissed as institutions for those deemed not smart or wealthy enough to attend a “real” college. Workforce needs were met by those who did not pursue higher education, and the role of four-year institutions was clear-cut and unchallenged.

However, over the decades, I’ve seen a massive shift. Community colleges have become incubators of innovation. And four-year institutions



are now competing in workforce development—a space they once largely ignored. Student loans and the accessibility of higher education have also undergone significant transformation. Where once the burden of financing education was solely on students, today, institutions are more accountable and have a greater role in enabling access to education.

These shifts have created new stressors for higher education, particularly as we face a decreasing population of traditional college-age students. The pressure on institutions to attract and retain students has never been greater. This new reality demands a level of courage that goes beyond simply managing change—it requires leaders to actively shape the future.

### **Courageous Leadership in Action**

I've been inspired by leaders who exemplify what it means to lead courageously. One such leader is Dr. Paul LeBlanc, former president of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). I vividly remember when Paul shared his vision of transforming SNHU into a non-regional institution that could reach students nationwide, offering degrees without the need to step foot on a physical campus. At the time, this idea was revolutionary—no one else was thinking on such a scale.

Paul's courage wasn't just in his vision, but in his relentless pursuit of that vision. He convinced his organization of the societal impact this mission could have, making the seemingly impossible feasible. His leadership has had a profound impact, not just on SNHU, but on the broader landscape of higher education, proving that with courage and conviction, even the most ambitious goals can be achieved.

Another example is Dr. Karen Stout, who, a few years ago, boldly prioritized the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agenda at Achieving the Dream. This was a courageous move given the political climate. Karen's courage was rooted in her guiding principles and her belief in the necessity of advancing society through inclusivity. Both Paul and Karen were driven by a strong sense of responsibility and mission, which fueled their courage to move forward despite the challenges.

### **A Call for Courage**

In today's challenging political and economic environment, the need for courageous leadership is greater than ever. Leaders are bombarded with pressures and opinions from all sides, making it easy to become paralyzed by indecision or fear. Yet, staying grounded in one's beliefs and pushing forward, even when the path is uncertain, is crucial.

Courageous leaders understand that bold strategic plans often come with discomfort. They are willing to face that discomfort, knowing that failure to act can lead to the demise of their institution. This is not just about maintaining the status quo; it's about recognizing the new realities of higher

education and adapting to them. The demographic cliff is real, and so is the demand to remake the underlying business model that supports postsecondary education. Institutions that do not acknowledge these new realities and respond with courage may not survive.

### **The Cost of Inaction**

We are already witnessing the consequences of fear, indecision, and inaction. Institutions are struggling to survive in the current economic climate. Failure to address the challenges head-on—whether it's adapting to a shrinking pool of traditional students, embracing new technologies, or rethinking the role of higher education in workforce development—can have dire consequences.

Leaders who shy away from difficult decisions, who fail to collaborate or communicate effectively, risk not just their own positions but the future of their institutions. Leaders must demonstrate a willingness to collaborate and solve problems, even on a small scale, and to clearly articulate the reasons behind their decisions. This kind of decisiveness and transparency will drive institutions forward.

### **Advice for Aspiring Courageous Leaders**

For those new to leadership, this is a moment of great opportunity. You have the chance to ask questions, listen, and connect the dots between your institution's objectives and the challenges it faces. Courageous leadership is about staying centered, true to your guiding principles, and always being ready to adapt to change.

Engagement is key—both with your support system and with those you lead. Listen attentively, solve problems creatively, and remain open to new ideas. And remember, even after you've found a solution to a problem, the work is not done. Higher education is constantly evolving, and leaders must be prepared to evolve with it.

### **Hope for the Future**

As I look to the future, I am hopeful. I believe that our society is better when more people are educated, when there is a zeal for learning that extends beyond the classroom. Education not only enriches the human spirit but also equips individuals with the tools they need to solve problems, engage in meaningful dialogue, and make informed decisions.

In the pages that follow, you will hear stories from courageous leaders who have faced and overcome formidable challenges with unshakable resolve. My hope is that their stories will inspire you and galvanize leaders to embrace courage and rise to the challenges before us. Together, we can ensure that higher education remains accessible, relevant, and transformative for all who seek it—because our future depends on it. §

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

**Eleanor Roosevelt**  
American First Lady,  
Diplomat, Activist

## CHAPTER 1

# THE COURAGE to INSPIRE

## Inspiration

Courageous leadership begins with inspiration—the spark that ignites change, fuels resilience, and unites communities around a shared vision. In higher education, this often means connecting with the people we serve, understanding their aspirations, and creating a sense of purpose that drives collective action. It requires the courage to lead with clarity and conviction, to embrace a mission-driven approach that places students and communities at the heart of every decision. In this chapter, courageous leaders share how they’ve captured hearts and minds, sparking the flames of change to challenge the status quo and ensure their institutions remain guiding lights in an ever-evolving world.

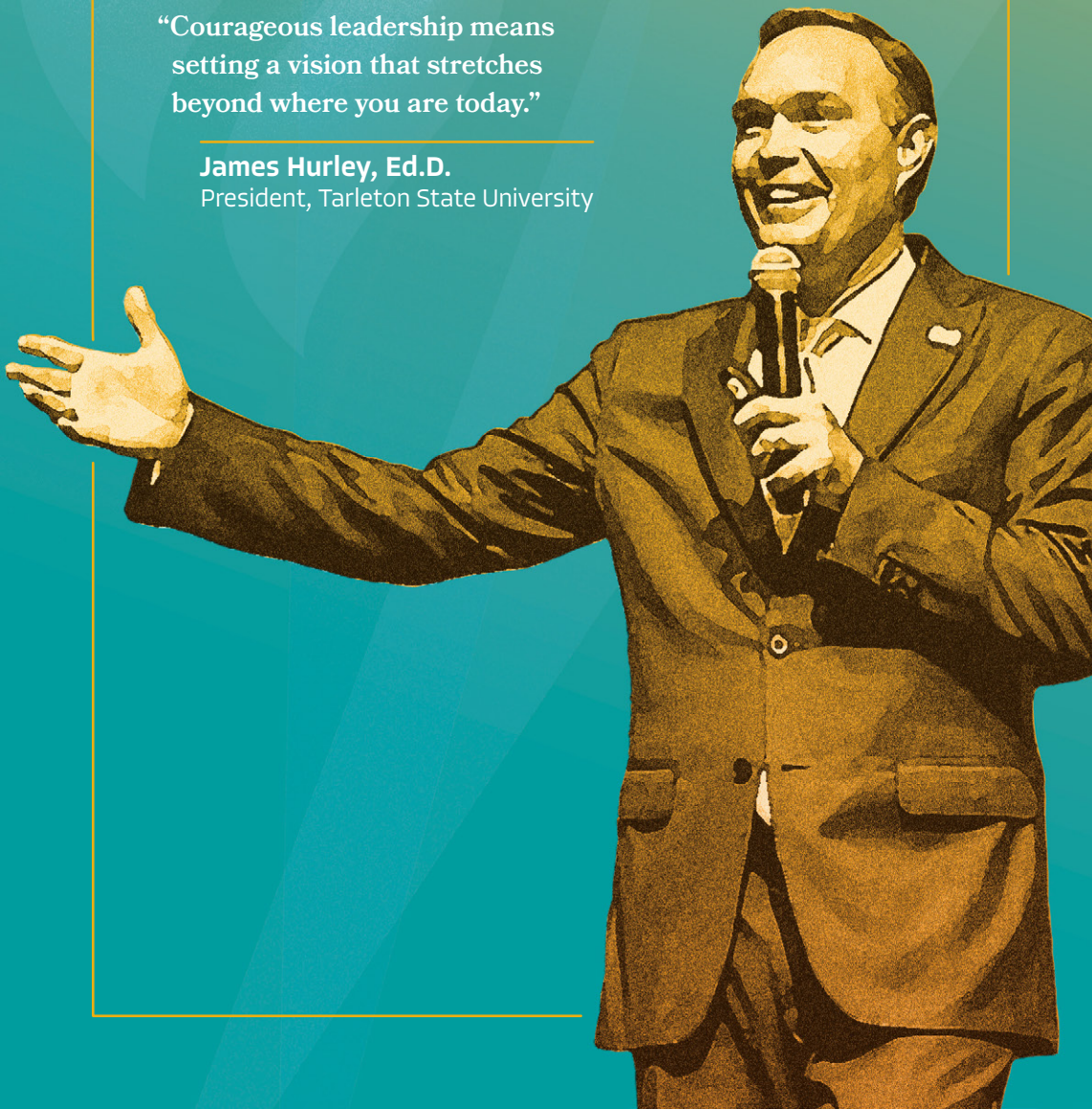
**PHOTO** Harris & Ewing/Library of Congress (stylized)





“Courageous leadership means setting a vision that stretches beyond where you are today.”

**James Hurley, Ed.D.**  
President, Tarleton State University



# Leading with Vision

**JAMES HURLEY, ED.D.**  
President, Tarleton State University (TX)

**W**hen assuming the role of president at Tarleton State, it was clear that the university had a proud legacy with unbridled potential. With cherished traditions and unwavering support in place, we outlined a vision for the future—a vision that would honor our past while guiding us to new heights. To reach our goals, we needed to understand the heart of this institution: the people. In meeting with students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members, their stories, hopes, and dreams for Tarleton State inspired our path forward.

One thing became clear early on: Tarleton’s strength is in our people, our Texans. The traditions, values, and sense of belonging here are unmatched. We knew that any strategic plan that was developed had to be rooted in these strengths. That’s why our vision wasn’t just about buildings or budgets. It was about people. It was about making sure every single student, no matter their background or circumstances, had the opportunity to succeed. This institution is built on the hard work and passion of those who came before us, and it’s our responsibility to build on that foundation for the next generation.

## Casting a Bold Vision

Our strategic plan, *Tarleton Forward 2030*, was born out of the desire to create a lasting impact. It was designed to carry us through the next decade, coinciding with our 10-year reaffirmation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). I wanted a plan that would guide us until 2030, positioning Tarleton State as the premier comprehensive university in the nation. As we were finalizing the

details, none of us could have predicted the storm that was about to hit. By March 2020, the world was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, and everything we thought we knew about the future was suddenly uncertain.

Many leaders might have paused their plans, but I felt a conviction deep in my gut: we had to move forward. The pandemic, with all its challenges, couldn't be allowed to dictate the next decade for Tarleton State. We had a momentum that I wasn't willing to lose. Faculty, staff, students, and community stakeholders had already bought into our vision, and I didn't want to let fear of the unknown take that away. We pressed forward, using our strategic plan as an anchor in the storm.

What I didn't expect was how much the plan would mean to our community during those dark days. Faculty members would stop to thank me for continuing. They told me that working on the plan allowed them to take their minds off the pandemic and to dream again. It gave us all hope—a sense that no matter what was happening in the world, we had control over our future. And that's what leadership is about, isn't it? Offering hope when the outlook is bleak, and giving people something to work toward, even when the path ahead is uncertain.

As the months went by, we encountered challenges we never could have anticipated. The pandemic changed the way students viewed learning. Those finishing middle school or transitioning into high school during COVID were now our incoming freshmen. Their expectations were different. They wanted a hybrid learning experience—both face-to-face and online—and we had to adapt. It forced us to rethink how we deliver a transformative educational experience. But it also opened new doors for innovation, and we're now leading the way in providing flexible learning options that meet the needs of modern students.

## Turning Challenges into Opportunities

The journey hasn't been without its hurdles. There were moments when we questioned whether we were aiming too high. But I've always believed that courageous leadership means setting a vision that stretches beyond where you are today. It's about looking five or ten years down the road and saying, "This is where we want to be," even if you don't have all the answers right now. It's about betting on your team, on your community, and on your future.

Our bold decisions have already begun to pay off. We've outpaced our projected growth, which has brought its own set of challenges—like having more students than we have housing for. But these are good problems to have. We're managing active construction projects and planning for the future, all while maintaining the momentum we've built.

We recently announced the launch of a feasibility study to create the College of Osteopathic Medicine. This means more than just new programs; it's a game-changer for our university and the State of Texas. We are addressing a critical need for primary care physicians, particularly in rural areas. The new college aligns perfectly with our strategic goals, from enhancing student success to making a meaningful economic impact on our region. It's the kind of initiative that sets Tarleton State apart and positions us as a leader in higher education.

## Courageous Leadership

Looking back, I realize that every step we've taken over the past few years has been guided by a single principle: courage. Courage to set a bold vision, courage to move forward when it would have been easier to stand still, and courage to inspire others to believe in themselves and in their ability to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

That's what I believe courageous leadership is all about. It's not just about making decisions for today—it's about casting a vision for tomorrow and rallying others to help make that vision a reality. It's about empowering people to see beyond their current circumstances and to believe in their potential to create something better.

At Tarleton State, we're not just here to help people survive, we're here to help them flourish. As president, it's my responsibility to make sure that every decision we make and every plan we create, moves us closer to that goal. Because in the end, it's not just about being a good leader—it's about seeing an organization's potential and having the courage to help a community realize that potential. §



“Staying the course required courage—not the kind of bravado that makes headlines, but the quiet persistence of sticking to a vision, even when it’s difficult.”

**Terry Murrell, Ph.D.**  
President, Western Iowa Tech  
Community College



# The Courage to Change Lives

**TERRY MURRELL, PH.D.**  
President, Western Iowa Tech Community College (IA)

When I became president of Western Iowa Tech Community College in 2011, our institution faced a troubling reality. Our graduation rate was just 17% with a student loan default rate of 24%. These numbers told a concerning story. More of our students were leaving in worse shape—financially and academically—than when they arrived. That reality wasn’t just unacceptable; it was contrary to our mission. And it was clear that something had to change.

Back then, we were firmly rooted in our identity as an access institution, which is important, but access alone wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough for our students to start their journey with us; they needed to finish it—with credentials in hand that would unlock better jobs, better opportunities, and better lives. This was not just about changing numbers on a report; it was about changing lives.

So, we embarked on what we called the “Completion Initiative,” a focused effort to transform how we supported our students from enrollment to completion. Our original goal was to double the number of completers. But over the course of a decade, we increased our completion rate to over 46% by 2022—a more than 270% improvement. Our student loan default rate dropped from 24% to the low teens.

## Changing the Language, Changing the Focus

One of the first shifts we made was linguistic but symbolic. We stopped talking about “graduation rates” and began focusing on “completion.” Graduation, after all, is just one path to completion. Our *learners*, a term we adopted instead of “students,” are diverse in their goals. Some pursue degrees, others certifications, and still others are here for workforce

training, English language learning, or personal enrichment. By framing our mission around *completion*, we ensured that every corner of the institution saw itself as contributing to this goal.

This shift wasn't just cosmetic; it required us to think differently about our responsibilities. If we were going to hold high expectations for our learners, we also needed to provide high levels of support. We needed to help them not just enroll, but persist and succeed.

### From Shiny Objects to Strategic Focus

Early in my presidency, I realized that our strategic plans were often overloaded with initiatives—280 at one point—which diluted focus and impact. Inspired by Aristotle's Rule of Three, I set a cap: three strategic priorities at any time. These priorities weren't just operational goals; they were deeply tied to our mission. For years, every budget request and every institutional decision had to answer one question: How does this contribute to doubling the number of completers?

That singular focus created a ripple effect. We renovated our campus, not by building new structures, but by transforming existing spaces into environments where learners could thrive. Our facilities, once overlooked and outdated, became sources of pride. Even seemingly minor changes—like fixing potholes in the parking lot or repainting walls—sent a message: “You matter. Your success matters.”

### Addressing Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Western Iowa Tech serves the most diverse and economically disadvantaged population of any community college in Iowa. While these challenges could have been excuses for low outcomes, I saw them as mandates for action. Our campus needed to be a place where every learner felt they belonged.

We launched an inclusion initiative that went beyond diversity numbers. It was about creating a culture where learners from every background could see themselves thriving here. This involved overhauling how we support learners, from tripling our mental health counseling staff to building a food pantry and health center directly on campus. We even provided every learner with a MacBook and access to subscription-based textbooks to level the playing field. For too long, some learners had access to tools for success while others didn't. We eliminated that inequity.

### Leveraging Partnerships for Impact

One of the most transformative lessons of this journey was the power of partnerships. During my first 100 days as president, I conducted a listening tour, meeting with more than a thousand people to understand our strengths and areas for improvement. What I discovered was striking: in every instance where our community praised something we were doing

well, a partner was involved. Conversely, our areas of weakness were often where we were operating alone.

That insight reshaped how we approached collaboration. We stopped working with vendors and started building partnerships. Whether it was Apple, which helped us become a distinguished institution for technology, or local hospitals that enhanced our clinical programs, we sought relationships that were mutually beneficial and deeply engaged in our mission.

### The Courage to Stay the Course

Leadership in higher education comes with challenges—budget constraints, political pressures, and the need to show results quickly. But real change takes time. It took us a decade to achieve our ambitious completion goals. Along the way, there was resistance. Some faculty feared that focusing on completion meant lowering academic standards. Others were skeptical of initiatives like universal technology access.

Staying the course required courage—not the kind of bravado that makes headlines, but the quiet persistence of sticking to a vision, even when it's difficult. Courageous leadership, I've learned, is about doing what's right by your mission, even in the face of criticism. It's about holding high expectations and providing the support necessary to meet them.

### Real Impact, Real Lives

One of the most humbling moments in this journey was calculating the human impact of our work. By increasing our completion rate, more than 1,750 learners—people who might have dropped out—earned their credentials over a decade. That's 1,750 individuals now contributing to their communities, supporting their families, and living better lives because we refused to settle for 17%.

Today, we are building on the lessons of our Completion Initiative with a focus on inclusion and belonging. It's a long road, and the work is far from done. But I believe the same principles apply: a clear vision, a focused strategy, and the courage to stick with it. To me, courageous leadership is not about chasing quick wins; it's about making lasting change. And that makes all the difference. §



“Leadership is not about making popular or easy decisions. It is more often about making tough choices that prove, in the end, to be wise.”

**Sandra Kurtinitis, Ph.D.**  
President, Community College  
of Baltimore County



# The Courage to Reconnect

**SANDRA L. KURTINITIS, PH.D.**  
President, Community College of Baltimore County (MD)

In 1998 the Board of Trustees of the three community colleges of Baltimore County made the difficult decision to create one college out of the three independent institutions. When I arrived in 2005 as the fifth chancellor of the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in its short life span of seven years, I quickly realized that achieving this goal without radical change would be a challenge. Faculty and staff were disoriented and unhappy, and the new institution still had three of every policy, position, and process.

Although the college was too small to be a “system,” its executive structure of chancellor, multiple vice chancellors, and three independent campus presidents was not aligned with the needs of the new college. College leadership was far removed from the daily rhythms of life and learning on the campuses. This disconnect not only isolated the leadership team from the staff but also hindered collaboration between the campuses, leaving CCBC fragmented and in need of greater cohesion.

Having already served for ten years as a president experienced in leading a college with multiple sites, I knew the power of unified leadership to provide one clear vision and one strong voice. I also knew my leadership style was not about sitting in an office and sending messages down the chain. Having been an English professor for 22 years, I needed to be on the ground, engaging directly with faculty, staff, and students. These personal connections, along with an understanding of the everyday experience of front-line professionals serving and supporting students, both in and out of the classroom, prompted me to consider a vastly different leadership model for my new college.

Within a month of arrival, I proposed to the Board a new organizational structure designed to dismantle the college's hierarchical leadership levels. In short, I would demote myself from chancellor to president and replace a 15-member executive team with four traditionally focused vice presidents: Administration, Academic Affairs, Enrollment, and Advancement. It was a bold move, but one which the trustees were willing to support.

