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Issue Brief

A Blueprint for Building Better University Leadership—and Cutting Administrators

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Introduction

Universities are like supertankers moving through the ocean: there is enormous momentum behind their present direction, whichever way that might be. Changing a university requires great energy and a finely trained set of officers who execute their complementary roles with excellence and patience. Typically, a reform-minded board views its task as replacing the university president with an on-mission individual who, once hired, will inherit the existing leadership team and, if necessary, shape it in his/her vision. Once the president is installed, the board sits back and eagerly anticipates his/her progress reports.

Much can be said for a broad delegation of authority from the board to those who manage the university. When the organization is performing as desired, a hands-off policy and highly decentralized organizational form are generally the best practice. After all, when the ship is going where it needs to go, the executive officers understand and embrace the mission, mid-level officers run tight departments, and everyone works well with one another. In this case, slotting in a new captain is not disruptive because all he/she really must do is ease into the rhythm of the ship while allowing all the others to do their jobs.

However, a university reform project is more like directing a ship toward a new destination through dangerous, pirate-infested waters with an officer cadre and crew who are unfamiliar with each other and inexperienced in operations of this kind. The team may have grown quite attached to working in the usual, tried-and-true way. Their existing skills may require retooling. Junior

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officers may fear the career implications of taking on a new endeavor with a high risk of failure. Indeed, the leadership team's aversion may be so strong that mutiny is a legitimate concern for the new captain.

Under this scenario, the senior leadership of the shipping company has a greater responsibility than simply hiring a new, courageous captain and turning him/her loose. Rather, it must do everything possible to support the captain in ways that ensure success. To be effective, senior leadership must be familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the various members of the crew, including the allocation of decision rights, as well as the portfolio of skills required for success. Leadership must know how to develop complementary interactions among the officers and crew responsible for the ship's tightly knit operations and how to incentivize the captain and the crew as a whole. It must also know the support infrastructure required to keep the ship on course and the potential dangers and the related backup plans to be put into place long before trouble swims by.

Universities generally have evolved governance structures—both formal and informal—and cultures ill-suited to their essential missions. As a result, a well-chosen president is a necessary but insufficient first step toward redirecting an institution of higher education. Reform-minded boards must equip themselves with the knowledge required to redirect the ship. Given the complexity of the university, this is difficult in the best of times. Yet, as recent events have made clear, the university has become the focus of increasingly contentious claims among its central stakeholders, thereby making the job of the board an order of magnitude more challenging.

This brief is designed to be a primer for reform-minded university boards. We outline the evolution of university management and culture over the decades following World War II and explain the dynamics that have led most universities to be underperforming on their essential mission. This sets up a discussion of the steps that board members must take to reform the organization and its culture to maximize the likelihood of success. The implementation specifics will differ in substantive ways from institution to institution. We cannot delve into all the details; rather, we provide a template that reformers can fill in as the project gets under way and the appropriate personnel begin to fill their mission-critical roles.

We provide background on the priorities of key members of the senior leadership team. Trustees must understand how these jobs fit into the larger mosaic—why these roles are essential, what they entail, and what skill sets are required by each to ensure that the performance of the whole is greater than the sum of the performances of the individual parts. We discuss this in the context of the issues likely to be most pressing and discuss how the board can strengthen the leadership team's ability to address them successfully. This includes the board's involvement in hiring and staffing oversight.

We also identify the choppy waters that inevitably lie ahead. The board is likely to encounter resistance to its reform program from every direction because every stakeholder group, from administrators to faculty members to students to donors, can see their interests as best served by the status quo. Worse, the byzantine policies and governance structures of the typical university are used very effectively by these interest groups to thwart attempts to change course. Therefore, the strategy we discuss calls for swift action and sustained effort over many years. University reform is not for the faint of heart or for those who are easily distracted.[1]

Universities' Unique Management Challenges

A university's traditional professor-led structure makes it difficult to redirect it toward the efficient attainment of intentional, organization-level goals. Even talented, experienced, well-intentioned leaders can struggle with the obstacles.

