

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Change Agent Leadership

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*Change agent leadership must identify future trends and needs, lead change agendas, invest in what makes a difference, and remain authentic and courageous.*

THE TIMES ARE CHANGING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION in dramatic ways at what feels like warp speed. What skill sets are mandatory for change agent leadership?

Change agent leadership creates the capacity and environment to move into this future while preserving the values and core missions that make institutions strong. Change agent leadership must determine what made institutions strong in the past versus what will make them strong in the future: strong in terms of articulating the value they provide to students, communities, and society as well as strong in terms of sustainability in an ever-changing environment. Change agent leadership must identify future trends and needs, lead change agendas, invest in what makes a difference, and remain authentic and courageous.

To begin, what has changed?

Many organizations reference global trends affecting higher education, such as those related to demographics, economics, environment, globalization, technology, learning, and politics. Today's changes are more powerful than ever before, including intense competition among traditional institutions, expansion of for-profit institutions, advances in technology, globalization of colleges and universities, and demands for accountability and return on investment.

Here we highlight four key areas of change—demographics, expectations, economics, and technology (DEET)—of which change agent leadership must be aware:

## DEMOGRAPHICS

People continue to seek educational opportunities to improve their lives, and students attending college today are more diverse. According to Merisotis (2015, ¶ 1),

The profile of today's college-going population looks much different than it did decades ago, when the average student was a fresh-faced 18-year-old moving directly from high school to campus. Students today are older, more experienced in work, and more socioeconomically and racially diverse than their peers of decades past.

Over the last 50 years, opportunity has increased in American higher education. Thirty-one percent of those 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree—two-and-a-half times the rate in 1970 (Fry and Parker 2012). Yet there have been stagnant or falling completion rates over the past decades (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2007).

The profile of students is changing:

There are currently 17.6 million undergraduates enrolled in American higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that just fifteen percent of them attend four-year colleges and live on campus. Forty-three percent of them attend two-year institutions. Thirty-seven percent of undergraduates are enrolled part-time and thirty-two percent work full-time. Of those students enrolled in four-year

institutions, just thirty-six percent actually graduate in four years.

The most significant shift is probably the massive growth in the adult student population in higher education. Thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in higher education are over the age of 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another twenty-three percent by 2019. (Hess 2011, ¶ 2–3).

## EXPECTATIONS

Students are no longer expected to succeed or fail based only on their own merits. Institutions must invest in student and academic support systems to improve student success. Expectations for accountability, transparency, and integrity of outcomes are now the norm. The change is from expecting an environment of open access to higher education to expecting student success; this includes understanding the metrics and deploying actions that empower students to succeed.

However, a paradox persists: many in the higher education rankings business continue to use metrics that do not focus on teaching and learning. In a Council for Higher Education Accreditation presentation in early 2015 based on the World University Rankings 2014–2015 methodology (*Times Higher Education* 2015), an international publisher presented the following five performance indicators:

- » Teaching: the learning environment (worth 30 percent of the overall ranking score)
- » Research: volume, income, and reputation (worth 30 percent)
- » Citations: research influence (worth 30 percent)
- » Industry income: innovation (worth 2.5 percent)
- » International outlook: staff, students, and research (worth 7.5 percent)

Not a single factor applied to learning outcomes: retention and persistence, completion, graduation, placement, pass rates for licensure exams, cumulative GPA, graduate satisfaction rates, employer satisfaction rates, comprehensive portfolio review, or satisfactory completion of externships.

## ECONOMICS

The fundamentals around how students pay for education amid rising costs have changed. This has resulted in a shift from grants to loans and from state support to student tuition to cover a majority of the cost. The current economic times coupled with current higher education business models do not support student access, affordability, or success in a sustainable manner. Moreover, current models are incapable of supporting or sustaining institutions in the long term. In fact, college tuition cost has outpaced inflation again in 2014 (Lorin 2014), and student debt is second only to mortgage debt in the United States (de Vise 2012). This amount of debt is unsustainable for our nation, and the solution has to include the increased affordability of a college education, again necessitating innovative business models for colleges and universities.