While this massive change shocked some, many more were heartened by it. A flattened leadership structure made a strong statement about forging a partnership between a newly minted “boots on the ground” executive team along with faculty and staff. All of us would recommit to our open-door mission and together make support for our students Job #1!

### **Fostering a Culture of Connection**

With the Board's support of this restructuring plan, the cultural shift within our college community was immediate, strengthening connection across the campuses. Rather than excluding faculty and staff from transformational conversations, we engaged them, illustrating the strength of leadership at every level. We rallied around a central theme: “The power of one, built on the strength of three!” Translation: one great college built from the combined strength of three fine institutions. No matter the role each of us played at the institution, we bonded around the need to build a strong college-wide model designed to support all students with a single set of policies, procedures, and organizational structures. Real leadership in the community college world is never about impressive titles and fancy office suites. Our job satisfaction comes from our dedication to our “open door” mission. Not only do we love it, we live it! Leadership is not about making popular or easy decisions. It is more often about making tough choices that prove, in the end, to be wise.

That same philosophy guided us through one of the greatest challenges we have faced as an institution—the COVID-19 pandemic. Like every other educational institution, we shut down our campuses in March 2020 when Governor Hogan ordered mandatory closure of all Maryland schools, colleges, and universities. We moved to a virtual universe as quickly and efficiently as we could. By April, however, a devastating saga had begun to unfold before our eyes as 4,200 students—out of the 15,000 registered for the Spring semester—withdraw...and we quickly figured out why.

### **The Courage to Act**

CCBC's demographics show that 85% of our students are low-income or minority and come from economically challenged communities. Most of these students, therefore, had no Wi-Fi, no technology, and no skill to enter a digitized world. This crisis quickly showed us that our mission now was

not just about delivering education; it was about ensuring equity in access to education. In this time of crisis, a new challenge presented itself and a new commitment emerged. Too many students had already slipped through the cracks, and we were determined to find a way to ensure that no one who came to us seeking educational opportunity—computer literate or not—would be left behind.

By May, we reached a critical decision. We would not simply protect ourselves from COVID by hiding behind a virtual wall while students unfamiliar with a virtual world simply disappeared. I challenged my leadership team to join me in an effort to keep our campuses fully open to serve these students, and they, without hesitation, said, “Yes.” So, while 80% of our 50,000 students continued to study online, the other 20% (roughly 8,000-10,000 students who would otherwise have quietly disappeared during those COVID years) were able to sit in “covidized” on-campus classrooms to continue their education.

We reopened our campuses and set to work. By Fall semester, 30% of all classes offered at CCBC were onsite with class sizes reduced to 8-10 students to ensure social distancing. We created a financial model to maximize college, state, and federal relief funds to create a Tuition Free program to support nearly all of our students as well as to purchase tens of thousands of masks, COVID tests, and other equipment necessary to fight COVID. We held COVID shot and test clinics in gymnasiums and installed huge air filters everywhere. Faculty, clad in protective gear resembling spacemen, volunteered to teach in classrooms across all three campuses as did professional and classified staff in major service areas. In addition, we expanded Wi-Fi access to parking lots and outdoor spaces as well as opened large computer centers on all campuses to ensure access to those who had no technology or study space at home.

None of this was easy, and there were many moments when the magnitude of the task felt overwhelming. We followed every state regulation to the letter to achieve the support we needed. As grueling and challenging as this two-year saga was, all of us at CCBC take rightful pride in our accomplishment. The commitment of faculty and staff during this time was little short of inspiring. We forced no one to return to campus during those dark days, but plenty of volunteers stepped forward to do so. Whether on campus or online, CCBC faculty and staff kept teaching, supporting, and guiding students through one of the most difficult times we have experienced as an institution.

For us at CCBC, the pandemic was not only hard work; it was “heart work.” Because of the courage and dedication of our college community, thousands of students continued their education. And the business side of this equation also brought positive news. Remaining fully open during the



pandemic meant that CCBC's enrollment decline dipped only to the minus 7% range rather than minus 20+% experienced by so many of our colleagues.

### **The Heart of Leadership**

This experience reinforced something I have always believed: leadership is not about making only popular decisions; it is about responding to circumstances to make the right decisions. It is about having the courage to act when the stakes are high, and lives are impacted. At the core of CCBC's leadership philosophy is the image of drawing circles that pull people in rather than building walls to keep them out. It is about creating a sense of community where every voice is heard and valued as well as finding ways to insist that laughter and lightheartedness are not forgotten. We had found ways to stay connected with our sprawling community of 3,000 employees stretched across 8 sites. I held weekly "Desk-Side Chats" from my office computer to share information with the college community as well as to keep us connected. Throughout the pandemic, we continued to conduct our regular business both virtually and onsite: holding college-wide forums, leadership meetings, academic school meetings, etc. in virtual format. We made silly videos to keep spirits up and found ways to hold special events like Commencement, our annual Gala, student town halls, etc. rather than cancelling them. We made sure that everyone knew what was happening; understood why decisions were being made; and could count on the college to support them. None of these measures was solely about keeping people informed; they were intended to remind all of us that we were all in this together.

I am proud to say that CCBC's challenging origin is now a fact of history. Our college has matured into a powerhouse in our region and our state. We served 51,600 students last year in over 300 credit and continuing education programs. By year's end, nearly 13,000 of them completed something important to themselves and their families: a degree, certificate, transfer or workplace certification. As we are a community college...community is our first name! Thus, upon completion, 93% of all our graduates return to their communities to get jobs, buy houses, pay taxes, and send their children to local schools. This is the true animation of the community college mission, and no other sector of higher education can make this claim.

At CCBC we try to practice strong and visionary leadership dedicated to making creative things happen rather than finding reasons why they cannot, in short, turning "administrator as barrier" into "administrator as facilitator." We work to celebrate the rich diversity of our students and our staff, taking pride in our open-door mission and striving to meet the needs of the students sitting in our classrooms today rather than those we served in decades past. Fundamentally, we know that the classroom is a far more

important place on the campuses than the executive offices. And as the song goes, "we work hard for the money," fully aware that none of us would have a job if we did not have students to serve. §

“Mission-driven leadership doesn’t just apply to how one approaches the presidency or administrative duties but should apply to every aspect of life, including our personal lives.”

**Mordecai Brownlee, Ed.D.**  
President, Community College of Aurora



# The Mission-Driven President: Navigating Challenges with Purpose and Courage

**MORDECAI IAN BROWNLEE, ED.D.**  
President, Community College of Aurora (CO)

Serving as a college president has been the most vulnerable role of my career. The position itself holds immense power and influence. If you noticed, I didn’t say *I* had incredible power and influence; the position does. Courageous leadership shouldn’t be found in what personal power one can showcase at a given moment or measured by a decision one is willing to take. Instead, it lies in one’s effectiveness in fulfilling the responsibilities required by the institution to advance its mission and achieve strategic goals set forth by the strategic plan, which holds everyone accountable with key performance indicators.

As I frequently share with our college community, we must all embrace the responsibility that our roles require and act accordingly. Such action may differ significantly from what our innate nature may desire or how we might address an opportunity. In service to the transformation of others as educators and college executives, it is imperative to recognize that this work is not about us and our personal preferences. It’s about our role and responsibility to the institution.

## Bravery and Boldness: Leading Institutions to Long-Term Success

In my journey thus far, I have been privileged to serve some powerful and influential leaders. However, not all have been effective leaders



throughout their administrations. The common thread shared amongst those who proved effective over the long term was their ability to understand that the institution's mission stands above all else. To say it another way, no person, entity, or agenda should come before an institution's defined purpose, as declared by the mission statement. Courageous leadership demands college executives to have a keen awareness of the critical mission bestowed on them and the proper systems to evaluate every opportunity and action associated with the institution to ensure alignment.

This book presents an excellent opportunity to define what it means to be brave and bold to change higher education. First, let's start with what it is not. Being *brave* is not about being willing to accept the brunt of criticism for making a decision you believe is correct. Especially if you have failed to utilize a system of proper checks and balances, including data, advisory council(s), and environmental analysis to inform your decision-making thoroughly. Being *bold* is not about taking action to advance personal agendas, making decisions rooted in one's own biases, building a personal empire that edifies oneself, utilizing college resources to take advantage of perceived cool ideas that are not centered on advancing the institution's strategic plan, or failing to center all actions in alignment to key performance indicators established by the institution.

Instead, bravery and boldness are tools that, when utilized strategically, can lead the institution to record success, market responsiveness, or even a rebirth in relevance. Being brave is about accounting for the unknown and developing a plan centered around the community's and society's emerging needs. It is a tool that is laser-focused on leading an institution to properly equip itself to thrive in disruptive markets by reimagining the value and purpose the institution provides for learners. Bravery is about embracing the essence of innovation and creating institutional systems for testing concepts before scaling them, encouraging fellow educators to embrace failure as a beautiful gift that teaches without fear of their livelihood or the inability to test new concepts again and again.

At the Community College of Aurora (CCA), my own bravery came into play during the first six months of my presidency when I realized our institution did not have an established system for determining and governing the utilization of resources in alignment with the institutional strategic plan. Furthermore, our institution had failed to properly align all aspects of operations with the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) principles of accreditation. Consequently, our institution was not prepared for our 10-year comprehensive regional accreditation. However, I bravely informed our college community of our realities and successfully requested a one-year extension with HLC to delay our institution's comprehensive review.

Over that year, our institution developed a planning budget, innovation, and assessment cycle to properly align spending and resource allocations with the institutional strategic plan while having proper key performance indicators in place to identify opportunities for further innovation or inform the need for resource allocation to ensure the fulfillment of the strategic plan. Furthermore, we broke down all barriers and systems that led to silos and competing agendas that prevented our alignment with HLC's principles of accreditation. Following our comprehensive review, I am proud to share that our peer reviewers and, ultimately, HLC identified no findings and approved CCA becoming an Open Pathway institution.

Being bold is about developing an institutional culture committed to embracing its students' needs and steering clear of distractions and detractors who desire to create disruption rather than build strong institutional foundations in the next era of higher education. It is about embracing artificial intelligence and the brilliance it provides the institution and its learners by creating new means for supporting learning accessibility challenges, native language barriers, and instructional support. Being bold is about grasping that higher education has entered a new era, and college mergers, consolidations, and closures will become routine.

At the Community College of Aurora, we are boldly pursuing equitable student success by deeply integrating artificial intelligence into our learner experience. Recently, CCA has incorporated a live chatbot feature that has effectively increased our ability to answer prospective and current student questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Furthermore, this integration has improved our ability to connect with our diverse communities by translating content on our website into various languages. This is critical for our institution as we have over 60 countries represented within our student body.

Another example of AI integration can be found in our Office of Disability and Equity. There, our team has implemented Kurzweil Education and Read&Write to enable our ability to make our curriculum accessible to all students. Our institution firmly believes and understands that to remain relevant in the new era of higher education, AI integrations are critical to the learner experience to ensure community colleges remain committed to access and economic mobility.

Boldness, in combination with bravery, can empower institutions to reimagine a new era of institutional existence and, consequently, help us beat the odds and survive the predicted impacts of environmental factors that might otherwise shutter our doors.

## Mission-Driven Leadership

As a mission-driven president, success is rooted in a steadfast commitment to ensuring that every institutional action aligns with and advances the mission. When an opportunity, decision, or action aligns with the mission, the institution has clearance to proceed, as such action enables the fulfillment of strategic objectives and goals established by the strategic plan. However, suppose an opportunity or initiative is not aligned with the institutional mission. In that case, the institution should not pursue it because all misaligned actions that occur within or by the institution are wasteful and ultimately a distraction because they fall outside the mission's scope.

I was faced with one such decision when our institution reviewed the results of our comprehensive academic review, which revealed that several of our programs were leading our learners to low-wage and low-demand jobs in our market. With an institutional mission statement declaring a college-wide commitment to providing high-quality instruction and support services to prepare students for transfer and employment, CCA found such outcomes unacceptable. Mission-focused, our faculty led the closure of 30 programs of study that were no longer beneficial to our learners based on market demand shifts, low program enrollment, and low completion rates.

My commitment to the institution as we led this historic effort was to ensure no layoffs, dismissals, or furloughs were experienced by completing this work. By eliminating unemployment concerns for our faculty, our educators could innovate to the deepest levels necessary to ensure mission alignment within our academy. Utilizing data and abiding by regional accreditation standards, faculty members whose programs were impacted would be provided with sections to teach in in-demand programmatic areas where students demand additional sections. Furthermore, our institution has developed new programs of study in areas such as construction management, engineering, and the historical development of several Bachelor of Applied Science programs to ensure our institutional relevance based on market demand.

A mission-driven approach to leadership contributes to the institution's longevity and enables the tools of boldness and bravery to be utilized effectively.

## The Power of a Personal Mission

Looking back, my journey has taught me that mission-driven leadership doesn't just apply to how one approaches the presidency or administrative duties but should apply to every aspect of life, including our personal lives. To that end, I have found it helpful to develop a personal mission statement that serves as an ever-present compass, and I challenge you to do the same.

My personal mission statement is, "Mordecai Ian Brownlee empowers the lives of people and develops systems that empower the lives of people."

Leadership begins with our individual journeys and our families. A mission-driven person can serve a mission-driven home, enabling us to be mission-driven leaders in all our roles and relationships. As for my family, my wife, Daphne, and our children have developed a family mission statement, identified four key values that govern our family decisions, and have a strategic plan that includes objectives, goals, and data points. Twice a year, our family has a vacation where we review our strategic plan, assess the environmental realities impacting our ability to fulfill our plan, and adjust accordingly. Every Sunday, my wife and I hold our family meeting to review our family budget and determine spending and investments over the next week.

I am sharing this information with you not to encourage you to adopt the same structure or habits. Instead, it highlights a very important point I would like to close with—we should not do more for the institutions we serve than we do for our own families. Leadership begins at home. I wish you, your family, and your institution the absolute best. §



“If you want to make a meaningful impact, you must capture both the hearts and minds of the people you serve.”

**Cynthia Roth**  
President and CEO  
West Virginia University Foundation



# Capturing Hearts and Minds to Drive Change

**CYNTHIA ROTH**  
President and CEO, West Virginia University Foundation (WV)

When I was first recruited to higher education twenty years ago, including the last eleven at the West Virginia University Foundation, it was a new field for me as I didn't come from higher education—I came from healthcare. My background as a nurse and hospital administrator shaped the way I viewed leadership and change. In healthcare, courageous leadership means making hard, time-sensitive decisions because lives depend on it. You assess, gather data, identify best practices, create a plan, and execute it—quickly. Moving into higher education philanthropy required me to adapt, but one lesson has remained true: if you want to make a meaningful impact, you must capture both the hearts and minds of the people you serve.

At its core, philanthropy is about connection. It's about listening to donors, understanding their passions, and helping them see the long-lasting impact they can make. During my interview for this position, I remember sitting down with a group of six generous, deeply committed university supporters. But when I asked them if they felt appreciated, they all shook their heads no. That was a lightbulb moment for me. These were people who had given so much to WVU and WVU Medicine, yet they didn't feel properly stewarded. It was clear to me that this role wouldn't just be about raising funds; it would be about inspiring a renewed sense of value and purpose in every donor.

## Fostering Lasting Connections

One lesson I brought from healthcare was the importance of listening and responding with a sense of urgency. At WVU Foundation, we had to move beyond transactional interactions and start creating meaningful connections with our donors. They needed to feel that their contributions weren't just noticed, but that they were deeply valued. We know that people have countless options when it comes to where they give their money—there are thousands of nonprofits doing incredible work. So why should someone choose to give to WVU? The answer is simple: we help them see the legacy they can create through education.

For so many of our donors, education was the turning point in their lives. First-generation graduates often tell me, “Without my education, I wouldn't be in the position I am today.” They want to give back because they know the transformative power of education. Our job at the Foundation is to make sure they feel connected to the mission, to the students, and to the university's future.

Over the years, we've embraced new ways to strengthen these connections—from overhauling our business processes for greater efficiency to leveraging new technologies to personalize our outreach to donors. Imagine the impact of a donor receiving a video from a student whose scholarship was made possible by their gift. It's authentic, heartfelt, and a reminder of the real difference they are making. We also do birthday videos and special gifts for donors celebrating milestone birthdays—personal touches that show we see them as partners in our journey, not just benefactors.

## Creating a Culture of Accountability and Trust

Capturing the hearts and minds of donors also required establishing a culture of accountability. When I arrived, there was no strategic plan guiding our efforts. I couldn't believe it. How could we build trust without a roadmap? So, we set a bold course, establishing our first five-year strategic plan, and now, over a decade later, we're preparing for our third. This commitment to planning and transparency has strengthened our mission focus and inspired confidence among supporters who see we're not just asking for money—we have a vision, and they're a crucial part of it.

In philanthropy, it's not just about how much you raise, but how well you steward what you've been given. Since I joined the Foundation, we've more than doubled our annual fundraising, from \$101 million to \$282 million. And what's even more exciting is that we're giving back more than ever before. We used to return nearly \$80 million a year to the university. Now, we're giving back nearly \$135 million annually. This is real money that goes directly into supporting WVU's students, faculty, and programs. And it's all possible because our donors believe in what we're doing and feel connected to the impact they're making.

## Building a Brighter Future—Together

The success we've achieved at the WVU Foundation isn't just about the numbers—it's about the relationships we've built. By listening to our donors, understanding their passions, and showing them the transformative power of their generosity, we've created a culture where people feel proud to give. They know their investment will make a lasting difference, not just for the university, but for generations of students to come.

Courageous leadership in philanthropy is about capturing hearts and minds to drive change. When you do that, the impact is limitless. [§](#)



“If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.”

African Proverb

## CHAPTER 2

# THE COURAGE to COLLABORATE

## Collaboration

Collaboration is the passing of the torch, a courageous act that invites others to carry the light alongside you, making it shine even brighter. It requires the courage to embrace vulnerability, build trust, and empower individuals to bring their unique strengths to the flame. In higher education, where complex challenges demand multifaceted solutions, passing the torch to others—whether colleagues, teams, or trusted “outsiders”—can transform fractured efforts into unified momentum. By valuing diverse perspectives and healing dysfunction, leaders create synergy that illuminates new pathways. In this chapter, you will hear from leaders who have embraced the courage to collaborate, sharing the torch to strengthen their institutions, amplify their missions, and turn challenges into opportunities for meaningful progress.





“Empowerment doesn’t mean giving up responsibility; it means sharing it.”

**Brian Knetl, Ed.D.**  
President, Waubonsee Community College



# Empowering Leadership

**BRIAN KNETL, ED.D.**  
President, Waubonsee Community College (IL)

I believe that a leader’s success is not defined by the decisions they make alone, but by their ability to cultivate an environment where leadership is a shared responsibility, and others are trusted and empowered to lead alongside them. This philosophy has guided me from my early days as a new administrator to my current role as president of Waubonsee Community College. It has taken courage to adopt and stay committed to this empowering leadership style, but I have found that the most effective way to lead is by listening deeply, trusting my team, and fostering a culture where everyone has a stake in the institution’s success.

When I first stepped into leadership roles, I didn’t fully appreciate how formative my past experiences would be in shaping my leadership style. Early in my career, I was fortunate to work under leaders who empowered me, even long before I had earned the right to that trust. They handed me the reins to projects that were essential to the institution’s mission, allowing me to lead initiatives, experiment, and yes, sometimes fail. That trust and confidence, early on, helped me grow as an administrator and an educator. It’s a gift I’ve carried with me throughout my career, and it’s one that I’ve tried to pass on to others.

