

Leading Higher Education Post-COVID

Opportunities, Challenges and Capabilities for Leadership in an Altered World.



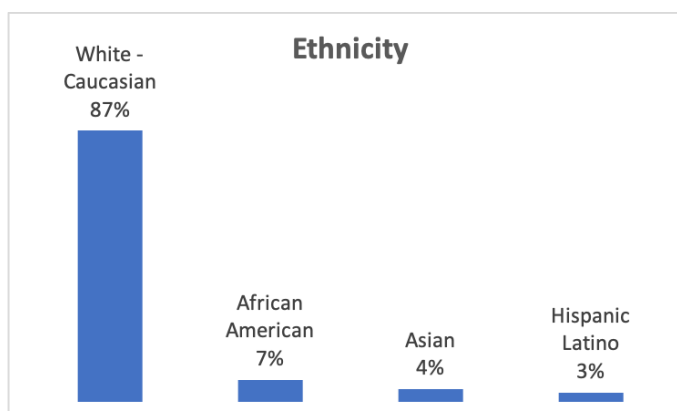
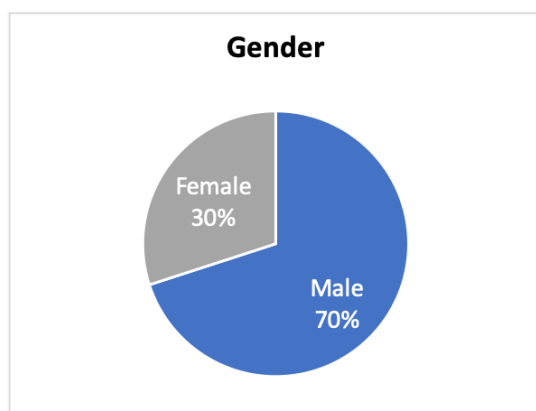
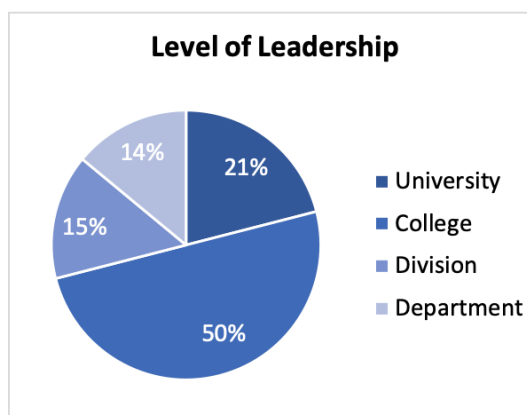
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ABOUT THIS REPORT

During the summer of 2020, Mitchen Leadership and Organization Development engaged senior leaders across the American higher education community. Over 100 senior leaders gave input into several key questions facing Higher Education during and after the COVID pandemic.

This report presents new findings on the challenges higher education leaders are facing, key competencies that leaders must master to be successful and potential innovations that higher education might carry into a post-COVID world.

Respondents to the study lead at over 43 major universities across the country, including land-grants, HBCUs, APLU and even one Canadian institution. Among the 101 participants in the study, the overwhelming majority have responsibilities at the college or higher level in leading research universities. All participants serve in a role of significant leadership and as a whole, represent a spectrum of institutional size, diversity of programs and senior roles. Participants self-identified as the following:



Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to develop the findings. While this study is exploratory in nature and serves as benchmark for leadership views during 2020, it also provides clarity on key imperatives for leaders for the next decade. The most significant finding is the establishment of 17 core leadership capabilities that are critical to success.

CHALLENGES DUE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The year 2020 brought unprecedented challenges to higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Business as usual has been overturned, and institutions of education were faced with shifting systems, schedules and human capital to address moving conditions. When asked, senior leaders responded with over 200 comments that identified 11 major challenges they faced and are facing during the crisis:

UNCERTAINTY

Senior leaders find themselves having to make decisions in the face of “so much uncertainty” and often with little information. Decision-makers at all levels face rapidly changing data, conditions and information. The complexity and sometimes unclear communication at the federal, state and university level has increased the challenge of leading. Senior leaders are continuously planning and re-planning the state of operations, which may extend into early 2021.

