



2010/2011 Series: Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade

chapter six: **That Vision Thing**



That Vision Thing

Dr. Joanne V. Creighton: President Emeritus of Mount Holyoke College

People say that a president must have vision. I say “that vision thing,” as George Bush (the first) called it, can be a misunderstood component of leadership. Beware of the college president who comes into office with a full-blown vision, like Athena from the head of Zeus. The president can say, “I’m in charge,” but not with shaky credibility. So many others—students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni—make up the fabric and generating energies of the institution, as well as its accumulated history, customs, policies, and traditions.

Rather, vision is the ability to appreciate what is there and imagine what more might be if an institution were to realize its unique genius and full potential. How does a president, particularly a new president, acquire that kind of vision? I believe it is through planning, which is an educational process, as well as an opportunity for reflection, stocktaking, and assessment—both for the president and for the institution.

Drawing on my disciplinary background as a professor of English, I think of the president as *reading the text of the college*—learning about its characters, themes, conflicts, history, contexts, and challenges, and trying to fit them all into clarifying analyses and hypotheses. The president should attend, in particular, to constituents’ hopes and dreams for the institution, and should collect, like a magpie, the best and most doable ideas. Most fundamentally, the president must try to understand the aspirational core, the shared ideas and values at the heart of the college: its implicit *raison d’être*. Indeed, seeing and championing the common ground and imaginatively building upon it is how *that vision thing* is developed.

In order to fully develop a vision, the president should place him or herself clearly at the center of the planning process, lead with questions, and listen carefully. By taking on the role as the drafter of the planning document, as I did at Mount Holyoke, there is opportunity to gain a nuanced understanding of the motivating core of the institution.

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During my first 15 months in office, I led a comprehensive planning process that resulted in a seven-year *Plan for Mount Holyoke 2003*. We met or exceeded all of our goals, and then immediately developed an ambitious follow-up plan, the completion of which coincided with my stepping down as president after nearly 15 years of service. The College experienced dramatic revitalization during this time, with successive years of record-setting applications for admission, the hiring of more than 90 outstanding tenure-track faculty, the creation of three highly successful new centers, the restoration of fiscal equilibrium, and a robust endowment through careful financial stewardship and successful fundraising, which generated more than \$450 million and the addition of 150,000 square feet of new or renovated space in one of the most significant building periods in the College's history. Most importantly, institutional confidence was restored. An unmistakable sense of buoyancy, optimism, and energy supplanted the widespread malaise and anxiety before the planning process.

As a new president, I was a tireless advocate for the planning agenda, giving it a high profile and making it matter. I assembled an effective team of administrative colleagues who carried the agenda to all the precincts of the College. Early on, we sent letters to all faculty, staff, students, and alumnae, inviting them into the process and encouraging them to write to us about strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. We held innumerable meetings, public forums, and in-depth conversations at the president's house. I made clear that the planning train was going down the track, and one could either jump on or get out of the way. The most critical constituents to get on board were faculty.

Having long been a faculty member before crossing over to the other side, I try to blur the boundaries between "us" and "them," to insist that in governing a college, we are all in this together, with the faculty playing a central role. Shared governance is more than ideal; it is essential. The faculty has legislative power and responsibility for the curriculum and academic appointments. Their expertise is fundamental to any academic planning and valuable in most administrative arenas. A president ignores or underestimates the faculty's role at his or her own peril. From my first moment on campus and throughout my tenure, I worked to build trust and make faculty members full-fledged partners in advancing the College. In this, I was blessed to have a talented and beloved dean of faculty.

I believe in leading with a positive agenda. It is demoralizing and counterproductive to start with the proposition: "We're in trouble. What should we cut?" Rather, the initial inquiry should be: "What are our strengths, core purposes, and essential services? How do we enhance them?" Planning at its best, even in the toughest economic environment, is an affirming process. The president should keep the focus on the big picture and higher purposes. People get mired in their own parochial view and problems; they need to be inspired by and encouraged to take the larger view. Only after articulating the shared values and aspirations for the institution, should the problems and challenges that inhibit or prevent their realization be addressed. Don't get me wrong—problems and challenges need to be faced, and faced squarely.

