

PROVOSTS: THIS IS YOUR LEADERSHIP MOMENT



BY

Amit Mrig

President, Academic Impressions

There has never been a more important moment for Provostial leadership.

Over the last five-plus years, I've been fortunate to work with dozens of esteemed Provosts and Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs. Without fail, I have found them to be of the utmost integrity and dedicated to carrying out the mission of their institutions.

I have also found them to be mired in the day-to-day details of running their institution, often with no time to step back and think about the big picture, plan for the future, or invest their limited time and relationship capital in pursuit of bold ideas. The COVID-19 pandemic no doubt exacerbated these dynamics. To provide some of this reflective space, Academic Impressions began hosting Provost Roundtables, where 8-10 Provosts gather bi-weekly and discuss pertinent issues. The most valuable feedback we've heard from participants is that these meetings provide some of the only times they can step out of the day-to-day, check in on their leadership, and reconnect with more strategic issues.

Provosts are the right hand of the President, and in most cases, the President relies on the Provost to execute their agenda. Presidents are routinely out of the office dealing with external stakeholders (donors, alumni, government, business), so in most institutions the Provost has become the de facto Chief Operating Officer. In many cases, the Provost has to strategically “manage up” to help narrow the President's agenda in terms of what's realistic. As boards are often attracted to visionary presidents, it's not uncommon for Provosts to be swimming in projects and initiatives, many of which compete for resources. In fact, one R1 Provost made an important observation—in a one-hour meeting with the President, they can easily create 800 hours of work for others. The Provost, in effect, is forced to think critically about the capacity of the institution and how

decisions made at the highest level will cascade changes in workload across campus.

This dynamic forces the Provost to spend their time managing budgets and projects, focused on implementation and coordination. But it's not just the heavy demands that keep Provosts in operations mode. Many of them are excellent managers and have a penchant for “keeping the trains running on time.” Many Provosts I know are caught in endless meetings focused on matters that are urgent. They may or may not also be important. In fact, many Provosts are selected into their role because of their track record in getting things done—and so a repeating cycle emerges.

The challenge, of course, is that these responsibilities leave little time to craft and attend to a strategic agenda at a time when most institutions desperately need to have a clear direction on how they'll emerge from the pandemic, navigate shifting student demographics and needs, find sustainable growth, adapt the curriculum to a changing world of work, get increasing costs under control, and address structural inequities. To name a few.

The Provost is uniquely positioned to lead on these issues. As Chief Academic Officer, they are best qualified to evaluate the whole of the academic offerings relative to student demands, the marketplace, and labor trends. They have their finger on the pulse of the faculty in terms of their level of engagement and morale. They see both the entirety of the research and the scholarship enterprise to know the level of innovation and productivity, and they can identify opportunities to build on institutional strengths. They often have responsibility for the whole or most of the institution, so they see

how all of the parts fit together, which is a necessary perspective for tackling systemic issues like DEI. They understand both the macro environment—internal and external forces shaping the institution—and the micro—how the governance and culture of individual academic units impact the ability to effect change. More tactically, they have the experience, expertise, and credibility to address faculty concerns and pushback to new initiatives or changes. And because they are academics, they are keenly aware of the life cycles of the academic programs and are likely best positioned to know how to balance current trends with long-term pursuits.

For these reasons, there has never been a more important moment for Provostial leadership.

So how can the Provost move from the chief operating officer and reclaim their role as chief academic officer? Based on our extensive work with academic leaders, we propose 10 strategies to consider. The first three focus on the Provost's own leadership, the second three speak to the importance of building the capacity of others, and the final four speak to Provost's leadership of the institution itself.

Investing in Your Own Leadership

1. Prioritize Strategic *Thinking* as Much as Strategic *Doing*.

Most Provosts are overscheduled and run from meeting to meeting, usually late. The demands on their time easily outstrip their capacity, and this results in Provosts putting in countless hours outside of work just to keep up. And in fact, senior leaders, especially Provosts, can easily fall into the trap that the harder they work, the more value they are adding. But this is rarely the case, as constant and unending commitments drive Provosts further into the weeds, so from a [leadership perspective](#) they get stuck in autopilot, leading from a style that is comfortable but that may or may not be effective. For instance, analytical Provosts can easily

justify spending more time behind closed doors to do their work, ignoring the need to build relationships, while relationally oriented Provosts can get caught up in trying to appease everyone's needs and may put off making hard decisions.

