

Envisioning Transformation

Just getting through a year, a week, a day can be exhausting for college leaders. The last thing they have time for is dreaming.

Yet dreaming, for some at least, might be necessary not just to the success but also to the survival of their colleges. Preparation for the next recession is a good, maybe crucial, opportunity to pause, take a big step back, and think about just what your college is for.

Melanie Ho, senior vice president for strategic research at the education-research and -technology company EAB, interviewed more than 100 four-year college presidents before the company created the Higher Education Strategy Forum, in 2018, which now serves some 175 presidents. The forum helps these leaders with big-picture strategies and best practices.

“We often heard presidents say that incremental change will not be enough for their institutions to thrive into the future,” she explains. “They have to start shifting the future model, and it needs to happen on the current leadership team’s watch.”

“In private moments,” she says, “presidents often bemoan that strategic plans take up thousands of hours of campus staff time, yielding something ultimately that is neither strategy nor plan.” The market shifts faster than the plans can. Consensus leads

to “all things to all people” proposals that don’t sufficiently emphasize dollars and time. And, she says, strategic plans tend to all sound the same.

Ho oversees research forums not just for presidents but for enroll-

ment, business affairs, student affairs, information, and other officers as well. For more than a decade, her unit at EAB has been thinking about the student of the future.

Like Lowe’s, Boeing, Nike, and other companies, it uses “design fiction” — speculative, provocative futures, complete with brochures and other materials, that help evaluate current organizational directions and goals. The team came up with three models to spark innovative ideas about what higher education might look like in years to come.

One model is the Atlas Society, “a lifetime membership providing education for every crossroads in a student’s life, from undergraduate through retirement.” Another is Centaur University, where “advanced technology plus student service equals seamless experience, enabling student focus on academic and personal development.” A third is Tychaeon College, “the ultimate in education to foster regional economic development; students, faculty, and organizations work side-by-side to find innovative solutions to regional challenges.”

Presidents “have to start shifting the future model, and it needs to happen on the current leadership team’s watch.”

All three are extensions and expansions of current trends. Among their features:

The Atlas Society draws from the focus on lifelong learning and the nontraditional student. It offers

“pause and play academics.” If you pause, Atlas awards a “preliminary credential” and maintains “your access to student services and



EAB

Melanie Ho, an education-research consultant, says college presidents must think strategically about the future if their institutions are to thrive.

resources.” When you resume your education, Atlas offers “online workshops to refresh your knowledge,” gives you “prior-learning credit for your experiences while away,” and offers “Compass Coach support focused on smoothing your transition back to academic life.”

Centaur focuses on customer experience, not just updating student transcripts on blockchain portfolios but also prompting “the meal delivery drone when you are busy studying or your blood sugar is low.” Centaur would know exactly when that was from its circadian-rhythm, heart-rate, exercise, eye-movement, face-recognition, and other biological-tracking capabilities.

Tychaeon College is an exemplar of regional development, with students

living, learning, and working in “engagements” with start-ups, nonprofits, and innovation teams from national corporations. Instead of dorm fees, students live in co-op apartments, and their payments are mortgages. When they’ve finished their degrees, students from the next four-year cohort buy the apartments. And every Tyche, as a participant is known, works on a three-year Community Innovation Project, tackling “a real challenge faced by the region.”

You can imagine some of the objections that arise: Atlas shreds current notions and measures of retention and completion, disrupting the momentum of the traditional undergraduate experience. Centaur is Orwellian. Tychaeon is too vocationally focused. And so on.

But you can probably see the strengths, too.

In an era when workers repeatedly shift careers, and artificial intelligence makes ever greater incursions into job descriptions, a flexible, lifelong educational and retraining “society” like Atlas could solve a lot of problems.

Centaur’s tracking is intrusive, but hey, your students are already wearing Fitbits and have surrendered their privacy to social media. You’re following their movements around campus through their swipe cards anyway. So why not help them out when they’re on the verge of getting bronchitis, need a reminder to see their psychotherapist, or are just hankering for a bowl of poke during midterms?

And wouldn’t a Tychaeon College help revitalize some of those Midwestern areas that are losing population and businesses?

The idea isn’t to wholly subscribe to any or all of these visions, Ho explains. It is to snap college leaders out of their routines and get them thinking about potential transformations. Could your regional public university become a Centaur? Could your small, declining, but culturally rich private college become an Atlas? Could your busy, industrious commuter campus with thriving engineering and computer-science divisions form a Tychaeon?

research, and Susan Campbell Baldrige, a professor of psychology and former provost at Middlebury College — have devised what they call the Market Stress Test Score.

To complement a college’s detailed internal budget analysis, or as a thumbnail measure of its risk if that comprehensive analysis is unaffordable, the Market Stress Test Score offers an alternative view.

“We intentionally kept the number of variables small,” Baldrige says, and the authors’ methodology is explained in the book’s appendix so that colleges can take their own measure. Better yet, colleges in the “messy middle” of the competitive pack can plug in more recent data than the authors had available to them, getting even a better sense of where those institutions stand.

“Those who are likely to close tomorrow may be beyond help, to be honest, but there are lots of schools that could be taking action.”

For four-year private not-for-profit colleges, the components of the Market Stress Test Score are enrollment and finances. For four-year public colleges and universities, the measures are similar but include changes in state appropriations. Two-year public colleges take account of changes in local as well as state support.

An institution, in each of those categories, receives a score from zero to three, so the overall scores can range from zero to 12 for four-year institutions and from zero to nine for two-year colleges. The higher the score, the greater the risk. This approach can provide not just a snapshot of the peril for an individual college but also a revealing big picture.

“All told,” the authors write, “the 2,320 institutions for which it was possible to calculate a Market Stress Test Score in 2016 enrolled 13,016,205 undergraduates — 41 percent in Two-Year Public institutions, 42 percent in Four-Year Public