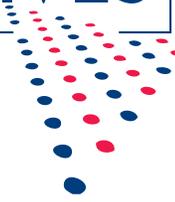


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES



*A HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
PRESIDENTIAL  
THOUGHT  
LEADERSHIP  
SERIES*

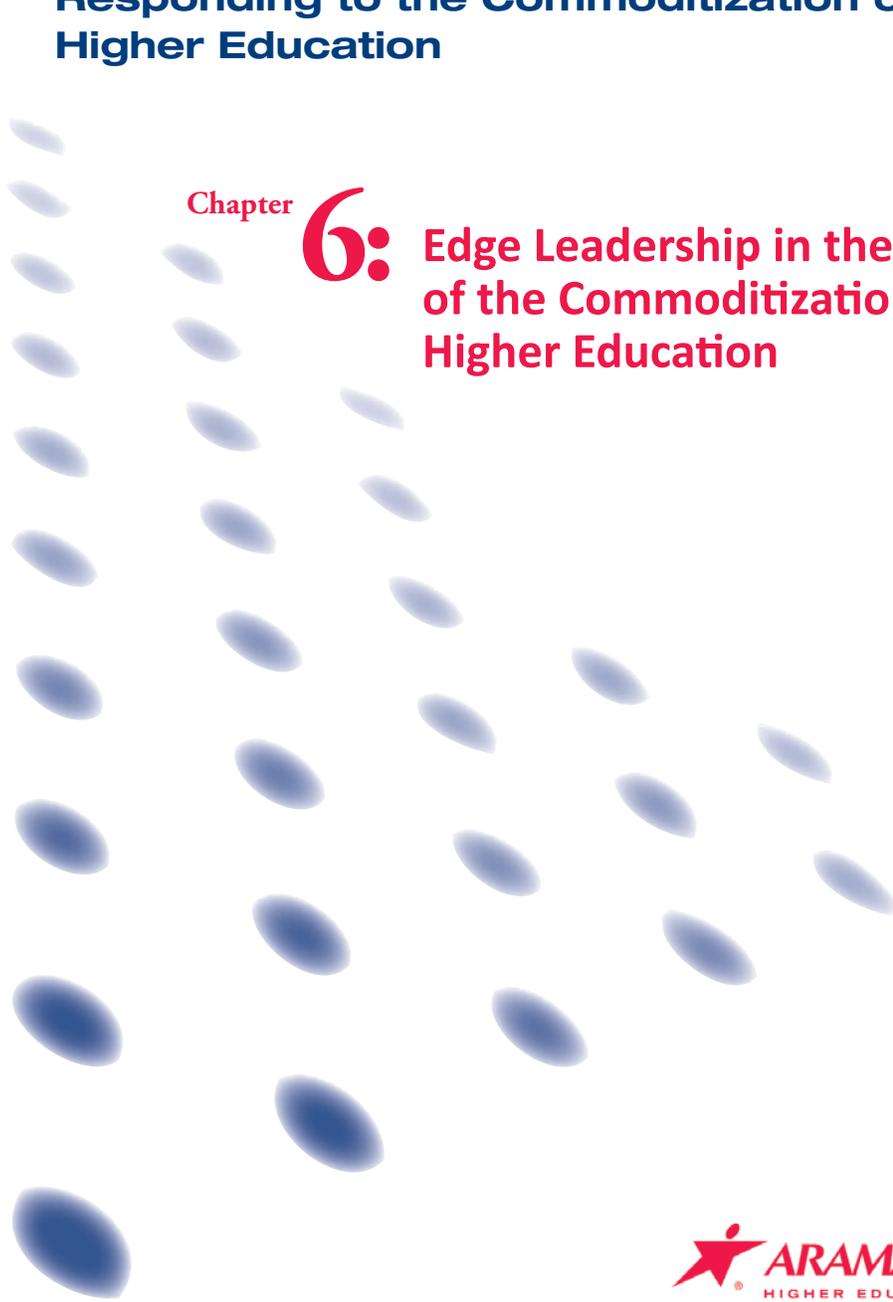
2012-2013 Series:

## **Responding to the Commoditization of Higher Education**

Chapter

# 6:

## **Edge Leadership in the Age of the Commoditization of Higher Education**



## Edge Leadership in the Age of the Commoditization of Higher Education

Dr. Jake B. Schrum: President of Southwestern University

The premise of what I want to communicate is that allowing higher education to be classified as a commodity is a default position. It will happen if we let it happen. Keeping this from occurring is the challenge that faces an edge leader.

I must make two confessions before I begin. First, I believe that people who lead on the edge do not call themselves “edge leaders” even though others might describe them in that way. And second, my understanding of edge leadership has an unabashedly moral tone or possibly even a moral imperative associated with it.