Being overscheduled and overcommitted can also mislead Provosts (and those they lead) into thinking that, because they are very busy, they are also very productive. But busyness doesn't equate to effectiveness. Provosts should look at two dimensions of how they spend their time: focus and urgency.

The dimension of focus reveals how concentrated or diluted their efforts currently are. Are Provosts working on major initiatives that have the capacity to move the institution forward? Or are their efforts dispersed and diluted across myriad day-to-day issues, recurring meetings, hundreds of emails and/or teams' messages, and urgent fires that need extinguishing? Meanwhile, urgency refers to the intensity and speed at which they pursue these priorities. Urgency is necessary—especially in today's world that is changing at faster and faster rates—but if not paired with focus, it results in a pattern of staying busy while not making a meaningful impact. In the end, Provosts must measure their success by the impact they make and whether the institution is on a more sustainable course than when they first assumed office.

Taking space for reflection is a key strategy for breaking this cycle. Provosts need to find time to step back and reflect, and to use this time to focus on strategic thinking. Note that strategic thinking is not the same as strategic doing—here, pausing and thinking is the work. The purview of the Provost's role is too big to simply process everything they are seeing and learning on the fly, rushing from one building on campus to another. Yet for many, it will feel very counterintuitive to slow down and carve out this time because there are more meetings to attend than there are hours in a day. It may even feel like a dereliction of duty to some Provosts, because they'll have to say no to some things.

With this in mind, to maximize this time, Provosts should reflect on questions about their leadership, as well as where and how they invest their time and attention:

Reflecting on your own leadership

- Am I spending too much time analyzing and putting off decisions that need to be made now?
- Am I being too risk-averse?
- When was the last time I was challenged?
- Am I listening as much as I am speaking?
- Am I deferring too much to others versus trusting my own voice or judgment?
- Who have I not been connected to that I should be?
- Am I having the impact I want to have?
- How am I continuing to grow and learn in this role?

Reflecting on where you invest your time and attention

- What is the biggest thing preventing us from achieving our strategic goals?
- What are we not talking about that we should be?
- What activities are draining resources and not adding value?
- What are we discussing but not resolving?
- What is our competition doing?
- If we had to redesign this area/unit from scratch, what would we do differently?
- In 5 years, what will be the most important issue facing this university?

Having a [leadership coach](#) is another effective way to carve out this time. Coaching can create the space for Provosts to reflect on what's either inspiring or troubling them. Coaches enable leaders to examine current challenges and opportunities from a holistic lens—enabling them to examine both the personal and professional, overcome limiting beliefs, balance competing demands, and help to explore difficult situations in a safe space. Finding a coach who is a student of leadership who also has lived experience in

leading higher education is important—especially for Provosts. Leadership at the Provost level is filled with complexity and ambiguity, and leaders at this level need true thought partners.

As the Provost creates a more regular practice of reflection, they can also start to change the way their meetings are run through more focused agendas—creating more space for dialogue, feedback and pushback, and looking at problems from different angles in order to encourage innovative solutions to pressing challenges.

2. Network with Other Provosts.

There is only one Provost on campus, and as such it can be a lonely job. Provosts are in such a unique role—a first among equals in the cabinet, and yet they serve at the pleasure of the President so their position is always at risk. They may not be the most visible leader on campus but are often the most accessible, given the President's schedule and external focus. The job is all-encompassing, as most Provosts don't just have responsibility for the academic enterprise but also often for enrollment management, student success/retention, and, increasingly, DEI efforts as well. The complexity of the job necessarily means that Provosts need help, and yet they often can't find it internally to the institution.

Provosts are also one of the few roles on campus that lack a robust professional association of their own. They most often meet with peers from systems they may be a part of, such as athletic conferences, faith-based consortia, and institutions in their home state. Often, however, these groups are as competitive as they are collaborative, so Provosts can't always openly share their concerns or challenges. This was one of the main reasons we started our [roundtable series](#). In our sessions, Provosts are able to discuss common challenges and concerns, ask questions, bounce ideas off one another, learn from each other's experiences, and generally provide support to one another. These experiences have proven invaluable for providing space for reflection, learning, and validation.