## Changing the Culture for Empowerment

At Waubonsee, I knew from day one that I wanted to model the style of leadership that was so formative for me. I wanted to build a culture where people were empowered to make decisions, took ownership of projects, and contributed their unique insights and expertise.

One of the most important steps I took in this journey was conducting a 100-day listening tour when I first arrived. I called it the “Tour de



Waubonsee”. It was a concept that reflected my love for cycling but also set the tone for how I wanted to lead. I spent those days listening and learning. I talked with faculty, staff, and students about their experiences, their frustrations, and their hopes for the future. On the 101st day, I held an all-college meeting to reflect back what I had heard. This wasn’t just an exercise in gathering information; it was about building trust and letting people know that their voices mattered. It was the first step toward reshaping the culture into one where collaboration and empowerment were not just ideals but lived realities.

I quickly learned that empowerment doesn’t happen overnight. In a room full of highly capable people, it can be tempting for a leader to be the one with all the answers. Yet, I believe it’s important to resist that temptation. Courage, in this context, means trusting others to lead, even when the stakes are high. It means stepping back so others can step forward. This style of leadership can feel risky, but I have seen firsthand the transformative results it produces.

For example, one of the proudest moments of my time at Waubonsee so far came from an initiative I didn’t even start. At a national conference, my team and I were discussing how our current policy on dropping students for non-payment wasn’t serving them well. The conversation was casual, and I simply asked some questions: “Why do we do it this way? Is there a more student-friendly approach?” A few weeks later, one of the administrators who had been part of that conversation took the initiative to form a team to review the policy. She didn’t wait for me to “direct her”—she took action. That team eventually brought their proposal to our President’s Cabinet, and we’re set to implement a new, more student-centered policy next semester.

This moment exemplified what I’ve been working toward: a culture where people feel empowered to act, where they don’t wait for the president’s permission to lead. It’s a small but significant example of how trusting others, even in seemingly small decisions, can lead to big changes.

### Embracing ‘Intelligent Failure’

Of course, trusting your team doesn’t mean everything will go smoothly. There are risks to this approach to leadership. Empowered leadership often leads to challenges and mistakes, but I’ve learned to view those as opportunities to learn and grow. I talk often about what is referred to as “intelligent failure”—the idea that we should do our due diligence before taking risks, but we should also be willing to move forward, knowing we won’t always have all the answers. It takes courage to say, “Let’s try this, and if it doesn’t work, we’ll learn from it, and figure out how to fix it.” Empowered leadership is about creating a safety net, not by avoiding risk but by encouraging responsible risk-taking and learning from the results. That’s how we build resilience, both as individuals and as an institution.

The courage to lead with open ears and an open heart means being vulnerable. It means letting people know that while I’m the president, I don’t have all the answers, and I don’t need to. I surround myself with talented people who bring diverse perspectives, and I trust them to help guide the institution forward. Empowerment doesn’t mean giving up responsibility; it means sharing it. It means creating a space where others feel comfortable and supported stepping into leadership roles, knowing that their contributions are valued.

As I look toward the future, I’m committed to continuing this journey of empowering leadership. It’s not always easy. It takes time to build a culture of trust, and it requires constant reinforcement. But I’ve seen the results—better decisions, stronger relationships, and a more engaged community. §

“People judge us not by our intentions  
but by our actions.”

**Tuesday Stanley, Ed.D.**

Past President  
Westmoreland County Community College



# Healing a Dysfunctional Leadership Team

**TUESDAY STANLEY, ED.D.**

Past President, Westmoreland County Community College (PA)

In my years of leadership, I’ve learned that a team’s health can make or break an organization’s mission. When I took on the presidency at Westmoreland County Community College in 2014, I was deeply committed to building a healthy, cohesive team. I wanted a leadership team that was rooted in trust, driven by shared purpose, and dedicated to lifting each other up in service to our students and community.

However, as many leaders discover, you don’t always get to build your team from scratch. You inherit strengths and struggles alike. When dysfunction shows up—whether it’s gossip, competition, or a lack of accountability—it’s the leader’s role to set things right.

Reflecting on the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni, I recognized the telltale signs in my own leadership circle. Distrust, fear of conflict, and inattention to shared goals are not just harmful traits—they’re impediments to our mission. I had to make a choice: address these behaviors head-on or risk their ripple effects on every corner of our college community.

## Reimagining Hiring

My first lesson came in recognizing that while we can’t always control the team we inherit, we can control the team we build. Early in my presidency, I heard a speaker make a simple but profound point: people judge us not by our intentions but by our actions. That prompted me to rethink our hiring approach, especially for leaders who would shape our culture. Rather than relying on traditional questions about strengths and weaknesses, I



started using situational questions to see how candidates handled real challenges. I wanted to hear their stories of integrity, resilience, and growth. I learned so much more about candidates by asking questions like, “What would you do if you made a mistake that went unnoticed?” Through these questions, I gained insights into their problem-solving, ethics, and willingness to learn. I wanted a team that would lift each other up, not tear each other down.

### Accountability Beyond Individual Goals

To strengthen our culture of accountability, I revised our annual performance reviews to include contributions to team success. It wasn’t enough for my cabinet members to achieve their department goals; I wanted them to actively support their peers. One instance comes to mind when our vice president of enrollment was overwhelmed by a backlog of transcript evaluations. The VP of academics stepped in, rallying faculty and deans to help clear the workload in record time. This spirit of mutual support not only solved the immediate problem but reinforced a culture of teamwork and shared purpose.

Recognition became a cornerstone of our culture. At the start of every cabinet meeting, I asked my team to share stories of how they supported each other. These moments were more than mere acknowledgments—they set the tone for collaborative conversations and underscored the value we placed on teamwork. Another memorable practice we adopted was the “bragging buffet,” where team members could publicly celebrate their achievements and highlight each other’s contributions. This simple act of celebration bonded our team and kept our focus on shared victories.

### The Power of Alignment

Breaking down silos is vital to any organization’s success, and our college was no different. Inspired by *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, we adopted the “huddle” concept—brief, action-oriented meetings that kept us aligned. These gatherings were not just about updates; they were about problem-solving in real time. For instance, our enrollment and retention teams would hold twice-weekly huddles to review metrics and tackle issues as they arose. By joining these huddles, I saw firsthand the power of alignment, where solutions were immediate and support was unwavering.

Of course, courageous leadership often requires us to make tough decisions, including parting ways with those whose behavior no longer aligns with our values. While these conversations are never easy, I approached them with empathy, understanding that nobody aspires to become a “toxic” employee. I found that framing these discussions around finding a better cultural fit allowed for mutual understanding and respect. Sometimes, the most compassionate thing we can do as leaders is help others find an environment where they can truly thrive.

### Embracing a Time for Change

The recent challenges in higher education have left many leaders stretched thin, operating with reduced teams and heightened stress. I believe this is the perfect time for leaders to shape the culture they envision. We can use these moments to cultivate trust, empower our teams, and tap into hidden talents within our own walls. By taking these steps, we create a workplace where collaboration, respect, and accountability are woven into the very fabric of our mission.

A sentiment from Patrick Lencioni sticks with me: “It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.” If we, as leaders, commit to fostering healthy teams, we not only improve our organizations but create a lasting impact that transcends our tenure. §

“When an institution needs a strategic shift or a bridge between permanent leadership, the fresh, unencumbered perspective of external interim leadership can open doors to new possibilities.”

**Christine Hammond, Ph.D.**

Past President, Mid Michigan College  
Interim President, College of DuPage



# The ‘Outsider’ Advantage

**CHRISTINE HAMMOND, PH.D.**

Past President, Mid Michigan College (MI) (2014-2020)  
Interim President, College of DuPage (IL)

As I reflect on my journey in higher education leadership, I’ve come to appreciate the value of being an “outsider”—both as a college president and as an interim leader helping institutions navigate moments of transition. This perspective offers a unique vantage point. When an institution needs a strategic shift or a bridge between permanent leadership, the fresh, unencumbered perspective of external interim leadership can open doors to new possibilities.

In my experience, a college thrives on collaboration, where the president and leadership team work as a unit, balancing insights and talents to move the institution forward. But in challenging times, sometimes this symbiotic relationship isn’t enough. As leaders, we face sleepless nights contemplating the “why” of our institution’s struggles—why, despite our best efforts, do we fall short of our goals?

The questions that keep us awake at night often reveal the core issues needing our focus. In my years as a college president, I found the willingness to ask “Why?” brought clarity and, ultimately, solutions. Here are some critical reflections for leaders on the “outsider advantage” of interim leadership.

## Embracing the “Why” in Institutional Challenges

The first step in resolving issues is confronting the hard truths about what’s not working. I recall grappling with questions that probed beneath the surface of our operational challenges: Why are our goals not being met? Why do specific processes drain our team’s time and energy? These are fundamental questions yet answering them requires more than introspection. It calls for a willingness to see the institution’s structures, systems, and routines with fresh eyes.



When external leaders enter, they bring an impartial viewpoint—one that can honestly evaluate processes without attachment to past decisions or internal politics. Asking these tough questions helps shift focus from immediate challenges to the broader context and the institution’s strategic goals. Bringing in external expertise to ask and answer the “Why?” allows the leadership team to escape the trap of “we’ve always done it this way,” and it positions the team for sustainable improvement.

### Strategizing “How” to Move Toward Optimal Performance

Once we identify the “why” of our struggles, the next step is determining “how” to address these issues effectively. The power of external interim leadership lies in its objectivity and purpose-driven approach. These leaders arrive focused, not distracted by day-to-day demands, ready to address the issues at hand. They help clarify what can be achieved in the short term and, importantly, offer a plan for long-term stability.

This is where an external interim leader’s distinct skills come into play. Their purpose is not only to stabilize but to lay the groundwork for future success. They often take a step-by-step approach, tackling operational inefficiencies, aligning systems, and ensuring a seamless handoff to the permanent leadership team. The interim leader can engage in an objective analysis of the institution’s constraints, pinpoint specific areas of improvement, and provide actionable insights without getting entangled in institutional history or hierarchy.

### Identifying the “What” in a Successful Partnership

Bringing in an external leader isn’t without challenges. An institution may resist due to concerns about culture fit, costs, or the potential for interim leaders to focus too narrowly on short-term fixes. I’ve found it helpful to approach these concerns openly, involving stakeholders in understanding the institution’s current needs and articulating the role of an interim leader in addressing those needs.

To create a strong foundation for this partnership, institutions should consider specific questions:

- 1 Values Alignment:** Does this external leader or organization share the institution’s values? Alignment is crucial for trust and effectiveness.
- 2 Expertise Fit:** Are they equipped to handle our unique challenges? Their background should match the institution’s specific needs.
- 3 Commitment to Long-Term Impact:** Are they invested in sustainable growth, even beyond their tenure? A successful interim leader will plan not only for immediate improvements but also for continued progress once they transition out.

### Addressing Concerns and Building Trust

Integrating an external leader may cause initial unease among staff who fear disruptions to their workflow or feel overlooked for leadership roles. Transparency is key. Explaining the reasoning behind bringing in external expertise, especially in times when specialized skills are needed, helps build understanding and openness.

The role of the interim leader, in my experience, is not to replace or overshadow the existing team but to support them. With this focus, the external leader can help prepare staff for future roles, mentoring potential leaders and equipping them with the skills and confidence they need to lead effectively.

### Preparing for an Interim Leader’s Success

When preparing for an interim leader’s arrival, it’s essential to lay out clear objectives. I’ve seen the best results when leaders set up structured introductions, ensuring the interim leader can quickly engage with the campus community and access essential information. It’s also vital to establish regular progress checkpoints to keep the interim work aligned with institutional goals. This approach not only empowers the interim leader but also reassures staff and stakeholders that their work aligns with the institution’s strategic priorities.

Reflecting on these experiences, I’m convinced that leveraging the strengths of external interim leaders provides a distinct advantage. Their fresh perspective, dedicated focus, and objective insights bring a powerful catalyst for institutional growth and optimization. For leaders in higher education, this approach offers a unique blend of adaptability and strategic depth, providing institutions with a pathway to not just navigate change but to thrive in it.

As I look back on my own journey, I’m grateful for the opportunity to bring this “outsider advantage” to institutions striving to realize their fullest potential. And I hope that in sharing these insights, more leaders can embrace the transformative potential of interim leadership—not as a temporary fix, but as a valuable step toward lasting progress. §

“By pooling resources thoughtfully, we can focus on our mission and unite our communities under a shared vision of sustainability and success.”

**George Pernsteiner**

Past President, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association & Chancellor Emeritus, Oregon State University System



# Stronger Together

**GEORGE PERNSTEINER**

Past President, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (CO) & Chancellor Emeritus, Oregon State University System (OR)

The past fifteen years have been a time of great challenge and change for American higher education. From the massive budget cuts of the Great Recession to the explosive growth in enrollment of students who historically had not pursued postsecondary education, to COVID and artificial intelligence, our colleges and universities have struggled mightily. As I reflect on this time, I see how vital it is for higher education to change and, perhaps even more crucially, to change collaboratively. The urgency for a shift in how we leverage shared services to sustain and strengthen our institutions has become undeniable. Michael Horn's prediction years ago that many American colleges would face closure or merger within ten years may not have fully materialized as foreseen, yet his insights were strikingly accurate. Since 2016, more than 120 colleges have closed, and financial pressures continue to bear down on many more. Leading the Oregon University System and later serving as president of SHEEO, I witnessed these realities up close and felt deeply the pressing need for adaptive solutions.

The story behind these pressures is familiar. Enrollment numbers, once robust, began to plateau and, in many cases, decline, painting a challenging picture, particularly for smaller institutions that must contend with the magnetism of larger universities. Today's steep tuition discounting, especially at smaller private colleges, often means collecting barely half of the sticker price. Add to this the approaching demographic cliff, which will bring a significant drop in 18- to 24-year-olds, and it becomes clear: only the most innovative, resource-efficient institutions will survive and thrive.



Beyond these financial and demographic trends, I've also seen how public attitudes have shifted. The college degree, once a golden ticket to career advancement and a middle-class lifestyle, is now viewed by some as an unnecessary detour, too costly for its perceived value. This skepticism complicates an already uphill battle for institutions, especially those struggling to maintain enrollment. Against this landscape, doing things the way we've always done them is no longer an option. The conclusion is clear: we need transformative change, and shared services offer a powerful path forward.

### **Facing the Realities and Pressures**

I know well the pain of budget cuts, having led universities through the Great Recession. As a leader, making decisions about what and where to trim—or sometimes slash—without harming core academic and student services is painful work. Early on, the go-to choices are often freezes on non-essential travel, purchases, and hiring. While effective in the short term, these measures hardly sustain us in the long run. Sooner or later, we find ourselves grappling with permanent cost reductions in administrative and support functions. While necessary, these cuts can trigger cultural and morale challenges across campus, creating ripple effects of uncertainty and resentment.

But in these tough times is an opportunity—one that goes beyond mere cost savings. Shared services can help us preserve what matters most: educating students and advancing knowledge. By pooling resources thoughtfully, we can focus on our mission and unite our communities under a shared vision of sustainability and success.

### **Building on What We Do Best**

As I navigated through difficult budget decisions, it became clear that leading through crisis means keeping sharply focused on fulfilling our institution's purpose, emphasizing what makes it unique and what it does best. For many of us, this centers on our true core, our faculty—their knowledge, dedication to students, and drive for discovery. They are at the heart of what we do. But I also had to acknowledge that our institutions are more than places of learning; they are vital community centers and economic engines, facts that add layers of complexity to every decision.

Even as we protect our academic core, we must recognize that not everything needs to be managed independently by each institution. The vital role of education and the centrality of faculty does not dictate that every service needs to be handled in-house. There can be flexibility in how we approach our support functions and even academics. Through shared services, we can maintain quality while refocusing our resources on the academic priorities that truly define us.

### **Shifting to a Culture of Shared Services**

I've learned that creating a culture of shared services requires a courageous shift in thinking. Traditionally, higher education has been anchored in the idea of independence—a belief that to be a “true” institution, all services must be managed internally. Understandably, managers and staff are often protective of their roles, believing their contributions uniquely uphold the institution's culture and standards. Yet shared services can yield greater efficiencies, redirecting resources back to our core mission.

A key to making this shift is ensuring that shared services are seen not as an outsourcing of responsibility but as a collaborative effort rooted in an institution's collective mission—a mission shared by its members. Working with institutions to establish shared service models, I have seen how transformative an inclusive, transparent approach can be. By engaging faculty and staff in the reimagination of roles and systems, we shift perceptions, helping people see themselves as part of a broader, more sustainable mission.

This transformation is never immediate or easy. It requires consistent, clear communication and an open process that invites feedback and participation. When everyone is involved, shared services can become a part of an institution's identity, breaking down traditional barriers and creating a collective commitment to thriving amid financial pressures.

### **Sustaining the Path Forward**

There are challenges not only to establishing shared services but also to sustaining them. Once services are shared, it's critical to maintain open communication with all stakeholders. Without ongoing persistent engagement and commitment, any initial enthusiasm can wane, leading departments or individuals to revert to familiar, independent practices and losing both the quality and financial gains sharing brought.

I've seen the pitfalls of state mandates pressing colleges into shared services for efficiency's sake—mandates that often stir resistance. But when we take time to articulate the purpose and advantages of these changes and invite staff into the conversation, resistance can soften. The goal of shared services is never to cut corners; rather, it's to focus resources where they are most needed—in our classrooms, labs, and communities. Keeping this process alive and adaptable requires transparency, persistence, and a shared commitment to directing resources to where they matter most to fulfill our educational mission.

### **The Courage to Lead Together**

Stepping into shared services takes courage. It calls for a leader willing to ask tough questions about what must change and able to rally a community around a new direction. It demands a willingness to step away from

the status quo, to challenge long-held assumptions, and to inspire a vision grounded in a commitment to sustainability. And, crucially, it requires that people trust others.