## TECHNOLOGY

The need to support academic technology continues to rise. The *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition* (Johnson et al. 2014) lists six key trends to consider as part of developing future-sustainable strategies:

- » Growing ubiquity of social media
- » Integration of online, hybrid, and collaborative learning
- » Rise of data-driven learning and assessment
- » Shift from students as consumers to students as creators
- » Agile approaches to change
- » Evolution of online learning

Within our institutions, academic technology must take center stage in support of access, affordability, student success, and institutional sustainability. Robust data warehouses empowered by data mining and analytical tools are critical within this rapidly changing environment. If performance metrics are to be identified, targeted, measured, and, most importantly, analyzed to improve the higher education learning environment, then major attention must be devoted to institutional data, research, and analysis.

Norris and his colleagues emphasize in *Transforming in an Age of Disruptive Change* that

We are starting to face multiple combinations of challenges. In previous decades, these challenges occurred singly and independently. If the multiple-challenge trend continues, then higher education could face a new “perfect storm”: declining authority, unfavorable economics, new competition, and reduced career opportunities for new graduates. (Norris et al. 2013, p. 11)

What is fundamentally different is that the “perfect storm” has come, but most institutions have believed that these circumstances would pass and they could return to “normal.” Yet there is no normal or going back. The “new normal” compels institutional leaders to change the way they approach students, learning, and institutional sustainability. It requires that leaders become change agents.

To do so, most institutions have undergone some form of strategic planning or strategic positioning; however, the majority of these efforts have not resulted in transformative change (Dolence and Norris 1995; Kanter 2001; Norris et al. 2013; Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence 1998). Institutions continue to reorganize, restructure, reallocate, and retrench their activities in response to ongoing shortfalls and changing learning demands. Such changes are incremental in nature and occur at the margins of the organization. Once again, they do not support or sustain student access, affordability,

or success in large enough numbers, and they do not result in supporting and sustaining our institutions.

Hence, we propose a radically different course.

### 1. Focus the Institution on Accountability and Analytics, and Do So with Authenticity

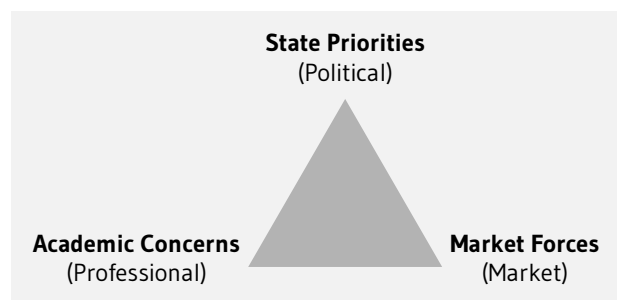
Institutions with **accountability** are focused squarely on the right targets, i.e., those set by organizations such as Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design, Complete College America, the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and others. Within accountability is assessment, which ensures that an institution is setting the right targets, measuring them consistently, and using the information for improvement.

Higher education stakeholders increasingly demand more accountability and more evidence of innovation in higher education environments.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities published its list of the “Top 10 Higher Education State Policy Issues for 2015” (Hurley, Harnisch, and Parker 2015). Among the many issues on the list is performance-based funding. States have been shifting from enrollment-based to performance-based funding for public colleges and universities over the last several years, and according to the National Council of State Legislatures, more than half now have performance-based funding systems in place with wide variations in performance metrics and the amount of state funding distributed based on performance. Soon it will be possible to see if performance-based funding has served as a catalyst for improving outcomes.

1. See examples: White House College Scorecard ([www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/college-score-card](http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/college-score-card)); U.S. Department of Education College Rating System, December 2014 preliminary outline ([www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/public-feedback-college-ratings-framework](http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/public-feedback-college-ratings-framework)); the proliferation of online college consumer information clearinghouses (e.g., [www.goranku.com](http://www.goranku.com)); and the GAO 2014 Report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives, *Education Should Strengthen Oversight of Schools and Accreditors* ([www.gao.gov/assets/670/667690.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/667690.pdf)).

Given the complicated environment surrounding accountability, the Accountability Triangle (Burke 2004) shown in figure 1 is one way to consider who is accountable to whom, for what purposes, for whose benefit, by which means, and with what consequences.

Figure 1 **The Accountability Triangle**



Source: Burke 2004, p. 23.