BUDGET

Senior leaders are deeply concerned about the financial implications of COVID with 23 % of respondents either already facing budget cuts or have concerns that they will have potential budget cuts in the near future. Coupled with the concern that COVID may impact enrollment numbers and raise costs of doing the business of higher education, leaders forecast a period of operating under reduced or tight budgets for several years.



LEADERSHIP

The lack of clear guidance from political and university leadership has left some leaders with the task of addressing a “diversity of interpretations” and frustrations among faculty, staff and students. Senior leaders at some institutions report that they have spent a great deal of time reconciling and clarifying. In other situations, highly hierarchical decision-making systems have micromanaged, countermanded and/or limited decision-making by leaders. In some cases, organizational trust may have been harmed due to lack of transparency and decision-making systems. A significant number of leaders are frustrated either with limitations on their ability to make decisions or with the challenge of continuously adjusting decisions.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Senior leaders repeatedly cited concern over ensuring the safety of students, extension clients, staff and faculty during the COVID-19 crisis. The logistics of ensuring social distancing, masks and continuing to operate offices, research labs and classrooms was repeatedly cited. The challenge to be equitable, ensure health and operate the university has “no easy answer,” according to many of the leaders responding.

ENGAGEMENT

Whether it is the need to get input and feedback from faculty, staff, students or external partners, senior leaders are challenged to keep and maintain those relationships due to the lack of face-to-face and traditional methods of meeting. Likewise, all employees are faced with the challenge of maintaining strong engagement with students, colleagues and other stakeholder groups. Leaders also report concern over the long-term impact on morale, personnel, employee development and partnerships. Maintaining a sense of community and collaboration now requires increased effort and thought. Ensuring a connection to stakeholders and influencers demands planning and thoughtful approaches with technologies that not all may be comfortable with.



REENGINEERING

Regardless of the goal, task or context, senior leaders and their institutions are having to reengineer every aspect of university life. While the public focus might be on how students are taught, the reality is that every human interaction must be redesigned to increase protections for health and safety. Every space, every activity, even those that have not been traditionally managed, including bathroom visits, must be redesigned. Policies must be updated, guidelines for operations and human resource systems have to be modified to support the faculty, staff, students and public.



COMMUNICATION

Ensuring accurate and timely communication with employees, students and the public has always been critical and challenging for leaders. With remote meetings and classes, new communication systems and the new learning curve for instruction and learning, communication has taken on a new form and with new demands for effective interactions. The additional need for ensuring transparency, clarity and frequent communication due to the COVID-19 crisis has made successful communication tough to achieve at all levels of the organization. Coupled with a lack of equity with respect to internet and technology access, leaders are faced with obstacles that will not be resolved quickly.

TECHNOLOGY

Most universities have been providing online instruction and using virtual tools prior to 2020, but the COVID crisis has forced universities into the virtual world in ways that few programs could have imagined back in 2019. Remote access, virtual meetings and classes, and moving the business side completely online was suddenly the only framework for the work of higher education. Boosting the infrastructure and power of these technologies, ensuring bandwidth and cloud storage, and providing education on their use has been a huge unplanned demand to be addressed by institutions.



WORKLOAD TO WORKFORCE UPHEAVAL

Anyone reading to this point might have reflected already on the number of new tasks that universities are faced with due to the COVID-19 crisis. Whether it is reengineering existing practices or adjusting as more is learned about the crisis, everyone in higher education has seen an increase in workload. Adding to this challenge are the reductions in workforce as a result of temporary hiring freezes and elimination of temporary roles. Leaders are also concerned that budget cuts, declines in enrollment and reductions from fee-based programs will also add to workforce reductions. The ratio of workload to workforce capability is and will most likely be trending higher and higher for the next few years and will lead to reorganization and workforce rebalancing.