Whether through AI or other networks, it's critical to find a group of colleagues who have the same challenges that you can lean on for support, guidance, and camaraderie. When this safe space is created, Provosts are able to let their guard down, ask questions, and genuinely feel seen and heard.

3. Get Comfortable with Failure.

Failure is hard. Most senior leaders got to where they are because of a track record of success. They aren't used to failing. Further, the higher up you ascend in the institution, the higher the stakes are, and this makes failure even more costly.

The operational nature of the Provost's role prioritizes efficiency in terms of both process and finances. Even in relatively well-resourced institutions, aspirations and ambitions outstrip resources, and Provosts are often the ones who have to make hard choices on what to cut, what to reallocate, and where to invest. In this work, being accurate and precise with decisions is important, and it can lead Provosts to spend more time preventing what can go wrong—versus trying to maximize what can go right.

The challenge, of course, is that if you want new ideas, growth, and innovation, some of the things you try won't work out. That's part of the process and is not only okay but necessary. If you aren't trying lots of new things and tolerating some failures, you'll miss out on the big wins too—decisions that have transformational potential. I interviewed a Provost who regularly took 2-3 percent out of a \$24 million operating budget for new ideas. Most of these ideas didn't work out and only strengthened faculty pushback to redirect that money towards leaking roofs and compensation (the institution was below average in its pay). The Provost, however, knew that many of these investments might not work out, and that was part of his plan. Eventually, however, they allocated their strategic fund towards online programming, and it quickly took off. The year was 1997, and the online operation more than quadrupled the size of the university.

Provosts should do two things: 1) model the way by

pursuing new ideas, and 2) encourage others to do the same. First, Provosts have the power themselves to initiate new ideas and invest in pilot projects that align with critical university priorities. Second, ensure that there is start-up funding to support these ideas. Too often, Provosts are happy to support new ideas but offer no financial support, making it much harder to prove initial results. Focus on finding asymmetric investments—projects that require little seed funding (limiting the downside) but have a huge potential upside.

Provosts also need to create the conditions for new ideas to exist. Most new ideas don't come from the Board, President or Provost. They come from faculty doing research or networking with the community, from staff who come up with a novel solution to a sticky problem, or even from students, parents or alumni. The challenge is to create a culture that is wired to be listening for these ideas—and when they emerge, to explore them. This is not the norm in higher education. The standard practice is to shoot down new ideas in the name of critical and rigorous thinking. As a result, most frontline and mid-level leaders focus on why new ideas won't work, usually within the first five seconds of the idea being voiced. This kills creativity and sends a message that preserving the status quo is more important than trying something that may not work.

Provosts (along with Presidents) set the tone for leadership and what's expected. They can model the way. When new ideas emerge that are from left field, they can ask questions with genuine curiosity in order to understand and explore the idea. They can let the idea breathe before evaluating it. They can ask their Deans to regularly share what new ideas are emerging in their school and college. They can hold skip-level meetings with Chairs to ask about what new ideas are being pursued. They can create competitive funding opportunities to source new ideas from across the institution and build a culture of pilots and experimentation. They can celebrate the learning that comes from projects with the right intention but the wrong outcome. They can and must demand that if their leaders aren't failing, they aren't doing their job. Without failure, there is no

growth, and learning (and the leadership moment) will pass you by.

Most importantly, Provosts need to challenge the [scarcity mindset](#) that is so prevalent in higher education. Too often, leaders—especially faculty leaders—are focused on what they don't have in terms of resources or authority. They conflate events they can influence (financial and enrollment challenges, turnover, and low morale) with those they can't (COVID and political interference). When everything is outside your control, it's easy to feel powerless. Provosts have to help their leaders regain their leadership and reclaim agency to address the challenges of the day with new ideas and new thinking. AI is spearheading the creation of new resources focused on agile leadership, design thinking, and creative problem-solving to help mid-level leaders, especially Deans and Directors, to reframe the challenges they face and reimagine their work. In a post-COVID era, we can't simply do more with less, we have to do our work differently.

