



## Higher Education at a Crossroads: Pathways to Bridging the Administrator-Faculty Divide to Remain Relevant

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### Abstract

*For years, many predicted Higher Education was ripe for disruption. Today it seems that future has arrived. The forces disrupting and challenging faculty and administrators are substantial, structural, and strong. For instance, higher education institutions in developed economies with shrinking populations are left competing for fewer students. Also, the manner in which governments historically supported Higher Education seems to be waning. These factors, along with other competitive drivers, are forcing Higher Education leadership to innovate or face possible extinction. Against this backdrop, our paper offers insight into possible success paths to address these environmental forces. Specifically, we examine the viability of Higher Education through the lens of the administrator-faculty relationship. Our commentary blends recent personal experiences in administration and our own research on the role of faculty in contemporary higher education. We detail observations and trends that speak to the silos that exist between faculty and administrators, the dangers of short-term leadership orientations when facing competitive threats, and the heightened relevance of data in driving university strategy and decisions. We hope our advice better prepares colleges and universities to respond effectively in the face of environmental turbulence. Moreover, our paper should spark dialogue on a topic that is underexposed and under-researched—the relational ties between faculty and administration.*

*Keywords: Competitive Forces within Higher Education; Educational Leadership; Faculty-Administrator Relationships; Contemporary Higher Education; Challenges for the Future of Higher Education*

### 1. Introduction

Turbulence is a watch-word for today's faculty and administrators as they wrestle with economic and demographic challenges for which simple solutions are not readily available. Factors that will enable our colleges and universities to survive and thrive are being considered. For instance, some discourse has focused on revising curriculum to stay relevant. Others suggest increasing student convenience and choice by offering courses on-line, in-person, or in a blended format. Some seek to enhance their competitiveness by offering degree programs that can be completed in shorter periods of time or on the weekends. Conspicuously absent from these discussions, however, is the impact of relationships and teambuilding on college or university success. In this manuscript, we assert that relationships do, indeed, matter and enhanced relationships between faculty and administrators, in particular, offer hope during these difficult times.

In this essay, we explore the teaming relationship between faculty and administrators and how small changes may engender promising results. Moreover, we explore some of the folly underpinning many assumptions embedded in college and university strategy making and execution. Finally, we lobby for a re-conceptualization of the traditional faculty-administrator relationship and roles.

Much of this manuscript is anchored on personal experience. The lead author temporarily left the rank of Full Professor of Business Management to enter administration as an interim Associate Provost. Because the intent was always to return to faculty, thoughts and observations were not conflated with careerism. Given our backgrounds, we use a management theory lens to understand the current higher education context and to offer avenues to ensure viability.

Before discussing the administration-to-faculty relationship, let's explore some of the environmental factors that are necessitating change across Higher Education. First, and embracing a business management vocabulary, there are simply fewer customers. In developed economies in the United States and Europe, the birth rate continues to decline, resulting in a fewer future students [1]. Complicating matters is that since World War II, college capacity has increased in the form of more buildings, student

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services, and/or curriculum offerings. Of course, constructing and maintaining these buildings and funding these programs is expensive. As a result, competition emerges; the same number of colleges are competing for a smaller number of students at the same time that keeping the “lights on” has never been more expensive.

Second, over the last 20 years, many states experienced a rise in debt and borrowing costs to fund social, environmental, and defense efforts, causing state commitments to Higher Education to suffer [1]. Just as competition is increasing, tax dedicated dollars to Higher Education is decreasing.

Third, competition is no longer constrained by geography due to on-line degree programs. Colleges from thousands of miles away compete for local students. Reinforcing the competitive rivalry, for-profit colleges and universities, such as the University of Phoenix, are aggressively courting students. In addition, programs in the European Union, such as the Erasmus Programme, make a relatively boundariless educational experience financially possible. While beneficial for students, the competitive pressure to colleges and universities increases.

It is against this backdrop that higher education is forced to adapt. We assert that re-thinking the faculty-administration relationship may bear fruits that, to date, have yet to be accounted for in this dialogue. Toward that end, we integrate our management and organizational theory backgrounds with our own recent experience in Higher Education administration to offer three critical observations.