With the exception of pure-play teaching colleges, the overarching mission of the university is twofold: 1) to contribute to the advancement of knowledge through scholarly research; and 2) to equip students with knowledge of reliable, general principles that span a broad range of subjects and to hone the necessary cognitive skills to apply those principles in their lives and vocations.

The complementarities between research and education make it sensible to house these activities under the one roof of a university. Indeed, it is most efficient when the people advancing the boundaries of knowledge through research are the same ones passing that knowledge on to students:

1. The disciplinary knowledge required to execute research and teaching functions is highly specialized, diverse, and distributed among individual faculty members.

2. Advancing the state of knowledge in a field requires not only a thorough grounding in existing scholarship but also creative and innovative thinking.

3. Successful research requires collaboration, which depends on high levels of trust among collaborators.

4. Large research projects, especially in STEM disciplines, typically rely on support from government agencies or other funding organizations. In most cases, these organizations fund specific projects led by researchers who are leading experts in their respective fields and deemed trustworthy (i.e., as opposed to providing general funds to the university itself).

As scholars have long recognized, when the skills critical to the success of an organization are highly dispersed among its members, so is the allocation of decision rights. The ideal organizational form to achieve this is the partnership (e.g., law firms and consulting firms, which share these features, are almost always structured as partnerships).

Historical Developments in University Organization

Traditionally, universities *were* managed according to the partnership model. Deans and other senior leaders were themselves scholars acting as their colleagues' "managing partners." Faculty committees played active roles in hiring and promotion, degree programs, and student admissions. This era of university governance and organization began with the inception of the first universities in the eleventh century and lasted through World War II.[2]

Following the war, university enrollment exploded (often because of GI Bill educational benefits).[3] This trend continued, with the growth in economic prosperity. With money to burn, faculties figured out that they could offload administrative tasks onto a new class of professional university administrators. Accepting a reduction of their administrative decision rights in return for a reduction in their administrative workload was a trade-off that faculty were happy to make. Although grumbling about administrator incompetence is a staple of faculty lounges everywhere, most faculty are happy to trade their rights in return for relief from responsibilities and accountabilities that they find unpleasant, if not onerous.

This was a devil's bargain. Like bureaucrats everywhere, university administrators sought to consolidate power and expand their fiefdoms. Today in higher education almost everywhere, the state of play is an organization in which a centralized, hierarchical reporting system of professional managers has been imposed, and faculty members are disconnected from the administrative issues of institutional management.

Although most universities have retained the committee structures inherited from the faculty partnership era, these committees rarely threaten the goals of administrators (though they have the potential to do so, as we discuss below). From 1976 to 2018, student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities grew 78%; but the number of faculty, full-time administrators, and other professionals grew 92%, 164%, and 452%, respectively.[4] This is a global phenomenon: in Sweden, administrators grew 200%, compared with just 23% for teachers from 2001 to 2013; and in the U.K., administrative staff also increased while student satisfaction ratings decreased.[5]

Administrators have largely achieved their apparent dual goals of dominance over faculty and the establishment of enormous, ever-growing bureaucracies.[6] Universities have transitioned from the partnership model to the command-and-control organizational form. The latter is a bad match for the features and tasks of the university. Over time, a culture has solidified within universities in which faculty not only have little power but also little inclination to use what remaining power they have.[7] Viewpoint homogeneity is actively pursued and enforced, resulting in a monolithic culture that is not representative of the society in which these institutions are embedded.[8] The headcount ratio of administrators to faculty and students is far out of balance, resulting in skyrocketing operating costs.[9] Revenue growth is a central priority; as a result, student satisfaction is now the central measuring stick for faculty performance.

Outside observers might believe that higher education has gone off the rails while internal stakeholders are satisfied with the status quo: administrators get to run the show; faculty are free from administrative demands; and students—as customers—receive attentive service.

