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**Leadership for Student Learning**

In these trying economic times, one of the hardest tasks for college and university presidents is to focus on the educational center that properly defines their leadership. These days presidents have to carry the dead weight of sharply reduced resources that can lead to a preoccupation with slicing budgets and making painful decisions. The president’s work also has become ever more external to the campus and involves constant and draining efforts to cultivate donors and find friends in all the right places. Nor does the presidency come equipped with a large supply of executive power on campus to set the educational agenda. Shared governance involves an intricate pattern of collaborative decision-making. Groups and constituencies press for a place at the table, and academic programs and faculty committees will only grant professional and moral legitimacy to decisions that satisfy the norms of academic autonomy and peer judgment. With so much to do and with so little power to do it, it is not surprising that presidential voices are often muted on central educational issues like student learning.

How then is authentic educational leadership by presidents possible? Presidents in fact have more organizational and educational influence than they often imagine. Their challenge and opportunity is to use an integrative and continuous strategic decision-making process as a tool of leadership to mobilize their organizations. The primary goal is to find focus, purposefulness and energy in a renewed understanding of the power of education and the centrality of student learning. Never more than now has the future of the United States and the globe turned so clearly on educational access and quality. The task has many sides, but at its core it means making
student learning that develops the powers of the mind and the capacities of the person the top priority for higher education. The documentation of the often sorry state of student learning and attainment on America’s campuses is now a tale often told, recently and strikingly by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.

If a continuing process of strategic decision-making is to enhance student learning, it will itself be focused around the core educational capabilities of the institution. Each college or university has a set of distinctive traditions and capacities to foster student learning, and these need to be raised to sharp and articulate awareness to be effective in setting priorities for improvement. The question goes to mission and vision in a compelling way, and has to do with how an institution creates educational value or worth. Nothing is more descriptive of the leadership responsibilities of presidents than this continuing translation of the organization’s strategic educational vision into priorities, plans and actions.

What can besieged presidents really do to re-focus the educational enterprise on the reach and rigor of student learning? To be sure, the answer begins with publicly claiming the centrality of the larger aims of student learning through significant and coherent study in the arts and sciences as a component of all undergraduate programs. But setting goals and framing issues is just a place to start, and the message soon becomes hollow unless it leads to action. Initiatives like the following illustrate the possibilities of presidential educational leadership.

**Connecting Evidence and Action.** Presidents have legitimate and significant influence in the larger decision-making systems and protocols of their organizations. Two of the challenges to advancing student learning are first to create robust ways to gather information about student learning and then to fill the often empty space between data collection and use. The information
about student learning and success that is increasingly available on most campuses often sits in silos unread and unused. In many cases, the glue that can hold these pieces together comes from strategic analyses that have defined the key priorities for student learning and success around the larger vision of the place. Presidents can create linkages among groups and committees of faculty and staff to consider the evidence and to propose actions that tie back to the continuous work of the strategy process. Creating ways that an organization learns from evidence about its own work to improve performance is at the heart of contemporary concepts of leadership.

**Modifying Incentive Systems.** Arum and Roksa make plain that one of the challenges in improving student learning are the “perverse” incentive systems that typically define contemporary faculty work. The recognition and rewards that have come to define professional identity in most universities and many colleges have taken shape around research and publication. Success in research leads to a similar pattern of incentives across campuses that result in higher compensation, more prestige, greater mobility—and less teaching. In another disturbing trend, Arum and Roksa note that the low level of faculty expectation of many students appears to be correlated with the negative teaching evaluations that some students give faculty who ask too much of them. Presidents cannot set standards and incentives by themselves, but in working collaboratively with faculty and staff to champion and recognize the use of evidence to improve teaching and learning, priorities and criteria for performance can change over time.

**Telling the Story: Communication and Competitive Advantage.** As the chief communicator for a college or university, the president knows and tells the organization’s story of identity and aspiration. The plotline of the narrative gives an account of the educational value that the institution has added to the possibilities and lives of its students. This account now often takes the form of seeking and claiming a wider reputation and a stronger position in the
educational marketplace, typically in terms of selectivity and resources. But improving market position is not sufficient to this day and time. Now presidents can know and tell more than in the past about the differences an institution makes in the cognitive and personal development of its students. Describing these molecular elements of learning also strengthens the task of communication with prospective students, alumni and the public at large. As high tuitions grow ever higher in both public and private institutions, questions will become ever sharper about educational performance and what students are supposed to learn. Demonstrable results speak to the core educational abilities and competitive advantages of the organization, and can strengthen admissions and retention and attract financial support. What has been implicit can be made explicit, what has been disjointed can become systematic.

**Demonstrating Transparency and Accountability.** Story telling is not just about the poetry of a place, but also about its face to the public and the metrics that it can share with the wider world. The transparency that presidents can foster includes a full account of the processes and methods that are used to gather and use evidence. The way evidence is put to use actually to change the ways courses are taught and programs are designed can be systematically described and illustrated, as is now expected in most accreditation reviews. Presidents can also develop and support efforts to provide metrics that can be compared with similar institutions about critical aspects of student experience and attainment. The progress that has been made in creating more public transparency for student learning and attainment in recent years has been led by a number of presidents and national associations, and presidents should continue to lead in finding new ways to share data publicly.

**Encouraging Innovation and Experimentation.** The effort to improve student learning does not begin and end with external accountability. Improving student learning is not linear or
standardized, but open and experimental. The data open lines of inquiry that should generate a spirit of innovation and improvement in teaching and learning and in finding new and illuminating forms of evidence. Improvement comes through faculty working collaboratively to evaluate student performance in a variety of ways in key courses and assignments, such as capstones and theses, or in the gateway courses to a major, or in various approaches to experiential learning, or in clarifying and evaluating the learning goals and achievements in general education and professional programs.

Clarifying the Educational Responsibilities of the Governing Board. Presidents are uniquely able to embed the commitment to student learning into the total system of governance and decision-making, including the deliberations and oversight of the governing board. Boards will do well not to involve themselves in academic decisions and methods that properly belong to the faculty, but the interest and the understanding that they demonstrate in the work of the faculty can underwrite and motivate the improvement process. To do this effectively, the board will need information and metrics that provide the basis on which to understand the issues and to pose the right questions. They will have to be spared the jargon of assessment, be shown how instruments and methods work in practice and learn that there is no single test or measure that comes close to telling the whole story. The board’s own deliberations in committees and meetings will need new ways to focus on the central issues in student learning. If the governing board as the organization’s final legal and symbolic authority shows interest and exercises engaged oversight, the president has a way to support changes in the decision-making and incentive systems, and to infuse the work of improving learning into each level of the institution.

The president is the key to developing and sustaining a culture of evidence and action committed to student learning. Nothing will happen unless the total process is rooted in the
commitment and work of the faculty, but little will be sustained unless incentives for faculty are changed and new decision making methods are woven into the culture of the organization. To be sure, presidents will have to delegate and hold others accountable for many aspects of the work, and will serve as partner with the chief academic and student life officers and others to assure that the total process remains connected and robust. At times, presidents will have to assure that resources can be provided for the tasks at hand, which remains a way to signal the priority of the learning enterprise. With a sharp focus on student learning, the president’s educational leadership then takes hold as a continuous collaborative process that integrates and empowers the educational mission and vision of the organization.