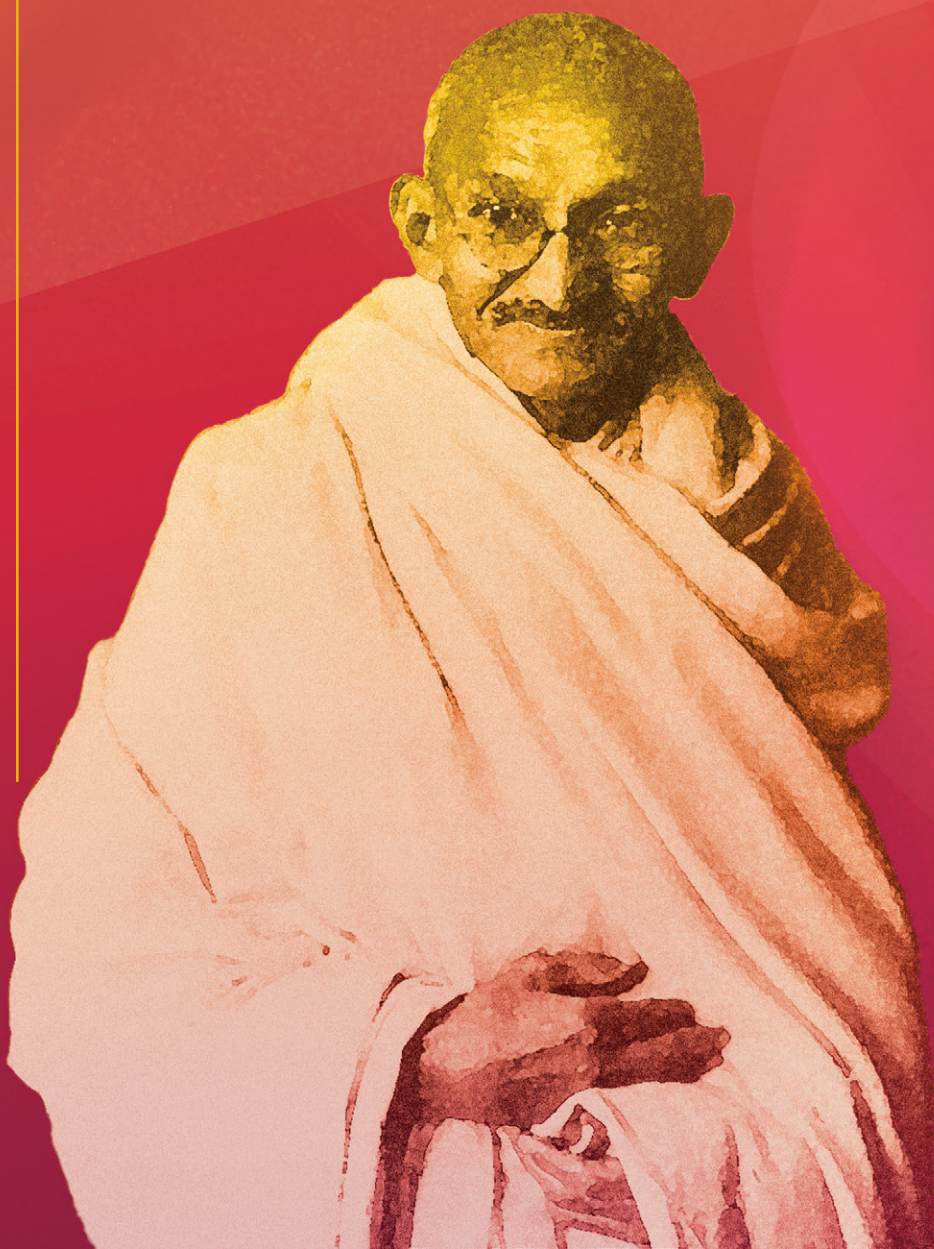
As I reflect on my years in higher education, I am more convinced than ever that we are stronger together. In a time of financial constraint, we owe it to our students, faculty, and communities to pursue every avenue for efficiency and innovation. Shared services offer not just a financial strategy but a testament to our commitment to the future of higher education.

Though we face great challenges, I remain optimistic. With courageous, collaborative leadership, we can create institutions that not only endure but flourish—institutions that honor their mission while adapting to a rapidly changing world. By working together, we can meet these challenges head-on and emerge more resilient, bound by a shared vision and commitment to the transformative power of education. §



“The future depends on what  
you do today.”

**Mahatma Gandhi**  
Indian political leader, activist



## CHAPTER 3

# THE COURAGE to ACT

### Action

Bold and decisive action is essential to bring light into uncertain spaces. In times of uncertainty, courageous leaders step forward with clarity and purpose, making tough decisions that may be unpopular but are essential for progress. In higher education, this means safeguarding organizational health, navigating crises, and prioritizing long-term impact over immediate comfort. In this chapter, leaders share stories of pivotal moments when their courage to act sparked transformative change, reminding us that the flames of progress are kindled through bold decisions and fearless determination.

**PHOTO** Elliott & Fry, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, Stylized



“I’ve found that transparency, when done thoughtfully, helps to build trust, even when the news is difficult.”

**Michael Frandsen, Ph.D.**  
President, Wittenberg University



# Navigating Crisis with Clarity

**MICHAEL FRANDSEN, PH.D.**  
President, Wittenberg University (OH)

Today was one of the hardest days of my career. It was the day we notified people that their positions are being eliminated. These decisions are painful, but necessary. Recently, Wittenberg University’s Board of Directors passed a resolution to eliminate 24 full-time equivalent faculty roles, 45 staff positions, and five majors with their corresponding minors and two athletic programs after the current academic year, all to balance the operating budget by fiscal year 2027.

As a leader, this is one of the most difficult parts of the job. But we can’t continue as we are. We must honor our 180-year history while embracing the need for change, all without losing our sense of community and support.

The guiding principle I rely on is our students. Every decision must minimize the impact on their experience, education, and time with us. How do we continue to prepare them for their futures? That’s our North Star—why we exist as a university. And it’s the people—faculty and staff—who make that happen.

Not everyone agrees with these decisions, but in a complex organization like ours, which is a primarily residential college, we must strike the right balance. We aim to minimize disruption to students while also ensuring our employees aren’t overburdened by constant demands. Our focus must be on what truly adds value and discontinue what doesn’t.

## Cost-Cutting with an Eye on Tomorrow

Balancing immediate cost reductions with long-term goals of academic excellence and student success is no easy task. At a recent board meeting, I gave each member a needle threader to symbolize the fine line we walk. Whether it’s our communication, financial, or program plans,



maintaining service and excellence while being fiscally responsible is a delicate balancing act.

We're in a people business. People drive both what we do and what it costs. To maintain high quality, you need high-quality people. While we've outsourced services like IT, food, and janitorial work, we've brought some things back in-house, such as janitorial services in residence halls, to foster personal connections between staff and students. We must avoid short-term fixes for long-term problems. For example, suspending retirement contributions or temporary pay cuts won't address our structural cost issues. This isn't unique to Wittenberg, and I've worked hard to steer the board away from such band-aid solutions.

Instead, we're narrowing our focus to what matters most and leveraging strategic partnerships to keep moving forward. We've expanded partnerships for online courses, and students can now earn dual degrees in physics and engineering through our collaboration with Indiana Tech University. Our partnership with Erie Insurance offers students internships and job opportunities, and our partnership has led to the creation of a risk management certificate program. We're also providing tuition benefits for Erie employees' dependents. Locally, we've launched a preferred partner program with businesses to create more student opportunities.

### Transparency Builds Trust

Transparency is essential in times of crisis. I've been regularly meeting with faculty, the Faculty Executive Board, and the Student Senate Executive Committee. I've answered numerous emails and shared communications frequently. As a "finance guy," I know I have to be mindful of how I communicate, remembering who the audience is and avoiding jargon and acronyms. Repetition and consistency are key to making sure everyone understands. We also work with a crisis communication partner to ensure our messages are empathetic and honest about the challenges we face.

Recently, Wittenberg was featured on a podcast by the College Viability Network, sparking a lot of social media attention. One of our faculty members was quick to point out that everything mentioned in the podcast had already been shared with the faculty. That made me feel our efforts are working.

While people who join Wittenberg from other institutions often praise our transparency, it's never quite enough. There's always a feeling that more should be shared. I understand the desire for more information, especially in uncertain times, and we strive to provide as much clarity as possible while balancing the need for discretion and timing. I've found that transparency, when done thoughtfully, helps to build trust, even when the news is difficult.

### Self-Care as a Leader

I care deeply about our faculty and staff, so this decision has weighed on me heavily. I recently met with a faculty member whose position is being eliminated, and their child, a junior, will lose their tuition benefit next year. Another faculty member up for tenure is also losing their position. I try to be empathetic and supportive, but I know it's hard for them to feel that coming from me as the leader right now.

I'm fortunate to have an incredibly supportive life partner who helps me navigate these challenges. For other leaders facing similar financial crises, I encourage you to find people you can talk to, whether a family member or a colleague. Don't try to do this alone—it's too much to bear. You need a support system.

Leading through tough decisions isn't easy, but with the right focus and support, we can steer our institutions toward a better future. §

“I’ve learned not to fear being the first, as long as I’m confident in my direction. When decisions are made with students’ best interests at heart, we are on the right path.”

**Vanya Quiñones, Ph.D.**

President

California State University, Monterey Bay



# Leading Through the Unknown

**VANYA QUIÑONES, PH.D.**

President, California State University, Monterey Bay (CA)

**A**s a scientist, I’ve always trusted data. But leadership has taught me that data alone is not enough—you must also trust your gut. Together, data and instinct shape a vision that others can rally behind.

At this moment, higher education is facing challenges that test even the most experienced leaders. Institutions confront the demographic cliff, competing for a shrinking pool of students while managing rising operational costs. Navigating these waters requires bold decision-making that ensures our institutions’ long-term viability while guiding people through uncertainty. The challenge lies in doing this without causing panic, maintaining trust and transparency, and focusing on what can be controlled in an unpredictable future. In such moments, trusting your vision and instincts becomes crucial.

## Learning to Trust Yourself

Visionary leaders often step into uncharted territory, which can be daunting. But I’ve learned that courageous leadership begins with trusting yourself.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when I was provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at Pace University, this lesson became clear. In January 2020, long before the broader public grasped the full implications, I saw the need to prepare. Trusting both the data and my instincts, I approached the university leadership and urged action. Although some believed I was overreacting, I knew we couldn’t afford to wait.



Thankfully, they listened. By March, our faculty were certified in online teaching, and Zoom was fully operational before the shutdown began. While other institutions scrambled to adjust, we smoothly transitioned to online learning and reopened by summer 2020.

### Sharing Your Vision

My experience at Pace solidified my leadership philosophy: always think ahead. Many make decisions based on current data, but I focus on where we're headed. I often ask, "What will this decision look like in the future?" Gaining buy-in can be challenging, especially when others don't share your perspective. Helping your team understand the "why" and "how" of a vision is essential, as is maintaining transparency and open communication.

I've learned not to fear being the first, as long as I'm confident in my direction. When decisions are made with students' best interests at heart, we are on the right path. Leadership means balancing student success with team well-being, ensuring progress without overwhelming those who make it possible or altering our institution's core values.

### Adapting Your Approach

Being a visionary can be challenging, especially when asking others to rethink their ways of working. When I joined Cal State Monterey Bay, I sensed that the university wasn't operating sustainably. Like many institutions, we faced enrollment pressures, budget constraints, and inefficient systems. I saw from the data that enrollment had been declining for nearly seven years without corresponding budget adjustments.

While I had previously used data to highlight needed improvements, I knew a unique approach was necessary for Cal State Monterey Bay. I launched a 100-day listening tour, meeting with faculty, staff, and students. By analyzing these conversations, I identified patterns that highlighted the need for more communication, improved student experience processes, and a sustainable budget model.

Working with my leadership team, we set targets for reductions and strategic investments, aiming to stabilize our finances while maintaining a reserve. Transparency was key; we held town halls, maintained an active university budget committee, and communicated regularly through email updates. These efforts helped us navigate change, and I'm pleased to report a recent enrollment increase—the first in seven years. Watching our new students march down the main road at convocation was a powerful reminder of our commitment to stability and student success.

Now, other universities look to our team for guidance as they face similar challenges.

### The Power of Collaboration

Higher education traditionally moves slowly, yet the world around us is evolving rapidly. As someone who has worked in academia for many years, I have collected many tools and recipes for success. But as with real-life cooking, we sometimes need to adapt our recipes to the ingredients we have readily available. Each institution is different and has its own unique opportunities and challenges. As a leader, it is important for me to take time to understand the culture and learn the strengths of my leadership team, and then to adapt the recipes I have developed through my years working in different places to what is best suited for my current institution. Of course, trust is a fundamental ingredient, as it grounds us to face challenges together.

To me, trust means empowering team members to make decisions and fostering collaboration across the institution. Coming from a farming family, where everyone worked for the collective good, I've applied that collaborative mindset to our team dynamics, promoting partnerships across our divisions of Academic Affairs, Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, Administration and Finance and the Office of the President. I encourage leaders from different areas to connect, aligning their strengths toward a shared vision.

As a leader, when you understand the strengths of each team member and can align them all together, your institution moves faster toward strategic goals and can be more agile in responding to emerging issues. You end up with greater power as a whole than if each individual person is acting on their own. I've achieved this at multiple universities through restructuring committees to encourage communication among mid-level leaders, solving problems efficiently and creating lasting impact. True leadership is not imposing authority, but creating a team that fosters a collaborative culture to empower progress toward collective goals.

Commencement is a day that exemplifies all of these efforts. Not only does it bring together leaders, faculty and staff from each of our divisions to celebrate the milestone of graduation with our students and their supporters, but it also symbolizes the collective work we have done together year-round. By empowering our community to make decisions, aligning goals across the institution and working together, we are successful in graduating our students to the next phase of their careers or education, and ensuring they have the tools they need for long-term impact across our region and state.

### Advice for Today's Leaders

Leadership is both a privilege and a journey of growth. We are all works in progress, constantly learning from mistakes and growing stronger. Courageous leadership means having a vision, trusting your instincts, leveraging what you've learned, and aligning your team's strengths to achieve goals. If you can do this while prioritizing what's best for students, you can lead your institution through any challenge. §

“Courageous leadership involves making tough decisions that may not be immediately popular but are essential for the sustainable advancement of our institutions.”

**Christine Hammond, Ph.D.**

Past President, Mid Michigan College  
Interim President, College of DuPage



# Making Unpopular (But Essential) Decisions

**CHRISTINE HAMMOND, PH.D.**

Past President, Mid Michigan College (MI) (2014-2020)

Interim President, College of DuPage (IL)

The late 1960s and early 70s, a period of profound economic prosperity spurred by the return of GIs post-World War II, witnessed an explosive growth in college enrollments. This era saw students flocking to campuses, craving the quintessential “college experience,” and it spurred a campus building boom across the nation. As Arthur Cohen, author of *The American Community College*, noted “there was a time when a new community college appeared on the landscape every single week.” Private institutions weren’t far behind, erecting buildings that, decades later, would be revered as the “ivy-covered walls” cherished by many alumni.

Fast forward to my tenure as president at Mid Michigan College, and I found myself grappling with a legacy of those decades—particularly, the future of our beloved but beleaguered Harrison Campus. Since its establishment in 1965, the campus had grown organically, with each new program prompting the construction of yet another extension. The sprawling hallways and maze-like arrangement of offices and classrooms were a testament to a bygone era of expansion. However, these structures were aging, inefficient, and expensive to maintain. The preliminary estimate for a much-needed renovation was a staggering \$23 million—a cost that would deplete our reserves and potentially alienate students at our more favored Mt. Pleasant Campus due to the financial burden.

The decision before us was monumental and required a type of leadership that transcended administrative acumen—a courageous leadership



rooted in vision, empathy, and pragmatism. After extensive consultations and strategizing sessions with our CFO and other stakeholders, we proposed a bold solution: demolish 40,000 square feet of the existing structure (about 25% of the classroom building) and renovate the remainder. This plan was not merely a financial decision; it was a transformative vision that demanded letting go of cherished spaces and routines, including the very room where our Trustees had convened for decades.

Implementing such drastic changes was akin to asking our community to swallow a “bitter pill.” Yet, the renovation that followed not only enhanced the functionality of the Harrison Campus but also preserved its historical essence, thereby continuing to serve our college community effectively.

Reflecting on this experience, my advice to other college leaders facing similar challenges centers on several pivotal strategies:

- 1 Explore All Options:** Diligently work through various scenarios, understanding that each choice leads to distinct outcomes.
- 2 Engage in Open Dialogue:** Discuss issues extensively with stakeholders before finalizing decisions. While input is crucial, ultimately, the decision rests on the leader’s shoulders.
- 3 Communicate a Compelling Vision:** People cling to familiar narratives; presenting a new, inspiring vision is essential to facilitate change.
- 4 Secure Resources Wisely:** Ensure you have access to adequate financing and skilled professionals. If feasible, set incentives to align with your strategic timelines, but remain grounded in realism.

Jerry Kramer, the former Green Bay Packers legend, once reflected that his college years were “especially sweet because of the positive, hopeful atmosphere of a college campus.” As leaders, our role is to foster this atmosphere not just through maintaining physical spaces, but by nurturing an environment where new generations can thrive amidst change. Courageous leadership, therefore, involves making tough decisions that may not be immediately popular but are essential for the sustainable advancement of our institutions. §

“Our ability to create a thriving virtual organization hinged on three fundamental pillars—values, trust, and purpose.”

**Liz Murphy**  
CEO, CampusWorks



# Building a ‘Happy Campus’ in a Hybrid World

**LIZ MURPHY**  
CEO, CampusWorks (FL)

When CampusWorks wrote its last rent check in February 2013, I knew we were stepping into uncharted territory. Going fully virtual back then felt like a bold experiment, but it was a move that would eventually shape the fabric of who we are. Over the years, we’ve grown from a small team you could count on two hands to an organization with hundreds of talented people across North America. This shift didn’t just change the logistics of our work; it transformed how we connect, collaborate, and support one another across distances.

Our journey to becoming a virtual company taught us valuable lessons about embracing flexibility and collaboration across time zones, and it has allowed us to tap into a national talent pool that we couldn’t have accessed otherwise. We learned how to create a tight-knit team where miles don’t interfere with the sense of belonging and purpose that binds us.

Fast forward to 2020: when the pandemic abruptly forced colleges and universities to go remote, leaders across higher education turned to us for insights. They wanted to know how we had managed to sustain high performance and a connected culture in a virtual world. There were concerns: Would productivity drop? How would leaders keep their teams connected and motivated when they couldn’t be in the same room? Reflecting on our experience, we realized that our ability to create a thriving virtual organization hinged on three fundamental pillars—values, trust, and purpose. These principles have not only allowed CampusWorks to flourish but have also enabled us to make a lasting impact on the institutions we serve.



## Creating a Culture Built on Values

Building our people-first culture started with a clear articulation of our Guiding Principles, and it's these principles that set the tone for who we are and how we work. When new team members join, they receive a card that lays out our mission, vision, and values. From day one, this reinforces what it means to be part of CampusWorks. Over the years, we've found that values aren't just statements on a wall—or, in our case, a webpage. They are beliefs we live out every day.

Our values aren't abstract ideals but action points. We embed them into our work by encouraging team members to nominate colleagues who exemplify these principles in their daily actions. This creates a regular rhythm of celebrating our values and keeps them present in our team's minds. Each year, our Guiding Principles Exemplar Award highlights those who embody these values, reinforcing the importance of values-driven work.

For us, values are part of performance management too. Every quarter and in annual reviews, team members assess how well they are living out our Guiding Principles, and managers provide feedback through this lens as well. We've seen the impact of this commitment reflected in our Trust Index Survey—91% of our employees feel that CampusWorks' executives embody our core values. Living our values has helped us maintain a strong culture and grow authentically as a team, no matter the distance between us.

## Leading with Trust to Drive Accountability

One of the greatest myths about remote work is that it erodes productivity. Many leaders worry that if they can't "see" their employees, they can't trust them to get the work done. But we've learned that a culture of trust generates accountability, and we treat each team member with trust and respect from the start. This approach has led to impressive results—our Trust Index Survey found that 94% of our employees are willing to go above and beyond to meet goals.

Trust is something we work at, from our policies to our daily interactions. We communicate clear policies about how we operate and what we expect, but we don't micromanage. Instead, we focus on outcomes—evaluating the quality, timeliness, and consistency of our work. By encouraging team members to take an active role in their professional development, we empower them to set individual goals that align with our mission and foster growth. This focus on results, rather than minute-to-minute oversight, has helped our team feel supported while achieving exceptional levels of productivity.

## Aligning People with Purpose to Achieve Results

The fear that virtual work will impact service levels and results is common, but our experience shows otherwise. In a recent survey of our clients, CampusWorks received a satisfaction rating of 9.2 out of 10, with 100% saying they'd refer us to others. I credit this high satisfaction to a sense of purpose and alignment that runs deep within our team. When people are connected to a mission and believe in the work, the results speak for themselves.