QUALITY

Senior leaders are concerned about the ability to deliver and measure quality. The cultural shift of working at a distance has moved leaders from hierarchical management systems to flatter approaches with empowered workers and students. Determining which innovations are leading to effective programs, high-quality instruction, knowledge transfer and outstanding research at the same high level as pre-COVID 19 is a new task for leaders.

Ensuring accountability for both employees and students in a world at a distance will require study and new systems for measuring rigor and outcomes.

WORK, LIFE & WELL BEING

Leaders also express hope and concern for employees balancing work and personal life at a time when so many are worried about health, their jobs and the new obligations due to the crisis. Preventing burnout, supporting and motivating, and maintaining organizational morale while employees work remotely will continue to be a challenge. Senior leaders also expressed concern for their own stress levels and the pressure placed on decision-makers during the crisis.



INNOVATION FOR 2021 AND BEYOND

Netflix, Microsoft, General Electric and Disney have one thing in common. They were all launched during an economic crisis, and their beginnings are linked to new learning and innovations. Learning and innovation during chaotic conditions have been found to expand and diverge the process of discovery leading to innovation.¹²³ There are indications from this study that higher education is rising to the challenge. During the COVID crisis, when asked what letter grade they would give higher education leaders, 77% responded with a B- or higher score. The lowest grade given (D+) was only given twice.

Toward the goal of capturing learning and innovation across the system, this study identifies the most promising innovations observed during the pandemic. We hope this leads to exploration of normalizing the best of these innovations as practices in higher education for the future. Adoption may vary due to the ease and appropriateness of implementing these innovations. We believe that several of these innovations, described below, will lead to a competitive advantage for adopting institutions during the next decade.



BLENDED TEACHING BECOMES STANDARD

Easily the most dominant innovation that respondents noted, new instructional approaches are exploding as more and more classes and programs are moved online. While some curricula have had strong distance education courses, the crisis has caused many programs to experiment with online learning where they have not before. In most cases, blended learning will now be an expected part of classes, where online learning will complement hands-on, applied learning in face-to-face environments. Expanding the move to new teaching methodologies is an increasingly growing set of diverse technologies that will enable enhanced virtual facilitation and instruction.

TEAMWORK AND MEETINGS AT A DISTANCE AS THE NORM

Although forced, everyone who has any connection to higher education has now been introduced to meetings at a distance using one of the many video conferencing systems. While in use before the crisis, never have we had a critical mass where every individual has been obligated to work in a virtual meeting space. The leap in both participative and facilitative skills has enabled a new, more efficient model for dealing with most meetings. While face-to-face meetings will return and are a much-needed approach for some types of conversations, it is also clear that virtual meetings, large and small, may become a dominant practice due to the efficiency they bring. Virtual teamwork, enabled by shared virtual spaces, will become ubiquitous across silos and institutions.



WORK WHERE AND WHEN IT WORKS

Flexible work times and places are not new, but not common across most employee job roles in higher education. One early lesson from being forced to stay home was increased trust in employees working from home and at remote locations. In many cases, employees working remotely were even seen as more productive. Certainly, there are roles that require workers to be onsite at specific time frames. Concerns about employee performance and accountability need to be explored further, but benefits are being noticed. Elimination of travel times, reduction in space requirements, access to more members of teams are just some examples given that suggest flexibility in work schedules and locations may increase in the coming years.

INCREASED ENGAGEMENT USING VIRTUAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

We will see an increase in the use of social media and virtual networking spaces as vehicles for engaging students, staff, faculty, partners and the public. Live video feeds, group virtual meeting spaces and social networking sites will all play a role in connecting higher education closer to stakeholders of the system. Senior leaders also see these mediums as important vehicles in connecting political leaders to the universities in greater ways. Advisory boards are loaded with very busy leaders that rarely meet due to schedules, but members' increased comfort with virtual meetings may allow more frequent and timely meetings.

