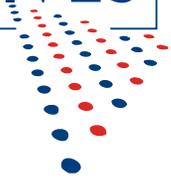# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

A HIGHER EDUCATION PRESIDENTIAL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

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Inspirational Innovation

CHAPTER

7

Leading and Learning:
Structures and Strategies for Accelerating Innovation

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Leading and Learning:
Structures and Strategies for Accelerating Innovation

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I like to think of myself as a student of community colleges as well as a leader of a community college. A commitment to learning and leading anchors my leadership approach. Learning, while leading, brings forth a deep engagement in my work and offers me an immense amount of personal satisfaction. Even more important, I am finding that this blended approach is essential to leading the accelerated innovation necessary to keep our colleges relevant.

This quote, from the book The Student Loan Mess, attributed to innovation strategist Clay Christensen, brings home the importance of today's leaders holding a "leading and learning" approach. He says: "Fifteen years from now more than half of the universities will be in bankruptcy including state schools." If this is a viable possibility for the future, and I believe it is, most of us will be pressured to lead our colleges in new ways and in new directions. Being students of our work, with a willingness to identify the hidden commitments and big assumptions" (Kegan and Lahey, 2001) that prevent us from more boldly leading change, is important. I am struck that it was just a few years ago that Christensen labeled community colleges as disruptive innovators (Disruptive Innovation for Social Change, HBR, Dec. 2006) "dramatically changing the shape of higher education in the United States by expanding access to and redefining the goals of advanced study." Less than a decade later, community colleges have become a maturing model that is no longer the disruptor as new, more affordable (the $10,000 degree movement), and more convenient delivery models have entered the market and have expanded access, especially for adult students who are now the mainstream learners in higher education.

" *Ideally, colleges poised to engage in deep disciplined innovation would rest in the upper right quadrant as energetic, innovative, adaptive, and well run.* **"**

A Disciplined Approach

These new and intense pressures require presidents to shape an intentional approach, a disciplined approach, to accelerating innovation on our campuses. To me, a disciplined approach cherishes what makes us uniquely strong (e.g. a commitment to the value of the liberal arts for some private colleges, access, and equity for community colleges, research for research universities) while supporting our colleges in breaking out of doing everything with the same model. It is an approach that is constantly creating, scaling, and sustaining new opportunities that are consistent with our unique strengths and the heart of our missions. It is also an approach that challenges the relevancy of traditional strategic planning models, but that is a rich topic for another article.

A disciplined approach can lead to the disruptive or breakthrough innovations that Christensen talks about but, as important, can lead to sustaining innovations that are vital for institutional quality, renewal, and relevancy. For mature colleges, that cannot opt for a full replacement of their organizations as an alternative for future relevancy, the disciplined approach supports a leader in bringing just enough disequilibrium into their systems to keep them from remaining stable and potentially stale.

To draw a picture of my own disciplined approach, I mentally map new ideas and opportunities for innovation at Montgomery as a portfolio of options mapped across two axes. The "y" axis (the vertical line) is the degree of transformation of the business model. The "x" axis (the horizontal line) is the degree of transformation of the student experience. Innovations that fall in the upper right quadrant (transformed business model and transformed student experience) are labeled disruptive. Innovations in the lower left quadrant (little change in the business model or student experience) are labeled sustaining. The college's new Culinary Arts Institute, a stand-alone facility designed to support an integrated student experience with redesign from entry to completion and with a different pricing model, is in the upper right quadrant as is the college's Gateway to College program, an early college high school for at-risk students funded by a unique partnership of the school districts, the local Workforce Investment Board, and private donors. The college's Gateway Academy, a year-long facilitated program for faculty to use data to engage in redesigning the pedagogy of high enrolled, low student success courses falls in the lower left quadrant.

Reliance on Networks: An Adaptation of Kotter's Dual Operating System

The leadership of the design and implementation of an innovation, especially those that focus on transformation of the business model and the student experience, cannot be relegated into the college's traditional organizational structure. As John Kotter, in his book Accelerate: Building Strategic Ability for a Fast Moving World, notes, "traditional structures meet daily demands, but are not built for organizations to remain relevant in a world of constant turbulence and disruption." Hierarchies are effective, if managed well, at operating systems that result in reliability and efficiency. They are not designed for speed or agility and are not effective in living into and with ambiguity.

Networks, however, give organizations a fluid structure. They are perfect for innovation. As David Brooks described in his recent opinion piece on "Baseball or Soccer?," the power of soccer's dynamic, team-oriented, and networked style of play produces contagion with "people absorbing memes, ideas, and behaviors from each other" that lead to often unexpected and not predicted outcomes (Brooks, NYT, July 10, 2014). Leading the intentional use of networks in catalyzing innovation is a core dimension of disciplined innovation. At Montgomery, we use Kotter's dual operating system approach, an approach that uses both networks and hierarchy. The networks work independently yet also in partnership with the hierarchy. They are not two powerful silos competing for attention and resources.

