

Introduction

Here's the situation: I've just offered our talented football coach, Tommy Bowden, a higher salary than he's been offered by Clemson University, which has a Goliath of a program compared to Tulane's David. True, we're coming off an undefeated season, but that's an extremely rare event at Tulane—the last time was sixty-nine years ago—and I want to keep him. With this offer on the table, I feel I have a shot at it.

Tommy is clearly taken aback. He says, "It's not the money. You can't give me what I want."

"What do you want?"

"Winnebagos on Wednesday."

"Say again?"

Tommy explains: "I want a school where the program is so great, people start bringing their Winnebagos on Wednesday—for the Saturday game."

And I thought: So this is what we've come to. Tulane, a major research university, is somehow, for various crazy reasons, involved in the entertainment business—and we're not on the A-list.

I've carried that story in my head for over eighteen years; it comes to mind every time I'm confronted by one of those situations that feel both insoluble and also faintly ludicrous. The

Winnebagos story raises, in highly condensed form, a fundamental question: What is the ultimate purpose of higher education, and how is it changing over time? The long history of higher education in the United States is marked by the singular moment in 1862 when the Morrill Act established the land-grant colleges in every state in the union (later expanded to include the Confederate States and historically black colleges and universities). The Morrill Act created a uniquely American model, very different from the European system's focus on educating professional and military elites. In the United States, the overarching mission of colleges and universities was to prepare masses of young people for meaningful employment and engaged citizenship in a participatory democracy. But over the past hundred years, that original aim has been joined by another mission, the solving of social and global problems through research and innovation. Higher education's challenges—poverty, urban decline, income inequality, increasing diversity, racial and gender inequities, job loss, climate change, and a host of other issues—are the nation's challenges. The sector can't solve those problems in isolation; public understanding and continued investment of both private and public resources are necessary if the nation is to address its knottiest problems and remain a beacon of enlightened progress in a troubled world.

But in recent decades, we seem to have lost sight of our fundamental goals in a distracting sideshow of arguments and crusades. Somehow, we end up talking about Winnebagos. And athletics aren't the only flash point. Rival constituencies confront university presidents with a whole array of contradictory demands: protection of free speech vs. provision of "safe spaces"; the norms of shared governance vs. the need for nimble leadership; the requirements of medical training vs. the primacy of clinical services; investment in basic research vs. commercialization of medical discoveries; the pressure of media-generated rankings vs. adherence to institutional mission; and, the ultimate conundrum, preserving high quality vs. ensuring low cost. Add to this list of warring values the out-of-control admissions game, the amenities arms race, the all-digital craze, grandiose global ambitions, and the

overriding insanity of spiraling costs and graduates without jobs. Some believe we've reached a point of no return—"The End of College"—but in my view, we need repair and reimagining, not demolition. We can do better, and the way to begin is by getting down to cases and taking a hard look at the facts.

This book consists of stories about those thorny situations—everything from athletics to the selection of a university president—that demand, but don't often get, rational assessment and decisive action, and about the leadership we need to remake higher education as a powerful, affordable, and meaningful agent of self-realization and social progress for the coming generation. I want to acknowledge, up front, that these stories don't always tell the whole story. In cases where an incident never received a full public airing, insiders privy to the undisclosed details may find its portrayal here oversimplified and partial. I've also sacrificed some degree of nuance and detail because I wanted to describe the entire landscape of higher education, in the belief that the wide-angle view reveals features that the close-up sometimes misses. Taken together, the examples will, I hope, convey a sense of the big picture—what is happening widely and variously in the sector.

I was moved to write this book because of my own forty-year experience in higher education as a professor and academic dean, and as president of Tulane University when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, and the known world—of the institution, the city, the region, and beyond—shifted dramatically. Since that time more than ten years ago, I've often been asked to speak about leadership in times of crisis. Here I want to speak not about crisis leadership *per se*, but about "transformative" leadership—the kind that creates positive, fundamental change through judicious action at key decision points and offers a vision of hope that inspires others to join in. My views on leadership and organizational change are also informed by my experiences as a board member and consultant to many for-profit and nonprofit organizations during the last four decades. A crisis requires a series of urgent choices and actions, but the daily life of an organization also demands crucial decisions that affect the character of the entire institution. You

don't need a hurricane to know which way the wind blows: the times are a-changing, and every academic leader needs to focus on the arc of the future.

