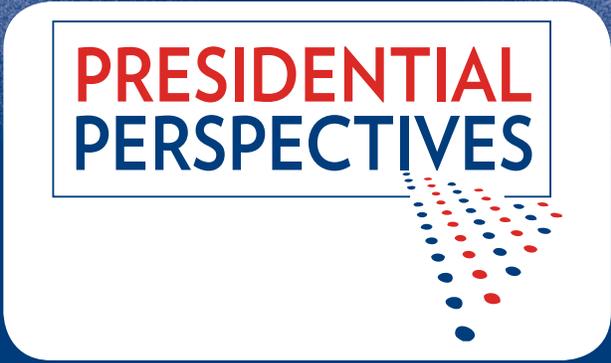


PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



A HIGHER EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP SERIES

2013-2014 Series:

Elevating Sustainability Through Academic Leadership

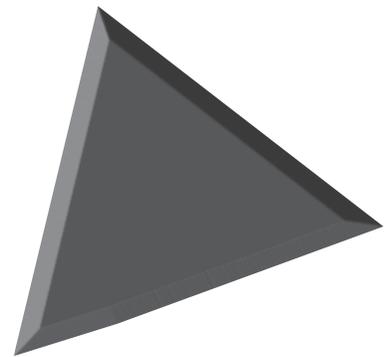
CHAPTER

10

When Choice Must Be
Made; Leadership in a
Time of Choosing

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When Choices Must Be Made; Leadership in a Time of Choosing



Dr. David Hales: President, Second Nature

Leadership is, in large measure, a response function of context and circumstance. Think, for example, of George Patton without World War II, or perhaps more apt, consider the preparation, forces and opportunities to which Eisenhower responded.

Considered this way, that means that higher education faces a perfect storm of leadership opportunity and demand.

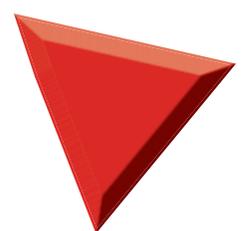
As our institutions look ahead to the 21st century, the flaws in our financial model are increasingly apparent, student debt burden accumulates, our pedagogy is questioned as our institutional forms are shifting under the pressures of an e-world, our very mission is under fire from many directions and the physical environment in which we exist has begun to change before our very eyes. The impacts of climate change, which we have only just begun to assess, will increase expenses and affect longstanding practices, adding new dimensions to presidential challenges.

In short, for higher education, business as usual is not sustainable.

Consider our context and circumstances. By the beginning of the 22nd Century, we will live in a world that is sustainable, relatively predictable, generally peaceful, and measurably more just, or we will live in one that is unstable, violent and characterized by insecurity. We have a choice, however, and the beginning of the 21st Century is the Time of Choosing. The trajectories we adopt now will have long-lasting effect. For some of our schools, the choices will be existential.

From our perspective on the front lines of knowledge, we have seen humans become a force of geological proportions. We cannot help but perceive the pace and magnitude of the changes we face. The aggregated output of our research leaves little doubt about the ill-considered consequences of the choices we make as individuals, institutions and societies to threaten fundamental relationships and values.

“*Despite the variety of language the common core of our mission is to build the knowledge base necessary to promote the comprehensive well-being and sustainability of human society.*”





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Where the land on our planet is flat, we occupy it and appropriate its productivity. Humans are now the primary users of more than half the fresh water in the world. No major natural system of our planet is unaffected by human action. Even as human choices dominate, simplify and weaken our planet's natural systems, we accelerate our demands on them, and increase the stress on our political and social systems.

The number of births each day approaches three times the number of deaths. Of the 4 souls born each second, three will be born in a city in a country whose governing systems already lack the capacity to systematically address major problems, provide for basic human needs, and protect human liberty.

Each of the 7.2 billion souls alive today must have direct daily access to 1,400 calories and four pounds of water to survive. The assets of the richest 300 people exceed aggregated wealth of the poorest 40% of the world's population. Of these 2.8 billion people, the vast majority of which are women and children, 2 billion will go to bed hungry tonight, and a majority are functionally illiterate. There are more people living today who cannot read or write, and more people malnourished, than there were people living in the world just a century ago.

The unavoidable dilemmas we face all involve moral choices:

- Debilitating and dehumanizing poverty
- The unequal distribution of wealth
- The use of violence for political purposes
- Unsustainable patterns of production and consumption

Each of these is exacerbated by the reality of climate change. We are proceeding almost blindly into a future shaped by our discharge of our wastes into our atmosphere.

The context in which we will meet these challenges include the full panoply of societal institutions and emergent phenomena of 21st century networks. The vast majority of these, from governments to corporations, to twitter, seem incapable of long-range considerations and dominated by narrow and special interests. If they are to become agents of sustainability, they will have to be in large measure enabled by education.

Reaching some degree of sustainability, like dealing with the consequences of climate change, is not a choice. What our institutions and societies can choose is the way we address the challenges.

Enabling this choice is the unique responsibility of higher education, and its burden of leadership will fall heavily on those who lead our institutions.