Most Provosts are faced with the difficult choices of where to cut and how to make the institution smaller. They need to be equally concerned with how to make the institution stronger, too. Tolerating failure creates a culture of innovation and learning that builds trust and brings stakeholders together rather than pitting them against each other.

Build the Capacity of Others

4. Build a High-Performing Senior Team.

Teams are where leaders get their leverage, and, conversely, without a strong team, Provosts won't be able to get much done. To build a team takes time and intentionality. The first step is making sure you have the right players (Deans, Vice Provosts, Senior Directors, etc.) on the team. This means dealing with ineffective Deans or Vice Provosts who aren't capable of doing their

job or who aren't team players (see strategy #5).

Provosts need to be careful not to prop these people up rather than deal with their underperformance. Since most Provosts were in these roles at some point, they're very comfortable providing a lot of handholding and "operational"-level support (guiding program decisions, dealing with personnel issues, or managing budgets). Provosts need to commit to being the Provost, and build the capacity of their Deans and Vice Provosts, delegating both responsibility and authority to these individuals.

And that brings us to the second step—once you have the right players on the team, pay close attention to how the group functions together and invest time to get the group process right. Only the most important decisions and problems land with the Provost's cabinet, and there needs to be a climate of trust and psychological safety to ensure robust discussions where all voices are heard, pushback and dissent are expected and welcomed, new ideas are regularly shared, and members of the team are able to ask for help. It's critical, too, that the purpose of the senior team is defined—is the Provost's cabinet a decision-making body? Advisory to the Provost? Clarifying how the input from the discussion will be used and knowing how decisions are made makes the playing field level and fair—without this clarity, Deans and Vice Provosts jockey for influence and play politics to sway the decision maker.

AI is often asked to play the role of outside facilitator to support the formations of new Provost cabinets, or the reformation of the cabinet when there is significant transition. In doing so, we start by helping each team member learn more about their own leadership style, how it interfaces with the Provost as the team lead, and how the team will communicate, collaborate, set the agenda, make decisions, etc. Having an outside neutral facilitator ensures that the Provost can fully participate, and that the conversations are safe but honest. In one recent team we worked with, we found out that the Provost's style (highly outcomes-focused) clashed with the Deans and Vice Provosts (who were highly process-focused). The team felt that this tension was reaching a

breaking point, but we were able to reframe the issue and examine how this tension could actually be productive—allowing the team to strike a dynamic balance between moving quickly and making sure everyone felt heard and included in decisions. The key was to create awareness of the tension first, understand why it existed, and ensure that everyone had the language to engage in the discussion.

5. Make the Hard Personnel Decisions.

These are the hardest decisions that any leader has to make, so there is a natural tendency to want to manage around the issue rather than deal with it directly. This is especially true when the leader in question is competent but not a team player. It's much easier to deal with a Dean or Vice Provost who is simply ineffective and can't get the job done. It's much harder to remove someone from a position when the primary issue isn't their competence but their leadership character—but that's exactly what Provosts need to do.

We may not think of these leaders as toxic (even though that's exactly their impact) because they are often outwardly collegial and friendly. They wear the school colors proudly and show up at all the events. These are the most pernicious types of leaders—those who are benevolently toxic. However, you can easily spot these leaders because they:

- Focus on hierarchy (i.e., they want to be the Dean rather than do the Dean's job)
- Lack self-awareness (they are not aware of their impact)
- Ignore feedback (they don't ask for it, or it goes in one ear and out the other)
- Are arrogant (they are the smartest person in the room, never ask questions, and are not curious)
- Are self-interested (they are more focused on protecting their unit than on serving the whole institution)

Most institutions need greater collaboration across units, to find efficiencies and to pursue new interdisciplinary

opportunities. Deans and Vice Provosts who operate with a zero-sum mindset and are more concerned about protecting their turf destroy the team dynamic. They don't just prevent opportunities for collaboration, they can actually diminish the contribution of others by spreading their negativity. The roles of Deans, Vice Provosts, etc. are too critical to allow this kind of behavior to fester.

These toxic leaders have often been allowed to continue in their roles because they are highly competent and get the basic job done. They don't innovate, but they meet minimum objectives. Some may even be high performers (judged by their individual contributions). Often, someone previously has protected them; they may have had a close personal relationship with the prior President or Provost, and so their behavior has gone unchecked.