The change that we're undergoing is, if not a crisis, a tipping point. I remember long ago as an undergraduate reading Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and it seems to me that its central insight applies here: when data accumulate that can no longer be explained by a traditional model, a new paradigm emerges to accommodate the wave of new information. In the realm of higher education, we are awash in data of all kinds—metrics that measure pedagogic practice, graduation and retention rates, jobs and salaries, and a host of other things—and these indicators may point the way to a new paradigm for education. That's the position that the prophets of digital learning take: they predict a totally new kind of college experience in the "University of Everywhere," as students soak up information from online courses on a range of subjects, many of them with a technological and vocational emphasis. Their basic argument is familiar to anyone who has a degree in business administration: innovate or die. We all know the cautionary tales of Kodak and Smith Corona, and many more (may they rest in peace): companies that didn't see which way the wind was blowing and, by ceasing to adapt to new realities, became dinosaurs.

On the other side of things are the traditionalists who defend the value of the system we have and, even while admitting the necessity to adapt, warn against throwing the proverbial baby out with the proverbial bathwater. They say there's no substitute for residential colleges, the liberal arts curriculum, and flesh-and-blood teachers in brick-and-mortar classrooms if we're to continue to produce educated and sophisticated thinkers and innovators. You can add bells and whistles and tinker with the details, but the basic model should stay the same. The answer of the all-digital crowd to the defense of the liberal arts is to decry the two-tier elitism inherent in a system that provides immersion in high culture and critical thinking for those who can afford it, and sends the rest to community colleges, with few resources and poor track records, to acquire vocational training.

Let me say at the outset, and it's hardly a unique or novel position, that I strongly believe in the inherent value and aspirations of higher education. I also support efforts to expand access and affordability. Let me also say, despite the sense of an impending revolution and talk of new paradigms, I am skeptical of universal remedies that fail to take into account some key facts, chief of which is the intricately woven tapestry of our schools—some four thousand of them across the United States. It's one of the splendors of the American system of higher education that so many diverse schools are pursuing so many distinctive paths to educating young people, who themselves have widely various backgrounds and learning styles. One result of this rich complexity: different institutions exhibit different strengths and suffer from different ills. That is, the successes and failures of our institutions are specific to people, places, and circumstances.

This book is about people, places, and circumstances—what's actually going on inside the ivy-covered halls in the second decade of the twenty-first century. I hope to avoid the one-size-fits-all problem by drawing from our vast array of schools, public and private, large and small, to tell specific stories about leadership and institutional mission in the context of contingent events and social trends. The stories of leaders at moments of decision on matters of importance—from athletics to medicine to research to community engagement—reveal the approaches, realistic and practical but also innovative and courageous, taken all across the country by committed educators and administrators. Some of these stories are, sadly, about presidents derailed and initiatives abandoned—equally instructive as we try to get at what works, what doesn't, and who we need at the helm.

I am taking this inductive approach because I believe we can arrive at a true assessment of higher education only by looking hard at individual narratives when something changed for the better (or sometimes, regrettably, for the worse). Among the many people I'll be describing in the coming pages are truly great leaders who through their vision, persistence, and character transformed their schools. To name a few: Norman Francis, who recently, after

forty-seven years, stepped down as president of Xavier University, a small Catholic historically black school in New Orleans, having during his long tenure turned it into a major pipeline for black doctors, scientists, and pharmacists; Steve Sample, who in the space of nineteen years transformed the University of Southern California into a world leader in the fields of communication and multimedia technologies, while also creating innovative community partnerships and solidifying its reputation as one of the nation's leading research universities; Diana Natalicio, the president of the University of Texas at El Paso, who over the last twenty-nine years has increased the endowment, expanded research expenditures, grown the graduate degree program, and upped enrollment from fifteen thousand to over twenty-three thousand in a low-income minority population; and Judith Rodin, president of the University of Pennsylvania from 1994 to 2004, who in addition to increasing research funding, endowment, and enrollment and consolidating the university hospital and medical school into one organization, significantly enhanced the ties between the university and the surrounding community through public safety initiatives, university alliances with small businesses, and the revitalization of city buildings and public spaces.