A New University Success Sequence

One key takeaway from this trend of the growth of university administrative bureaucracy is that the strategy of hiring a "white knight" university president to impose change from the top is not a recipe for success. To understand why, let us begin by defining "success." Success is making efficient use of resources to equip students with the essential knowledge and cognitive skills that are required for their vocations and, more generally, the ability to flourish in a complex, modern society. This requires scholars with skin in the game to lead and manage the university in the right direction.

Faculty naturally lean toward the student-as-student rather than the student-as-customer model. In terms of educational efficacy, this is an important benefit of replacing the command-and-control governance with a faculty partnership. A benefit of this shift is a significant reduction in fixed operating costs due to a reduction in administrative headcount. The problem for the lone reformer—even in the present setting of a powerful centralized bureaucracy—is that reform will be resisted at every level. Those benefiting from the status quo have something to lose when reforms succeed. Moreover, elements of the organization will view the tenure of the lone reformer as a temporary inconvenience. Senior leaders can stonewall, slow-roll, or otherwise obstruct. Faculty can find many ways to resist as well—for instance, by leveraging committee structures and long-standing faculty protections. Students can protest, file grievances, write scathing op-eds, seed potential stories with local press, and find other ways to gum up the reform.

Importantly, although administrators have developed a powerful hierarchy, that power does not extend in all directions. The senior leadership team has the power to appoint its own members; fill leadership roles one level down (i.e., deans of the schools) and monitor their performance; control the allocation of resources; set other aspects of university-level policy; and exercise ultimate veto power over faculty hires and promotions. However, the optimal governance structure of a university is a faculty partnership, for good reason. The faculty are the disciplinary experts who must decide what research to conduct, the content of their courses, and how to present that content to students. There is no combination of formal policies—even if energetically enforced by a powerful hierarchy—that can succeed in micromanaging a faculty to do its will. As the Australians say, there are too many opportunities for faculty to "white ant" the process.[10]

Therefore, the approach we advocate is organizational jujitsu. Reformers begin by taking advantage of the existing command-and-control hierarchy via a rapid replacement of unaligned senior leaders, installing a mission-aligned, determined, complementary management team. (These new leaders are aligned if they agree with the definition of success that we proposed above.) Then, relying on its existing powers to set university-level policies, direct resources, and influence the shape of university staff, the team must align school-level leadership. The leadership team should build a balanced, reform-oriented faculty. Finally, having used the existing structure to kick-start reform, the leadership team should set about returning the university to a faculty partnership governance structure.

Successful execution of this strategy requires a board that is bold, patient, and willing to be hands-on. The concrete details of each reform strategy will vary based on the institution. But in general, board members can think in terms of stages of reform.

Stage I: New Faculty Leadership

The existing, top-down management structure can be used to quickly advance reform. Essentially all activities of the university are reported to a particular senior leader at the university level. These activities include research, human resources, finance, student affairs, programs, and development. Establishing momentum swiftly is crucial. The implementation plan should include an early assessment of the degree to which senior leaders are mission-aligned and a plan for replacing those who are not.

With an aligned senior leadership team in place, the next task is aligning leadership at the level of schools/colleges; these are the deans. Whereas leadership alignment at the executive level can (and should) occur quickly, leadership at the school/college level will take longer, even if compelling candidates for deanships have been identified. University policies concerning filling these roles typically involve committees appointed by the provost and lengthy procedural requirements. The provost ultimately hires and can also relieve a dean. School/college leadership is the step at which serious resistance efforts are likely to coalesce. This is why staffing out the university-level leadership team is the priority: control of research fund allocations, financial procedures and

controls, and human resources policies at the university level can be leveraged to clear the way for establishing mission alignment at the level of college deans so that there is a shared interest in the reform goals of the university.