The challenge of course is that people are watching; faculty and staff know who the toxic leaders are, and when they are allowed to continue in their role, it sends a powerful—though unintended—message to the rest of campus as to the kind of leadership that is valued at the institution. The costs are immense—over time, your best talent will migrate out and these inactions will undercut your credibility when you want to rally the campus to action on issues that you think will move the campus forward.

6. Build the Capacity of Chairs.

One of the most strategic investments a Provost can make—for the institution and for their leadership—is to [invest in their Chairs](#). Effective Chairs advance the institution's most important work and free up critical time for the leaders above them to focus on the strategic priorities of the institution. Said another way, if individual academic units have issues, the Deans have to step in and deal with them, which in turn causes the Provost to do the Dean's job. While it may seem indirect, building the capacity of the Chairs is critical to enabling the Provost to focus on strategic matters.

Despite being one of the most important positions on the campus, Chairs often receive no professional development and support for their work. If support is provided, it is most often limited to operational matters—budgeting, performance evaluations, evaluating teaching, HR “dos and don’ts,” etc. What is missing is the part of their new roles that actually determines their success and that they most often struggle with—leadership. [AI’s leadership offerings](#) provide Chairs with support navigating a new identity (are they faculty or administrators or both?), build effective relationships with others, deal with conflict, run meetings effectively, know how to ensure that all of the voices in the department are included, deal with difficult faculty who often have a competing agenda, delegate effectively, manage academic staff, and so much more. We have also found productive and supportive ways to provide Chairs with honest and anonymous feedback on their leadership, which they often lack.

New research by Academic Impressions also reinforces how important the Chairs are to the engagement, satisfaction, and retention of all faculty—and even more so to underrepresented faculty. Most institutions we work with are struggling with low faculty morale and retention. They are also struggling with recruiting and retaining underrepresented faculty, a stated goal of almost every institution. If Provosts want to improve faculty retention and engagement, and by extension faculty productivity, the best lever they can pull is to invest in Chair development. Chairs shape the climate in the department, can deal with toxic faculty or staff, and can provide the necessary support to individual faculty to help them advance and thrive. But these actions are not automatic or even intuitive for some Chairs and so they need ongoing leadership support and development.

Additionally, Provosts should work with the Deans to create a Chairs Council if one doesn’t already exist and ensure that Chairs from across Schools and Colleges regularly convene to discuss important topics. If a Chairs Council does exist, they need to ensure that it’s highly effective and has support from a senior member of their office—it can’t just be run by a volunteer or a Chair

of Chairs. Many Chairs Councils operate as safe and neutral spaces for Chairs to meet and discuss what’s on their mind; in practice, however, these often devolve into complaint sessions and are highly unproductive.

Staff these councils with a trusted person who can both protect the anonymity of conversations and ensure that the broad themes and issues make it onto the Provost’s radar and resources can be identified. If there is a senior academic leader to partner with this group, they can help use the time for critical professional development. Even better, they can leverage the problem-solving capacity of this group. AI has helped a number of Chairs Councils to engage in collaborative problem-solving so that common issues can be surfaced and addressed, the Chairs learn how to diagnose issues and think strategically, and real work gets done while the Chairs expand their leadership range.

Leading the Institution

7. Identify and Prioritize Institutional Strengths.

Historically, most institutions have tried and, in many cases, continue to try to be all things to all people. Differentiation is not an innate idea in higher education for many reasons, not the least of which is the false premonition that to be a great university you have to excel in all academic programs. Identifying and prioritizing strengths is thus counter to the way most institutions operate, in part because it requires leaders to say no to people and programs; it requires disinvestment and reallocation of resources from weaker programs to stronger programs. And that’s incredibly hard to do.

Complicating matters is the fact that evaluating programs is tricky business—you can’t look at a simple set of measures such as enrollment, credit-hour production, or graduation rates, so an apples-to-apples comparison of quality or workload is notoriously difficult, though there are [proven models](#) for how to do this and even for [how to engage faculty in the process](#).