Building and facilitating the operation of these innovation networks, or innovation pods as I call them, gives leaders a chance to engage many people in driving change from multiple directions. The network includes a core group of participants that coalesces and disbands as needed with continuous morphing of membership for renewal. The networks are connected to the hierarchy by people who populate both the hierarchy and the network, usually one of my senior team members. Their participation symbolically blesses the work of the network. In addition, the senior leaders have a responsibility to role model the delicacies of working effectively in both systems and connecting the two systems when required to advance an innovation from concept to implementation. Each network has a facilitator leader who manages the constant flux of the network, keeps the thinking on task, and brings in and out expert assistance to move the design of the innovation forward as required.

As a leader, it is important for me to think about what efforts I move into the hierarchy and which efforts I move into a network. Tangible straight line projects, where we know how to get from point A to point B, and where there is little or no ambiguity, go into the hierarchy where traditional project management approaches can lead to success. While important to building the organization's management competencies, typically, these are projects that yield incremental process improvements. A recent example at Montgomery is the migration of our information technology platform to SQL, an 18-month project that involved multiple stakeholders and clear deadlines, but a project that was straight forward. High stakes efforts bringing forth much change, that are highly ambiguous, and that require creativity, speed, and agility go into the network. Projects at Montgomery that are in networks include, in addition to the Culinary Arts Institute, efforts to build a competency-based associate degree program, emerging work on new student success initiatives, the development of a Virtual Campus, the development of our University Center, and other new ideas for breakthrough products and service delivery that push on changing our business model and the student experience.

The Care and Feeding of Both Systems

Balancing the effective dual operation of these two distinct operating systems requires skillful leadership and careful attention of both systems from the president. Kotter offers a good example of the important balance between leadership and management in his book <u>Accelerate</u> (Pg. 65) in a quadrant map. The "y" axis represents the strength of leadership. The "x" axis represents the strength of organizational management. Colleges with weak management and leadership are doomed. Colleges with weak management and strong leadership are energetic, innovative, but chaotic. Ideally, colleges poised to engage in deep disciplined innovation would rest in the upper right quadrant as energetic, innovative, adaptive, and well run. When I reflect on the strengths at Montgomery based on this framework, I see a need for my leadership attention to go into building stronger basic process management competencies in some of our administrative areas, especially in building strong finance support and analytics for improvement of our traditional programs as well as to the fuel the work of the network innovations.

In addition to knowing when to use the network and when to use the hierarchy, presidents must possess other skills to balance this dual operating system. We must be pioneers and hold a deep understanding that bold change will be necessary for the future "thrivability" of our campuses. We must bring the outside into our organizations and share analogous cases of what is working in other types of organizations. We must identify and populate the networks with "tempered radicals," (Meyerson, HBR, 2001) members of our communities that yearn for rapid change, work behind the scenes every day and invisibly to advance change, and who are well respected by their peers. We must offer unwavering support for the work of the networks, keeping these efforts in "our pockets," advancing them by navigating the tension between dynamic ideas emerging from their work and the tendency for those outside the network to derail the work of the network.

Learning and Leading

Most importantly, we must be willing learners and leaders and encourage others to jump out in front of us with new ideas. I find my own participation as a member of these networks is important for endorsing, motivating, and sustaining the work of these "innovation pods." Here are a few tips for colleagues considering the same type of active engagement in this work of disciplined innovation on their campuses.

1. Let go of any pre-determined thinking about the end result of the work of the network. Be nimble. Listen. Let ideas emerge while occasionally guiding the conversation by asking questions rather than offering answers.

2. Watch for emerging leadership among network team members and coach and mentor the advancement of that leadership for potential facilitator leadership of another innovation idea.

3. Give the network space for risk taking and creative thinking, literally and figuratively. At Montgomery, we have dedicated space for our newest idea to develop within our small business incubator. We are supporting the development of our idea like we help aspiring entrepreneurs develop business plans for their ideas.

4. Look for opportunities to bring new expert resources into the network as required, including those from inside and outside the organization.

5. Allow the network to fail and be willing to abandon an idea to give the network space to continually reframe and improve concepts/prototypes as the network continues to learn together.

6. Hold senior leaders in the networks accountable for proactively connecting the network ideas to the hierarchy and for role modeling behavior as connectors as they have the potential to derail innovation as they bring their unresolved competing hidden commitments to the table.

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has served as President of Montgomery County Community College (PA), a multi-campus college, in suburban Philadelphia since 2001. Acknowledged as an innovating community college, MCCC is recognized nationally for its work in student success, most recently receiving the prestigious 2014 Leah Meyer Austin Award through Achieving the Dream. Dr. Stout is active in national and local organizations. She serves as Chair of the President's Advisory Board to the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University Teacher's College, is a Commissioner and Executive Committee member with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and is past member of the American Association of Community Colleges Board of Directors (2011-2014). Most recently, she served as co-chair of the AACC 21st Century Commission's Implementation Steering Committee working with more than 100 leaders from across the country in developing a framework for the redesign of American's community colleges.

Dr. Stout holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Delaware, a master's degree in Business Administration from the University of Baltimore, and a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Delaware. She was named to the University of Delaware's Alumni Wall of Fame in 2005 for her outstanding professional and public service achievements and received a Presidential Citation from the University for her contributions to community colleges in 2012.