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Higher Education, a unique responsibility:

It is in the academy of practitioners and scholars that we can study, debate and clarify our basic values, identify the drivers of our behavior, and understand the consequences of our choices. The purposeful and conscious examination of values, understanding of institutional and individual behavior and the scientific assessment of the outcomes of our actions must begin with higher education.

Institutions of education are essential to understanding the nature and consequences of the choices we face, and essential to making them wisely and implementing them effectively. We are the crucible in which the shape of this century will be chosen, not in some cosmic moment – as Camus cautions us – but in the day-to-day learning and teaching which are our heart and soul.

The Presidency, a Unique Opportunity:

So what then is the role and responsibility of presidential leadership in our context and circumstances? There are few challenges as complex as the presidency of an institution of higher education in the 21st century. There cannot be a greater violation of the basic management principle, “co-locate authority and responsibility”, than in the modern university. Presidents are not without influence, but the character of our institutions limits independent exercise of authority. Our dependence on on-going support from diverse constituencies, frustrating at times, in the hands of presidential leaders, contributes to the unique potential of the academy to exemplify and advocate for sustainability. Rising to the challenges facing the academy is no longer more management than leadership, and it demands exemplary performance on both.

At the core of the challenge is to protect the mission, purpose and vitality of the institutions we steward. Each institution has guiding values, usually stated more or less clearly, and accreditation assessments examine every aspect of our behavior for consistency with our values and fidelity with our purposes. Despite the variety of language the common core of our mission is to build the knowledge base necessary to promote the comprehensive well-being and sustainability of human society. At our best, we are servants of the common good.

The first task of presidential leadership is to protect the freedoms upon which achieving the purpose of the academy rests:

- Freedom of thought
- Freedom of inquiry
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of debate
- Freedom of choice

These freedoms are nested, rising one from another, leading to a fragile edifice which is one of the highest expressions of the human spirit. These freedoms can enable us to become the authors of our own stories.

The second is to understand and defend our allegiance to the pursuit of enlightenment and to the objective pursuit of science-based wisdom. Ignorance and denial are not new to societies or to the academy, but the costs and consequences of their exercise have increased exponentially.



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Third, in ways consistent with unequivocal allegiance to the fundamental freedoms, and unrelenting commitment to the generation of knowledge, we must ensure the sustainability of our own individual institutions. Sustainability in this case includes more than energy efficiency, ensuring a green supply chain for all the products we purchase, or promoting organic food.

There is a sustainability component to every accreditation standard. Sustainability is central to the standards on institutional and financial integrity. It is especially fundamental to the way we manage, invest and exercise fiduciary responsibility for our endowments. Not only are there value-related issues which we must be willing to address publically and transparently, it is clear that fiduciary responsibility standards must be more strictly applied to college and university endowments. Prudent person standards fall short of the conservative approach required of institutions which aspire to last forever.

Fourth, engage all elements of the academic community in promotion of sustainability, insisting on the broad focus that is economic as much as it is environmental, and rise in implications for justice and fairness. The other essays in this series elaborate on these elements. Integration of sustainability across the curriculum is a necessary but not sufficient element of leadership, as is making sure our operations do not spread our wastes throughout our atmosphere and environment to the detriment of innocent others.

Tying all of these elements together must be a willingness to explain why we believe these measures are right and necessary for our institutions, and openness to the challenge of our arguments.

To these tasks, presidents will bring a variety of talents and individual institutional circumstances. Leadership is rarely defined by the loudest voice, however articulate. The president who can be responsive to the nature of our own individual institutions and responsive to the grand challenges of the times without conflict is lucky. The president who confronts the institutional norms and strictures to effectively align the expression of the basic values of the academy with the global challenges of our context and circumstances is a leader.

There are competing etymologies for the English verb "educate," but the one I prefer considers the word itself to be based on the Latin word ducos, to lead, and the prefix e - out or out of. In the ancient foundation of the very word is the challenge of our times.

One of the wisest mentors I have been privileged to know, Donald Strauss, a person of many talents and accomplishments tells the story in his journals of sailing across the Atlantic for the first time. As they made landfall, confronted with the lights of Calais, he wrote into the log, "either those lights are not there or we didn't end up where we intended."

We can no longer ignore the lights, and we occupy positions of unique opportunity. The basic ethic demanded by a commitment to sustainability is that the opportunity to make a difference creates the responsibility to act.

Our actions will write the future across the face of this planet. It is in our power to choose the future. This is both the lesson and the legacy of the marvelous world in which we live. Our actions are our choices, and we, as individuals, and as institutions of higher can and therefore should make a difference.

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Dr. David F. Hales, President, Second Nature. After serving as President of the College of the Atlantic until 2011, David Hales accepted the position of President and CEO of Second Nature, the Boston-based advocacy organization committed to promoting sustainability through higher education since August, 2012.

Under Hales' leadership, College of the Atlantic received recognition for innovative academic excellence, more than doubled the size of its endowment, and became the first institution of higher education in the United States to be a "NetZero" emitter of greenhouse gases.

President Hales has held numerous positions promoting sustainability nationally and internationally, including directing environmental policy and sustainability programs of the United States Agency for International Development throughout the Clinton administration.