## **2. The Faculty-Administrator Divide: The Presence of Silos**

Organizational silos, also referred to as stovepipes and similar to structural holes [2], inhibit interaction across departments [3]. Silos act as fortresses around individual working units, preventing cooperation and understanding, and threatening organizational performance [2, 3]. Our first assertion is that silos continue to exist between faculty and administration [4], despite competitive demands that they should disappear.

For instance, until this recent, personal administrative experience, we had little understanding or appreciation of the efforts required to recruit and admit quality students. In the managerial domain, this is an anomaly. Employees in other organizations tend to understand how customers or clients are acquired. Faculty’s lack of knowledge in this area is surprising given the mutually beneficial possibilities inherent in this relationship. Namely, strong faculty performance and an engaged professorate add value to the educational experience admissions and recruitment personnel promote in their efforts to enroll students. When admissions uses these points of pride to recruit students, faculty benefit by having more students, especially more academically-inclined students, both of which help secure the viability of their profession and employment. Although the job security of faculty, especially untenured faculty, is anchored on a reliable flow of students, faculty sometimes ignore the economic forces in higher education.

Conversely, we found that administrators and admissions personnel are rather ignorant of the consequences to faculty of admitting lower caliber students to meet enrollment goals. Students are increasingly unprepared, academically and otherwise, for college-level work, and many suffer from physical and mental health problems that pose additional challenges to learning [5, 6]. At the very least, faculty must devote more time to remedial instruction. At the very worst, they must face classroom environs in which they are responsible for managing students with life-threatening physical and/or mental health problems [7]. Most faculty are ill-equipped to deal with such issues as their doctoral training focused on producing scholars—not social service providers or even teachers [7]. A fuller appreciation of both sides should enable a tearing down of silos. Notably, admissions staff will appreciate an easier “sell” by having an engaged faculty and the professorate will be duly rewarded by having more and better students.

## **3. Short-termism and Unintended Consequences**

When competition increases, many embrace short-term gains without consideration for longer term impact [8]. We contend that administration may be tempted to embrace short-term revenue gains without fully considering the longer-term costs. Let’s return to the admissions and enrollment example above. When we lower standards even a bit to allow more students into the admissions “funnel,” we fail to address the long-term impact this decision may have on other areas of the institution, including faculty. The impact not only to instructors and academic departments, but to others such as Academic and Student Affairs, Career and Psychological Counseling, and Tutoring are often ignored [5]. What, for instance, are the

additional costs of employees having to process more academic dismissals, probations, and warnings that accompany the decision to lower standards? Interestingly, these new demands on the departments above may redirect money from higher performing students to those with special needs. An unintended consequence may be that academically-gifted students exit for another institution. Embracing a longer-term plan that accounts for *all* costs of a given strategy will help guarantee the financial viability of a given college or university.

#### 4. Learning from Corporate Organizations: Big Data = Big Wins

Although many faculty rely on measurement and quantitative analysis in their research, Higher Education does not take a similar approach in its day-to-day strategy execution. Decision-making is often based on “gut feelings” or adhering to maxims such as “this is the way that we’ve always done it.” Institutions that leverage data/analytics will have a competitive advantage over institutions that do not. They will spend their limited resources more wisely, which, given the small margin for error due to reduced budgets, could prove to be life-saving. For example, more sophisticated data analysis would help refine the targeting of future students. The talent to perform these functions is likely in house, in the form of marketing, statistics, and math professors. Regardless of where higher education turns to build this capacity, it will need to embrace numbers, metrics, and phrases such as “return-on-investment.” Furthermore, the technology and analysis are not the critical variables. Instead, the thoughtful interpretation of the data and its appropriate use by leadership in decision-making are what counts.

#### 5. Conclusion

In the face of competitive pressures, many colleges and universities are confronting the real possibility of having to shutter their doors [9]. In this short essay, we expound on some of the core causes of this retrenchment. We then offer some predictions and observations that we think can help bolster the chances for organizational success. These include: tearing down the silos between faculty and administrators, shying away from the temptation of short-termism, and fostering a data-driven decision orientation to get more from fewer (resources). As these competitive forces fail to subside or yield, this type of dialogue is more and more necessary.

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