In order to do so, a president must be fearlessly candid and open with information, putting everything on the table. Have no sacred cows, no forbidden subjects. At Mount Holyoke, I made clear that we could talk about the dreaded taboo, coeducation, as well as the escalating expenses of a policy of need-blind admission, the less-than-robust applicant pool, and the fiscal disequilibrium threatening the financial stability of the College. In fact, we presented in public forums the unvarnished financial facts, including an \$8 million structural deficit. Some of these conversations were emotional and heated. Not everyone was comfortable with this degree of transparency, nor did everyone trust that we were not hiding something. However, eventually these doses of reality do, if you are patient and unrelenting enough, have the effect of winning over most people and drawing them into shared problem solving.

When, for example, it was apparent that we must relinquish a sacred cow, need-blind admission, there was widespread angst; however, in time, most accepted the hard medicine. To be sure, a few students staged an 11th-hour sit-in to protest this and other changes, but they didn't garner wide support, in large part because most people believed the issues had a fair hearing.

I'm a strong proponent of using drafts to go fast and communicate broadly. I assumed the presidency in January, and by August, we sent out to all campus constituents a first draft of the plan with a preliminary mission statement and a list of principles and challenges with possible themes, emphases, and initiatives. This speed and lack of caution shocked the Board chair. "You did what?" She feared I would be discredited before I got my feet firmly on the ground. On the contrary, drafts are wonderfully useful, allowing you to test out ideas without boxing yourself into the corner. ("What, you don't like this idea? That's okay; it's only a draft. How would you reframe the issue?") Drafts help you to have iterative, interactive processes, stake out territory, and get people used to ideas and invested in shaping the document.

In both planning processes, we shared three public drafts before the final document was drawn up. The second draft went to all 30,000 constituents, including alumnae, who were invited to send their comments. The final documents were unanimously approved by both faculty and the Board—no small feat. They had been shaped, refined, and vetted by an extraordinary number of contributors. It is fair to say that the final plans were owned by the constituents of the institution, and indeed, they also took ownership of the implementation.

The ultimate objective of the planning process is to reaffirm and draw energy and direction from the mission. After innumerable attempts, we managed to distill all the essential elements of institutional identity, purpose, and aspiration into a single mission sentence—an accomplishment that warms my English professor's soul. If you get the mission right, it resonates with authenticity and inspires loyalty, allegiance, and good work from its constituents. It becomes the engine that drives the institution forward.

In this, I'm reminded of Jim Collins' book about corporate strategy, *Good to Great*, which builds on Isaiah Berlin's famous essay dividing the world into hedgehogs and foxes: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Collins champions the hedgehog corporation. "Its One Big Thing," says Collins, "is a confluence of what it is deeply passionate about, what it can be best in the world at, and what drives its economic engine."¹ A merely good fox corporation, in contrast, darts around in cunning fashion, devising complex strategies for sneak attacks on the hedgehog.

1. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harpers Business), 2001, p. 96.

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A great college's strength is to be found in knowing *One Big Thing*: its distinctive mission, which, at its hedgehogian best, is a synthesis of what constituents are deeply passionate about, what the institution excels at, and what compels broad support. With this kind of clarity and simplicity at its core, the strategic plan should be relatively short and quotable (indeed, reducible to a one-page synopsis, so that everyone can literally be on the same page); set clear goals, emphases, and priorities within a specified time frame; establish benchmarks and assessment measures; and encourage creative engagement and further planning—because success begets success, planning becomes habitual, and institutional revitalization builds on itself.

One of the great pleasures of serving as a college president is that one can, on occasion, see the college steadily and see it whole (to adapt a phrase from Victorian poet Matthew Arnold). Such an epiphany illuminates the inestimable value and uniqueness of the institution—diverse, complex, yet inevitably bound together by implicitly shared values, habits of mind, and attitudes towards knowledge. That vision can be shared with others and harnessed into a powerful engine of transformation—through planning.



Dr. Joanne V. Creighton became President of Mount Holyoke, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in January 1996. After nearly 15 years of service in this role, she stepped down from this position in June 2010. Now on sabbatical leave, she is President Emeritus and Professor of English at Mount Holyoke.

In 2003, Dr. Creighton cofounded Women's Education Worldwide, an organization she continues to lead, which brings together the Presidents and Chief Academic Officers of women's colleges and universities from around the world. Dr. Creighton is the past chair of the Women's College Coalition and past President of Five Colleges, Incorporated. Dr. Creighton is widely sought as a consultant to other institutions. She is now affiliated with The Registry of College and University Presidents and Collegiate Enterprise Solutions.

Prior to her presidency at Mount Holyoke, Dr. Creighton served in various roles at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, including Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, Professor of English, and Interim President. Dr. Creighton holds a Master of Arts in Teaching from Harvard University and a Doctoral degree in English Literature from the University of Michigan.

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