And yet despite these difficulties, or perhaps because of them, it's even more imperative that leaders define the pillars they want to build the institution around over the next 10-20 years: pillars that inform academic programs, research investments and community engagement efforts. This doesn't mean creating an academic plan that's static—the world is changing much too quickly for that. But there should be broad themes that guide the institutions' investments and that can offer clarity on how the institution will build or strengthen core competencies.

James Moeser, former Chancellor of UNC Chapel Hill, advocates placing big bets where you think you will get a big return. When Moeser was Provost at the University of South Carolina, he [talked about building](#) “cathedrals” of excellence that built on existing strengths, even if those strengths were niche programs but could be broadened into big areas. He uses the example of a stellar program in the business school, international business, that had the potential to elevate the entire school's visibility and impact. He notes that he didn't worry as much about shoring up the institution's weaknesses as he did about maximizing what the institution was already doing well.

Most Provosts regularly attend enrollment and budget meetings, so they're keenly familiar with the programmatic strengths and challenges of the institution. The short-term nature of these conversations, however, precipitates short-term actions—developing a new program in a hot field (criminal justice, nursing or health professions, data science, etc.) or expanding the suite of online programs offered. Too many institutions are following the same playbook.

Instead, Provosts should be thinking about the future and aligning current areas of strength with future opportunities. One suggestion is to convene a group of Horizon Thinkers whose job it is to regularly scan macro-level trends such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, blockchain, climate change and clean energy, genomics and more—to discuss the ways in which these trends will shape the world around us. The group can be comprised of faculty, staff, and students—the more

diverse the better—to scan new opportunities and host discussions with thought leaders from business, local and state government, national and community organizations, and others.

The goal of this group isn't to predict the future but to track the blips on the radar ([subscription models for higher education](#), [transcripts on the blockchain](#), etc.) and continually engage in sense-making conversations about what this means for the institution. This group should brief the entire cabinet, not just the Provost, and share their findings with the broader institutional community. It's not about responding to short-term fads but about finding ways to develop new offerings that are in line with longer-term trends. The reality is that there isn't a straight line between present offerings and the ways in which education needs to evolve in the future.

8. Pick the Hill(s) You Will Conquer.

Most universities have structural, organizational, and procedural barriers to innovation. They are designed to protect the status quo. Shared governance (sometimes, divided governance), budget models that enable schools and colleges to own their revenue, promotion and tenure policies, unionized faculty/staff, and other related factors can make effecting major change a herculean task. Beyond these structural and organizational barriers, cultural barriers exist too. Most faculty have seen multiple Provosts during their tenure; if they don't like the message or direction being promoted, they may have an attitude of “waiting it out”—of withholding support in the best of cases and actively working against the Provost's agenda in the worst of cases. In the latter situation, they don't just build a coalition of other like-minded faculty, they may also incite students to protest, leak stories to the media, or go directly to the Board. Their aim is to thwart the Provost's agenda, and there are too many examples across the country of where their efforts are successful, resulting in a no-confidence vote or frustrating the Provost to resign.

Compounding matters are several factors: the average tenure for a Provost is only about [three years](#). Some Provosts may not have a President who is willing to let

them set the strategic agenda. Many are dealing with overreaching boards and governors. In these situations, it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. And the nature of the job is such that it forces the Provost's attention to be spread across dozens of needs, not upon a focused and prioritized set of issues.

Provosts need to have a strategic agenda, and in cases where their purview is more limited by the above factors, that agenda might only consist of one or two items. But Provosts need to know what their top priorities are; what difference do they want to make? In other words, they need to identify the hills they conquer. Said another way, what are the projects or priorities that you would be willing to lose your job over? Provosts have to operate with urgency—not on every small issue, but on the big things. Presidents are caught up in politics, in managing the board and various stakeholders. Provosts can and need to be the chief urgency officer on the issues that matter the most.

80% of the Provost's job is spent keeping the institution running. It can easily be 100% of the job if you let it. However, if you invest in building leadership capacity throughout the institution, you can free up to 20% and allocate that time and energy to strategic projects that are both more personally rewarding, and which move the institution forward.

9. Become Best Friends with the Advancement VP.

Most people typically think fundraising is the responsibility of the President, and that's certainly true—most Presidents spend considerable time outside the institution cultivating new and existing relationships to secure financial support. But increasingly, donors who are investment-minded want to talk to the implementer of the idea—and that's typically the faculty member, Center Director, and even the Dean. Rarely are investment-minded donors providing unrestricted funds (blank checks) to Presidents.