IMPROVED FOCUS ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased awareness of a host of wellness issues facing students and employees of higher education. Mental health had already become a growing concern on campuses with several institutions implementing new counseling systems prior to 2020. The crisis has increased attention, added physical health to the conversation, and the result has strengthened the commitment of improving the physical and mental health of everyone. Changes in human hygiene and behavior, significant work-life balance strategies and increased flexibility with human resource management may lead to new work and student culture. These cultures will hopefully be built around protecting health, while still delivering performance outcomes.

NEW EXPECTATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled leaders, faculty and staff to work differently in two significant ways: 1) adoption of a diverse set of online tools and techniques to ensure continuity of operations; and 2) acceptance of change and the need to be flexible in the way they work. The sheer level of knowledge gained and adoption of new ways of working demonstrates that working virtually may now become an expected skill of almost all employees. Employees also have new confidence in accepting changes and moving forward through uncertainty. Leaders should consider that they may experience a period where strategic change will be easier to implement.

DOING BUSINESS EFFICIENTLY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

One of the more optimistic outcomes from the COVID-19 crisis has been the move to more efficient methodologies using virtual systems. Universities have the potential to reduce costs by moving to shared-services models, reducing travel and physical space needs, and freeing up labor by automation. While already in place for some systems, moving business online is now a necessary practice. The urgency to invest into systems that allow for secure financial, legal and operational transactions will continue to grow and be a priority.



ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION-MAKING SYSTEMS CHANGE

The COVID-19 crisis has produced huge disruptions to how most institutions make decisions and guide at every level. In many cases, job roles have taken on more responsibilities due to having to make decisions once reserved for more senior roles. In addition, leaders have had to work differently to be inclusive and transparent when making decisions. We can expect that these experiences will lead to new levels of empowerment and engagement. Decision-making systems may be redesigned to better equip human capital with the flexibility to deal with uncertain times.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES AS SOCIETY'S NEEDS SHIFT

The COVID-19 pandemic is resulting in socioeconomic, technological and political shifts that have the potential for creating new opportunities for higher education. Universities have the ability to expand online enrollments to existing and new audiences as society becomes more comfortable with learning online. Research agendas may also find a shift in funding priorities in response to issues raised by the crisis. A deep crisis often creates new opportunities. Institutions who are thinking strategically may position their programs to be successful for the next 20 years through thoughtful conversations and the setting of intentional organizational targets for success in a post-COVID world.



CRITICAL SKILLS NEEDED FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

Higher education leadership has been challenged, but senior leaders are also in a position to make huge strategic leaps forward in innovation and the effectiveness of their institutions. But, what are the most critical skills needed to lead during these times?

