

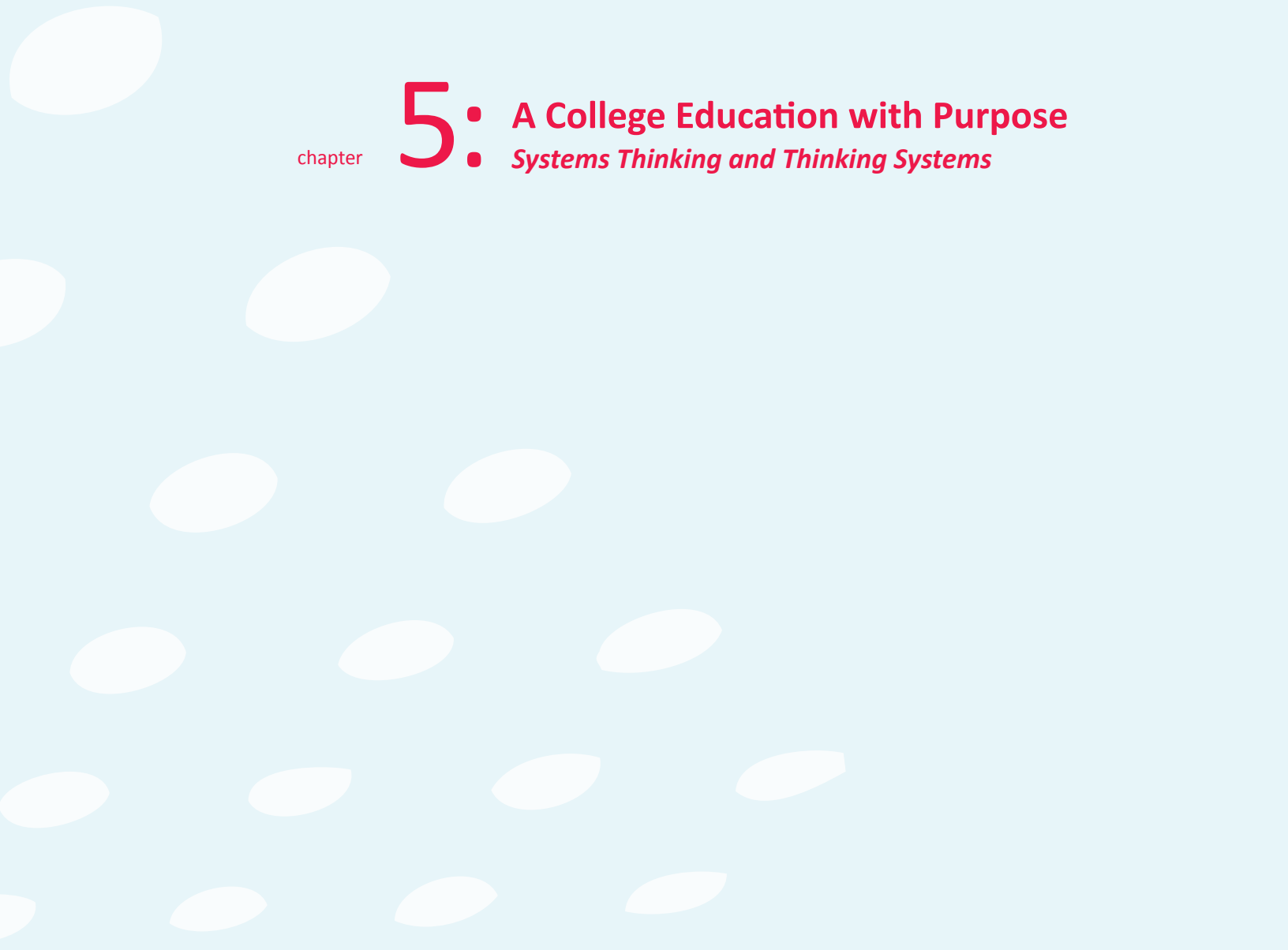
PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2011/2012 Series: **Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education**

chapter **5** • **A College Education with Purpose**
• *Systems Thinking and Thinking Systems*



A College Education with Purpose

Systems Thinking and Thinking Systems

Dr. Scott Koerwer: President of Newberry College

In 1993, my late professor, advisor, and mentor, Dr. Russell Ackoff, published in *Systems Dynamics Review* (Summer–Fall 1994) a monumentally important article entitled “Systems Thinking and Thinking Systems.” This article was of landmark importance because it presented a basic explanation of systems thinking and simplified the application of these definitions to the modern enterprise.