The partnership of faculty and academic leaders in the fundraising process is thus critical to securing significant

resources that can advance the institution's strategic priorities into the next several decades, not just the next several years. Provosts are in a unique position to partner with the VP of Advancement to help set this expectation among the faculty and Deans, and to bring them along knowing that they may be reluctant or lack relevant experience.

To be clear, faculty members' reluctance isn't always unfounded. The traditional models of philanthropy that focus on chasing the wealthiest donors and kowtowing to their interests, and on schmoozing on the golf course or at galas, hold little appeal and are often counter to the aims of the academic. But if philanthropy is pursued as a means to advance institutional strategy—specific initiatives and programs that dovetail with their academic strengths and capacity—the interests of the Dean and the Development Officer are in fact aligned.

Not only are the Dean and Development Officer aligned, but so too is the Donor. High-net-worth donors are more committed to causes and issues than to institutions. They want to support those who can make a difference, and they want evidence that their investments have a chance of paying off—not in a monetary return to them, but in a societal impact to benefit others.

Institutions need to be able to promote compelling ideas that highlight significant opportunities to address local, national, and global challenges. These transformational ideas have to come from Deans, Center Directors, and faculty. The Provost needs to ensure that these are rooted in institutional strengths and align with the long-term direction of the institution. Even better is to engage donors in conversations as the ideas develop. That's why AI's work in this space is about building partnerships across the academic and advancement side of the house—sustainable philanthropy will come from identifying institutional priorities and building institutional capacity to raise more money, not from just hiring more and more major gift officers.

Advancement offices often struggle to engage academic leaders like faculty, center directors and Deans in their work. With a strong partnership with Advancement,

the Provost can help to bring along these key leaders by helping them to articulate compelling visions, define the impact of the work in ways non-academics can understand, and ensure that the ideas can be broken down into fundable projects.

Absent this partnership, it works the opposite (backwards) way. The offices of institutional advancement end up driving these priorities because none exist—or worse, dozens of priorities exist, all focused on short-term needs. Small aspirations beget small gifts, and you simply can't make up in volume what a transformational \$20 million gift can do for the institution. That point is critical to understand.

90% of the money donated to American higher education comes from 1% of the donors. These donors are increasingly less interested in donating to the institutional needs (endowment, endowed professorships, new buildings, etc.) which are often what the Deans and other academic leaders see as the most pressing priorities. Instead, high-net-worth donors want to invest in specific initiatives that will help to move the needle on the societal outcomes that they care about. And they want to see evidence that these initiatives line up with existing areas of strength—evidenced by programmatic strength, enrollment, research prowess, etc. As our long-time partner Jim Langley of Langley Innovation says, “Donors are skeptical of ‘wow’ statements if they aren’t accompanied by ‘how’ statements.”

And in doing so, Provosts can build a culture of philanthropy—a culture that can endure beyond their tenure, the constant churn of development officers, and even the President’s tenure. They can secure the resources to change or accelerate the institution’s trajectory by focusing on transformational opportunities rather than on simply mitigating weaknesses. And their partnership with the VP of Advancement is critical to making this happen. Given higher education’s structural deficits and the fact that the greatest transfer of wealth in human history has begun, the time to seize this leadership moment is now.

10. Create Alignment Through Engagement.

At the end of the day, leaders are measured by their results. And the Provost can’t accomplish the results they are accountable for alone. They need the engagement, buy-in, and participation from faculty and staff across the institution, which can be easier said than done—especially in large, decentralized ones for a number of reasons already shared in this paper.

Despite the popular rhetoric to the contrary, most faculty and staff want to contribute, achieve, and innovate. But there are numerous reasons why they are either unable or prevented from doing so.

Most often, they don’t know how to contribute to the strategic direction of the institution because priorities are unclear and too numerous. Paradoxically, if Provosts want faculty and staff to be creative and entrepreneurial, they are better off telling them what not to do. Most Provosts, however, do the opposite, repeating key directives or outcomes they wish to see. But establishing parameters and constraints can actually unleash creativity and empower employees to come up with new ideas; said differently, these parameters provide the canvas so that faculty and staff can paint.