Institutions are accountable to state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. Being accountable to each means balancing the institutional response to ensure service without subservience. These multiple demands place higher education in a difficult position, resulting in conflict between autonomy and collegial governance and accountability to federal, regional, state, and local stakeholders. These competing interests create a dynamic tension within the institution between internal and external concerns. Burke (2004, p. 10) portrays this tension as

- » Institutional improvement versus external accountability
- » Peer review versus external regulation
- » Inputs and processes versus outputs and outcomes
- » Reputation versus responsiveness
- » Consultation versus evaluation
- » Prestige versus performance
- » Trust versus evidence
- » Qualitative versus quantitative evidence

This situation places great pressure on change agent leaders as they navigate paths to innovation and transformation. Accountability is basically reporting on measures, targets, and outcomes. In response to funding mechanisms based on achieving targeted outcomes, many institutions have built performance-based models and invested in activities to improve their outcomes. Yet, the targeted outcomes identified and the activities conducted to improve those outcomes are not always based on the best research as to how students persist, why they drop out, how they succeed from course to course and term to term, and how they graduate in a timely manner.

It is critical to focus squarely on the right targets. To do so, use **analytics**.

The field of data science uses analytics to assess what is happening and why. Analytics is a rapidly developing field that is improving what institutions know about all aspects of the organization from finances, human resources, and facilities to student recruitment, persistence, and learning. Predictive modeling determines what will happen next. Prescriptive analytics targets what can be done to improve student success; moreover, it brings leaders far more insight into the decisions they must make in relation to improving student success.

Note the Gartner Analytics Maturity Model in figure 2. Descriptive analytics is at the most basic information level; data describe what happened in the past. The next level of assessment is diagnostic and adds more insight; with interpretation, it can result in specific actions to be taken. The next level is predictive analytics, in which models and analysis expand the value of the information to describe what will happen depending on the actions taken. Prescriptive analytics moves to optimizing activities and outcomes. This level of analysis applies the foresight gained from advanced analytics to determine those actions that can in fact result in improvements. Furthermore, prescriptive analytics coupled with advances in adaptive and personalized learning can

improve students' experiences and ultimate success. And in turn, advances in targeted performance activities can improve the overall sustainability of institutions.

The *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition* notes that

There is a growing interest in using new sources of data for personalizing the learning experience and for performance measurement. As learners participate in online activities, they leave an increasingly clear trail of analytics data that can be mined for insights. Learning analytics experiments and demonstration projects are currently examining ways to use that data to modify learning strategies and processes. Dashboards filter this information so that student progress can be monitored in real time. As the field of learning analytics matures, the hope is that this information will enable continual improvement of learning outcomes. (Johnson et al. 2014, p. 12)

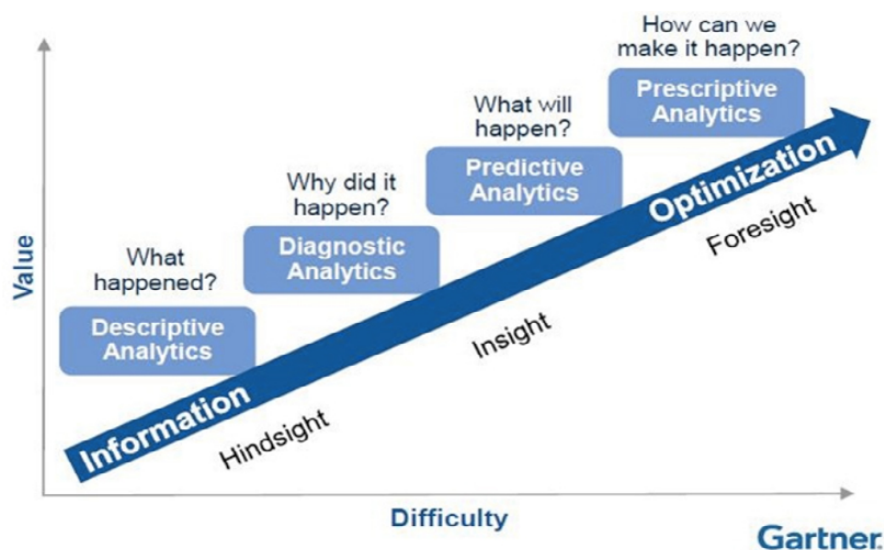
In short, with these more sophisticated data, analytics, and predictive capacities, we now have models that can significantly improve student success.

