



Essentials of Institutional Transformation:

Remaining Resilient through
Leadership Transition



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GATES *foundation*



CONTENTS

About the Frontier Set	3
Foreword from President Percy	4
Guiding Principle: Institutional Transformation	5
Institutional Transformation Amid Leadership Transition	6
About Portland State University (PSU)	7
Causes of Transformation	8
People-Driven Transformation	12
The Cost of Transformation	13
Risks to Transformation	14
Questions to Consider	16
Resources for Practitioners	17
Acknowledgements	18

This case study is the culmination of a five-year research partnership between Portland State University, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Coalition of Urban-Serving Universities. It is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as part of the Frontier Set initiative.



ABOUT THE FRONTIER SET

In 2015, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) launched an initiative called the Frontier Set. The Frontier Set united thirty-one colleges, universities, and state systems in a shared commitment to serve first-generation, low-income, and other underrepresented minority students by eliminating race, ethnicity, and income as predictors of student success.

In addition to BMGF, six intermediaries—American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Aspen Institute, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Frontier Set Intermediary Team, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), and University Innovation Alliance (UIA)—and four support partners—American Institutes for Research (AIR), VentureWell, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA)—were responsible for carrying out the initiative by:

1. designing, implementing, and supporting the network that connects the involved higher education systems; and
2. determining how to gather, analyze, and share the initiative's findings more broadly. Funding and resources from BMGF supported this process. BMGF recognizes that the efforts made by the Frontier Set will create a strong foundation to scale similar initiatives with more higher education systems in the future.

While the funding period for the Frontier Set ended in 2021, the work continues. The intermediary partners continue to refine and incorporate key interventions with the goal of achieving institutional transformation by closing equity gaps, improving access to higher education, and accelerating the production of degrees for underrepresented students.

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), together, are one of the intermediary partners of the Frontier Set. This case study, one of three produced, is a joint effort of the two organizations on behalf of the Frontier Set, in fulfillment of one of the initiative's key goals: **to share best practices related to institutional transformation.**

Foreword

from President Percy



Dear Colleagues:

Since our founding in 1946, Portland State University has stayed true to our mission as a university of opportunity, where people come to change their lives and their communities. At our very core is our commitment to student learning and success, starting 75 years ago with veterans returning from World War II. Today, we are home to Oregon's most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse student population.

At the onset of the Frontier Set project, PSU's transformation focused on setting a strong foundation of innovation in student success: empowering the "do-ers" at PSU to work alongside our students to identify challenges and opportunities, and create solutions using design-thinking strategies. The focus on building the best student experience provided an inclusive student success structure that emphasized our culture and commitment to equity in student success across the institution. As senior leadership changed during the Frontier Set project, our commitment to equity in student success remained strong.

The Frontier Set connected us with incredible institutions of higher education across the nation. We learned from and alongside these institutions to take risks and innovate together to benefit our collective students nationally. We deepened our understanding of what it means to be resilient in times of incredible disruption and change together while continuing to serve our students and the community.

As we head into the next phase of our transformation journey, PSU must provide students with a pathway to social mobility as we emerge from a historic pandemic and reckoning on racial justice. To do that, we are building on our Students First initiative to advance student success, graduation, and career readiness. We give our students meaningful experiences that lead to rewarding careers.

We are fighting racism and advancing social justice across our campus by applying an antiracist lens to everything we do, measuring our progress and holding each other to account. We are taking steps to ensure success for all students, more equitable working conditions and an environment where people feel safe, belong, and prosper.

We are engaging with our partners across the city to achieve a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future. Now more than ever, our city needs us to be a key player in solving complex problems, tapping our research and education resources to recover and come back stronger.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Stephen Percy". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Stephen Percy

President

GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Institutional Transformation

The three institutions participating in APLU and USU's Frontier Set study are Portland State University (PSU), Florida International University (FIU), and Georgia State University (GSU). These institutions contribute to the growing chorus of voices in the field that are united around a common purpose: to document and understand institutional change in order to improve the lives of students and the communities in which they are based. The Frontier Set project also provided the APLU/USU participating universities the opportunity to underscore the important role that urban-serving universities play as models and agents for transformational change. Given their legacy of educating diverse student populations and their ability to creatively scale effective practices, urban universities serve as valuable examples of how institutional transformation occurs. With support from the APLU/USU and BMGF, the three participating universities are exploring what it takes to achieve successful institutional innovation and transformation. Collectively, their efforts provide a framework to guide other universities' transformational change initiatives and explore the financial and human costs of such transformation.