Faculty and staff may also get tripped up because they don’t know how they can move the needle on critical outcomes, or they may be afraid to voice opinions that challenge the status quo. That’s also why it’s so critical to build the capacity at all levels of the institution so that faculty and staff know how to best add value.

We recommend that Provosts regularly gather middle-level leaders from Chairs to Vice Provosts (different vantage points are helpful)—to regularly discuss progress on strategic priorities and engage in collaborative problem-solving exercises where individuals help each other to diagnose and create novel solutions to each other’s stickiest challenges.

We regularly facilitate these “solutions clinics” once for

an institution, and then show them how to continue forward on their own. Committing to something like this on a monthly or bi-monthly basis sends several powerful messages: that challenges are normal, it's ok to ask for help, we need to slow down and get curious before just jumping to action, and there is tremendous power in bringing diverse groups together to look at issues from different perspectives. Barry Oshry, who pioneered research on how organizations and systems work, encourages leaders to get the middle managers together—they are the implementers, and enabling their collaboration and alignment moves the entire institution forward.

Provosts must also pay attention to the level of trust within the academic enterprise and across the institution. I have been traveling almost weekly to different campuses since the Fall of 2021, and I'm struck by the lack of trust and low morale on campuses. It's arguable that these measures were challenged before COVID, but after the pandemic, they have sunk to even newer lows. As Stephen Covey noted, organizations move at the speed of trust. It's hard enough to enact these changes when trust and engagement are high; it's almost impossible to move the needle when trust is low. When trust is low, faculty and staff will question and fight every slight shift in strategy.

Provosts must recognize that they might be trustworthy leaders operating in an untrustworthy system. That is to say that faculty and staff may have lost faith in the senior team's ability to make good decisions—that team could be the President, the entire cabinet, or prior leaders who have since left the institution. For new Provosts, that's a particularly vexing dynamic. But understanding that the issue may not be with them personally, but rather with years of failed or ineffective decision making can help target the right interventions to begin to rebuild organizational trust—starting with these ten strategies. Individually and collectively, these ten strategies have the power to change both the trajectory of the institution and the minds of its hardworking faculty and staff. Moving the needle on trust is a prerequisite to moving the needle on any institutional outcome.

Conclusion

These practices are based on proven models that we've seen make a difference at numerous institutions. They aren't silver bullets, but if you practice them over time, they will make a difference. Our hope is that one or two of these suggestions resonate and inspire you to incorporate them into your own leadership.

It's important to understand that these aren't ten disparate strategies, either. The common theme or link is the importance of pursuing opportunities versus simply solving problems. Provosts need a proactive stance towards their leadership—the singular and unique nature of their role is that of an asset, not a liability. They have the power and influence to move the institution forward, and I encourage those reading this paper to claim this leadership if they haven't already.

In claiming their leadership, Provosts need to know when to be decisive and when to collaborate. Too often, I see most senior leaders in higher education—Provosts among them—prioritize collaboration to the point of spending disproportionate time, effort, and relationship capital trying to convince a vocal minority that their approach is the right one.

I would argue that now is the moment for strong Provostial leadership to be decisive in the pursuit of bold and transformational ideas. It's unlikely that a collaborative process driven by faculty, Chairs, and Deans will result in disruptive thinking. Instead, we encourage Provosts to be clear about the direction they wish to move, the parameters of what is and is not flexible, and to then invite others to improve and shape the ideas and create alignment across the faculty.

The challenges facing institutions today are significant, but so are the opportunities—if we are to adapt as an industry and ensure that our institutions remain relevant, financially sustainable, and accessible, we need meaningful innovation, not incremental improvements. And for this, we need strong Provosts who recognize that this is their moment to lead.



Amit Mrig

President, Academic Impressions

amit@academicimpressions.com

720-988-1210

Would you Like to Continue this Conversation?

We welcome you to share your reactions to this paper and its ideas, and if we can be helpful in supporting your Provost's leadership, or in building the capacity of Deans and Chairs, we welcome a conversation.

If you would like to contribute (through our leadership development or coaching offerings) please contact me at amit@academicimpressions.com.

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