So, what is our obligation to do something? How are we using these models and this knowledge to change our approach to learning, to integrate the work of faculty and staff to improve student success, and to empower students to know where they are and what they can do to improve?

How can change agent leadership take the vast insight and foresight now available through data science and advanced analytics and apply this knowledge to inform institutional culture and become the change agent required to move people and institutions to new ways of using data, new ways of doing business, and new ways of serving students and communities? It takes **authenticity**.

Authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are. Their leadership strengths come from their life stories. A recent study of 52 university presidents in the United States found that “the attribute of authenticity must reside within the university president’s acumen so that there is consistency between his/her actions and most deeply felt values and beliefs” (Basham 2012, p. 56).

Figure 2 **Gartner Analytics Maturity Model**



Source: Elliott 2013, following “Be Proactive: More Difficult, But More Value.”

Authentic leadership is grounded in core values, strong emotional intelligence, and reliance on integrated and innovative teams to work on the important issues of the day. Authenticity is based on transparency and open communication. Improved accountability and analytics will bring forth important stories about where students are on their pathway to success. Openly communicating those stories, even when they are unfavorable, is imperative as a first step toward transforming institutional models and cultures.



How does this apply to change agent leadership? Authentic leadership keeps the focus on the interconnections between assessment, accountability, and analytics. Authentic leadership is the way to move to a sustainable environment that supports change and innovation. As Bill George and his colleagues point out, “Superior results over a sustained period of time is the ultimate mark of authentic leadership. It may be possible to drive short-term outcomes without being authentic, but authentic leadership is the only way we know to create sustainable long-term results” (George et al. 2007, under “Empowering People to Lead” ¶ 7).

What happens when an organization innovates? It is important to attend to three areas of capability: collaboration, engaging in discovery-driven learning, and making integrative decisions. While this may sound logical, there is a great creative tension and paradox inherent in working in such an environment. This needs to be recognized, valued, and nurtured.

The authentic leader understands the interplay that is present when an organization innovates. The authentic leader values, celebrates, and implements transparency, collaboration, and courage. By developing a supportive, creative, and collaborative environment, leaders can use their knowledge of the organization and its people, supported by metrics, to remix directions, goals, and outcomes. In an innovative organization supported by an authentic leader, the environment is based on trust and the shared development of innovative and transformative opportunities and actions. This trust supports an ongoing change agenda that takes organizations boldly into new spaces and places to benefit stakeholders.

## **2. Build Strong Strategies, Models, and Approaches to Improve Student Success and Institutional Sustainability—In Short, Be Bold**

The authentic, accountable leader must also articulate a bold, clear vision of change for his/her organization. This vision must be bold enough to make the case for a change in the status quo and clear enough to support implementation efforts. Once a bold vision is articulated, change agent leadership must engage others in sharing this boldness and encourage risk taking within the organization in support of the vision. In other words, change agent leaders must not only be bold themselves, they must also support boldness in others in the organization in order to move in the new direction.

Hill and her colleagues describe the strength of “collective genius,” i.e., taking the slices of insight and creativity across the organization and leveraging them to create a more powerful environment based on many ideas (Hill et al. 2014). It is important for leaders to understand that innovation is generated from the interplay of ideas that occur during the interaction of people with diverse expertise, experience, or points of view. It usually arises from an often lengthy period of conscious experimentation and repeated trial and error. Innovation is a problem-solving process that is about searching for a solution by creating and testing a portfolio of ideas. Ultimately, innovation requires leaders to work to encourage integrative decision making. Einstein hinted at the integrative nature of the process when he said that innovation is really about “‘combinational chemistry’ . . . about taking ideas, half-baked notions, competencies, concepts, and assets that already sit out there and recombining them . . . What’s new in many instances is the new mix” (Hill et al. 2014, p. 19).

One common defense against change (even in the face of a bold and clear vision) is to suggest that the new direction is not possible. Thus, change agent leaders will also be faced with many operational and tactical decisions. Immediately after articulating the vision, change agent leadership must begin to build long- and short-term strategies to achieve

it. These strategies require input from key leaders within the organization and buy-in across the organization. Bold strategies designed to achieve the bold vision will likely require the creation of new capabilities.

