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LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

'This Is an Existential Time for Higher Ed': an Interview With Gordon Gee

By Scott Carlson and Paul N. Friga | JUNE 02, 2020



West Virginia U.

E. Gordon Gee, president of West Virginia U., has led several colleges, including Brown University and the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Please join The Chronicle's virtual forum on Wednesday, June 3, at 2 p.m., Eastern time, to hear a discussion about key factors for making positive, long-lasting, and sustainable change in higher ed. The forum will be hosted by Scott Carlson, a senior writer at The Chronicle, and Paul N. Friga, a clinical associate professor of strategy, and co-founder of ABC Insights. They will be joined by Gordon Gee, president of West Virginia University, and Rick Staisloff, founder and principal, Rpk Group.

E. Gordon Gee, probably more than anyone else, is America's university president. Hardly needing an introduction to a higher-ed crowd, Gee has had leadership appointments at more prominent universities than anyone else: the University of Colorado

at Boulder, Ohio State University (twice), Brown University, Vanderbilt University, and West Virginia University (also twice), where he started in 1981 and where he will most likely end his presidential career.

Gee has been no stranger to controversy. Over the years, he has generated press for the size of his salary and off-the-cuff (and occasionally retracted) remarks. But he has also been outspoken about the need to change the funding models and culture of higher education, in the face of declining revenues and public questions about its relevance. And part of that process, he says, is about being more honest with the institutional community.

“Unfortunately, because of the nature of search committees, the people who become university presidents have offended the fewest number of people for the longest period of time,” he says. “University presidents had to be very Janus faced. Internally, you have to tell everyone that you love and appreciate them. And then externally, you have to say the world is going to hell in a handbasket.”

At a moment of profound change for higher education, Gee talked to *The Chronicle* about what should change, and how college leaders might accomplish it. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How do you think the Covid-19 crisis will affect higher ed?

This is an existential time for higher education, without a doubt. When I became a university president in 1981, there was a public survey showing that 95 percent of people in this country thought higher education was important. It's now fallen below 50 percent, even though higher education is the most important element in our culture and our economy right now.

This is happening in part because change has not been part of higher education's portfolio. Although we are viewing this as a dynamic moment, everyone wants the world to remain sort of the same that it was — and it will not. Universities are made up of two elements: talent and culture. Most universities have very talented people, but they have the culture wrong. We need to spend much more time on developing a culture, which is a

culture of change, a culture of accommodation, a culture of creativity. Universities are places of curiosity. We have great people thinking about great ideas and doing great things, but we have no curiosity about how we make ourselves better.

Why does tradition dominate the culture?

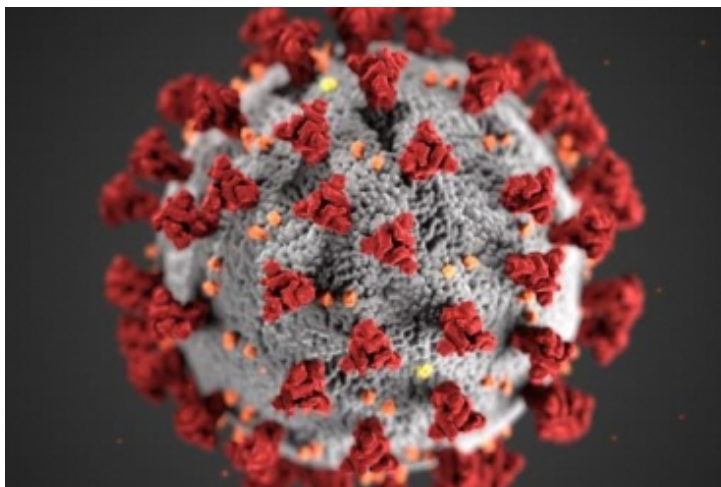
We are organized the wrong way. If I were king for a day, first, I would get rid of colleges and departments, create centers, institutes, and working groups, and organize around ideas. Second, every institution is chasing after other institutions, rather than trying to be themselves. Because of that, I think a thousand institutions are going to fail over the next couple of years.

Third, I would change the reward and recognition structure. This notion of being good at teaching, research, and service, that's for the renaissance person. That's not for today. You have a certain number of professors who love to teach and do it very well, and then you have certain faculty who will write the great American novel and probably shouldn't see students, but they can be great colleagues. We need to recognize people for their individual worth rather than for some kind of a formula. Instead, we treat our faculty like McDonald's hamburgers: Everyone is the same. And we beat creativity and energy out of people. A young faculty member comes to a big institution like this, they want to make a connection with students and start to do it. And then, all of a sudden, some 65-year-old who is the chair of the department, says: You're doing fluffy stuff, and if you don't do it my way; you're not going to get tenure. We've got to change the reward system.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall
- We're Tracking Employees Laid Off or Furloughed by Colleges
- How the Pandemic Will Change Teaching on Campus ✓ PREMIUM



Let me give you an example: We say "teaching loads" and "research opportunities." That says it all to me. Teaching is a "load." Teaching is a drag. Teaching is something you only do to be able to get into your laboratory or the library. We've got to say, "teaching opportunities."

The idea of breaking down silos between departments has been pushed by others, like Mark C. Taylor of Columbia University.

Absolutely. We need to move from being a vertical university to a horizontal university. The verticals are these colleges and departments — I joke about the fact that the large universities are really colleges and departments connected only by a telephone line, no relationship to each other. The dynamic of a university should be the intellectual ability to cross barriers and create new ideas. That's where universities will thrive. Universities today are elephants: They're big, they're ponderous, they're powerful.

How do you persuade public officials to support a vision, particularly when there is a lot of bureaucracy hindering public institutions?

I went to the legislature and said, Look, you don't have any money, so I don't want your money. I want freedom, and we put through what I called a "freedom bill," which allowed us to be more creative, efficient, and effective. We will be accountable, but don't tell us

how many people we need to have on top of the pin.

You have to have a relationship with these people. A lot of university presidents come down from on high — they go down there, they spend a half an hour, have their picture taken, and then they get back onto the campus. I get in a van and I travel to every county in the state and meet them in their home. Today, I've got the birthdays of two legislators on my calendar. I am going to call them and wish them happy birthday, because I like them, not because it's political. You develop a relationship, and then you can develop the credibility to make the changes.

There's probably a similar dynamic going on with faculty — presidents don't have a relationship to make changes.

No, they don't. One of the joys of my job is that it's like a seminar. I'm very curious. I'll call faculty members and say, "I just read you're doing this thing, and tell me a little bit more about it." And I try to come over and see them. The university president has to be a vagabond.

What would you tell a young president who wants to enact an agenda of change and take the university in a new direction? Where should that person begin?

Don't spend a lot of time saying, "I want to learn about the institution." Get out there and almost immediately put forward a plan, because you're going to know the institution well enough. You're getting out in front of it. And then, as you travel around the institution, you say, This is the way I view the institution. If you've got a better idea, tell me; if not, we're going to do it my way.

The second thing is, I do not believe in the strategic plan. I think it is a false positive. I believe in strategic action. Just just find the sweet spots, find the opportunities, and move very quickly into those. Strategic planning is a way to delay making a decision. And we have no time to delay.

And the third thing is, keep it simple. I carry a card with me that has everything that I know about this university on two sides. I say if I can't run a university with this kind of a simple effort, then I've made it too complicated.

Scott Carlson is a senior writer who explores where higher education is headed. Follow him on Twitter @carlsonics, or write him at scott.carlson@chronicle.com. Paul N. Friga is a clinical associate professor of entrepreneurship and strategy at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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