One of the ways we build this sense of purpose is by celebrating the successes of our team and showing how their work directly impacts our clients. Whether it's a project that improves enrollment outcomes or a consulting engagement that helps an institution refine its strategic vision, we share these stories with the entire team. These celebrations underscore the value of our work and keep us all connected to a common purpose.

We recently held a "Values Alignment" exercise at an in-person meeting to help team members see how their personal values align with our mission and Guiding Principles. Exercises like this create a powerful bond between individual purpose and organizational mission, reinforcing why we do what we do. Purpose-driven work, we've learned, generates not only satisfaction but also remarkable results.

## Building a Happy Campus in a Hybrid World

Transitioning to a virtual or hybrid workplace doesn't come without its challenges, but for CampusWorks, this shift has unlocked new possibilities. By grounding ourselves in values, trust, and purpose, we've created an environment where people thrive, productivity soars, and our impact on higher education continues to grow. For organizations striving to adapt to the hybrid world, I encourage you to lean into these three pillars. When they are in place, the benefits ripple outward to employees, clients, and the communities we serve. §

“I raise up my voice—not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard.”

**Malala Yousafzai**

Pakistani activist,  
Nobel Peace Prize recipient



## CHAPTER 4

# THE COURAGE to ADVOCATE

### Advocacy

Advocacy shields the flame, ensuring its warmth and light reach everyone. Courageous leaders stand against the winds of hate, bigotry, and prejudice, championing justice, equity, and inclusion. They create people-first cultures where every individual feels seen, valued, and empowered to thrive. In higher education, this means ensuring that opportunity is accessible to all and fostering communities built on respect and humanity. In this chapter, you will hear stories from leaders who have stood boldly for these ideals, showing how their courage to advocate has transformed organizations and inspired others to carry the light forward.

**PHOTO** Ms. Yusufzai/Cabinet Office kantei.go.jp, Stylized



“Courageous leadership is never easy, yet it’s always necessary.”

**Del Anderson Handy**  
Chancellor Emerita,  
City College of San Francisco



# When Necessary, Be a Disruptor

**DEL ANDERSON HANDY**

Chancellor Emerita, City College of San Francisco (CA)

As a young Black woman navigating the realities of segregation in Mississippi, I faced bigotry head-on. One encounter that stands out occurred during my undergraduate studies at Alcorn College, where a history professor openly espoused racist beliefs. At just 19 years old, I took a stand, channeling my outrage into words and penning a manifesto that led to the temporary shutdown of my college in 1957. This act of defiance didn’t come without consequence—I was expelled, banned from attending any college in Mississippi, and my academic transcript bore 16 units of “F.” But that experience lit a fire within me, a fire that would fuel my determination to lead and transform higher education in profound ways.

Courageous leadership is never easy, yet it’s always necessary. Becoming the first woman to lead San Jose City College and later the first African American and woman to serve as Chancellor of City College of San Francisco came with challenges, but each obstacle solidified my belief in the power of disruption when the stakes are high. Through my memoir, *Jump Time!*, I’ve tried to share the lessons I learned along the way and hope they inspire others to overcome challenges and effect meaningful change. They include the following:

## Master the Ability to Communicate

Speaking out against that history professor was one of the first lessons I learned about the power of words. I’ve always believed that effective communication is a leader’s most valuable tool. Throughout my career, I found that words, when used purposefully, can drive change, inspire hope, and spark action. My experiences have taught me that every leader should prioritize mastering this skill because articulate communication can amplify our influence and make our visions resonate.

## Invest in People

I'm proud to have invested in others because, as a leader, I understood the importance of nurturing talent. Over my career, at least twelve of my mentees went on to become college presidents, and two even served as high-level administrators in the Obama Administration's Education Department. I truly believe that when we invest time and effort into developing our teams, we create a foundation for lasting, collective success.

## Embrace Your Weaknesses

One of the greatest strengths a leader can have is the humility to recognize and work on their weaknesses. In every role, I acknowledged my limitations and tackled the gaps in my skills and experience. Sometimes, I felt intimidated, especially when stepping into unfamiliar roles. I knew that others might question my qualifications, and occasionally, I did too. However, I trusted in my ability to learn and grow. In job interviews, I was always open about my shortcomings. By doing so, I conveyed my commitment to growth and earned respect, along with opportunities that stretched and shaped me.

## Hone Your Listening Skills

Listening is the unsung hero of leadership skills. I've always viewed listening as a form of respect. It not only affirms the worth of others but also enriches the pool of ideas we draw from. My graduate education introduced me to Theodore Reik's "listening with the third ear," which taught me to hear beyond the spoken word, grasping the deeper layers of meaning. This approach has helped me understand and empathize more deeply, qualities I consider crucial to effective leadership.

## Take Reasonable Risks

My willingness to take risks paved the way for many of my achievements. I remember applying for the position of Chief Academic Officer at Skyline College, a role that combined the responsibilities of two full-time vice presidents. It was a daunting prospect—I had been a student services administrator, and I had already faced rejection twice for similar roles. Yet, I knew that the experience would be invaluable. Though I took the risk of rejection and the even bigger risk of being hired without prior instructional leadership experience, the opportunity was worth the leap. The experience challenged me, but the growth was undeniable.

## Be a Disruptor When Necessary

I believe in the power of constructive disruption. My expulsion from college was a pivotal moment that led me to reflect and redefine my path, eventually leading to some of my proudest accomplishments. I was only three months into my role as Chancellor at City College of San Francisco when

I was invited to co-lead a \$150 million bond campaign to improve district facilities. Despite never having led a campaign of that magnitude, I saw the poor conditions at some of our campuses and knew this was a chance to make a difference. I took the plunge, learning along the way, and that experience deepened my commitment to disruption when the circumstances called for it.

## Do More Than Required

The initiative to improve systems and facilities at every institution I served was driven by my desire to create lasting impact. One of my proudest achievements was pioneering the concept of computer-assisted advising software to help students transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions more seamlessly. My proposals for funding were rejected multiple times by the U.S. Department of Education, but I found support at the University of California, Irvine, where the program known as ASSIST was born. This initiative became widely adopted across California, and I'm proud of the positive impact it has had on countless students.

In 1999, I joined CampusWorks as the Founding Vice President for Strategic Planning, becoming their second employee. Looking back, I'm honored to know that my journey has left a legacy there as well. My time at CampusWorks reinforced my belief that each of us has the power to transform adversity into opportunity, challenges into achievements, and to disrupt for the greater good.§



“Fear often stems from a lack of understanding—  
a gap between the desire to do what is right  
and the knowledge of how to navigate the  
complexities of our current political climate.”

**Michael H. Gavin, Ph.D.**  
President, Delta College



# Education for All

**MICHAEL H. GAVIN, PH.D.**  
President, Delta College (MI)

The work of advocating for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in higher education has always felt like a natural extension of who I am. The path that led me to take a stand against anti-DEI legislation and to lead the Education for All initiative was shaped long before I ever set foot in the President’s Office. It was born out of a lifetime of experiences that taught me to see the world through a lens that recognizes the power structures in place, how they oppress, and the importance of resisting them.

Growing up in a diverse neighborhood, I learned early on how institutions, including educational ones, can perpetuate systemic oppression through policy. As a child, I didn’t have the language to describe what I was witnessing, but the disparities were clear. My K-8 classrooms were a mix of white, Black, and Hispanic students, but by high school, those same students had been segregated into different tracks. My honors classes were almost entirely white, while my friends from the neighborhood were placed in regular or remedial classes. The only spaces where we came together were on the sports fields and in the lunchroom. These experiences left an indelible mark on me, highlighting the ways in which our systems divide rather than unite.

This awareness carried into my professional life, informing my approach as an educator and leader. When I first encountered the divisive concepts legislation introduced under an executive order, I wasn’t entirely surprised. This legislation, which threatened to undermine DEI initiatives across the nation, felt like the inevitable result of a growing politicization of higher education. It was a stark reminder of the trajectory our country was on—a trajectory that I knew, from my own experiences, was dangerous and wrong.

The catalyst for Education for All was less a moment of realization and more an accumulation of frustrations. Many of us in leadership positions, including college presidents and national stakeholders, were disheartened by the lack of action from major organizations in response to the executive order. We saw the potential consequences for our institutions and our students, yet the response was muted, likely out of fear. This fear is real and understandable; it stems from concerns about funding, institutional autonomy, and the very survival of our colleges in increasingly hostile environments. But it was clear to me that inaction was not an option.

Education for All began as a grassroots movement, a way for those of us who were deeply concerned to come together and resist the tide of anti-DEI legislation. Our mission was—and is—to provide support, resources, and a collective voice to those who might otherwise feel isolated and powerless. We knew the risks, especially for institutions in states where these laws were most aggressively pursued. Yet we also knew that if we did nothing, we would be complicit in the erosion of the very values that higher education should stand for.

Leading this initiative has not been without its challenges. One of the most significant obstacles has been the fear that pervades our institutions. There is fear of financial retribution, of political backlash, and of personal and professional consequences. This fear can lead to stasis, to a reluctance to act, even when action is desperately needed. Yet, what I've found is that this fear often stems from a lack of understanding—a gap between the desire to do what is right and the knowledge of how to navigate the complexities of our current political climate.

This is where Education for All comes in. Our work is not just about resisting bad legislation; it's about empowering leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to advocate effectively within their own contexts. We provide professional development that helps leaders understand the sociological and legal nuances of these issues, so they can push back in ways that are both strategic and impactful. A concrete example of this is our work in helping institutions interpret divisive concepts legislation. By understanding the weight of the words in these laws, we've been able to guide institutions on how to remain compliant without compromising their commitment to DEI.

One of the greatest successes of Education for All has been our ability to lift up the voices of those who are most affected by these laws, particularly in states where the political climate is most hostile. We've done this by creating spaces where these leaders can speak freely and confidentially, sharing their experiences and strategies with one another. We've also produced videos and other resources that have been used by states to advocate for their own DEI initiatives, demonstrating the power of collective action.

As I reflect on this journey, I am often asked how I balance the risks with the need for bold action. The truth is, I don't spend much time worrying about the risks to my career. I was fortunate to be hired by a board that fully understood and supported my commitment to DEI from the outset. This alignment between my values and the values of Delta College has been crucial in allowing me to lead with authenticity and conviction. But more than that, I believe that the work we are doing is not just a professional obligation—it's a moral one. It is about ensuring that our institutions live up to their promise of providing education for all people, regardless of the color of their skin, their socioeconomic background, or any other factor that might otherwise marginalize them.

Looking to the future, my hope is that we can shift the national consciousness to recognize the true power of public education. We need to move away from the idea that institutions like Harvard are the gold standard and instead focus on the potential of community colleges and other public institutions to deliver on the promises of democracy and equality. This requires a new level of commitment to funding and support, as well as a reevaluation of the role that higher education plays in our society.

In the meantime, Education for All will continue to do the work of supporting leaders, advocating for students, and resisting the forces that seek to divide us. This is not political work; it is human work. It is about lifting people up, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to achieve a better life through education. §



“The journey of courageous leadership is not about avoiding the storm but rather about learning to steer through it, guided by a moral compass that points towards unity, understanding, and resilience.”

**Cary Israel, J.D.**  
District President Emeritus,  
Collin College



# The Courage to Unite

**CARY ISRAEL, J.D.**  
District President Emeritus, Collin College (TX)

In the span of my 25-year tenure as a college president, I’ve weathered storms that tested the bounds of my courage and resolve. From dealing with an Ebola alert and a shooting on campus to confronting hate, bigotry, antisemitism, and prejudice, the challenges were formidable. These crises were compounded by public disagreements with board members, community leaders, faculty, and staff over our policies and actions. Each confrontation was a trial by fire, a test of leadership under intense pressure.

These experiences, however daunting, taught me invaluable lessons about the essence of leadership in times of crisis. True leadership requires a blend of courage, tenacity, and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to bring people together. In an era marked by division, the path forward is often shrouded in uncertainty. Yet, I firmly believe that the solution lies in our collective needs, in forging a “fusion” of diverse perspectives into a cohesive whole that reinforces our democratic ideals and the strategic vision of our institutions.

In practical terms, this fusion manifests as a commitment to inclusivity and open communication. During my presidency, I initiated several platforms to foster dialogue and collaboration across all levels of our college community. We held town hall meetings that included faculty, staff, students, local businesses, and community members to develop and refine our core values and strategic plans. These core values—passion for learning, service, creativity, academic excellence, dignity, respect, and integrity—became the pillars upon which we built a more engaged and responsive educational environment.

Communication was key. We maintained constant dialogue through monthly newsletters, summaries of board meetings, and updates on college outcomes and community initiatives. Recognizing the rapid pace of change, we established a Rapid Response Team to address urgent issues swiftly and effectively.

Moreover, inclusivity in decision-making was a cornerstone of my approach. Regular meetings with the Faculty Senate and inclusion of faculty in the President's Leadership Team were standard practice. I also made it a point to connect with students and staff through informal gatherings like "Pizza with the President" and engaged with the wider community through educational summits and active participation in local and national organizations.

Our actions, both as individuals and as leaders, send ripples through our communities. They can either sow division or foster unity and growth. I always strived to ensure that our conduct at the College set a positive example, one that could inspire and facilitate responsive change. It is my belief that good leadership, like light, grows stronger when it emerges from the shadows, illuminating paths not just for ourselves but for those who follow.

The journey of courageous leadership is not about avoiding the storm but rather about learning to steer through it, guided by a moral compass that points towards unity, understanding, and resilience. This journey has shown me that through collaboration, commitment, and an unwavering adherence to our core values, we can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and renewal. As leaders, we must own our conduct, understanding that our actions have the power to shape futures. In this way, we not only navigate our own storms but also light the way for others. §



“In our culture, belonging means knowing you are part of something greater than yourself.”

**Christine Lloyd, Ed.D.**  
Executive Director of HR & Talent,  
CampusWorks



# Creating a People-First Culture

**CHRISTINE LLOYD, ED.D.**  
Executive Director of Human Resources  
and Talent, CampusWorks (FL)

When I think about what it means to lead courageously, I think about creating an environment where people feel proud, valued, and inspired to bring their full selves to work. Did you know that when people genuinely feel proud of their organization, they're nearly half as likely to leave? They're more than twice as likely to give that extra push to get the job done, and they're much more likely to recommend their workplace to friends and family. It's powerful—and it's exactly what we've worked to achieve at CampusWorks.

We're on a journey to become Great Place to Work-Certified™ for the fifth year running, and it's been transformative. At a time when the Great Resignation has driven people to reconsider their careers and where they feel valued, our certification has not only validated our people-first approach but has also become a competitive advantage in retaining our best talent.

The journey to certification wasn't just about recognition. It was about deeply listening to our team, understanding what truly matters, and consistently building a culture where people feel seen and heard. The results? Our Great Place to Work Trust Index Survey revealed that 95% of CampusWorks employees are proud to tell others they work here. Seeing this response isn't just heartening; it's a testament to the intentional, people-centered culture we're building. And as leaders have reached out to ask how we've created this, I'm proud to share some of the key lessons we've learned along the way.

## Treat Employees as You Want to Be Treated

The Golden Rule might seem basic, but it's surprising how often it's overlooked. People leave jobs because they don't feel a sense of equity or fairness, and at CampusWorks, that's simply unacceptable. We know our employees value diversity of thought, background, skills, cultures, and experiences. We developed our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) values to reflect who we are and to create an environment where people feel they belong.

In practice, this means being intentional and consistent. We actively foster equity and fairness by avoiding favoritism and promoting those who truly deserve it. We avoid office politics and support employees with mentors who genuinely want to help them succeed. And it's working—our Trust Index shows that 99% of our team believes they are treated fairly, regardless of age or sexual orientation, with similarly high marks for race and gender. This commitment is the foundation of our people-first approach.

## Creating a Sense of Belonging

The shift to virtual work has brought a new challenge for higher education and companies like ours alike: the risk of isolation. According to a McKinsey survey, 51% of employees who left their jobs did so because they felt disconnected from their workplace. To combat this, we've worked tirelessly to create a true sense of belonging for our remote team.

In our culture, belonging means knowing you are part of something greater than yourself. From the day a new employee joins, we foster connection through our buddy program, which pairs them with a teammate who helps them feel welcomed and supported. We hold pinning ceremonies to officially welcome each new member, and we take time to celebrate milestones like birthdays and anniversaries. We even come together for non-work activities—like our annual March Madness bracket challenge and our monthly book club. These aren't just events; they're moments that connect us and remind us we're part of a community.

Our Trust Index results reflect the power of these efforts: 93% of employees feel that their colleagues care about each other, and 91% feel they can be themselves. In an increasingly virtual world, these feelings of connection and belonging are essential to fostering loyalty and satisfaction.

## Prioritizing Purpose

When people feel their work has special meaning, they're far more likely to stay with an organization. At CampusWorks, our mission is to partner with colleges and universities to transform higher education for the better. We know our work impacts students, faculty, and staff, and we take that responsibility seriously.

To reinforce this sense of purpose, we make our mission and vision clear from day one. Every new hire receives a mission/vision card, and we continuously highlight our Guiding Principles in how we work, recognizing those who live them every day. We even donate to our clients' foundations, scholarship funds, and student hunger initiatives. These actions are more than symbolic; they're a reminder that each of us has a role in shaping a brighter future for higher education.

The impact is clear. Our Trust Index shows that 90% of CampusWorks employees feel their work has special meaning and isn't "just a job." For us, purpose isn't a slogan; it's a practice, and it's what keeps us aligned and driven.

## Culture as a Competitive Advantage

In today's landscape, creating a people-first culture has become a defining aspect of leadership. The talent pool is shrinking, and competition is fierce, but by focusing on our people, we're not just retaining talent—we're creating a workplace where meaning, purpose, pride, and fairness are the standard. As leaders in higher education, we have the unique opportunity to create this for our own teams.

For those looking to follow a similar path, my advice is this: listen deeply, act with integrity, and always, always put your people first. The journey is ongoing, but every step forward strengthens the culture and community we're building together.§



“We must accept finite disappointment  
but never lose infinite hope.”

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**  
Civil Rights Activist



## CHAPTER 5

# THE COURAGE to PERSEVERE

### Perseverance

Perseverance is the steady hand that holds the torch aloft, guiding it through storms, setbacks, and long nights. It's the courage to press forward despite uncertainty, knowing that the way back is flawed and the path ahead, while unclear, holds the promise of progress. Higher education leaders must show up each day with resilience, extending grace to themselves and others as they face complex challenges. In this chapter, leaders share how grit, determination, and a relentless commitment to excellence have kept their fires burning, inspiring us all to persevere in the pursuit of a brighter future.

**PHOTO** Dick DeMarsico/Library of Congress (stylized)



“While I can understand the desire to return to a time that felt safe, comfortable, and familiar, I also know it’s not the path to a sustainable future in higher education.”

**Maureen Murphy, Ph.D.**

Past President, College of Southern Maryland



# Don't Look Back, It Was Already Broken

**MAUREEN MURPHY, PH.D.**

Past President, College of Southern Maryland (MD)

**H**igher education leaders have been talking about disruption for a long time. But looking back on it, I now see that many of us were responding to disruptive forces by “innovating around the edges” rather than inciting the organizational transformation we need to survive.

When the pandemic arrived in early 2020, it introduced volatility and uncertainty into our worlds, forcing us out of our comfort zones as we scrambled to keep students and employees safe and engaged while continuing to fulfill our mission. It interrupted our routines and required us to think differently, act swiftly, and overhaul systems and traditions that had been in place for years. It forced us, finally, to begin our long overdue transformation.