Many questions will arise regarding capability creation. Does the organization currently possess a needed capability? If not, how might a critical capability be developed to support the implementation of the strategy? More specifically, each leader and his/her team will face a question of what to create on their own, what to purchase, and when to partner with others to generate required capability and capacity. We can think of this as the “build, buy, or buddy” question. Answering these questions involves the consideration of many intersecting (and sometimes conflicting) variables, and the answers can be found within the organization’s strategy. Everything in the organization, from technology to policy to human resources and other tools, must be aligned to deliver the strategy. Without a strong strategic direction and a related set of tactical priorities, institutions may find themselves cutting services and capabilities in order to achieve short-term goals at the expense of their longer-term well-being.

When mobilizing toward this vision, talent, financial, and technical capabilities are all considerations. There are various paths to consider when maximizing the resources of the current organization, including decisions to build, buy, or buddy as described below.

- » BUILD. When should an institution consider building something from scratch? When the strategic direction of an organization is well-articulated, the essential capabilities required to achieve the aligned tactics and goals can be identified. One can imagine a set of concentric circles with a “bulls-eye” formed by the capabilities most central to the strategic goals. The closer to the bulls-eye a capability is, the more an organization ought to consider “building” it. The second consideration is organizational capacity to build the solution. Perhaps the capability is very central to an

organization’s strategy, but the organization has no experience or expertise in building that capability. In this case, the decision to build might require a new department with new staff and leaders. The organization must consider the opportunity costs of such a decision. When the capability is central and the organization has expertise and experience in the creation of that capability, building can be a powerful differentiation tool.

- » BUY. Another approach to acquiring a strategically essential capability is to buy it from a vendor. While this gives an organization less control over the actual design and distribution of the capability, this approach generally allows it to move more quickly in the implementation of at least part of its strategic goals. The decision to enter into a partnership with a vendor is best made in the context of a full view of the alternatives (a broad market scan of capabilities); in consideration of what type of partnership to develop (exclusive, strategic, or simple vendor); and with a clear scope and deliverable for the project.
- » BUDDY. When the desired capability is in the middle of the concentric rings scenario described above, the organization may benefit from a “lighter” partnership as it learns more about what is needed to achieve its goals. The organization may want to pilot or experiment with possible solutions while it refines its tactics. In this case, a minimal investment makes good sense, and it can work to “buddy” with another organization to create a shared solution for these initial trials or pilots. These can be considered prototypes and can help an organization make meaningful strides without risking substantial investment.

Ward (2013, p. 14) states that in looking at the big picture, higher education is in irreversible change mode:

Much of our current thinking about the performance, policies, ideals, and innovations of U.S. higher education

is based on assumptions derived from the post-World War II era. . . . For most of the second half of the twentieth century, we became used to a pendulum swing between adequate and inadequate state funding. In bad times, we waited patiently for the return of good times—which discouraged decisive responses to reduced revenues.

Ward (2013, p. 14) believes that now the pendulum not only is unlikely to swing back toward adequate state funding but has “fallen off its pin and is stuck in the mud.” Ward continues by pointing out that we must confront this shift in state, federal, and local support. We cannot rely on raising tuition. We must, in fact, face the possibility that there are limits to our future growth.

Change agent leaders seeking to transform institutions cannot allow themselves or their organizations to become “stuck” in analysis and capacity creation. They must simply begin. In other words, a key component of change agent leadership is the willingness to take action and begin the work of change. The importance of taking action is widely acknowledged across the literature on both leadership and innovation. Donald H. McGannon, who ran the Westinghouse Broadcasting Corporation and served as president of the National Urban League, is often quoted in this context, stating, “Leadership is an action, not a position.”

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### 3. Understand Culture, Embrace Collaboration, and Do So with Courage

Culture, collaboration, and courage complete our radical proposal for change agent leadership. The mindset and practice of collaborating with courage amid a recognition of culture provides clear leverage for accomplishing targeted goals and adding value to the overall work of the institution.

Leaders often talk of an institution’s culture; they attribute success to it and signal the need for “culture change” when things are not quite so successful. Culture has a clear effect on decisions, behaviors, and communication. Therefore, when initiating transformation efforts it becomes critical to understand and explicate the values and personal meanings that define the institution’s culture. According to Kashner (1990, p. 20), “Readying an institution to reply to the conditions that call for change or to innovate on the institution’s own initiative requires a clear understanding of its . . . culture and how to modify that culture in a desired direction.” And according to Basham’s (2012) study of 52 university presidents in the United States, “University presidents realize that their major challenge in introducing change at their institutions of higher education is the traditional and historical structures of culture with its accompanying policies and procedures” (p. 56).

