

## **Leading the Ivory Tower** by C Gita Bosch

*The problem is never how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get old ones out. Every mind is a building filled with archaic furniture. Clean out a corner of your mind and creativity will instantly fill it (Dee Hock)*

Operating within the constraints of financial austerity is the norm now for most, if not all academic institutions. This means that the educational leader must be able to operate in an environment in which there are uncontrollable forces with only educated guesses about some of the outcomes. They must be flexible in their strategic thinking and they have to be able to utilize their institution's strengths to manage unpredictable changes that occur within and beyond their institutions. They have to develop and implement creative and innovative practices for the long-term success of their organization which requires ongoing evaluation and assessment of the institution's mission, vision, and goals. They need plan A, plan B, plan C, plan D, etc. In other words, they have to anticipate and plan for various possibilities and scenarios.

Educational leaders are visionaries who have led their institutions with academic pride that did not usually embrace business practices of the cutthroat for-profit environment of their corporate counterparts. But in our current environment of limited resources, they need to adapt their philosophies to face this reality and embrace some of the qualities of their corporate brethren. But, can an educational president run an academic institution the same way a corporate president runs a corporation?

The uncertainty in financial security necessitates a new paradigm in which educational presidents, provosts and deans must lead amidst shifting sands. They have to create a new model of leadership which looks like the corporate for-profit model while maintaining the academic ivory tower philosophies in which learning, not profit, is the bottom line.

### **Educational leaders have to empower their stakeholders**

Higher education clearly plays an essential economic role in our society, it creates employable graduates. Educational leaders have to be able to prepare their graduates to function in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy. The question is how do they balance this technical and vocational preparation with a traditional liberal arts education which produces well-rounded graduates?

Another major challenge facing educational leaders is the maintenance and modernization of their physical and digital infrastructures. And as the infrastructures deteriorate due to lack of funds, enrollment is negatively impacted which creates a vicious cycle. Added to this concern is the uncertain future of the physical campus as online education continues to grow and there is more need to increase and improve the digital infrastructure, including the essential need for cyber security. These efforts require financial resources; how does a leader prioritize without fully knowing the outcomes of external pressures and market forces?

Educational leaders have to be able to empower all their stakeholders [Boards, administrative and academic leaders, faculty, staff and students] to be part of the solution to create success. In other words, the power should be shared with those sharing the risks and receiving the rewards to make them responsible and accountable partners in the institution. This builds loyalty and ownership for institutional success. Leaders have to think of their institution as a community in which everyone must participate, take ownership and be accountable for its growth and success. They have to make sure all the stakeholders learn and are motivated to play together as team.

### **Academic leaders have to deal with the reality of the direction of traditional classroom education**

Harvard, MIT and Stanford offer free online courses. Are these free online courses only a marketing tool, serving as a teaser to get more students to the brick and mortar? If yes, what about the smaller, regional and less affluent institutions that do not have the resources to do this? Can they compete in such a marketplace?

In the current economic environment, traditional college education may not be a viable option for many students because of the cost of that education; those students look to piece together the free online courses to fulfill their educational goals. This leads to a decrease in revenue for the traditional institutions which continue to have the overhead expenses not only for staffing, but also for the physical and digital infrastructures. This piecing together of online courses here and there begs the question, can this type of education really prepare a student to be a successful global player? This is a question for another discussion.

### **Today's educational leaders have to be equally excellent academic leaders and astute fiscal leaders**

Today's educational leaders have to be agile enough to recognize and seize the opportunities that are provided by the challenges in these fiscally constrained times. Inaction is the greatest danger for those leaders who are waiting for the good ole days to return. Leaders have to articulate the importance of and need for their institutions and create partnerships with philanthropy and the business community. They have to strengthen their institutions by streamlining operations and improving productivity while building the talent pool that will ensure global economic success.

Today's educational leaders need to understand the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of their institution and how to leverage these for success. They have to understand and guard against those environmental forces that can negatively impact their growth and success. They need to trim the dying parts of their "business" to make room for new innovative growth. This of course has to be done with great care and wisdom so that they do not toss out the good and bring in the bad; they have to look at those business components that may just need an infusion of creativity to rejuvenate them. They must understand and be willing to pull the plug on projects/areas/departments that are failing and to invest in those with strong growth potential. In other words, they have to "know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em"!