Years later, we now understand the virus better and have to come to terms with its continual presence in our lives. We’ve accepted uncertainty as part of our “new normal,” and we’ve learned how to adapt and respond. Our fears have eased as we’ve learned to use new systems to continue our work. We’ve finally reached a point where businesses are re-opening their doors and students are returning to campus.

As life returns to “normal,” many people want to go back to the way things were before the pandemic. While I can understand the desire to return to a time that felt safe, comfortable, and familiar, I also know it’s not the path to a sustainable future in higher education.

If the pandemic has taught me anything, it’s that key aspects of our industry and institutions B.C. (Before Covid) were broken and dysfunctional.



Going back to those times is a sure path to failure. And our mission is too important for us to fail.

### **The ‘Enrollment Cliff’ is Here**

We’ve known for years that demographic changes are poised to have a significant impact on higher education (and life as we know it). Since the onset of the pandemic, we’ve seen baby boomers leaving the workforce at an accelerated pace, a sharp decline in the U.S. labor force participation rate (LFPR), which measures people working or actively seeking work, and post-secondary enrollment trends that look like a rollercoaster ride (and have felt like one!). Add to this a national birth rate that has been in a decades-long decline, and you can begin to see why we can’t go back to the way things were. There simply aren’t enough people to make yesterday’s model work.

According to *The Demographic Drought* by Emsi, “The US is suffering the beginning phases of a great sansdem—‘without people,’ or in our case ‘without enough people’—a demographic drought that is projected to worsen throughout the century and will impact every business, college, and region.”

### **Advice for the Future:**

These days, enrollment trends are top of mind for most college and university leaders. While enrollment is important, I believe we are better served to shift our focus from how many students we’re bringing through the front door to how many students we’re helping pass through the back door to completion.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center estimates that 36 million Americans have completed some college courses, but never graduated. This represents a significant opportunity for all of us.

We can leverage this opportunity by remembering that the pandemic proved just how innovative and agile higher education can be. Now is the time to double down on these newfound strengths to provide greater access and better support to help more students reach graduation.

### **The Competitive Landscape is Growing**

Historically, our main source of competition for students has been other institutions. But recent years have ushered in new competitors who are vying for prospective students’ time, attention, and loyalty.

Online learning has enabled many institutions to expand their geographic reach and attract learners from far beyond their local communities. Alternative credential providers are enticing students with badges, micro credentials, and stackable certificates in lieu of a traditional degree. The ongoing talent shortage means higher education is now competing with high-paying unskilled jobs, like those available in the fast-food industry. In some cases, we’re even competing with our customers as the organizations

that once turned to us to provide skilled workers are now following Google and Amazon, hiring high school graduates, and providing their own specialized training followed by the guarantee of a high-paying job.

Our higher education system was not built to compete with these forces.

### **Advice for the Future:**

Now is the time to listen to the voice of the student. To find out what they really want. To learn where they go when they don’t complete with us (a.k.a. our “bump competitors”).

According to the McKinsey article “How Technology is Shaping Learning in Higher Education,” the pandemic “pushed the need for a new learning experience online. It recentered institutions to think about how they’ll teach moving forward and has brought synchronous and hybrid learning into focus.”

Many of my colleagues are introducing micro credentials and stackable certificates. They’re compressing course schedules from 15 weeks to five. They’re experimenting with new and hybrid learning modalities to meet adult learners where they are.

The pandemic has reminded us that our students have lives and responsibilities outside the classroom. Now is the time for leaders to *listen better* and learn how we can respond to our students’ cares and concerns.

### **Technology has Become a Great Enabler**

For years, many colleges and universities have navigated untenable funding challenges. Often, that meant they were unable to keep pace with rapidly changing technology. As a result, many institutions were operating on decades-old enterprise systems when the pandemic hit and required us to shift to remote learning overnight. Leading up to the pandemic, many institutions lacked the sophisticated infrastructure to provide the broad, fast connectivity today’s students expect, and they had significant information security vulnerabilities waiting to be exploited.

The Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) made millions of dollars available to us during the pandemic, which enabled institutions to make long overdue investments to shore up their technology infrastructure. We saw institutions provide laptops to students to enable them to continue learning remotely. We saw rural institutions make Wi-Fi networks available in their parking lots to address the digital divide. We saw understaffed institutions partner with managed services providers to bridge the IT talent gap.

While these initiatives undoubtedly came with some growing pains, the pandemic enabled technology to shine as the great enabler we’ve always known it could be.

***Advice for the Future:***

When the pandemic forced us to shift to remote learning, some of our best practices and efficient processes fell by the wayside as we focused on responding to the urgent issues at hand. As students and employees returned to campus, many institutions invested time and resources in business process optimization initiatives to realign their people, processes, technology, and data.

At a time when many institutions are understaffed, automated processes are helping to ease administrative burden and reduce the number of staff needed to operate effectively.

**Opportunities on the Horizon**

When I look back, I see a past focused on systems, processes, and metrics. I see a once-thriving model that is becoming increasingly obsolete.

Albert Einstein once said, “In the middle of a difficulty lies opportunity.” While the pandemic might be one of the greatest “difficulties” of our lifetime, it was also a catalyst to redefine ourselves. To transform our organizations and regain our competitive advantage by delivering a relevant product that meets learners where they are. And most of all, to focus on our people. Not just our students, but every single person who contributes to our mission.§



“In today’s unpredictable and turbulent world, the greatest demonstration of courageous leadership may be showing up every day, letting go of what did or did not happen yesterday, and leading the college with a renewed sense of professionalism, resilience, and grace.”

**Christine J. Sobek, Ed.D.**

President Emeritus, Waubonsee Community College



# The Courage to Show Up

**CHRISTINE J. SOBEK, ED.D.**

President Emeritus, Waubonsee Community College (IL)

As I think about what courageous leadership means to me, I have been reflecting on opportunities and challenges I experienced in my nearly 22 years as a college president. There are many examples including the courage to be bold and innovative, as demonstrated in our 2020 College Master Plan and our Vision 2050 Project. There are the challenges we faced when a community member or a community group questioned the college’s tax levy or an academic program or service. Then there are the sensitive personnel issues and collective bargaining issues. Some of these were direct challenges to my leadership, and others were more broadly focused on the college.

Maintaining courageous leadership in all these situations required three key traits. The first is professionalism, which includes maintaining integrity and demonstrating respect for all parties involved. The President is the living logo of the college. The Board, employees, and the community look to the President to set the tone and approach for launching bold initiatives and for resolving complex issues.

Next is resilience. This ability helps one stay committed to bringing an issue to resolution, even when faced with difficult choices. Staying laser focused on the problem at hand is key.

Finally, there is the art of giving grace to yourself and others. I have observed that presidents can be very self-critical about their responses in tough situations. Give yourself some grace and recognize there is no one perfect solution to a problem. Learn from the experience and share that knowledge with your team.

I would like to add some thoughts about communication. I have learned that in the absence of communication, people frequently apply their own meaning, which often has a negative view. Courageous leadership requires developing a communication strategy that fits the particular challenge. Always assume more communication is better than less.

College presidents face daily successes and challenges at a relentless pace, which can take a cumulative toll on a president's health, energy, and outlook. In today's unpredictable and turbulent world, the greatest demonstration of courageous leadership may be showing up every day, letting go of what did or did not happen yesterday, and leading the college with a renewed sense of professionalism, resilience, and grace. §



“For those in higher education, the journey to effective leadership, much like mastering a musical instrument, is a combination of experiences, lessons, and unwavering dedication to a goal, clearly articulated and diligently approached.”

**Dale Nesbary, Ph.D.**

Past President, Muskegon Community College



# The Courage to Be the Best

**DALE NESBARY, PH.D.**

Past President, Muskegon Community College (MI)

As we navigate the post-Covid-19 landscape, with its diminishing federal support and looming political and economic challenges, the essence of leadership in higher education has never been more critical. My unique journey to academic leadership—transitioning from a 16-year career in finance and criminal justice into academia—has been significantly shaped by an unconventional mentor: my career as a professional musician. Unlike conventional leadership narratives, my story intertwines with lessons learned from music, offering a distinctive perspective on leading through harmony and resilience.

Over the years, leadership and governance author Jim Collins has inspired my understanding of what it means to be a great leader. I often come back to the concept of Level 5 leadership from his best-selling book *Good to Great*. According to Collins, great leaders display a powerful mixture of personal humility and indomitable will. The five Level 5 characteristics include:

- 1 A personal sense of humility.
- 2 A deep personal understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses.
- 3 A laser-like focus on the organization's purpose.
- 4 A passionate commitment to continuous learning.
- 5 A relentless determination to do what is right, not what is easy.

As we discuss each one, I'll share some of the lessons I learned from music and how they made me a better leader, offering you insights to discover and refine your own approach.

## 1 The Rhythm of Humility

My ambition to perform alongside top music professionals led me to invaluable lessons in humility. Notably, Professor Burgess Gardner, who mentored me at Michigan State University, instilled in me the importance of relentless preparation, warning me that the music industry is unforgiving and competitive. A memorable moment playing a contract gig with The Temptations, where a single off-note nearly cost me my position, taught me the critical importance of preparation and humility—lessons that directly translate to the leadership in higher education, where every member, regardless of their role, deserves respect and consideration.

During my time as president of Muskegon Community College in Muskegon, Michigan, I intentionally demonstrated the value of inclusivity and collaboration through regular meetings with both on-campus and off-campus leaders, regardless of their official status or rank. One notable example is Ed Simmons, a now-retired friend from high school and former president of our custodial maintenance union. Our meetings served as a powerful example, challenging conventional perceptions of importance and hierarchy within the college community. Observers often expressed surprise at seeing the college president engage in discussions with someone they perceived as “just a janitor.” This dynamic offered a unique opportunity to dispel the outdated notion that rank dictates privilege or worth. Over time, this approach not only fostered a deeper sense of community and respect across all levels of the institution but also humorously highlighted the absurdity of rigid hierarchical thinking. Together, Ed and I showcased the transformative power of recognizing and valuing leadership in all its forms, benefiting the entire college community by promoting a culture of equality and mutual respect.

## 2 An Ensemble of Strengths and Weaknesses

Every leader in higher education will encounter their pivotal “Temptations” moment, where the outcome hinges on their preparation. This preparation spans from academia, including undergraduate and graduate studies, to practical experiences in classrooms and administrative roles. Standing before colleagues, regional chambers of commerce, or university boards, the depth of one’s experience is as crucial to success as my meticulous preparation for performing with The Temptations.

I often reflect that the most intense pressure I faced wasn’t during interviews for high-ranking academic positions, but in moments requiring flawless musical performance. Similarly, presenting a proposal for a \$5 million grant to a state’s economic development corporation demands not just equivalent preparation but an understanding of the high stakes involved. In the world of music, replacement is just a step away for those unprepared; in

academia, missed opportunities for significant funding can impede an institution’s progress. Success in these endeavors requires not only thorough preparation but also humility and collaboration.

When arriving at Muskegon Community College in 2009, I set a goal publicly for the institution to be the best community college in the state. This was a lofty goal, but in the minds of our campus community an achievable one. Together with my colleagues, we initiated relationships with Michigan’s governor, granting agencies, and donors at a time when the norm was to patiently await one’s turn in the appropriations process. This proactive approach was designed to overcome the limitations that hindered our students’ access to necessary financial and programmatic resources required for success.

By developing a strategic plan comprising members of our board, students, employees, and broader community, we forged a blueprint for how best to advance our institution, resulting in an unprecedented era of fundraising success and student success achievement. For the first time in the college’s history, we were named by *bestcolleges.com* (2017) and *intelligent.com* (2021) as the best community college in Michigan and among the top 30 overall among community colleges nationally, each based upon commonly used student and institutional success metrics. Moreover, we were named an Achieving the Dream (AtD) Leader College in 2015, a distinction the college still maintains.

Jim Collins states that success at an institution needs to be “built to last.” Our repeated rankings among the best in Michigan and our continued AtD Leader College status indicates that our plan for success was indeed built to last.

## 3 Conducting with Focus

Malcolm Gladwell’s theory—that mastering a discipline requires over 10,000 hours of practice—resonated with my musical journey. I continued to invest time in practicing multiple instruments, performing with orchestras and bands, and studying music theory before my college years. This effort led to an invitation from Dr. Leonard Falcone, a renowned low brass professor at Michigan State University (MSU), to join as a music major, a significant honor considering my role as the principal trombonist in the Michigan Youth Arts Festival Band. This invitation was also paired with a Creative Arts Scholarship, granted for a composition I wrote for a 17-piece ensemble.

My dedication paid off at MSU, where I was one of 60 trombonists, ranging from beginners to seasoned graduate students, like my instructor, Dr. Ed Huttlin. The experience underscored the importance of preparation and humility. My journey through music, from playing in small jazz ensembles to large symphony orchestras, honed my abilities to listen, collaborate, lead, and follow effectively.



Pursuing a career in academia—whether as a faculty member, dean, or president—similarly demands years of diligent effort and collaboration with a diverse array of partners, including students, staff, and various community and institutional stakeholders. Setting clear goals and persistently working towards them has been crucial to my success. Not surprisingly, strategic planning has been a key tool in navigating my institutions toward their objectives, demonstrating the universal value of hard work and strategic vision in achieving professional excellence.

#### 4 Honing Your Craft

Professional development is a fundamental aspect of higher education and has been crucial throughout my varied career. Initially aspiring to be a professional musician, I achieved this goal early but didn't stop there. My career path then spanned public budgeting and finance, policing, public policy, and eventually leadership and governance. My academic journey, from undergraduate to doctoral studies, equipped me with the necessary knowledge for each transition, particularly in areas of fiscal management, policing research, and leadership principles.

The discipline and collaborative skills honed through years of musical training have been invaluable, not only in maintaining my musical proficiency but also in adapting to new professional environments. These skills facilitated a seamless integration into professional development opportunities across different fields. The practice of continually upgrading my skills became second nature, eliminating any resistance to diving into professional development in each new domain I entered. This approach has underscored the importance of lifelong learning and adaptability, principles that have been essential to my success across the spectrum of my career.

#### 5 The Crescendo of Integrity

Long before psychologists Drs. David Dunning and Justin Kruger identified the Dunning-Kruger effect—the phenomenon where individuals with limited knowledge overestimate their abilities—my parents, Sadie May (Woolwine) Nesbary and Admiral Dural Nesbary, understood its essence. They observed that we often encounter individuals whose confidence, borne out of ignorance and a lack of effort, exceeds their competence. My parents emphasized the value of hard and intelligent work as the key to staying competitive and avoiding the pitfalls of unearned self-assurance.

They were adamant about the importance of completing what we start, striving for excellence, and working with unmatched diligence. This ethos led all my siblings to pursue higher education, achieving qualifications that span from community college certificates to a Ph.D. These achievements were not the result of an easy path but were essential milestones in realizing

our personal ambitions, underlining the importance of perseverance and dedication in the face of challenges.

Directing the children to select an instrument(s) or choose an art was a wise decision by our parents. Much like in the case of belonging to an ensemble, we found that while we may not have always been treated equitably, we did understand our relative strengths and adjusted accordingly. For me personally, professional life and life in the academy is not always fair. However, I was gratified that my efforts put me in a place in which I had an opportunity to succeed.

Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic is an example of doing what is right, not what is easy. In March of 2020, Muskegon Community College, like many others, shifted to a fully remote course delivery format. Many in the community felt this was not the appropriate direction for the college. Nonetheless, for the safety and security of our campus community, we did. Fast forward 6 months to the Fall semester of 2020, the College remained mostly remote with some individuals who initially protested the decision demanding to be remote-only for their own safety.

#### Orchestrating Success

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's oft-quoted phrase from his novella *Le Petit Prince*, “a goal without a plan is just a wish,” is more than simply a feel-good phrase. For those in higher education, the journey to effective leadership, much like mastering a musical instrument, is a combination of experiences, lessons, and unwavering dedication to a goal, clearly articulated and diligently approached. It's about creating a space where diverse talents can come together to orchestrate success, guided by the principles of humility, focus, continuous improvement, and integrity. Whether it be setting a goal to become the most talented musician or the most accomplished institution of higher education in a particular category, the principles are consistent. Looking forward, let us strive to lead with resilience, innovation, and inclusive excellence, ensuring our institutions not only survive but thrive in the face of adversity. §

“When the stakes are high, leaders must make bold moves to safeguard the future of the institutions they serve.”

**Frederick V. Moore, J.D.**  
President Emeritus, Buena Vista University



## From Crisis to Stability: Leading My Institution Through a Cybersecurity Attack

**FREDERICK V. MOORE, J.D.**  
President Emeritus, Buena Vista University (IA)

In 2010, I faced one of the most challenging moments of my presidency at Buena Vista University: a cybersecurity breach. What began as a minor observation of unusual activity on our systems quickly turned into a full-blown crisis. When it was confirmed that someone had tampered with our administrative computing system, I felt the weight of responsibility more than ever. I knew this was more than just a technical issue—it was a test of my leadership and my commitment to the university community.

To address the crisis, I acted quickly. We hired top legal counsel and a forensic team to investigate the breach’s scope. As news spread, we faced an onslaught of media attention and questions from students, faculty, alumni, and parents. I wanted to be as transparent and supportive as possible, so we opened a call center and offered free credit monitoring to any member of our community who wanted it. Thankfully, there was no evidence of personal data misuse, and no lawsuits were filed. Still, the process was intense, demanding significant focus and resilience from my entire team.

Once the initial crisis had subsided, I took time to reflect on what we had learned. Buena Vista had a strong reputation as a technology-forward institution, but this incident made it painfully clear that our administrative systems were outdated and vulnerable. Prior to the breach, we had postponed investing in a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, hoping that future cloud technologies might offer more affordable options. But



the breach underscored that waiting was no longer an option. We had to act decisively to protect our community.

To fully understand and address our vulnerabilities, we conducted a comprehensive assessment of our systems, protocols, and policies. I knew this assessment would be critical, and I made sure to gather experts who could provide honest, thorough insights into the health of our technology infrastructure. Their findings were sobering: our systems were in urgent need of upgrades, including a new ERP and improvements to our telecommunications. While these changes would require a significant investment, they were necessary to safeguard our institution's future and provide better resources for our faculty and staff.

Implementing these recommendations wasn't just a technical project; it required dedicated change management and clear communication with all stakeholders. I worked closely with our Board of Trustees, faculty, and staff, making sure they understood the importance of the changes ahead. Our IT staff, understandably, had mixed emotions about the upcoming shifts. To address this, we focused on providing development opportunities and clearly outlining the benefits these changes would bring to their work and the institution as a whole.

The ERP acquisition was one of the biggest changes, and through careful negotiation and planning, we secured it at a significantly reduced cost compared to initial quotes. This system went on to streamline our recruitment and fundraising processes, cut down on bureaucratic bottlenecks, and provide faculty with more reliable tools to support students.

Reflecting on this journey, I know that the decision to overhaul our IT infrastructure was both challenging and courageous. It was a decision that called for trust, resilience, and the willingness to confront potential resistance. But when the stakes are high, leaders must make bold moves to safeguard the future of the institutions they serve. By investing in a secure and modern infrastructure, we were able to move beyond crisis, strengthening our university's mission and our ability to support the community we hold dear.