It's by getting down to cases of individuals like these that I attempt to parse the phrase "transformative leadership." Significantly, all these leaders had substantial tenures, ranging from a decade to nearly half a century; meanwhile, the average length of a presidency is now seven years (with many terms at troubled institutions as short as a year or two). These long-standing presidents suggest that transformation rarely happens in a blinding instant, but rather unfolds through years of persistent effort. In addition to presenting the portraits of others, I also occasionally refer to my own experience, to give a view from the inside out; and, throughout, I stress the importance of context, collaboration, and mission in any successful leadership initiative.

My own understanding of transformative process was deepened by Hurricane Katrina, which threatened the very existence of the university and at the same time was one of those "blinding instants" that unleashed the possibility of transformation, both as

a strategy for survival and as a way to reset the university. More change could be effected in a short space of time because of the diminution of shared governance in the midst of a bona fide disaster and a concomitant rise in presidential power and autonomy. The transformation was also aided by an influx of resources, both financial and humanitarian, that helped bring us back from the brink, allowing us to reimagine what Tulane could become after this critical event in its history. One of the chief lessons of that time is the extent to which contingency and context influence outcomes. No one, however powerful and autonomous, can exert total control over events. And though I ultimately made the hard decisions, I consulted with an in-group of other university presidents who helped guide me through the roughest passages. Bottom line: as we think about the future of our institutions, we need to reexamine how we govern them—to consider the modes of leadership and the kind of change needed, incremental or transformational, according to various contingencies.

Before Katrina, I had learned something about leadership of the incremental, day-to-day kind. My background, including the military, athletics, even a learning disability diagnosed in my twenties, prepared me for the hard choices implied by “the buck stops here,” and I also have the temperament for it—an innate resilience (my wife, Margie, would say, “thick hide”) and tenacity (Margie would say, “stubbornness.”) A set of core values stemming from my identification with Judaism has served as a kind of internal compass in my life, both personally and professionally. Plus, probably a compensation for my early learning disability, I’m the sort who learns by doing: I grew into my jobs.

To give you just two points on my learning curve: the first involved a situation when I was a new dean of the business school at Case Western Reserve University, and a young one, thirty-eight years old, and feeling a little precarious, as though I were the child now managing all the adults. It was maybe in my second or third year that I received an anonymous note informing me that a prominent member of our faculty, a distinguished chaired

professor who had helped me get promoted and supported me for the deanship, had a fraudulent résumé. Given that the letter was anonymous, I could have brushed it off as malicious, but something about the way it was written seemed genuine to me. I had a trusted assistant review the professor's CV item by item, and significant discrepancies emerged—significant enough to warrant further inquiry. At that point, I called him into my office to inform him of a formal process of review. He tried to talk me out of it. It broke my heart to pursue it, but pursue it I did: I convened a faculty committee, and they issued a report confirming the falsehoods. The university dismissed him, thus ending what was once a flourishing career.

This, to me, felt like firing a father figure but taught me, in my bones, that I had responsibilities that superseded personal relationships and focused me on the best overall interests of the organization, no matter the consequences to me and perhaps others. I was indebted to him for past kindnesses, but I did not owe him a career based on a tissue of lies.