Ackoff wrote the article in a tone that closely resembled many of our personal conversations where he would lead me through the definitions of and differentiations between “problems” and “messes.” Inevitably, Ackoff and I would end up discussing the purposes of higher education—what role education plays in society and what impact we hoped to have on our students.

Ackoff taught me three types of systems:

- *Mechanical*. An automobile is a mechanical system. While observably complex, automobiles have no purpose of their own, no innate design; rather, they are solely dependent upon an agent, the driver.
- *Organismic*. An organism is a system that has at least one purpose or goal of its own. For instance, survival may be the sole purpose of a simple fungus or microorganism.
- *Social*. Social systems have purposes of their own, but are “open” in that their participants have their own purposes and they may be situated within other social systems. A college or university is a social system, with essential participants (such as students, faculty, coaches, staff, alumni, and trustees) who have purposes of their own and yet are parts of larger systems (such as, a community, the nation) that also have purposes of their own.



Are the actions we take at Newberry College, in and outside our classrooms, creating the necessary and ideal educational experiences that lead our students to an awareness of their roles in and contributions to the larger educational and civic ecosystem?”



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All too often, a college education is not thought of as a complex, interactive enterprise (or social system) that has the privileges and responsibilities of preparing future citizens for successful and significant lives. Rather, today, a college experience may be confused with a routine, mechanistic experience of preparing for a job, earning an income, or gaining access to goods or services. The assumption—mistakenly—is that the better one performs the routine or masters a discrete process, the greater access he or she has to more exclusive goods or services.

This is not a college education nor is it an education with a purpose of significance.

As a result of our strategic planning at Newberry College, our students are beginning to ask the important questions about how their courses fit together, how their curriculum prepares them for the responsibilities of the citizenship, and how their learning experience will prepare them to navigate a future that neither we, nor they, can predict. They are demonstrating agency in their educational social or ecosystem. This level of participation among college students cannot be assumed; rather, it must be elicited, discussed, debated, and reinforced so that the skills of critical thinking are applied to our daily decisions.

The College as a social system is an advanced and complex existence, which is often advertised or assumed, but rarely implemented with success and significance. It is for all intents and purposes an idealized educational state of operation. The administration and management of complex, interdependent, social systems require a higher state of individual, group (or team), and communal awareness. Ackoff regularly challenged me to identify an ideally designed and operated enterprise. His challenge inevitably led to a pause on my part of the conversation.

We are all members of complex social systems. Consider for a minute the last time a family member, a friend, or a professional colleague took action on something and it had an “unforeseen” ramification for you. Conversely, think about the last time a family member, a friend, or a professional colleague did *not* take action on something and it had an “unforeseen” ramification for you. Unforeseen ramifications are evidence that we are all participants in other systems—some that we are conscious of and may be fully involved, others that we are not.

The College as an educational social system requires that the members of the entire learning community—students, faculty, professional staff, trustees, and other participating agents—interact positively with the knowledge of and respect for the other constituents—and mindful of the larger system(s) in which they are involved. For instance, Newberry College is part of the social system of the city of Newberry, which is part of the social system of Newberry County, which is part of the social system of South Carolina. You understand the point, a critically important one because it leads to an essential question: Are the actions we take at Newberry College, in and outside our classrooms, creating the necessary and ideal educational experiences that lead our students to an awareness of their roles in and contributions to the larger educational and civic ecosystem? Do they understand how and why their education should prepare them to fully participate as citizens of Newberry—and beyond—when they complete their degrees?

This is the challenge for Newberry College and, hence, the foundation of strategic planning.



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The Newberry College strategic planning process compels us to envision more clearly the critical and important roles that we play in the business and economic development of Newberry. In turn, we understand better how the educational ecosystem of a liberal arts college and the town-and-gown relationships mutually develop—all the while offering our students essential insights into their roles and responsibilities in the educational, organizational, and civic complex systems they will need to negotiate and manage.