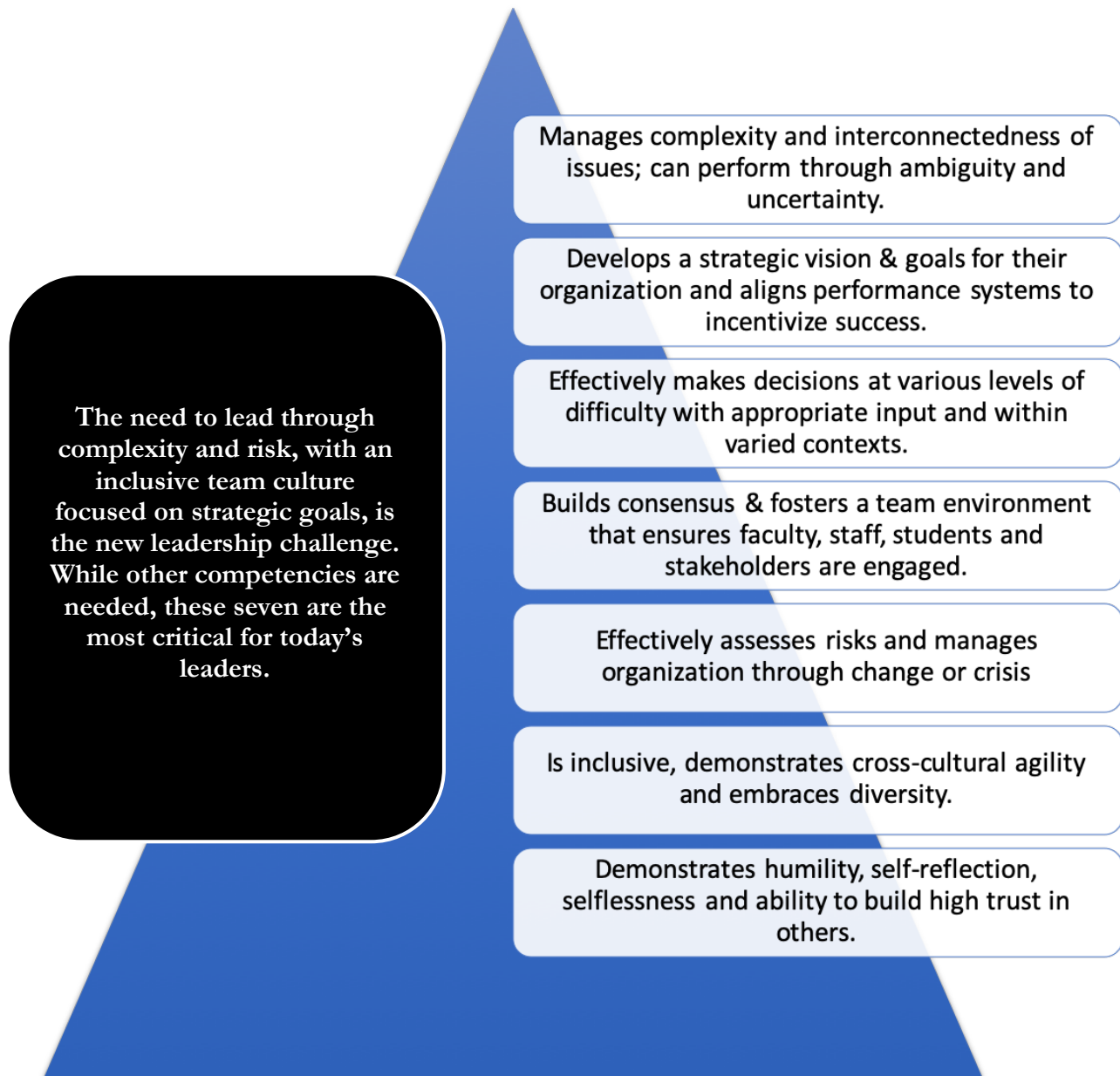
Previous researchers studied higher education leadership and produced a number of competencies models for leaders. In the 1980s, Patrick and Carruthers, Gilly, Fulmer and Reithlingshoffer, and Seldin presented separate competency models for success in higher education leadership.⁴⁵⁶ In 2002, McDaniel presented a framework that included a long list of competencies organized around four constructs: context, content, process and communication

competencies.⁷ Smith and Wolverton sought to refine McDaniel's work and published a shorter list of competencies in 2010.⁸ More recently, Mrig and Sanaghan produced a list of competencies using the framework of five qualities of leadership for higher education: anticipatory mindset, tolerance of risk and failure, conveners and facilitators, courage to lead, and resilience.⁹



A meta-analysis of these studies and unpublished findings by Mitchen Leadership and Organization Development resulted in a concise list of 18 core competencies or capabilities for success for current and aspiring leaders in higher education. To further understand the importance of these capabilities in today's context, senior leaders were asked to determine the importance of each with respect to the others. Using a MaxDiff approach, a long-established academic force choice mathematical method for identifying group insights, the capabilities were reduced to 17 and then ranked into three levels of importance as shown below:

Level I – The Seven Critical Competencies for Successful Senior Leadership of Higher Education in Rank Order¹



¹ Top Ranked Leadership Competencies as reported by 100 senior leaders in higher education in order of importance.