Another kind of bone-deep learning occurred early in my presidency at Tulane, when students organized a protest against the university's investment in companies accused of using sweatshops in Asia. The protesters took over the main administration building; ironically, many of them were wearing athletic clothes manufactured by these same companies. It was the first sit-in I'd confronted, and I felt some uncertainty, though I did know I wanted to avoid a 1960s scenario of open hostilities and outside policing. I asked the students to research the companies and collect data on how they might fix the problem, and also to consider their own choices and what personal sacrifices they were willing to make. Then I brought administrators at Tulane together to address the ethical issue the students had raised. After a week or so, the students decided to end the sit-in, and we all met to discuss an effective strategy. The end result: Tulane became a charter member of a group of schools fighting horrific labor conditions in these specific countries—an exercise in conflict resolution for the students and also for me.

When to stand firm, when to yield, how to compromise: these are the sorts of decisions that you make every day. Transformative moments come, most obviously, with crises, but they also come at quieter junctures: when business-as-usual falters for financial or other reasons, or simply when traditions have ossified and a deadening complacency has set in. I focus on these moments of change throughout the coming pages, in the belief that these stories will illuminate the practices that define effective leadership.

The book's structure reflects the most pressing questions confronting our institutions. Chapter 1, "On Impact," describes ratings and metrics, often drawn from media outlets and sometimes misleading, that are being used to evaluate our colleges and universities, and also considers the human meaning of the word—how higher education qualitatively changes the lives of graduates. Chapter 2, "Door Wide Open," is about the burning issue of access and affordability, and looks at schools that are doing a remarkable job of educating low-income, first-generation, and minority students and thus providing upward mobility. Chapter 3, "Keeping the Ship Afloat," is about financial sustainability and prospects for survival, and focuses on innovative strategies, other than the annual rite of tuition hikes, that generate funding. Chapter 4, "The Tail Wags the Dog, Part I: Athletics," details the problem of escalating costs and risks associated with big-time sports programs. Chapter 5, "The Tail Wags the Dog, Part II: Medicine," describes the collision between a new health-care system founded on principles of efficiency and economy and the training and research programs associated with academic medical centers. Chapter 6, "Brave New World," underscores the significance of the discoveries and innovations emerging from our major research universities, but also proposes increased support for an emerging scholarship of engagement that addresses urgent societal issues. Chapter 7, "Can We All Get Along?," is about governance and stakeholder issues in higher education—how implosions and cabals weaken an institution, and how the process of finding consensus works (when it works). Chapter 8, "The Ivory Tower," describes the historic tensions between town and gown, and presents cases of institutions of higher education

that embrace their role as anchor institutions and have become deeply engaged in their communities. Chapter 9, “Who Are We?,” tells stories of schools pursuing unique missions and of schools that for lack of clear identity and purpose are heading toward failure. Chapter 10, “Presidential Leadership,” recapitulates the central theme of transformative leadership, proposing a theory of change that synthesizes insights from all the preceding chapters, and offers recommendations for recruiting, evaluating, vetting, and hiring university leaders.

In each of these chapters, leaders of all kinds try to solve the problems that confront them and to strengthen their schools for the future. Though I present these subjects discretely, many topics overlap and many themes recur. Among the recurring themes are three that suggest a “tipping point”: widespread misperceptions based on misleading metrics and data; mounting financial pressures affecting adherence to mission; and increasing social and global challenges that present both risk and promise. As the future unfolds, the threats and opportunities will likely change, but the basic issues outlined here—the most urgent problems in higher education, requiring creative and courageous leadership to solve—will, I believe, remain much the same. Likewise, the traits required to meet the unknown head-on and create meaningful progress will remain the same. I do believe the best university presidents share certain essential qualities: an ability to grasp the realities in front of them; to contextualize the facts to their particular institution; to sense the possibilities inherent in the situations they face; to intuitively understand other people; and to be true to a set of beliefs and principles. The last is really “character,” in the old-fashioned sense of internal strength and integrity, and the most inspiring of the stories to come are about character in action.

The book’s closing analysis of leadership underscores a fundamental point. To carry on the work of higher education, we need to find the next cohort of leaders: people of character and vision who can make the right decisions, time after time, in instance after instance, and so reawaken the American dream of opportunity for future generations.