Leaders of departments and key committees will generally be drawn from the faculty. Ensuring alignment at this level will take time; it requires prior reform at the university and college/school level. To build a foundation, promising young faculty can be hired, retiring faculty can be replaced, unaligned faculty can be prevented from occupying roles of institutional influence, complementary policies can be enacted, and funds can be distributed strategically.

Stage II: Reduced Administrative Bloat

As Stage I gets moving, so must the initiative to downsize the administration. We wager that the administrative payroll at most universities can be cut by 50%, with no noticeable degradation in performance and likely a substantial *improvement* across the university. Here again, reformers can take advantage of the centralized structure of most universities: start cutting at the top and focus on those positions that wield substantial power while contributing little to the mission or on those that are opposed to the mission. The board can be involved in these efforts at a variety of levels. For example, the board can challenge the president to downsize administrative bloat, and some board members can serve on task forces and committees that will explore more efficient paths.

As the administration is downsized, we must remember that the idea is *not* to continue doing the same things with fewer people. Contrary to the view of some outsiders, the issue is not that lazy university employees need to be loaded with more work. Our experience is that most university employees like their jobs and work hard at them. Rather, the goal is to identify activities that are unproductive, if not outright detrimental to the new mission, as well as those activities that should be transferred back to faculty. Cut the problematic activities and the roles that go with them. The actual administrative tasks will depend on the university profile and require board members to proactively gather information and compare it with best-practice benchmarks.

Stage III: Implementing a Faculty Partnership Model

The next stage is transitioning back to a functioning faculty partnership model in which the faculty make decisions leading the university to mission alignment and achievement. Even among mission-aligned faculty, the natural inclination toward avoidance of administrative duties is an ever-present tension. The reduction in administrative bloat in the previous stage will help at this stage: Who will do it, if not the faculty? It should be made clear to all stakeholders what work should be done and who will do it.

The right faculty must step up for the crucial administrative roles. It is expensive to have the best researchers and teachers tied up in administrative work; nevertheless, they are precisely the people who should be involved in achieving the mission. Setting up appropriate incentives, financial and otherwise, as well as developing an organizational culture in which the best and the brightest are expected to do their share of the administrative work, is central to success at this stage. It is not enough to have faculty who are aligned; faculty must also be engaged in driving success and should have skin in the game. A great dean or department chair is a faculty member who has received accolades for research, teaching, and service and is interested in leading initiatives that are aligned with the university mission. The university president ultimately oversees this work and should present progress reports regularly to the board.

Board Members Know Personnel Matters

"No one can whistle a symphony." This saying is nowhere more appropriate than in the university setting: the president is only as strong as the team behind him/her. The success of the strategy requires the quick establishment of a senior leadership team closely aligned with the mission. For success at Stage I, the board must understand what these jobs entail and how to match them with the best candidates.

President

The president is the university's chief officer and is ultimately responsible for operating the entire university according to the board's vision. The president has direct accountability to the board of trustees for accomplishing the university's mission-critical objectives, for determining operating priorities, and for effective and financially responsible planning, utilization, and management of resources. The president is also responsible for apprising trustees of policies that the university will need to implement to facilitate progress. In addition to its inward-facing responsibilities, the president's role also entails critical outward-facing responsibilities such as external relations with government agencies, private organizations, alumni, donors, and local communities.

Vice Presidents

Vice presidents have executive responsibilities within the office of the president. Each vice president has functional authority over the work assigned directly to his/her unit regarding university-wide policymaking and coordination. These functional-area leaders must act in unison with the president and in harmony with one another to ensure that their decisions are mutually reinforcing. Typically, vice presidents are hired by, and report directly to, the president.

Vice President, Academic Affairs: Provost

The provost is a crucial role akin to a chief operating officer in a private firm. The provost oversees operations in the schools/colleges with direct reports from the deans as well as from key university-wide centers and directors. The provost enforces the policies and regulations adopted by the board, office of the president, and university faculty senate. The provost also coordinates the implementation of policies university-wide. In some institutions, he/she directly supervises other vice presidents.

