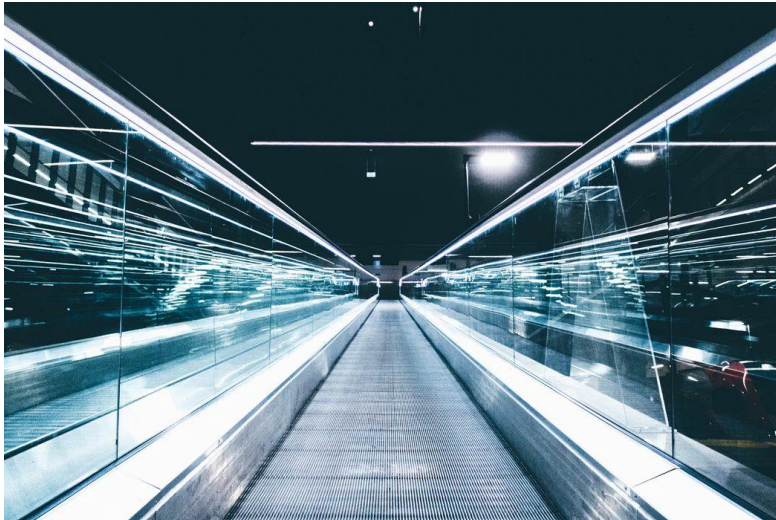


ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

Mentoring Mondays
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We are Outside the Box – Now is the Time to Think Like It
June 4, 2020



What does the future of higher education hold? How will our sector emerge from this crisis? To answer these questions well, we need to think bigger and bolder, with all the creativity at our disposal.

By W. Kent Barnds, Executive Vice President for External Relations, [Augustana College](#)

I once had a boss I called “the king of cliché.” I often found myself struck by the ease with which he would rattle off a cliché perfect for the moment. I’ve been thinking about him in recent weeks as the higher education community has resorted to management by cliché. Everywhere I turn right now, I hear “Don’t waste a good crisis” or “We are all in this together.”

Unfortunately, these sentiments seem to me to result in doing either the wrong thing or nothing at all.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis in this country, we are seeing so-called decisive actions from those higher education institutions that want to take advantage. They are cutting programs and people and executing pet plans behind the scenes. Many of these changes do damage to the mission and will ultimately result in weaker rather than stronger colleges.

Others have already cut to the bone and have nothing left to do other than wait around for a painful closing. Sadly, many smaller communities, especially in rural areas, will be devastated by these closures.

These may not be the only options for higher education, though. With imaginative, creative and courageous leadership, this can be a time for institutions to distinguish themselves.

All who have calling for a more entrepreneurial approach to higher education - including boards of trustees - can step forward with the resources to help higher education leadership think differently. Many of us, just a few short months ago, thought that delivering our academic programs entirely through distance education was impossible. But when really smart, creative people collectively go into problem-solving mode, amazing things can happen.

One of the most tired clichés we all know is, ironically, “Think outside the box.” Well, *now we truly are outside the box*. Now is the time to think differently about leading in higher education.

Now might be the time to:

- - Take what you are learning now by experimenting with distance education - and integrate that into your everyday delivery. Many of us are making distance learning work with virtual duct tape because we haven't had a choice. So, maybe we should be using this time to identify and maintain the most successful components of this experiment as part of what we do.
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- - Get serious about that merger or acquisition you'd been thinking about. I heard recently that Apple quietly acquired three companies in the month of March and spent about as much on acquisitions in the first quarter of this year as they did all of last year. Now, I get that none of us is Apple (except maybe Arizona State or Purdue Global), but there's still something here worth thinking about. This crisis could open avenues to new academic competencies or a new geographic footprint or even an expansion of institutional expertise and thought leadership.
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- - Approach that stronger institution you've admired over the years, to keep the legacy of your endangered college alive. Do this for your alumni, current students, and community. A partner might share geography or religious affiliation. Think creatively about how you can keep your legacy and mission alive on another campus, and give your alumni a place they can continue to love and feel is their own.
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- - Find a partner who can help you maintain your physical campus in a beloved hometown at a lower cost. The current crisis has resulted in everyone transitioning to distance learning, regardless of mission. What if a partner college could deliver some or all of your general education curriculum through distance learning, allowing you to reduce costs? How might this layered approach affect on-campus teaching and learning, or career preparation within students' major fields? One might imagine Boston College creating a Jesuit-ideal-driven general

education program that they could deliver via distance education to Spring Hill College. Or my own institution, Augustana College, could develop a foundational general education program (maybe called "The Augustana," in a nod to Luther) and deliver it to interested colleges.

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- - Consider shared senior administrative positions among colleges. It's hard to attract and keep talent; in some cases there is not a sufficient supply of talent, and that talent comes at a cost. Maybe it's time to think about some shared leadership, especially if partnering institutions are not competing for the same students. What about a community college and a local four-year college sharing a CFO or vice presidents in student life, ITS, advancement, admissions, or human resources?

Some of these ideas may sound crazy. But remember back when delivering everything via distance learning sounded crazy? Maybe some of this is worth thinking about.

My greatest fear in the aftermath of COVID-19 is that our beautiful, diverse, complex higher education system could be left gutted, leaving empty campuses, diminished missions, and a stripped-down version of what has been the United States' most important and influential contribution to the world.

Perhaps one of the phrases I am hearing so frequently right now, "we are all in this together," *is* the key. Maybe we need to embrace that sense and ask each other for help. Let's work together to continue doing what we are able to do so brilliantly.

Image Credit: Photo by Tomasz Frankowski on Unsplash.