Moreover, it is because of this moral imperative that the questions related to the commoditization of higher education should be brought into a clearer focus. Our imperative or core value in liberal arts education has always centered around the complete development of all that makes a person whole. Elements needed to provide and enrich this type of education include moral development, the ability to express oneself, a penchant for analytical or critical thinking, an appreciation for creativity, and, I would add, a sense for how counterintuitive thinking can shape better, more empathetic, and more inclusive outcomes. This is a key element of edge thinking and, therefore, edge leadership.

For instance, in the 1950s and 60s, colleges and universities began to change the titles of their senior officers to reflect the increasing corporatization of higher education. So the University treasurer’s title was change to Vice President for Finance and the Dean of Students’ title was changed to Vice President for Student Life. It is mildly surprising that the University’s Chaplain’s title was not changed to Vice President for Spirituality and Religious Life.

“ Edge leadership is creative. It’s about doing things for others, for the greater good. Edge leaders see things differently.”



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The natural reaction to changes like this is to regard them as subtle, not worth an argument, and besides, the titles seemed to add stature to the positions. An edge leader would have made the counterintuitive argument that changing the titles only pulls higher education into a corporate world, which tends to look at almost every person, every thing, and every decision as one that revolves around some form of commoditization.

Alas, the edge leader would say let's don't drift into the corporatization of higher education unless it adds to our central core value, educating a person to be a whole person who is capable of enriching their own life and in turn the lives and well-being of others. The Honorable James T. Laney, former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea and former president of Emory University, has said that presidents of colleges who want to be called CEO should think of those letters standing for chief education officer, not chief executive officer.

**My first point** then is why should we be surprised about the increasing commoditization of higher education, when we have acquiesced to many of the trappings of the corporate world that we think make our status more important?

Pilar Lopez and I were colleagues at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth in the first part of the 1990s. She was a member of the Wesleyan housekeeping staff, which cleaned all of the executive offices on the first floor of the administration building. This included my office when I served as president. We knew each other's names and spoke occasionally, but I rarely saw her, because her work hours were different from mine.

One day she asked me if she could have an appointment with me the first thing the next morning. I agreed and wondered about the formality of her request to visit.

The next morning she arrived at my office, which she had cleaned the previous evening, in what I might have assumed was her finest dress. Obviously, she wanted this conversation or meeting to be more than just a casual encounter. She began by telling me that she had borrowed a magazine from my office and was now returning it.

The magazine was similar to most college and university magazines and included stories about current efforts underway to make Texas Wesleyan better so that we could enrich the educational experiences of our students. There was a featured article on the University's desire to be known as a New Urban University, a moniker I had coined and one that I believed aptly described our mission. Unfortunately, there were few people who had taken real ownership in this idea, our fundraising campaign was languishing, and I was somewhat depressed.

Pilar told me that she had read the article about The New Urban University and that as much as she understood it, she was fully supportive. She told me she valued my leadership and then she made me cry.

She handed me a card that she said she had taken from the center of the magazine.

It was a pledge card for the campaign we had undertaken in support of the New Urban University concept. Immediately, I could see that she was pledging, from her somewhat meager paycheck, \$5 per month, every year for five years, for a total gift of \$300. This was a princely sum for her, and I was overcome with emotion.

She had helped me believe, once again, in the New Urban University. She had lifted my spirits as the leader of the University where she was working. And she had reminded me of the power of true philanthropy. Her gift would enable students she would never meet.



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*Was she an edge leader?* I believe she was and is. Edge leadership is not swayed by rank or status. It is not a corporate, top-down paradigm. It revolves around and recognizes the worth and dignity of everyone and believes in the creative spark of humanity which characterizes all of us.

**So my second point is this:** We have allowed ourselves to be drawn into the commoditization of higher education, because we seem to be persuaded by the notion that all good ideas come from the top and that seeking creative solutions from those colleagues who do the basic day-to-day work of the University is neither helpful nor necessary. Edge leaders are open to and influenced by anyone who wants to solve problems and make the academy and the world better.

Knowing that the Union would be saved, but that there would still be a great divide in America for many years to come, Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the greatest U.S. President in history, spoke these eight extraordinary words in his second inaugural speech:

*“With malice toward none and charity for all.”*

Why was this extraordinary? Powerful in its simplicity, stunning in its foresight, Lincoln was narrowly focused on forgiveness. The long civil war that had bitterly divided this great country was not even over, and yet Lincoln was urging his fellow citizens to “bury the hatchet.” To let it go, to forgive, and move forward. Was Lincoln an edge leader?