As chief academic officer, the provost has the authority and responsibility for a variety of activities, including academic planning, the translation of these plans into specific goals and deliverables, and, importantly, the allocation of resources to develop and maintain effective and efficient functioning of the academic units. The provost supervises key activities, including the recruitment, retention, and graduation of undergraduate and graduate students; accreditation by national and regional bodies; and cross-campus interdisciplinary education and research programs. The provost advises the president and other university leaders on the recruitment, retention, and promotion of faculty; allocation of academic space; and setting goals for individual colleges with respect to development, research, and student success. A provost should provide resources to academic units that deliver results—for example, metrics for performance-based funding such as graduation within four years and median salary at graduation. The provost should avoid funding underperforming departments with limited futures and should allow high-performing units to keep the revenue or funds generated from their success rather than bring it all back for central budgeting.

Vice President, Legal Affairs: General Counsel

The general counsel is the chief legal officer representing the university as an institutional entity. Having an aligned, fully engaged general counsel is an often-overlooked requirement. The lawyers in these offices engage in a vast array of matters related to personnel, budgets, debt, student complaints, town–gown issues, debt, accreditation, and more.

Vice President, Research: Chief Research Officer

The VP of Research promotes the university's research by ensuring a full range of research resources and activities that support faculty while maintaining guidelines to ensure the safety of researchers, ethical conduct in research, and adherence to state and federal regulations. This vice president promotes technology transfer through external partnerships, supports dedicated research facilities, and implements university policies that support research and creative activities. The VP of Research works closely with the executive leadership team, research institutes and centers, support facilities, and other units to ensure coordinated investment in people and infrastructure.

Vice President, Finance: Chief Financial Officer

The VP of Finance serves as the university's chief financial officer, with responsibility for operations spanning accounting, treasury, financial planning and analysis, and insurance. In large universities with several colleges, finance operations are typically structured in matrix form: each academic unit's dedicated finance department has a reporting relationship to the central finance group. An aligned CFO is crucial to ensuring that financial resources go where intended, that they are used as intended, that state and federal rules are followed, and that the board, executive leadership, and key constituents have a timely, accurate understanding of the university's financial situation at all times.

Vice President, Student Affairs

The VP of Student Affairs plans and develops overall policy and manages operations for the student personnel program. These activities are outside of educational programs and are designed to help students develop intellectually, socially, culturally, and personally. The key areas of responsibility typically include student counseling, testing, admissions, financial aid, student health services, housing, placement and career guidance, orientation, foreign student affairs, student union and its activities, in-service training, and ongoing research and student life studies. This office will also be involved in groups that require special attention (such as transfer students and military alumni).

Vice President, Foundation: Alumni and Development

The VP of Alumni and Development serves as CEO of the university foundation (a separate but linked entity) and designs and implements comprehensive development and alumni relations strategies that align with the university's strategic and financial aims. This vice president works with senior university leaders, foundation staff, and stakeholders from across the university, the board, and the alumni board. Development is a critical source of financial resources for the modern university. To maximize success, this leader must engage the highest-priority prospects and define and disseminate a compelling case to donors for supporting the university's strategic vision and philanthropic priorities.

Vice President, Marketing: Public Affairs

The VP of Marketing leads the university's marketing, communications campaigns, and online strategies. This leader develops and executes strategies across digital and traditional campaigns, collaborates with campus constituents to facilitate multichannel marketing strategies, and provides overall strategic guidance and management of university, college, school, and department-level marketing campaigns.

Deans

Deans are hired by the provost and serve as the chief academic and administrative officers of their respective colleges. Deans enforce the policies and procedures adopted by the board, office of the president, and the university senate. They lead their faculty in setting the college's vision, mission, and goals, and communicate these to alumni, professional, and other communities. Deans manage programs, research, personnel, financial, and student affairs within the university parameters. Specific duties include oversight of college-level tenure and promotion, faculty work plans, long-range professional development plans, annual budgets, curricula, research support, fund-raising efforts, and promotion of the college within the university and for external audiences.