Accordingly, our strategic planning program at Newberry College has adopted the controlling metaphor of the educational ecosystem. The strategic goal of the educational program that is emerging from our planning is that each student will participate in a system of increasingly self-guided and independent learning experiences across five major dimensions: 1) personal, character, and spiritual formation; 2) liberal and empathetic learning; 3) professional knowledge and expertise; 4) experiential learning and practice; and 5) civic and community participation. The College's educational ecosystem will include various, interconnected webs of learning, experience, and practice—starting with a revitalized campus, engaging the larger social systems of the City of Newberry and South Carolina, and expanding into other urban and global “webs” of engagement. Through an intentional developmental process of knowledge and praxis self-appropriation, each student will become increasingly independent in their abilities to manage complex learning and social systems, at the same time they grow into self-directed (or ontological) leaders.

Now, the difference between systems and “messes.” One of the most derailing misconceptions of leadership teams involved in strategic planning is that problems are objects of *direct* experience—that we directly experience a marketing or recruitment or financial problem. Ackoff would teach that problems are better defined as abstractions (or concepts) *extracted from experience* by analysis. He used to knock his knuckles on a table and say, “Tables are experienced, atoms are not.” Neither leadership teams (nor students) are confronted by separate problems, but with situations that consist of complex, interacting systems of strongly interacting problems.¹ Ackoff called this a “mess,” when these complex interactions were left unanalyzed and misunderstood.

Asking the difficult questions that help illuminate and deconstruct messes is not easy and can be perilous. We know this at Newberry College yet we persist. All of us at the College are committed to the task in front of us—to create an “educational ecosystem” that provides every single student that passes through our hallways the opportunity to understand, to engage, and to participate in solving our critical problems—whether right here on Main Street or halfway around the world. There are many messes that we will address, but positive strategic change inevitably results when we take responsibility for our messes.

The higher education industry is under siege by a complacency to interact with the challenges of the global marketplace and, in some cases, an unwillingness to make hard choices for fear of alienating competing constituencies. A strategic planning process, grounded in the market realities we face, just like the classes that

¹ P184 *System Dynamics Review* Vol. 10 nos 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1994) 175-188 “Systems thinking and thinking systems” All original content in this article, unless otherwise noted, is drawn from Dr. Russell Ackoff via this article or other sources. Some sentences are borrowed directly from the work.

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our students take, will touch every part of an educational enterprise, every constituent and every part of our students' lives. Everything will change with a great strategic plan; difficult choices will be made; and systems will be developed and integrated. This challenging process will evolve the nature of our curriculum, our co- and extra-curricular activities, our physical assets and footprint, our town-gown interactions, and, ideally, the very nature of how we work with each other—our critical constituents—students, alumni, staff, faculty, partners, and citizens of Newberry, South Carolina, the nation, and the world. Newberry College, through its reality-based education, will address ever-changing market dynamics and develop participative, interactive citizens capable of living in a world that we cannot fully predict or anticipate.

When we bump into problems together at the College, I like to tell our students that having to work through messes is a lot like life. Newberry College is your final lab experiment. Use this time in college to start working on some really big issues, some big messes. In years to come, I hope that every Newberry College student will be prepared to address and understand the interacting problems, or the messes, they will encounter as citizens with the knowledge and confidence that they can persist and work through the mess—because Newberry College made all the difference.



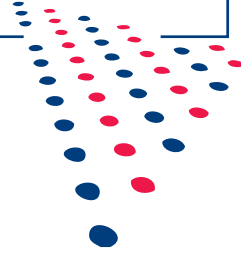
Dr. V. Scott Koerwer is an entrepreneur in the higher education industry with more than 20 years of experience, three entrepreneurial startups, and numerous program development initiatives around the globe. He currently serves as the 21st President of Newberry College. He has a bachelor's degree from Muhlenberg College; he earned a master's degree in government and political science from Lehigh University, and a doctorate degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Koerwer is an alumnus from the Kellogg School of Management's Advanced Executive Program and also earned a two-year certificate in organizational development and consulting from the National Training Labs.

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Dr. Koerwer has been a consultant to numerous companies, entrepreneurial initiatives, and educational enterprises around the world. Current and past clients include world-class organizations such as Johnson and Johnson, Merck, Dupont, IBM, Merrill Lynch, Black and Decker, the World Bank, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, SAIC, Samsung, Toyota Motor Corporation, McCormick, Nextel, Otis Elevator, and not-for-profit organizations including the Securities Industry Association, the Association of Investment Management Sales Executives, and the NASD. He has engaged in educational programs and/or business activities in countries including: Iraq, Saudi Arabia, China, India, Japan, Thailand, Tunisia, Egypt, Singapore, England, Mexico, and South Korea.

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