For any leader facing a similar crisis, I offer this advice: don't be afraid to face the difficult choices head-on. When approached with integrity, expertise, and a clear vision, even the most daunting changes can lead to lasting improvements. This journey not only protected our university but also set us on a path to greater resilience, ensuring a brighter, more secure future for our entire institution. §

“Courageous leadership demands both a sharp mind and a caring heart. It’s not enough to focus on institutional policies and outcomes—we must lead with humanity, ensuring that the individuals we serve feel seen, supported, and valued.”

**Yolanda Farmer, Ed.D.**

Executive Vice President, Joliet Junior College



# Courageous Conversations

**YOLANDA FARMER, ED.D.**

Executive Vice President, Joliet Junior College (IL)

Courage has been a part of my personal and professional journey for most of my life. As a young girl, my grandmother often said, “Be courageous, whether you’re speaking to someone on the first floor or in the boardroom.” Over the course of my career, I came to truly appreciate the wisdom in the words she shared with me, and it gained profound meaning during my tenure at Joliet Junior College (JJC). As the first public community college in the United States, JJC carries a strong legacy in its rich history—a foundation that presents both opportunities and challenges when navigating transformation in higher education.

To me, courageous leadership means stepping into discomfort with transparency, trust, and a commitment to student success. It’s about engaging in what I call “courageous conversations”—dialogues that debunk myths, confront difficult truths, and invite vulnerability from all involved. This approach has shaped not only my leadership philosophy but also the culture of care and trust at JJC.

The concept of courageous conversations emerged over a decade ago when I was the vice president of student development. Student enrollment was a pressing issue, and the data indicated that our approach was falling short—not only in recruiting students but also in retaining them. During a conference, I remarked to a presenter that “it takes resilience and courage” to tackle these challenges effectively. That realization inspired me to bring courageous conversations to my division to address these issues.

We created spaces where my team could ask any question and share concerns openly, with the assurance that I would be as transparent as possible. This required building trust and fostering a culture of respect and shared values. These conversations quickly became the backbone of our



work, evolving into a college-wide practice that has empowered staff and faculty to speak up, share insights, and embrace vulnerability for the greater good of our students.

These courageous conversations led to one of the most transformative projects I've led at JJC: overhauling our academic advising model. For years, our advising system blended academic and mental health counseling—a structure that left students and counselors struggling. Data painted a stark picture: only 65% of students expressed satisfaction with advising, and retention rates revealed systemic gaps.

The path to change required building what I call “cultural evidence.” Over a year, we collected data, conducted satisfaction surveys, and held roundtable discussions with stakeholders. These efforts highlighted the critical need for a specialized approach to advising. Transitioning to a coaching model, we restructured roles while ensuring all affected staff felt supported and empowered to succeed in their new capacities. The result? A 98% satisfaction rate with the new advising model and significantly improved student retention.

This journey wasn't without resistance. Sunsetting a 50-year-old model meant challenging deeply rooted traditions and navigating complex union negotiations. However, by involving stakeholders in designing the new system and committing to preserving faculty positions, we ensured the transition honored both institutional values and individual contributions.

### **The Heart of Courageous Leadership: Care**

A pivotal lesson I've learned in leadership is that trust isn't granted—it's earned through listening and showing you care. Early in my tenure as vice president of student development, I embarked on a listening tour across the college, an approach I later carried forward as executive vice president. This wasn't a performative exercise but an intentional effort to build relationships, understand diverse perspectives, and align our efforts around a shared vision.

One example of this approach in action occurred when concerns arose about an external institutional technology assessment. Staff expressed fears that the process might lead to unwelcome changes or a loss of control. Instead of delegating this issue, I personally attended the team's meeting to address their concerns directly. By listening to their anxieties and responding with care and respect, I reinforced a culture of trust. Afterward, one staff member told me, “We trust you because you show up and care for us.” Moments like these remind me that courageous leadership is grounded in relationships and authenticity.

While courage often conjures images of fearlessness, I believe it is inextricably linked to care. I have found that leading courageously requires not only intellect but also a deep sense of empathy and compassion. Early in my

career, while living in a residence hall as a student affairs professional, I encountered a student in crisis. This experience taught me that courageous leadership demands both a sharp mind and a caring heart. It's not enough to focus on institutional policies and outcomes—we must lead with humanity, ensuring that the individuals we serve feel seen, supported, and valued.

At JJC, this philosophy extends to both students and staff. While we emphasize holistic support for students, I've also made it a priority to foster the well-being of our employees. From celebrating individual wins to tailoring supervision to team members' unique strengths, I strive to create an environment where everyone can thrive.

### **Courage for the Future**

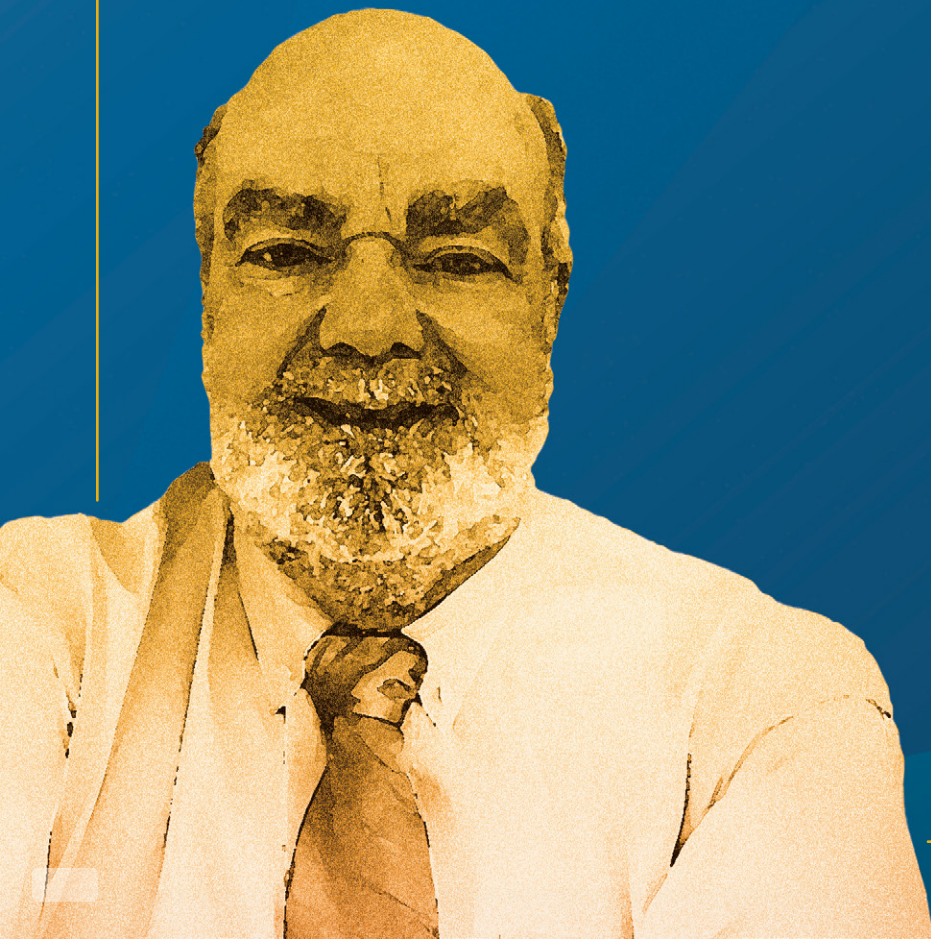
As I reflect on my journey, I'm reminded of my grandmother's wisdom: “Be courageous, whether you're speaking to someone on the first floor or in the boardroom.” Her words instilled in me a sense of responsibility to lead with authenticity and to use my voice to advocate for what is right. This guiding principle has shaped my leadership at JJC and continues to inspire me as I work across the college community and strive to transform the college into a place where every student and staff member can succeed.

I've learned that courageous leadership isn't about having all the answers; it's about asking the right questions, listening with an open mind, and responding with care. In a time when higher education faces extraordinary challenges, I believe that courageous conversations are the key to creating the conditions for meaningful change that not only strengthen our institutions but also enrich the lives of those we serve. §

“Don’t underestimate the power of trust, it can work miracles.”

**Roy Daykin**

Past CFO, Southern Alberta  
Institute of Technology (Canada)



# Trust, Tough Decisions, and Finding a Way Forward

**ROY DAYKIN**

Past CFO, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (Canada)

Looking back on my time as CFO at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary, Alberta, I’ve come to realize that leadership isn’t just about managing budgets or balancing spreadsheets—it’s about trust and having the courage to make tough decisions, even when the outcome is uncertain. From the moment I stepped into the role, I knew I needed to trust my team, and they needed to trust me. Trust speeds everything up, enabling decisions to be made quickly, even in the face of uncertainty. It’s something I leaned into naturally throughout my career, and while it occasionally led to challenges, it always paid off in the long run. More than anything, trust was what helped us navigate the tough times.

## Weathering the Storm

One of the hardest decisions we faced was in 2019 when our provincial funding was cut by \$10 million halfway through the fiscal year. We knew another \$10 million funding reduction was planned for 2020 with an additional \$20 million in the following two years. We also expected inflation to increase costs by \$10 million over the time of the cuts. I remember sitting down with Dr. David Ross, our president, and saying, “Let’s do it all at once. Let’s figure out how to absorb the total reduction right now and get it over with. We need to focus primarily on how to increase revenues as well as reduce costs.” I knew we had to have a plan, or employees and students would live in constant fear about what might come next. I knew that if we did not get out into the SAIT community to talk about the plan and be positive about the future that people would make up their own stories, which were often much worse than what was planned. It wasn’t an easy thing to propose,



knowing that it would mean laying off people and cutting programs that had been around for years. But I also knew that dragging it out with uncertainty over four years would be more painful in the long run.

So, the plan was to make a one-time reduction of \$20 million to deal with the immediate cuts and increase revenues by \$25 million over three years to offset the future government reductions and inflation. We did it. About two thirds of the reduction came from reducing personnel. It hurt; there's no getting around that. But it was the right decision. By taking that step, we were able to stabilize quickly and demonstrate to our employees that we had a plan. The following year, we were back with a surplus and didn't have to worry about more cuts hanging over our heads. We made the hard decision once, and then we were able to move forward and rebuild.

I believe being very public and transparent with the plan was critical to its success. We answered the tough questions about its impacts and provided a positive outlook for the future. We demonstrated to the SAIT community that the executive leadership had confidence that the Institute would be successful and continue to grow even though government funding was cut. The employees saw our plan—which was very different than other institutions' approach, which mostly focused on reductions—and I believe it inspired them to be positive about SAIT's future.

The irony is, even though we were making cuts, we never stopped growing. In 2020 and beyond, we expanded both international and domestic enrolments. We brought in thousands more students from abroad and increased the number local students. We expanded programs that were in demand, and we increased service levels to support student growth. This wasn't just about growth for the sake of it. We did it because we knew international students would provide the funding needed to support and grow our domestic enrolments. The reality is, international students pay more than domestic students, as required by government regulation. The extra revenue allowed us to maintain the quality of education for all our students, even during the pandemic.

I believe, if we had not made those decisions—if we hadn't expanded our international and domestic enrolments or made the budget cuts—SAIT, its employees, and our students would have had a very difficult time during the pandemic. It was tough, but it worked. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were ready. We had already made the cuts, and we had the financial flexibility to figure out how to get students back into labs safely, which was critical for a place like SAIT, where so many of our programs are hands-on.

## The Power of Trust

I've been lucky to work with leaders like David Ross, who trusted me enough to make these bold decisions. We've known each other since the

late '90s, and this was the third institution we worked at together. That kind of relationship, where there is mutual respect and trust, made all the difference. He saw the obstacles, and my job was to help us navigate through them.

I think the most important lesson I've learned is that leadership isn't about having all the answers; it's about having the courage to make tough calls and trusting that your team can help figure out the rest. One of the books that really shaped my thinking on this is *The Speed of Trust* by Stephen M. R. Covey. It talks about how organizations that have high levels of trust actually make more money because they're more efficient, and they get things done faster. That resonated with me. I saw it firsthand at SAIT. We were able to move quickly and make decisions that kept us ahead of the curve because we trusted each other.

## Advice for Today's Leaders

As I think about the future of higher education, I know there are going to be even bigger challenges ahead. The financial pressures aren't going away, and the competition for students will only get tougher. Institutions that don't find ways to innovate and bring in more revenue are going to struggle. I believe artificial intelligence is going to play a huge role in that—both in terms of making our institutions more efficient and in helping attract students who expect cutting-edge technology in their education. It's going to take courage to embrace that change, but I'm confident those that do will come out ahead.

If there's one thing I'd say to leaders in higher education today, it's this: Don't underestimate the power of trust, it can work miracles. And don't be afraid to make tough calls. It's what kept us going at SAIT, and I believe it's what will help our institutions navigate the uncertain times ahead. §

“Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity—not a threat.”

**Steve Jobs**  
Apple Co-founder



## CHAPTER 6

# THE COURAGE to INNOVATE

## Innovation

Innovation is the spark that leaps from the fire, igniting new flames and illuminating paths untraveled. Courageous leaders embrace the unknown, taking risks to pioneer fresh ideas and shape the future instead of reacting to it. In higher education, innovation means aligning bold initiatives with institutional missions to create meaningful and lasting impact. In this chapter, leaders reveal how they’ve dared to challenge conventions, forge new collaborations, and harness the power of innovation to spread the light of progress to the institutions and communities they serve.

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[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Steve\\_Jobs\\_WWDC07.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Steve_Jobs_WWDC07.jpg)



“Courage, though a necessary characteristic in leadership, is not sufficient without a team of experts who can advise the president in a collaborative manner and a communication strategy that ensures stakeholders know why a decision is being made. Bold presidential action *with* these elements is the real formula for success.”

**Frederick V. Moore, J.D.**

President Emeritus, Buena Vista University (IL)



# Going Where No Campus Has Gone Before

**FREDERICK V. MOORE, J.D.**

President Emeritus, Buena Vista University (IL)

In 2000, I was in my fifth year as president of an institution known as a pacesetter in learning technology. That spring, in a Technological Task Force meeting, a faculty member with phenomenal expertise in the field floated the idea of becoming a totally wireless campus. Today, nearly all colleges and universities have ubiquitous wireless systems. But a quarter century ago, wireless was still in its early stages. We studied the issue extensively, but knew we had to decide that spring when no other institution had done what we were exploring.

The experts on our team advised that based on early testing such a system was likely to work, but there were no guarantees. Should there be unanticipated problems that resulted in failure, the impact on campus and in the educational press would be devastating. On the other hand, success would differentiate us in the marketplace.

After balancing all the risk factors we could account for, we elected to move ahead. As the cutover to the new system proceeded, we held our breath until our IT Director gave us the word that the system was working—and a brand-new era dawned at the University.

We had rave reviews from all quarters, and the University was featured in a national advertising campaign that brought us publicity we could never have afforded to purchase. Enrollment shot up quickly as we began a new chapter in the University's history—ubiquitous computing.

When one thinks of courage, phrases such as *bold action*, *calculated risk taking*, and *decisions absent perfect information* come to mind. Those terms certainly applied in this case. But we could have never succeeded without careful analysis, as well as collaborations and communication that built the case for the decision we made.

Technological advances over the last quarter century, especially the rise of artificial intelligence, mean that new presidents will not face decisions exactly like the one we made. Nevertheless, new chief executives will encounter decisions where there are no guarantees, where the information is not perfect, and the risk of failure could have monumental consequences. In those moments, new presidents must have the internal constitution to take bold action when necessary. However, courage, though a necessary characteristic in leadership, is not sufficient without a team of experts who can advise the president in a collaborative manner and a communication strategy that ensures stakeholders know why a decision is being made. Bold presidential action *with* these elements is the real formula for success. §



“Leading through innovation requires building the plane while flying it. You have to be comfortable with ambiguity and trust the process.”

**Becky Rowley, Ph.D.**

President, Santa Fe Community College



# Embracing Risk: Spearheading a New Era of Collaboration

**BECKY ROWLEY, PH.D.**

President, Santa Fe Community College (NM)

**KATHY ULIBARRI**

Chief Executive Officer, the Collaborative for Higher Education Shared Services (CHESS) (NM)

**I**n New Mexico, we’ve always known our state’s higher education landscape was unique. We are a vast state with a sparse population, and historically, access to education meant physical access. As a result, we have a system made up of 27 public colleges and universities, many of which operate independently with limited resources. For years, policymakers pushed for greater efficiency and collaboration, but the path forward wasn’t clear. In response, we came together to create the Collaborative for Higher Education Shared Services (CHESS). Initially, CHESS was a partnership of five independent educational institutions that aimed to share tools, talent, and best practices to power seamless, student-friendly experiences and support the delivery of high-quality education and services that advance student success. Today, that partnership has grown to six.

Launching CHESS was not for the faint of heart. It required not only embracing the inherent risks of bringing multiple independently governed colleges together but also pushing against the natural resistance to change. It was a bold experiment in cooperation, innovation, and the belief that we

could do more together than we ever could apart. But this is how we've always approached leadership: not as a pursuit of comfort, but as a journey to build something better for the future of higher education.

### Taking the Leap

The seeds for CHES were planted long before the first official meetings. New Mexico's colleges had been discussing the need for greater collaboration for years. We knew there was a problem—the strain on resources, the lack of efficiency, and the potential for duplication of efforts—but finding a solution required visionary thinking and, frankly, the willingness to take some risks.

When the idea of CHES began to take shape, we faced the daunting challenge of rallying support. Not all colleges were ready to embrace change, and some preferred to wait and see how it would play out. But for us, the risk was clear: we could either take control of our future and work collaboratively, or we could allow outside forces to dictate changes that might not align with the needs of our students or our communities.

We knew that for this to work, we had to start with those willing to take the leap. And that's exactly what we did. We built CHES as a nonprofit, with each of the presidents of the participating colleges serving as board members, and established a clear governance structure. By doing so, we ensured that every institution had a voice and a stake in the outcomes.

### The Challenge of Innovation

Implementing a shared system like Workday was a massive undertaking, and aligning the business processes across multiple colleges—each with their own unique culture, processes, and challenges—was no easy task. But one of the key principles we embraced was the necessity of aligning around best practices. This wasn't just about sharing technology; it was about transforming the way we worked together.

At times, the resistance wasn't in the technology itself but in the change it represented. For some institutions, particularly those with more sophisticated processes, the idea of aligning and streamlining systems felt like a step back. They saw it as introducing risk into something that already worked well for them. This is where courageous leadership came into play.

We often say that leading through innovation requires building the plane while flying it. You have to be comfortable with ambiguity and trust the process. In a project as complex as this, there were bound to be moments of doubt, and we faced them head-on by fostering open communication and leaning into our collective vision.

The beauty of CHES is that it isn't just a technical solution—it's a community. The staff at our colleges work together more closely now than ever before, and they've developed professional relationships that transcend

institutional boundaries. They're collaborating not just because they have to, but because they see the value in doing so.

### Lessons in Risk and Leadership

One of the most valuable lessons we've learned through this process is the importance of trust. Trust in each other as leaders, trust in our colleagues, and trust in the process. We've had to remind ourselves that while the path isn't always clear, we are exactly where we're supposed to be.

Patience has also been key. When you're leading change, not everyone will be on board from day one. Some need time, space, and additional information to come around. What's important is that we remain transparent and consistent in our communication. As leaders, we've had to ensure that we're always aligned, that we're presenting a unified front, and that we're committed to the vision.

This project has reinforced the idea that leadership isn't just about making bold decisions—it's about sticking with them, even when the going gets tough. It's about recognizing that real, meaningful change doesn't happen overnight. It requires perseverance, adaptability, and a commitment to the long-term vision.