Level II – Competencies Necessary for Success in Senior Leadership of Higher Education²

Senior leaders reported that the ability to communicate, learn, empower, and establish presence were also important. While not as important as Level I competencies, lack of these skills may contribute to leadership challenges.



Level III – Competencies Important to Success in Senior Leadership of Higher Education³

While considered important, these six competencies are not seen as critical to success as others in the study.

Maintains a passion for quality, holds self & others accountable, and addresses performance issues.

Explores and cultivates opportunities for resource growth and development.

Manages facilities, technology, budgets and fiscal matters.

Works well with Boards and Advisory Groups; Networks and develops partnerships with allied organizations and networks of colleagues.

Manages, mediates, and negotiates through conflict & difficult situations.

Articulates institutional strengths and accomplishments in an effective manner with media and key audiences.

² Level II competencies are considered essential by the majority of senior leaders, but when compared to Level I competencies seen as not as critical.

³ Level III Competencies are important but are seen as less important to Level I and II competencies. One capability, *Manages Legal and ethical issues*, was not considered important. This may be reflective of the common practice to delegate the management of legal issues to counsel.

CONCLUSION

For more than 30 years, our team here at Mitchen Leadership and Organization Development have been involved in higher education and more importantly managing positive change for success in education. Having worked with many of our best public and private universities, we have never experienced a time when universities were as disrupted by factors beyond their control as they are today. And while the tendency is to pause and wait out the storm, we know that there has never been a more important moment for strategic leadership and action. Universities must engage their communities in a conversation about what our classrooms, labs and outreach may look like, what innovations and goals need to be targeted, and what we all can do to be successful in a post-COVID world.

Despite all the challenges, we are excited by the way universities have responded to the challenge of COVID-19. With the best minds in the world and a passion for knowledge, universities are poised to innovate and reimagine higher education in a way that significantly improves the effectiveness and efficiency of education for many years. We are excited. We have confidence that many in higher education will seize the moment. We know Mitchen will be working with some great institutions doing just that in the years to come.



For more information on the details of this report and/or our work helping universities with strategic positioning and leadership development, please contact us at:

www.mitchen.net

¹ Cheng, Yu-Ting, & Van de Ven, Andrew H. (1996). Learning the Innovation: Order out of Chaos? *Organization Science* 7(6) 593-682.

² Hite, JA (1999). *Learning in Chaos: Improving human performance in today's fast-changing volatile organizations*. Gulf Publishing Company. Houston TX.

³ Farazmand, Ali (2003) *Chaos and Transformation Theories: A Theoretical Analysis with Implications for Organizational Theory and Public Management*. *Public Organization Review* 3, 339-372.

⁴ Patrick, C., & Carruthers, J.K. (1980). Management priorities of college presidents. *Research in Higher Education*, 12, 195-214.

⁵ Gilly, J.W., Fulmer, K.A., & Reithlingshoffer, S.J. (1986). *Searching for academic excellence*. New York: Macmillan.

⁶ Seldin, P. (1988). *Evaluating and developing administrative performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁷ McDaniel, E.A. (2002). Senior Leadership in Higher Education: An Outcomes Approach. *Journal of Leadership and Organization Studies*, 9(2), 80-88.

⁸ Smith, Z.A., & Wolverton, M. (2010). Higher education leadership competencies: Quantitatively Refining a Qualitative Model. *Journal of Leadership & Organization Studies* 17(1), 61-70.

⁹ Mrig, A., & Sanaghan, P. (2017). *The skills Higher-Ed Leaders need to succeed*. Academic Expressions, Mrig Company. Denver, CO.