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A University President's View of the Evolving Role of Colleges of Businesses-

By Kyle Marrero



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I was asked a few months ago to contribute my thoughts on the evolving role of colleges of business in higher education. Interesting enough, the request came with the proviso that I relate my ideas within the purview as a sitting university president, internal

and external communities, and my own personal background, e.g. not your normal route to a presidency. So, from a first-time president, higher education administrator, professor, musician, and arts producer lens, I offer my naive and artistic thoughts!

How does an opera singer become a university president or more importantly, what was the search committee thinking?

It's true. My training and background is in music, opera, to be exact. I am a musician and former leader of arts organizations! And, while it might not seem like an obvious background for a university president, I believe it has prepared me very well for the challenges that come with the role. For one thing, the arts are always under-funded. I'm accustomed to raising funds and making every dollar work as hard as it can. That's important to any higher ed institution as it looks for ways to offer even more opportunities for its students by increasing scholarship support and enhancing the student experience. Also, musicians learn to be creative within set parameters. I have always been an organizer of people, processes, and systems, whether it is leading arts organizations or serving in a higher education administrative capacity. In music, you are asked to be creative and interpret a piece within the guidelines dictated by the composer and the performance practices associated within the period of the composition. You are given the key signature, the time signature, tempo markings, etc., but it is still your interpretation of the music in collaboration with others that culminates in a final outcome: the performance. You have to have a vision, be able to communicate, set a strategy and a process with which to accomplish the task, and ultimately you have to present your results in performance which others will evaluate. I would say that serving as an administrator within a university system is very similar – performance funding, articulating a vision, implementing that vision while honoring shared governance, knowing/understanding your market, the commodity of a seat in a classroom or a space in an online course is analogous to a seat in the theater, once the curtain opens you've lost that opportunity. The same is true as a semester begins, and the customer service responsibility to foster continued patronage – the successful recruitment, retention, progression and graduation of a student. For me, the passion to serve as a leader in higher education comes from the same place that drives my love for the successful administrating and producing of performing arts. Both experiences will transform lives!

These are critical times for institutions of higher education just as in the arts. In order to be relevant, institutions of higher education need to communicate their distinctives and align their programs with the needs of the region, the state, and beyond. We need to improve retention and graduation rates, cultivate and engage in mutually beneficial partnerships, friend and fundraise, and provide experiential learning opportunities for our students with the primary goal of preparing them for successful careers. I believe in the simple premise that we in higher education are in the business of transforming lives. I am passionate about assuming that responsibility beyond the

classroom. And I believe, it is our responsibility to prepare students for success – in all aspects of life.

Staying true to what we must know, learn, and experience...

In my former life, successful artists must have had the training and possess the technique, and developed skill before they are able to collaborate at an appropriate level. This is the premise, core and essential outcome that must remain and continuously improve at (the) Richards College of Business at UWG and all COBs. There are no shortcuts or new innovations that replace the foundation of business, finance, accounting, economic, and marketing principles. It is from that point, that we must evolve, align, partner and collaborate with communities to ensure we are preparing students for an ever evolving and complex world of business and technology.

I have immense respect and pride for the Richards College of Business at the University of West Georgia -- its track record of producing successful graduates, excellent faculty, great leadership and its continued commitment to impacting our community. What the RCOB and its leadership have done is to ensure that its graduates are equipped with the core business knowledge within the various disciplines, the practical application, and the experiential learning opportunities that launch our students into the current realities of the business environment. This dedication and success have created a legacy, respect, and validation by its accreditors and national recognition via rankings and awards.

The trick in evolving is not throwing the baby out with the bath water!

How do we evolve and what does relevance mean...?

We are now experiencing a period of time when the "value" and "return on investment" of higher ed are being questioned in relation to degree obtainment, cost, and employability. Clearly the mounting cost of higher education, student debt, and the ability to enter the workforce upon completion is the equation that must equal out. Rightfully so, we are being asked to be accountable (demonstrate and monitor student success indicators) and to move at the speed of business. This means holding true to our core values and learning outcomes, to be sure, but at the same time to become more flexible in adapting specializations, certificates, badges, and courses that align with new and projected business skills and jobs. This calls for a constant communication pipeline with industry, technology, chambers of commerce, development authorities and city, county, and state government. It also calls for faculty to be continually connected with new innovations in technology, adaptations in required skill sets, and predictive analytics of future job growth. Most importantly, without selling its

soul, a 21st century COB must embrace a role in economic development within the purview of preparing students and engaging in relevant research and community service, e.g. economic forecasting, occupational market alignment studies, business ethics, and financial literacy...to name a few.

Internally, not surprisingly, COBs have been the most well run colleges and first to embrace and perfect annual reporting, assessment, and other operational effectiveness necessities. (Thank you, AACSB!) The difficulty arises when collaboration is called upon to help develop, create and implement programs that require shared delivery of curriculum. This is where cultures tend to clash. I'm proud to say that at UWG we are pushing beyond these cultural norms and focusing on cross college/discipline opportunities to more quickly ramp up new programs, certificates, and specializations, specializations such as health informatics, cybersecurity, and business analytics. The golden age of resources that can be duplicated from college to college no longer exists. The new normal insists that internal resources both physical and human must be capitalized at optimal performance for the focused outcomes of student success and relevance to projected market needs. COBs and their faculty understand this paradigm shift more readily than their institutional colleagues. Therefore, it is imperative that institutional leadership engage all constituencies - internal and external - creating opportunities for shared dialogue, strategic direction and alignment.

Engagement is the essential ingredient...

At UWG, we've entitled this initiative "Engage West!" Our vision is bold - the University of West Georgia aspires to become the best comprehensive university in America, sought after as the best place to work, learn, and succeed. The "Engage West!" initiative was developed to help us reach this vision by creating a culture of high performance and evidence-based leadership, and by providing a solid framework on which to base innovation. Anchored in the new strategic plan, guided by our core values, and with student success always our primary goal, the Engage West family of programs is large, growing, and deeply interconnected. Historically, higher education may be, as some say, far behind the corporate and healthcare fields in terms of innovative methods of personnel management that incorporates fully and equally the goals of engagement, development, and assessment. Engage West! changes that. We are not merely incorporating industry research and best practices. We are creating them. While existing faculty and staff are certainly the primary focus of these efforts, Engage West is an initiative whose goal is nothing short than a transformation of culture. A transformation that will benefit all stakeholders, including students, alumni, donors, community members, by creating a more vibrant, more engaged, and ever higher-achieving campus. The initiative is extensive, but it hinges on a handful of core activities.

Our faculty and staff are at the heart of our institution, so fostering engagement is critical to attaining all other goals, from increased retention, progression, and graduation rates, to sustainable business practices, to developing innovative, highly-relevant academic programs. We know the "Why"...this is the "How!"...the phrase "culture eats

strategy for breakfast" reminds us constantly that we must focus on engagement to change culture.

And now the Coda...

So...from the lens of a first-time president, higher education administrator, professor, musician, and arts producer lens, what I see most clearly is that relevance and evolution for a 21st century College of Business is as simple as knowing your market and your audience and making sure that both value you, will invest in you, and look to you and in the future to transform lives!