While institutions are influenced by the powerful challenges noted earlier, they are also shaped by this strong force from within. Over 25 years ago, Tierney (1988, p. 3) stated that

This internal dynamic has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its force from the values, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization’s workings. An organization’s culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level.

Tierney (1988) emphasized that the lack of understanding of culture inhibits the ability to address the challenges that face higher education. Leaders need to understand the “webs of significance” within the institutional setting; however, they tend to recognize an organization’s culture only when they have “transgressed its bounds” (p. 4). Thus, leaders find themselves dealing with culture amid an atmosphere of crisis management instead of one of reasoned reflection and consensual change.



Attention to culture empowers leaders with information critical to leading during turbulent times. Change agent leadership brings the dimensions and dynamics of culture to consciousness, fostering conversation and insight about how to address each challenge. Change agent leadership attends to how an institution defines its environment and its mission, how new members become socialized, what constitutes information and how it is shared, how decisions are determined and what strategy is used, and what the institution expects from its leaders (Tierney 1988).

Attention to culture enables leaders to envision how best to foster collaboration or shared leadership. Instead of seeing the organization as an institutional machine with leaders at the top, change agent leadership sees it as a living, dynamic system of interconnected relationships, ready to change in smart ways to meet and exceed new expectations and demands. Change agent leadership “conceptualize[s] leadership as a more relational process, a shared or distributed phenomenon occurring at different levels and dependent on social interactions and networks of influence” (Fletcher and Käufer 2003, p. 21).

Given the complex challenges, we attest that change agent leadership must proactively identify, understand, and foster collaboration; change agent leaders must foster shared leadership. Of great importance is what Pearce, Manz, and Sims, Jr. (2009) note as the realization by senior-most leaders that they do not possess sufficient time or enough relevant information to make all the decisions in a fast-changing and complex world. They continue:

Speed of response to environmental pressures that are today far more turbulent than in the past is now a striking organizational reality—especially since the global financial crisis. . . . Leadership has to be more evenly shared across the organization to ensure faster response times to environmental demands. (Pearce, Manz, and Sims, Jr. 2009, p. 235)

Indeed, it takes courage to collaborate.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Ward (2013) believes that the irreversible changes in higher education include the shifting revenue model, the lack of capacity to meet demand, the need for access by an expanded diversity of learners, the evolution of the definition of quality, and the impact of technology on delivery systems and pathways to learning experiences. He believes that the ability to respond will require us to make significant shifts and changes. The decisions made today will shape a new world of learning. The shifts will open our minds to serving learners through a broader array of pathways and experiences:

It will not be enough to continue making changes through collections of scattered pilots. We must find ways to stimulate and scale change across the institutions—as well as to sustain those changes—if we are to create models that can serve the expanding needs of our learners. (Ward 2013, p. 22)

Leaders need to remember why they got in the business of building colleges and universities: to provide students with education and training to improve their lives, families, and communities. Education is still about providing for the common good. To improve student access and success, we need to find ways to improve retention through better partnerships, programs, and engagement.

*Leaders need to remember why they got in the business of building colleges and universities: to provide students with education and training to improve their lives, families, and communities.*

Change agent leadership needs to be laser focused on improving student learning and success. This means investing in the best data systems and data scientists possible. It means gaining insights and understanding from the data

and acting on them in a timely manner to improve students' persistence and completion. It will require an environment of testing and retesting what works.

This will require bold new models for the way we do business, with student success in the center of the operation. This in turn will require design thinking to integrate new ways of doing business into the existing systems. It means leading in new, productive collaborations to get the hard work done. Change agent leaders must have an absolutely clear understanding of the overall culture of higher education balanced with the local culture of their campus. Understanding the dynamics and strong paradoxes inherent in cultural and organizational change is critical for change initiatives to be successful and sustainable.

Above all, change agent leadership needs to build authenticity, be bold in sustaining the change, and be courageous with an unshakable commitment to investing in transformational education. This is the challenge before change agent leaders that can change the higher education experience to improve both student success and the future sustainability of our colleges and universities.

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