

A Theory for Preparing Future Higher Education Presidents

The higher education environment in the United States is experiencing unprecedented challenges: The population is aging. The student pipeline is diversifying. International student numbers are declining. Preparation levels are decreasing. Employers are demanding different skills and knowledge. The higher education market is expecting greater flexibility of instructional delivery. Alternative credentialing platforms threaten the monopoly on the academic degree. The perceived value of higher education is in decline among certain segments of the population. And, the pandemic has exacerbated all of these challenges and added more.



A few select colleges and universities will be able to weather such challenges with minimal change in the ways they do business. Unfortunately, others are closing or significantly restructuring to stave off closure. Many of these institutions were hanging on, hoping the ways in which they conducted business in the past would once again be viable. But that has not happened.

Leaders of today were prepared yesterday. They came of age in academic administration during an era with very different constraints. Many leadership development programs reflect these historical conditions. For leaders of tomorrow, this paradigm has to shift.

Preparing the Leaders of the Future

At the AGB Institute for Leadership & Governance in Higher Education, we prepare leaders to expertly adapt institutions to the challenges of the future, to evolve colleges to be successful in this new environment, and to work in effective partnership with their governing boards and stakeholders. We believe that colleges and universities are powerful forces for the betterment of the world, including having positive impacts on community vitality, quality of life, societal health, and research and innovation. That said, our focus is very much one that places students (and their success) at the center of our work in developing leaders.

The Institute is based on five primary concepts that are crucial for the higher education leaders of tomorrow:

1. Advancing Adaptive Leadership

Leaders need to adapt to change by understanding its implications and identifying ways in which to capitalize on it. The pandemic showed us that higher education can change — and change quickly. Thousands of institutions pivoted seemingly overnight to offering classes remotely. They then had to navigate balancing public health and safety with maintaining effective pedagogy, while also managing an unprecedented economic downturn. Life will not quickly return to normal, nor should it. Learning from the disruption caused by the pandemic will be important as institutions look to thrive in the future.

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To adapt, academic leaders need to understand the changing trends within our sector and in those that affect it. This means studying data, tracking innovations, and surrounding themselves with other smart leaders. No one can predict with absolute certainty what will happen in the future, but the challenges mentioned above will likely continue to affect our sector for some time to come.

Leaders have to be prepared to act. In the Institute, Fellows learn how to understand the environment and develop strategies for progress and evolution to keep institutions moving forward, even during sudden change. Each Fellow will take a journey of self-reflection about their leadership development and have the opportunity to define and refine their personal theory of leadership. Along the way, Fellows learn from current and former presidents who have led effective change efforts and have the opportunity to shadow sitting presidents to observe leadership in action.



2. Enabling Systems Thinking

The success of colleges and universities in the future will require engagement of multiple stakeholders within the institution and externally. Systems thinking is about being able to understand the whole (as greater than the sum of its parts) and identifying the interconnected nature of problems, people, and performance. Co-director Nancy Zimpher coined the term “systemness” to describe “the effective leveraging of the collective assets of disparate units to advance the overall mission of the institution”.

Historically, higher education has been designed to be competitive, not collaborative, and focused on isolated results as opposed to collective impacts. Not only does that approach hinder progress, but it may also negatively impact student success, as well as the perception of the value of higher education. Institutions have a unique opportunity to innovate under the collective impact model, focusing on common goals and objectives.

Take college completion, for example. It is a complex problem that is impacted by admissions criteria, advising, faculty engagement, funding, curricular structures, and a host of other factors. Changing any one of those factors may impact completion and may also impact any of the other factors. Leaders need to recognize that the completion rates of their students is the intended outcome of their current academic systems, and to affect that outcome, they need to understand the system and how adjustments to one part of the system will affect other components.

In the Institute, Fellows learn from leaders in the area of systems thinking and gain an appreciation for the power of systemness to transform higher education.

