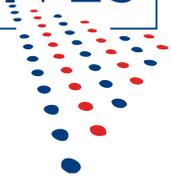


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



A HIGHER EDUCATION  
PRESIDENTIAL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP  
SERIES

*2014-2015 Series:*

**Inspirational Innovation**

CHAPTER

**6**

**The Future Is Now:**

*Educating Students to Thrive in a Volatile,  
Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous World*



## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

# The Future Is Now:

## *Educating Students to Thrive in a Volative, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous World*

### **Dr. Robert E. Johnson, President, Becker College**

Educational malpractice is what colleges and universities are committing today when they do not adequately prepare graduates for a world that is constantly evolving and changing. Welcome to the VUCA world—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

Arguably, the value of a college degree remains strong, particularly in lifetime earnings. But our collective responsibility in educating students must be to help them understand that in today's society they must be adaptive, nimble, and entrepreneurial. We are educating young people today for jobs that do not yet exist, to solve problems we have yet to identify. Unlike past generations, our graduates must be job creators who are innovative leaders in this VUCA environment, capable of reinventing themselves throughout their professional careers and adapting to change. It is also imperative that they have a global perspective. Possessing that view is not optional; it is required in order to understand their relationship within a global society, so they can thrive as citizens of the world in a global marketplace. Colleges and universities must prepare students for this VUCA and global world so when they end their educational journey, they are well-prepared to survive and thrive on a more critical and challenging journey.

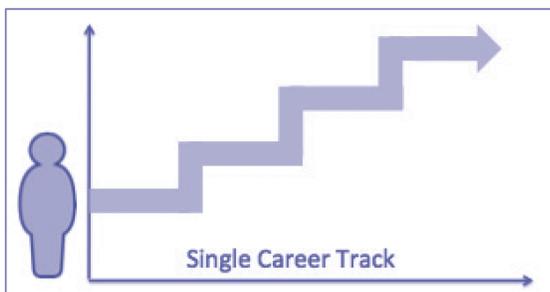
To best prepare graduates, we must commit to providing an education that ensures they are truly world ready. At Becker College, we define this as delivering to the world graduates who are prepared not just for their first job but also for their personal and professional career trajectories—graduates who can embrace possibility thinking to envision the future and make it a reality. We believe that students must develop an agile mindset to navigate unpredictability, and possess the knowledge and skills to be competitive in an ever-changing marketplace. The agile mindset has four components: divergent thinking, social and emotional intelligence, empathy, and an entrepreneurial outlook.

***“Our collective responsibility in educating students must be to help them understand that in today’s society they must be adaptive, nimble, and entrepreneurial.”***

## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

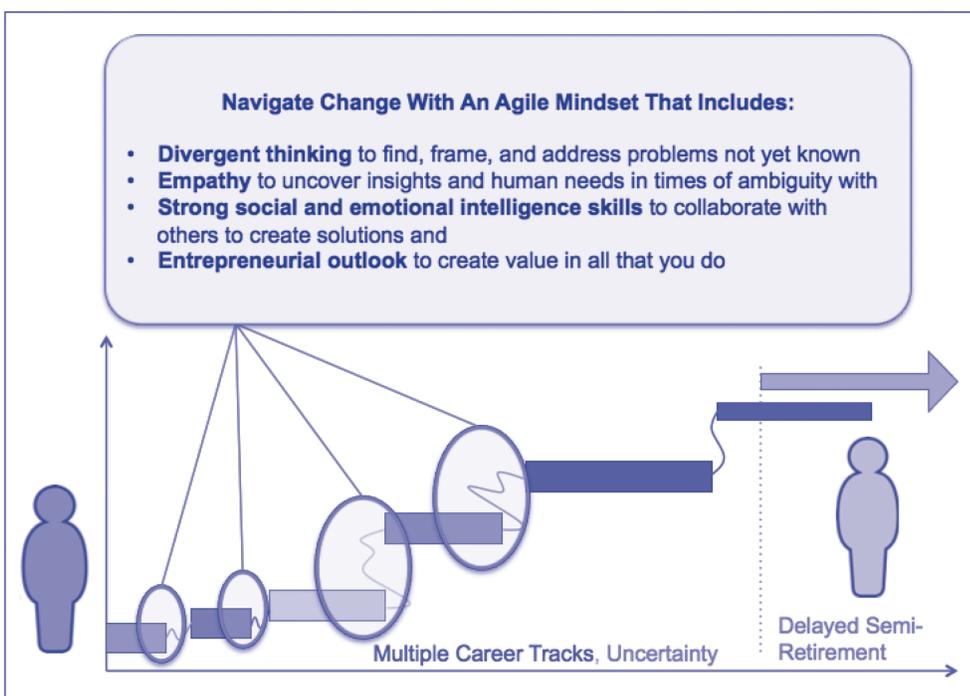
### Developing an Agile Mindset

The fact that we now live in a world in which **half of today's jobs didn't exist 25 years ago** makes it clear that universities, by themselves, simply cannot fully prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist<sup>i</sup>. As college graduates enter an increasingly VUCA world, with rapid rates of change—from brisk technology advancement,



expanding globalization, shifting economic conditions, and rising threats from climate change—colleges and universities must consider a shift in the way they train and educate undergraduate students. For professionally oriented colleges, in the recent past, the focus was on the major of study, augmented by a strong general education or liberal arts experience, designed to create a well-rounded, well-educated student based on the assumption a graduate would remain in a single career trajectory.

By 2020, the knowledge college students acquire will have an expected shelf life of less than five years<sup>ii</sup>. Given this anticipated rate of change, the emphasis has shifted from what you know to what you can do with what you know, as further evidenced by the hiring practices of Google, “[The] No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it’s not I.Q. It’s learning ability. It’s the ability to process on the fly. It’s the ability to pull together disparate bits of information<sup>iii</sup>.” The figure above depicts the past traditional path of a single career;



the figure below depicts reality today: a complex web of career trajectory. Becker College believes an integrated liberal and professional education, augmented by training in the agile mindset, are the keys to best preparing students to successfully navigate the VUCA world.

<sup>i</sup> Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* (Soulellis Design, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Bill Eggers, John Hagel, and Owen Sanderson, “Mind the (skills) gap,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 12, 2012, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/09/mind-the-skills-gap/>

<sup>iii</sup> Laszlo Bock, SVP of People Operations, Google as told in the *New York Times* column “How to Get a Job at Google” (Thomas Friedman) [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google.html?_r=0)



## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

The agile mindset stems from Thomas Friedman’s assertion that “Average is over.” As graduates enter a world where anything routine, either mentally or physically, will be robotized or described by an algorithm and therefore easily automated, outsourced, and digitized, they will compete for non-routine work—anything that is unpredictable, rooted in uncertainty, and requiring a specialty skill set. Not long ago, graduates could secure jobs based solely on the specialty skills acquired with an undergraduate degree and follow a predictable path identified by the employer. Today, employers in all industries seek employees who not only can execute their job, but also bring an agile mindset where they can rethink, reimagine, and reconceive the job to add new value for the employer. One of the most universally valuable non-routine skills is customer service. Given greater than 70 percent of our Gross Domestic Product is consumer spending and consumer spending is heavily influenced by customer service, customer service can be viewed as one of the single biggest drivers of the U.S. economy.

An agile mindset gives students the tools needed to navigate complexity and uncertainty so they can create new value.

### 1. Divergent Thinking: The Key to the Right Solution

*“If you are not prepared to be wrong, you will never come up with anything original.... Divergent thinking, a component of creativity, is the ability to see many possible answers to the question.”*  
—Sir Ken Robinson, education expert, TED talk, “Changing Education Paradigms”

Divergent thinking is the ability to see a problem or question from multiple perspectives and multiple stakeholders’ viewpoints, for the purpose of creating many possible pathways to solutions. Regardless of what industry our students enter, they will be faced with complex challenges and problems that require the exploration of new pathways to solutions that address multiple perspectives. Those who have developed divergent thinking will be capable of succeeding in this challenging environment.