### Moving Forward

As CHES continues to evolve, so too will the ways in which we work together. We've learned that collaboration on this scale is a process, not a destination. The challenges we've faced have only strengthened our resolve and proven that when we pool our resources and share our expertise, we can accomplish great things.

For other leaders considering a similar path, our advice is simple: think like an entrepreneur. Be prepared to embrace new ways of thinking, look outside of higher education for best practices, and be comfortable with ambiguity. This work is not for the risk-averse, but for those who believe that the future of higher education depends on bold, collaborative leadership.

We are proud of what we've built together, and we know that CHES will continue to grow and thrive, bringing lasting benefits to the students and communities of New Mexico. In the face of uncertainty, we chose courage. And in doing so, we've created something extraordinary. §



“True innovation challenges the status quo, embraces uncertainty, and navigates complexity with resilience and determination. At AFIT, our members embody this courage as champions of equity and opportunity, transforming education to create a better world.”

**Erika Liodice**

Executive Director, Alliance for  
Innovation & Transformation



# Impact Innovation

**ERIKA LIODICE**

Executive Director, Alliance for  
Innovation & Transformation (AFIT)

As the executive director of the Alliance for Innovation & Transformation (AFIT), I have the privilege of working with some of the most courageous leaders in higher education today. If you're not yet familiar with our small but mighty organization, AFIT is a collaborative community of innovators leading the radical renewal of higher education. Our mission is fueled by a shared belief in the transformative power of education and the necessity of innovation to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Our membership comprises visionary leaders from community and technical colleges, polytechnic universities, nonprofits, and corporations that support higher education. Many of these CEOs began their careers in the classroom, driven by a passion for teaching and a deep commitment to their students. Their journeys to the C-suite were often not motivated by a quest for prestige but by a desire to influence policy, improve accessibility, and help both individuals and their communities thrive. As a result, our members are uniquely positioned to drive what I call “impact innovation.”

Impact innovation focuses on creating and applying new ideas and solutions to improve student success, strengthen institutions, and benefit society in measurable ways. At AFIT, we catalyze this process by exposing our members and their teams to world-class thought leaders and innovative organizations across different sectors. Over the years, our members have gained transformative insights and practical strategies to elevate their institutions. They've reinvented the art of delivering exceptional customer experiences with inspiration from the award-winning Ritz-Carlton. They've explored how to cultivate a culture of innovation alongside the visionaries at

Apple. They've enhanced their foresight skills and embraced the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in collaboration with the futurists at the Institute for the Future. Through dynamic team-based and community learning experiences, we empower our members to lead organizational transformations that are actively shaping the future of higher education.

### Meeting the Challenges of a Changing World

At AFIT, our members understand the world is changing—they see it in the shifting demographics of their student bodies, feel it in the strain of economic and funding challenges, and witness it in the rapid technological advancements that are reshaping what it means to teach and learn. They also recognize that the practices of the past will not sustain the future. Instead of retreating in the face of uncertainty, our members roll up their sleeves to reimagine what comes next.

People often ask what the future of higher education looks like. At AFIT, I see our members creating it every day. Some are leveraging extended reality (XR) technologies to create immersive learning experiences that connect learners with people, places, and content beyond their physical reach. Others are integrating artificial intelligence to personalize education and streamline operations. Many are redesigning curricula to align with local workforce needs, helping students secure high-demand jobs while driving regional economic growth.

Still others are transforming campuses into innovation hubs with makerspaces and business incubators that foster creativity and entrepreneurship. Some are developing mobile education labs to bring learning directly to underserved communities. Many have transitioned to shorter academic terms to help students achieve their goals more efficiently, while others have embraced new models, such as becoming Community College Bachelor's Institutions (CCBI)—to offer affordable, accelerated pathways to in-demand degrees.

Of course, innovation is not without its challenges. It is often tangled in bureaucracy, constrained by limited funding, and complicated by political pressures and labor dynamics. Beneath these obstacles lies an even deeper struggle: the students they serve often face significant barriers in meeting their basic needs. Yet, despite these hurdles, our members persist. They go beyond delivering quality education, creating academic institutions that care for the *whole learner*—offering food pantries, affordable housing, mental health services, and childcare support. Each initiative is an act of courageous compassion, a lifeline extended to those striving to build a better future.

### The Courage to Innovate

Through my close work with AFIT's members, I've come to understand that impact innovation demands more than creativity and vision—it requires extraordinary courage. True innovation challenges the status quo, embraces uncertainty, and navigates complexity with resilience and determination. At AFIT, our members embody this courage as champions of equity and opportunity, transforming education to create a better world.

From them, I've learned that courageous leadership starts with a clear purpose—a compelling “why” that inspires action and unites teams. It thrives on trust, transparency, and a commitment to fostering belonging, where everyone feels empowered to contribute authentically and succeed.

Courageous leaders embrace experimentation, viewing failures as opportunities to learn and grow. They make difficult decisions thoughtfully and inclusively, ensuring alignment with their mission and their students' needs. They possess a rare combination of strength and compassion, boldness and integrity, vision and humility. Remarkably, they are often unaware of the profound courage they display—a quiet yet powerful force that inspires and empowers those around them.

When I think about the courageous leaders in our AFIT community, I feel hopeful about the future. They are living proof of the goodness in the world and the extraordinary power of collective action. Through their courageous commitment to innovation, they are reimagining what is possible in higher education—tearing down barriers, opening doors of opportunity, and transforming lives. This is not only the essence of impact innovation, but also a blueprint for the future. §



“Don’t ever underestimate the importance you can have, because history has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own.”

**Michelle Obama**

First African American First Lady  
of the United States



# A BRAVE NEW WORLD

## A Guiding Light

Courageous leaders illuminate the world, their light guiding us through both challenges and opportunities. If you have not yet stepped into your courage, we hope these stories ignite a spark within you—empowering you to lead with boldness and heart in a world that yearns for your light. If you are already a courageous leader, may these stories remind you that you are not alone and reaffirm the vital role you play in creating a brighter future.

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it needs leaders who are willing to bring  
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**Stefani Hicswa, Ph.D.**  
Chancellor,  
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# The Courage to Be Yourself

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**W**hen I became a college president at 37 years old, I knew I was walking into a position of immense responsibility, but also profound opportunity. As a first-generation college student, one of the first Generation X presidents, and the first woman president at the institution, my journey has been as much about authenticity as it has been about leadership. This path has required courage—courage to embrace who I am, lead boldly, and set an example for others to do the same.

Authenticity is a word we hear often, but in practice, it is not always easy to embody. For me, authenticity starts with always being true to my values. Growing up in a small town in Montana, I learned the value of hard work, integrity, and resilience early. I grew up on a ranch where my father was the foreman, and I started working with him at a young age baling hay, feeding cows, and moving irrigation pipe. Even though I had a strong work ethic and good grades, my high school counselor discouraged me from applying for college because my family could not afford it.

Consequently, I took it upon myself to research scholarships and financial aid opportunities, learning that leadership in high school clubs and activities could improve my chances. Through sheer grit and determination, I graduated third in my class, earned a distinguished graduate award, and pieced together about twenty different scholarships to help pay for college. Once there, I worked multiple jobs to support my education and became the first person in my extended family to earn a college degree. It was not easy, but it was worth it, and in the process the leadership bug bit me.

These experiences taught me not only about leadership but also the power of resilience and the importance of belonging—a message I often share with students. Many of our students feel like imposters, uncertain if



they truly belong in college. I tell them my story to demonstrate that no matter where they start, they have the potential for achievements bigger than they have ever dreamed. Like the professor in Dr. Tara Westover's memoir, *Educated*, who told her, "It was always within you," I remind students that they, too, have the ability to succeed despite the odds.

### The Power of Vulnerability

One of the first lessons I learned navigating as a leader despite the odds was the importance of courage and self-awareness. Early in my career, as one of the youngest college presidents in the country, I thought that leadership meant projecting confidence at all times. Over time, I realized that being true to who I am and being vulnerable are just as important. Being a college president is too demanding to fake it. Authentic leadership is not about having all the answers; it is about being open to questions, admitting when you do not know something, and inviting others to join you in finding solutions. This mindset has allowed me to build trust with my team and to foster a culture where people valued and heard.

Being authentic also means leading with purpose. In my roles as president of Miles Community College and Northwest College, and as chancellor of MSU Billings, I worked to create a vision that reflects the needs and aspirations of the region. This has not always been easy. Change is hard, and often it requires making decisions that are not universally popular. As a leader, I have found that if I can articulate the "why" behind a decision and connect it to our shared mission, people are more likely to come on board. Authenticity does not mean everyone will always agree with you, but it does mean they will respect you for being honest and transparent.

As a woman leader, I have had to challenge stereotypes and break down barriers. There were times when I have been told to tone down my ambition or to conform to expectations that did not align with who I am. In those moments, I had to summon the courage to push back. I learned that staying true to my whole self is not just about personal integrity, it is also about paving the way for others. When I am authentic, I am not just leading; I am modeling what is possible for the next generation of leaders. When I host student dinners at the Chancellor's Residence, students often ask how to become chancellor. I tell them the basics followed by, "if not you, then who? Someone must be chancellor when I retire." If they can see me, knowing my story, they can be me, since my background is similar to theirs.

### Work-Life Integration

In modeling what is possible for the next generation of leaders, I am open about the difficulties of juggling work and family. It has been one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, aspects of my leadership journey. Early in my first presidency, I discovered that work-life balance does not exist. It is

not about perfection, instead it is all about integration. For example, when my children were young, I would prioritize being home for their bedtime routine, even if it meant having the courage to excuse myself early from evening events with my board chair. The time spent with my sons—reading to them and tucking them in—allowed me to decompress from the day and reconnect with what mattered most. On many nights, I would go to bed shortly after my children and wake up at 2:00 a.m. to tackle emails and plan for the day ahead. This unconventional schedule gave me quiet, focused time while ensuring I remained present for my family.

There have been numerous moments when my dual roles as mother and leader collided. One year, my legislative duties conflicted with my son's birthday. My family traveled to the capital with me and my sons joined me in meetings with legislators. I also recall attending a fundraising event with my young children when my husband was out of town. Rather than seeing it as a challenge, I viewed it as an opportunity to integrate my family into my professional life. It was stressful but my sons charmed attendees and even helped share the college's story in ways I never could. These experiences not only strengthened my connection with my children, but also demonstrated to others that leadership does not require sacrificing family. As a bonus, my children learned social skills that continue to benefit them to this day.

Technology has also played a pivotal role in maintaining work-life integration. Tools such as FaceTime have been invaluable, enabling me to stay connected with my children while I am traveling. I was able to help with homework, admire their artwork through a virtual gallery tour, and pick out birthday gifts with them. These moments, though not traditional, allowed me to remain an active presence in their lives, despite my demanding schedule.

### Inspiring the Next Generation of Leaders

In addition to remaining present with my family while navigating a rewarding career, one of the most satisfying aspects of my role has been mentoring young professionals, especially women, who aspire to leadership positions. I tell them that authenticity is their greatest asset. The world does not need traditional carbon copies; it needs leaders who are willing to bring their whole selves to the table. I encourage them to embrace their unique strengths and to see their differences as advantages rather than liabilities. Authenticity is about celebrating who you are and using that to inspire others.

Authenticity is not just about how you lead; it is about how you live your life every day. For me, it means being present in all aspects of my life. It means having the courage to acknowledge that I am not perfect and giving myself grace when I fall short. It means being honest about the challenges I face and seeking support when I need it. I have learned to ask for help,

delegate responsibilities, and let go of perfection. I had to give in and hire a housekeeper, accept that laundry would not get folded, and develop systems to embrace the chaos. These choices have allowed me to focus on what truly matters.

Over the last two decades serving as a CEO at three institutions, I have had the privilege of working with amazing faculty, staff, and students. Together, we navigated challenges and celebrated successes. Through it all, I am reminded that authenticity is a two-way street. When I am authentic, it creates space for others to be authentic as well. This mutual vulnerability fosters connection, strengthens relationships, and builds a sense of community that is essential for any organization to thrive.

Of course, authenticity does not mean you will never face criticism. As a leader, I had to develop thick skin and protect my soft heart. Not everyone will understand or appreciate your approach, and that is okay. Authenticity is not about pleasing everyone; it is about staying true to your values and your vision. It is about having the courage to stand firm in your beliefs while remaining open to growth and change.

### **Paying it Forward**

Being authentic is a true act of courage. It requires you to put your real self out there, and that can be intimidating. Over the years, I found that the rewards far outweigh the risks. Authenticity allows you to connect with others on a deeper level, to inspire trust, and to create lasting impact. It is not always easy, but it has always been worth it.

Looking back, I am grateful for the mentors and role models who have shown me what authentic leadership is. They taught me that being true to yourself is not just a personal choice; it is a leadership imperative. They inspired me to embrace who I am, lead boldly, and pay it forward by mentoring others to have the courage to do the same. §



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**Liz Murphy**  
CEO, CampusWorks



# Developing Courage as a Daily Practice

**LIZ MURPHY**  
CEO, CampusWorks (FL)

Courageous leadership may come naturally to some, but for most, it’s a skill that grows with intentional practice. In higher education, where complex challenges demand bold action, cultivating courage is essential. Here are seven practices that have been invaluable in my own journey toward courageous leadership—I hope they prove helpful to you as well.

## 1. Align with Personal and Organizational Missions

Leadership rooted in mission is powerful. When considering a course of action, ask yourself:

- ▶ Does this align with the institution’s mission and values?
- ▶ Will the outcome benefit those we aim to serve?

Equally important is aligning your actions with your personal values. If you refrain from acting, are you betraying what you stand for? These questions help you stay centered, ensuring that your decisions reflect the best interests of both your institution and your personal integrity.

## 2. Begin with the End in Mind

Courage requires forethought. Before making a bold decision, take the time to mentally walk through potential scenarios. What are the consequences—positive and negative? Whom will this impact, and how?

This process demands harsh honesty and, often, the courage to engage with critics and advocates alike. While the pace of leadership frequently

demands swift action, taking even a moment to visualize the endgame can provide clarity and confidence, ensuring you act with intention rather than impulse.

### 3. Cultivate “Clear-Headedness”

Clear and calm thinking is critical for courageous decision-making. When stakes are high, you must be able to articulate:

- ▶ What you’re doing.
- ▶ Why you’re doing it.
- ▶ The potential outcomes—both favorable and challenging.

Achieving this clarity requires intentional practices. I rely on daily meditation, acupuncture, and spiritual activities to clear my mind and maintain balance. Identify what works for you and commit to it. A clear head leads to a clear vision, which inspires trust in your leadership.

### 4. Seek Support and Mentorship

Even the most courageous leaders do not act alone. Surround yourself with mentors and advisors who can offer guidance, share wisdom, and challenge your perspective. While it’s essential to connect with those within higher education, don’t hesitate to include people from other fields and industries who can bring fresh ideas and different ways of thinking. Diverse perspectives can help you see challenges from new angles and inspire innovative solutions.

Schedule regular check-ins with your support network and tap into professional organizations or cross-industry forums where you can share experiences and gain insights. Courage often requires stepping into the unknown, and having a trusted circle can make the journey less isolating and more informed.

### 5. Practice Self-Care

Sustaining courage is a marathon, not a sprint. Your physical and mental well-being are your greatest assets. Incorporate regular exercise, nutritious meals, and adequate rest into your routine. Find activities that rejuvenate you, whether it’s a morning run, time with loved ones, or moments of quiet reflection.

When you prioritize self-care, you model its importance to your team, creating a culture that values resilience and well-being.

### 6. Reflect and Learn

Courageous leaders are reflective leaders. Take time each week to evaluate your actions and their outcomes. What worked? What didn’t? How can you grow from this experience?

Journaling is a powerful tool for this practice. Writing down your reflections helps you distill lessons from challenging situations and recognize patterns in your decision-making. This iterative process builds your capacity for courage, helping you approach future challenges with greater confidence and insight.

### 7. Foster a Culture of Courage

Courage is contagious. As a leader, you set the tone for your institution. Encourage and celebrate courageous actions in others—whether it’s a team member taking a risk, proposing a bold idea, or speaking up about a sensitive issue.

Create environments where risk-taking and vulnerability are safe and valued. Share stories of courage during team meetings, in newsletters, or through campus-wide communications. Recognize and reward individuals who demonstrate boldness and integrity, reinforcing the message that courage is both expected and appreciated.

### Let’s Be Brave—Together

Courage is not a destination; it’s a daily practice. By aligning with your mission, reflecting deeply, seeking support, and fostering a culture of courage, you can build the resilience and confidence required to lead through uncertainty. Higher education needs bold, visionary leaders now more than ever. Together, we can cultivate the courage to inspire change and transform lives. §



# Thriving Together at the Top

The idea that “it’s lonely at the top” is likely one you understand all too well. The complexity and intensity of today’s challenges are overwhelming. At times, the top may feel like a lonely place to make courageous decisions.

We hope this collection of essays reminds you that you are not alone. These stories illuminate how others have tackled some of the most demanding situations imaginable and offer you the reassurance that connection and courage can help you navigate the path ahead.

## Finding Strength in Connection

Our courageous contributors echo a common theme: leaders grow stronger through connections with others. While your journey is unique, the collective wisdom within these pages reinforces that courageous leadership isn’t about standing alone. It’s about standing with others who share your commitment to the future of education and being open to support, collaboration, and shared experiences. By doing so, you don’t just survive at the top—you thrive, together.

## Embracing Vulnerability

You may feel the pressure to always have the answers, but our courageous contributors remind us that vulnerability, transparency, and a willingness to seek external perspectives are vital to harnessing the strengths of others. In moments of uncertainty, admitting your limitations and inviting others into the decision-making process can cultivate a shared courage that strengthens your institution and builds resilience. Vulnerability isn’t a weakness; it’s a foundation for trust and collaboration.





### Taking Bold Actions for Lasting Impact

When you face decisions that are unpopular or disruptive, know that there are no formulas—only principles like integrity, resilience, and a commitment to serve. These principles can guide you through challenging moments. The experiences shared in this book will remind you that courageous leadership demands both vision and action. When you lead boldly and remain grounded in your values, the rewards extend far beyond operational improvements. You foster trust, purpose, and a sense of belonging that permeates your organization, creating a legacy that inspires others to follow.

### A Call to Courageous Action

At a time when higher education faces formidable challenges—budget crises, shifting enrollments, technology disruptions, and legislative pressures—leaders cannot afford to stay comfortable. The courageous path may feel difficult, but it is also the one that makes a difference.

Though it may feel lonely at the top, you can transform that loneliness into a source of strength and inspiration. By daring to connect, embracing vulnerability, and taking risks, you do more than lead your institution—you shape the future of higher education.

Your courage lights the way for all of us. §



“Thank you” to all of our *Courageous Contributors!*







## **A Troubling Reality Is Emerging.**

Many leaders feel stuck—weighed down by complex decisions, relentless challenges, and an uncertain future.

Now, more than ever, leadership demands courage. The kind of courage that ignites bold action, fuels resilience, and shapes the future of higher education. Yet, leadership can feel lonely—perhaps now more than ever.

In this powerful anthology, some of the most inspiring leaders in higher education share their personal stories of courage in the face of adversity. Their journeys reveal the tough choices, pivotal moments, and transformative impact of leading with bravery.

But this book is more than a collection of stories—it's a call to action. A reminder that you are not alone. And proof that courage, even in the most challenging times, has the power to create extraordinary change.

Join the movement at [campusworksinc.com/courage](https://campusworksinc.com/courage).

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leaders who have driven progress  
in higher education.”**

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CEO, CampusWorks

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