Identify the Right Candidates

Stage I of the strategy requires rapid alignment of university-level leadership. In a perfect world, there would be a plentiful supply of seasoned leaders available for these roles who would grasp the reform plan and be eager to enact it. They would possess bold character capable of persisting, despite internal and external resistance, with grace and determination. Sadly, individuals with these qualities are too few in the market for university leaders.

Boards should help their presidents identify and recruit such candidates. They might be found inside the institution, in other institutions of higher education, other types of research or educational bodies, or in other high-functioning organizations. Board members' professional and personal networks might well include such individuals—individuals who might not want to apply for such positions or be on the radar screens of search firms. Reform-minded individuals may well be more willing to take on these jobs if approached by, or reassured by, members of the board. Although the final hiring decision must be made by the president or his/her designee, board members can participate in search committees and other related activities.

Navigating the Committee-Driven Organization

One of the main holdovers from the pre-WWII partnership era that continues to exist in the modern university's organizational structure is the faculty committee. Standing faculty committees are woven into decision processes at both the university and school/college levels. When properly operating, these entities can contribute meaningfully to decisions about curricula, promotion and tenure, and university policy.

Too often, these committees do not function well. The problem is often political/ideological homogeneity among faculty and administrators. Relatedly, faculty with dissenting views can avoid participating and speaking up for fear of reprisal. However, these committees can spring to action to thwart reforms that they don't like, which can happen when a new administration wants to bring about some kind of change. Indeed, these committees can pose one of the greatest threats to success in Stage I. Thus, in addition to filling key administrative jobs with qualified reform-capable administrators, the board should help ensure that the faculty chairs of mission-critical committees are aligned with the reform agenda.

Conclusion

The American higher-education industry is well past its time for reform, and, unfortunately, there is no quick fix. One-dimensional approaches, such as abolishing tenure, eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, or hiring a white-knight president are not up to the task. It took decades to pervert these institutions into the disordered organizations that they have become. Plan on it taking a decade to turn your school into the fully flourishing institution that it can be. To achieve that goal will require passion, grit, and long-term vision.

Endnotes

1 For a recent firsthand account, see Richard Corcoran, *Storming the Ivory Tower: How a Florida College Became Ground Zero in the Struggle to Take Back Our Campuses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024).

2 Michael Shattock, *Managing Good Governance in Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2006).

3 Eliza Berman, "How the G.I. Bill Changed the Face of Higher Education in America," *Time*, July 13, 2015.

4 Michael Delucchi et al., "What's That Smell? Bullshit Jobs in Higher Education," *Review of Social Economy* 82, no. 1 (June 2021): 1–22.

5 Fredrik Andersson, Henrik Jordahl, and Anders Kärnä, "Ballooning Bureaucracy? Stylized Facts of Growing Administration in Swedish Higher Education," IFN working paper no. 1399, Research Institute of Industrial Economics (2021).

6 Siri Terjesen, "Reducing Higher Education Bureaucracy and Reclaiming the Entrepreneurial University," in *Questioning the Entrepreneurial State*, ed. Karl Wennberg and Christian Sandström (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 111–32.

7 Although grumbling about administrator incompetence is a staple in faculty lounges everywhere, the reality is that that most faculty are happy to abandon their managerial responsibilities (and the rights that go with them) because it gets the faculty out of doing things that they find boring and distasteful.

8 Jay Schalin, "Ending Conformity on the Quad: How Trustees Can Bring Viewpoint Diversity Back to Their Universities," Manhattan Institute, Jan. 9, 2025.

9 Stephanie Keaveney, "Universities Are Churning Out the Next Generation of Higher Ed Bureaucrats," James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, Oct. 17, 2016.

10 "White anting" describes the process of internally eroding a foundation by a group of insiders.