



## The Strategic Thinker Presidential leadership for higher education today.

By Scott D. Miller and Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management*, April 2012

Inevitable and accelerating change places a premium on proactive leaders in higher education. Such executives anticipate change and lead effectively by planning strategically and articulating a convincing vision for the future.

Persuasion has been defined as motivating people to do what they know they need to do, but do not always *want* to do. Transformational leaders not only articulate a compelling, bold, and proactive vision; they also persuasively advocate for needed change while honoring institutional values.

### Be True to Your Values

“Having a clear set of values and being true to them is more complicated than it looks,” says Andrew Wicks, professor of business administration at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business. In summer 2004, in clear violation of the corporation’s privacy policy, Yahoo! divulged the name of a Chinese internet user, poet, and journalist Shi Tao. He was placed on trial and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Yahoo! “was assailed with fierce public and global criticism,” Wick notes. “The lesson: Yahoo! got into trouble not because it took time to think about what its values were, but because it didn’t live up to its values in a defining moment for the company.”

In her book, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, historian Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, notes that despite its inevitability, “change is frightening” to most people. Yet transformative presidents must be active agents of change on their campuses. The challenge, then,

as Faust puts it, is to “lead people along this path” despite their misgivings.

“I’ve found if you tell people that in order to have the things they most want and that most matter to them, they have to change certain other things... that makes those changes seem not just desirable, but imperative,” Faust notes.

Acclaimed American architect and urban planner Daniel Hudson Burnham, who designed the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C. and played a leading role in creating master plans for both Chicago and Washington, DC, exhorted his contemporaries to “Make no little plans, for they have no power to stir the soul.”

Bold plans, however, may sometimes require the courage to downsize, cut, or consolidate course offerings and programs. Writing in the January 2011 *McKinsey Quarterly*, authors Chris Bradley, Martin Hirt and Sven Smit emphasize, “Ultimately, strategy is a way of thinking, not a procedural exercise or a set of frameworks.” To stimulate that thinking and the dialogue that goes along with it, McKinsey’s firm has developed a set of tests aimed at helping executives assess the strength of their strategies.

**Test 1:** Will your strategy beat the market?

**Test 2:** Does your strategy tap a true source of advantage?

**Test 3:** Is your strategy granular about where to compete?

**Test 4:** Does your strategy put you ahead of trends?

**Test 5:** Does your strategy rest on privileged insights?

**Test 6:** Does your strategy embrace uncertainty?

**Test 7:** Does your strategy balance commitment and flexibility?

**Test 8:** Is your strategy contaminated by bias?

**Test 9:** Is there conviction to act on your strategy?

**Test 10:** Have you translated your strategy into an action plan?

On the final point, we strongly recommend that you commission an objective, independent, comprehensive institutional review to inform long-term master plans. A team widely experienced in higher education and not having any present association with the college or university should review its general condition and provide a completely objective assessment that includes relevant issues, a tentative agenda for the immediate future, and specific and realistic expectations, followed by a public report on the results.

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of the College and M.M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he has served as a CEO for more than 22 years.*

*Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and a partner in Hyatt-Fennell, an executive search firm.*

*Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.*