Many would say that Lincoln was not a strong leader. Many in his cabinet did not respect or appreciate him, and there were many people who criticized the brevity of his greatest speech, the “Gettysburg Address” stating that its length did not fully honor the gravity of what had taken place on that battlefield. Again, it was about numbers. In this case the number of words.

The counterintuitive edge leader knows that the meaning of a moment is more important than the weight of the transcript. This is why corporate America does not fully understand higher education. We are motivated by the transformation of people’s hearts, minds, and yes, even their souls. Business is motivated by numbers, commodities, balance sheets, and bottom lines. The academy’s bottom line can be the enormous power of the last sentence of an epic poem.

**So my third point is:** Don’t let the definition of success in the corporate world of commoditization become the hallmark for success in the academy.

Edge leadership is creative. It’s about doing things for others, for the greater good. Edge leaders see things differently. Many edge leaders have no title that suggests that they are leaders at all. Edge leaders make many corporate people nervous. Their leadership is sometimes confused with weakness. They are capable of leading others to the edge. They look out over chaos and see possibilities while other leaders are noticing the power structure’s reaction to them and are seeking applause or validation. Edge leaders are motivated by meaning and not by money. They constantly seek ways to make the world better for their having lived. Ultimately, they are always motivated by strong core values and finally, because of honesty and humility, they are often overlooked, even though they are sometimes the only ones who really know what’s going on.

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Gary Gunderson and Larry Pray in their book [The Leading Causes of Life](#), allude to the idea of edge leadership when they describe [the leading causes of life](#):

- **The first is connection**—Edge leaders develop an intimate web of relationships.
- **The second is coherence**—They have an unusual ability to sense how life makes sense.
- **The third is agency**—They have an unusual capacity to “do” in the world—to get things done.
- **The fourth is blessing**—They understand that we should be strongly animated by being blessed by those to whom we are most deeply connected.
- **The fifth is hope**—Edge leaders know that the final cause of life is hope – believing that things will get better.

Now the key to the realm for edge leaders is creativity. The good news is that we live in the creative era.

Stephen Tepper and George Kuh say that creativity is cultivated through rigorous training and by deliberately practicing certain core abilities and skills over an extended period of time.

These core abilities and skills are:

- The ability to approach problems in non-routine ways using analogy and metaphor
- Conditional or abductive reasoning (posing “what if” propositions and reframing problems)
- Keen observation and the ability to see new and unexpected patterns
- The ability to risk failure by taking the initiative in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty
- The ability to heed critical feedback to revise and improve an idea
- A capacity to bring people, power, and resources together to implement novel ideas
- The expressive agility required to draw on multiple means (vision, oral, written, media-related) to communicate novel ideas to others

One place to find this kind of rigorous training and deliberate practice in creativity is in arts-degree programs. Indeed, it is hard to compose and perform new music, stage a drama, design a new community center or video game, mount a solo exhibition, or interpret and perform a dance without tapping into many of the creative abilities suggested by Tepper and Kuh. Are artists edge leaders?

Moreover, are those persons in the academy who have a liberal arts degree or even a liberal arts outlook, are they edge leaders?

**My fourth point** is that as leaders who believe in the value of a broad-based, values-centered education, we have allowed corporate America and its commoditization of so many things to define our success. We need to take a stand, reverse this growing trend, and define our own success.

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Yes, we need to balance our budgets, make the best of our dwindling resources, and constantly study and revise our financial models, but we can't let our work on behalf of the well-being of humanity be defined by "bean counters" and corporate wizards.

In our work, scientific discoveries change lives, poems educate our heart, music nourishes our souls. We must continue to lead our institutions through inspiration, not simply balancing the bottom line.

One of my new favorite edge leaders is Ms. Kerry Robinson. Recently, she gave the eulogy at a friend's funeral service. To honor the legacy of her friend, she made these suggestions to those gathered, and I will end with her words:

*"Lend your life to something big, take a leap of faith in favor of something uncertain, bold, generative, that is designed to benefit others. Be on the lookout for grace in the most unexpected places and relationships. Do not protect yourself from love and the vulnerability of love. Cherish the time you have with those who ennoble you. And give of yourself—even everything you have—so that others might have life and have it more abundantly."*

Learning this is why education matters.



**Dr. Jake B. Schrum** grew up in Texas and received his formal education at Southwestern University, Southern Methodist University, and Yale. He has been a college administrator for 39 years. During 21 of those years, he has served as president. He is passionate about moral leadership, fostering diverse perspectives, and transformative liberal learning. He is the 14th President of Texas' oldest university, Southwestern. The innovative Paideia Program, which blends several of the most transformational experiences of college life, was created and has been developed at Southwestern during Schrum's tenure.