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3. Strengthening Cultural Intelligence

Cultural Intelligence, also sometimes referred to as CQ for Cultural Quotient, refers to engaging effectively with culturally diverse groups and situations. Cultural Intelligence is the ability to cross borders, whether they are disciplinary borders or national borders, and operate effectively when so doing. It goes beyond being culturally sensitive and aware, by advancing certain skills and capabilities needed to work effectively in culturally diverse situations.

Higher education has always been a crossroads of cultures, and the interconnectivity and interaction of various groups is only intensifying due to globalization and efforts to confront racism and other forms of discrimination within and outside of our organizations. Leaders today need to develop the skills that enable them to successfully work with and across various cultures, as well as to be champions for mutual respect and cultures of belonging on campus.

The Institute starts from day one with an introduction to Cultural Intelligence from a leading expert in the field, and the concept is woven throughout the entire Institute experience so that graduates have the skills and knowledge needed to be successful leaders in culturally diverse environments.



4. Pursuing Continuous Improvement

There is a willingness, if not a desire, to **see organizations as continuing learning experiments**, where each effort is undertaken in a way that the leader is willing to celebrate successes and learn from failures.

To build momentum in higher education, we need leaders who know how to build smarter universities. Change is happening at a rapid pace, and institutions must become more agile to stay ahead of the curve. Organizational evolution is a continuous process that requires tools and frameworks to identify and implement improvements.

We can trace concepts of continuous improvement back to Edward Deming and his work to infuse quality improvement into leadership and change management. Peter Senge later advanced the idea of a “learning organization” — one that develops systems to assess its work and make strategic realignments to improve operations. More recently, Jim Collins has written about moving organizations from being good to great.

What is it that cuts across all of these approaches? There is a willingness, if not a desire, to see organizations as continuing learning experiments, where each effort is undertaken in a way that the leader is willing to celebrate successes and learn from failures.



The Institute teaches Fellows about theories regarding how to effectively use continuous improvement, data analytics, and change management so that they can develop cultures of improvement in their own organizations.

5. Executing Effective Shared Governance

Higher education is one of the most complex organizational environments in which to lead. Colleges and universities have been labeled professional bureaucracies, loosely coupled systems, organized anarchies, and the multiversity. What is common across all higher education institutions is an expectation of shared governance in that multiple stakeholders, both internal and external, are actively engaged in institutional planning and decision-making.

In the Institute, Fellows will explore the inevitable tension between autonomy and authority in the academy and how it can enable and inhibit decision making. “While all shared governance models have unique characteristics, it is not the model that matters so much as whether the institution has developed a democratic way to share governance that gives appropriate decision-making authority to those most able to successfully execute particular decisions,” writes Institute co-director Jason Lane in his book *Academic Leadership and Governance*.

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One of the signature components of the Institute, particularly given its association with AGB, is a focus on leading in shared governance organizations and developing effective working relationships with governing boards. Fellows will have the opportunity to learn from current governing board members, board staff, and other participants in shared governance to explore these dynamics and better understand how they can be successful in these “organized anarchies.”



Conclusion

There are certainly numerous programs designed to prepare and train leaders at various levels. But much like how institutions need to evolve, leadership development programs need to deliver curricula that are well-informed, innovative, and forward-thinking.

The AGB Institute for Leadership & Governance in Higher Education is in a unique position in that we focus on both leadership and governance. We have a cadre of diverse faculty who are experts at adaptation, systems thinking, and continuous improvement. It is critical that leadership programs, particularly those training future presidents, introduce participants to methodologies that embrace community participation and teach cultural components such as learning from failure, embracing vulnerability, and cultivating trust across sectors and organizations. As challenges to higher education continue to emerge, there is a clear opportunity to not only prepare for the future, but also to have a hand in shaping it.

AGB *Institute for* **LEADERSHIP &
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*Presented by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB),
Miami University and AGB Search.*

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