### 2. Empathy as a Competitive Driver

*“The best organizations and the ones that survive economic tsunamis are those with emphatic cultures and managers who are able to step outside themselves and walk in someone else’s shoes... Innovation starts with empathy.”* —Dev Patnaik, co-author, *Wired to Care*, and founder and CEO of Jump Associates

Empathy—the ability to understand human need—is the key to innovation that unlocks a deep understanding of customer motivations, desires, needs, and pain points. As the VUCA world presents social, technology, economic, and/or environmental shifts, consumer needs will change as well. Those graduates who have a high level of empathetic development will have a competitive advantage, capable of rapidly seeking the right solutions at the right time and maintaining a strong consumer base for their businesses.

### 3. Social and Emotional Intelligence

*“To be sure, intellect is a driver of outstanding performance. Cognitive skills such as big-picture thinking and long-term vision are particularly important. But when I calculated the ratio of technical skills, IQ, and emotional intelligence as ingredients of excellent performance, emotional intelligence proved to be twice as important as the others for jobs at all levels.”* —Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, in the *Harvard Business Review*, “What Makes a Leader”



## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Social and emotional intelligence, often referred to as “soft skills,” help decipher the emotional state and drivers in others as well as in oneself. They are integral in the VUCA world, to better navigate rapid change, high levels of ambiguity, and complexity, and are essential to team management as well as to the delivery of great customer service. Those graduates who have developed a high level of social and emotional intelligence will be more capable of understanding and addressing the needs of customers—from discovery of desires to delivery of solutions.

#### 4. **Developing an Entrepreneurial Outlook**

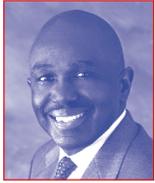
***“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning, a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the fastest or the slowest gazelle, or it will starve to death. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better start running.” —Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat****

The VUCA world is increasingly competitive: you are either predator or prey, and speed is key. Regardless of their job responsibilities, today’s graduates must be fully versed not just in the fundamentals of a business model, but also in how to create value in all that they do. If empathy, combined with social and emotional intelligence, helps them better understand human need, and divergent thinking helps them discover solutions to address such needs, then an entrepreneurial outlook can be seen as the intelligent spark that enables them to create innovative solutions that will result in real and measureable value, enhancing their employers’ competitiveness in the marketplace and their reputation as high-performing employees who can rise to the top of their profession.

The future of our global society is highly dependent upon the pipeline of college graduates we provide who are ready for the real world and who will influence the competitiveness of the American economy. Institutions of higher learning must prepare graduates for multiple careers. If we provide them with an understanding of the VUCA world and give them an agile mindset, they will not only succeed personally and professionally, but will also ensure and sustain the growth of our economy now, and in the future.



## PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



**Dr. Robert E. Johnson, Ph.D.**, is a strong believer in higher education as a public good, and has dedicated his more-than-25-year career to transforming the lives of young people while preparing them to realize their dreams. Since taking office as the tenth president of Becker College in July 2010, this charismatic leader has charged the institution with a new, world-ready entrepreneurial mission; led the creation of groundbreaking academic programs; realized significant capital projects; strengthened the institution's financial foundation; and challenged students and faculty to compete in an increasingly global society. He believes today's graduates must have an entrepreneurial mindset and be divergent thinkers with high emotional intelligence.

A native of Detroit, Michigan, Dr. Johnson holds a Ph.D. in higher education administration from Trident University International (formerly Touro University International), a master's degree in education administration from University of Cincinnati, and a bachelor's degree in economics from Morehouse College. Prior to becoming Becker College's President, Dr. Johnson served as Senior Vice President of Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio; Vice President of Enrollment Management at the University of Dayton; Vice Provost at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan; and Executive Director Of Enrollment Management at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. He has been appointed to the board of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, is a member of the Council on Competitiveness, and serves on the boards of a number of local organizations. He has addressed corporations, organizations, and institutions on the topics of leadership, innovation, strategic planning, personal brand, diversity, higher education, and volunteerism.