Institutional transformation has been regularly occurring at some higher education institutions. However, prior to the Frontier Set research, it remained unclear how that institutional transformation occurred and, more importantly, how it contributed to increased student success at scale and for institutions that were

primarily focused on “expand[ing] access, persistence, and completion for those who have historically been excluded from the benefits and value of higher education.”¹ Without that understanding, translating success to additional universities was difficult. Today, it's imperative that more universities adopt widespread transformational change in order to contribute to national economic stability and overall prosperity. To achieve these goals, leaders of Frontier Set institutions have pledged finances and effort to explore and explain change initiatives—both their successes and failures—so that other institutions can learn from, integrate, and adapt similar transformations on their campuses.

Understanding institutional change requires studying the forces that inspire, catalyze, and drive change. Institutional transformation within universities can stem from external and/or internal forces. Examples of external forces include federal and state policies, the philanthropic community, and globalization. Examples of internal forces include changes in leadership, student demographics, and institutional strategic finance.

Additionally, growing enrollments of traditionally underserved or marginalized populations in public universities, paired with increasing financial challenges, create an uncertain future for higher education. Together, these factors create an urgency for higher education transformation.

Each case study developed by APLU/USU focuses on institutional transformation through the lens of one participating institution and its experience. Throughout this case study, the terms “institutional transformation” and “institutional change” are used interchangeably to describe the realignment of an institution's structures, culture, and business model to create a student experience that results in dramatic and equitable increases in outcomes and education value.² In this case study, we examine PSU and the relationship between leadership transition and institutional transformation.



¹ https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/publication/edu/HigherEducationReport_final_high%20res.pdf

² Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: Frontier Set



INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Amid Leadership Transition

Why does leadership matter?

For institutions seeking transformational change of any kind, leadership must be a core focus. Senior leaders set tone and vision for student success and wield considerable influence over the operations of the institution. Meanwhile, turnover in executive leadership may present challenges to sustaining a transformative change agenda.

Leadership Transition's Impact

The role of the college president has become increasingly complex in recent years. College presidents must simultaneously assume roles as academics, crisis managers, politicians, fundraisers, public relations experts, and CEOs. Given the rigor and pressure of such a crucial role, the average tenure of college presidents has fallen steadily in recent years. According to the American Council on Education's (ACE) report, *The American College President 2017*, the average college president's term was just six and a half years in 2017 compared to seven years in 2011 and eight and a half years in 2006. Due to the steady decline in length of tenure, the rate of turnover for college presidents is higher than ever before.

Central to the issue of presidential turnover is examining whether transitions are voluntary or involuntary—that is, whether college presidents decide to depart on their own or are asked to leave the institution.

A 2012 study examining data from the ACE *Survey of American College Presidents*, conducted between 2001 and 2006, found that the rate of turnover for public university presidents is approximately 50 percent higher than their private counterparts.³ The study also found a significant reason for the higher rate of turnover: Public college presidents experience little to no returns on investment for longer tenures in office; in other words, it does not pay to stay at a public university.⁴ Therefore, public college presidents are more likely to leave to become presidents at private colleges than the reverse, and public colleges are experiencing presidential turnovers at a growing rate. This is an example of a voluntary turnover.

When examining the causes of turnover between 1988 and 2016, scholars noted that more than half of all involuntary turnovers during those years occurred between 2008 and 2016.⁵ Given that leadership turnovers at happening at an increasingly high rate, it is critical to understand the root causes of transition and strategies for campuses to adapt to them. A 2017 study described the seven most prolific causes of involuntary turnover: athletics controversy, financial controversy, loss of board confidence, loss of faculty confidence, loss of system confidence, poor judgment, and poor fit.⁶

But whether voluntary or involuntary, a presidential transition will impact nearly every aspect of an institution's operations.

Given the alarmingly high rate of turnover in the past decade, especially at public institutions, it is imperative that colleges be nimble to ensure the continued sustainability of operations during and after administrative changes.

³ [Job turnover among university presidents in the United States of America: *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*: Vol 34, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1390969)

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⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1390969>

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00221546.2017.1390969>

ABOUT PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Located in Portland, Oregon, PSU was home to 23,640 students in Fall 2020. Of those students, 37.2 percent attended part-time and 68.6 percent resided in the Portland metropolitan area. At PSU, 82 percent of students receive financial aid during the 2019-2020 academic year, including 46 percent of students who receive Pell grants. During the same year, PSU awarded 4,409 bachelor's degrees and 1,686 graduate degrees.



50%
students of color

46%
receive Pell grants



4,409
bachelor's degrees
awarded in 2019-20

23,640
students in Fall 2020

PSU is much more racially diverse than the Portland metropolitan area. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 30.6 percent of Portland residents identified as residents of color in 2019, compared to 49.7 percent of students at PSU.⁷

In 2021, PSU ranked 114 among 1,549 colleges and universities on the social mobility index (SMI), which “measures the extent to which a college or university educates more economically disadvantaged students (with family incomes below the national median) at lower tuition and graduates them into good paying jobs.”⁸ This ranking speaks to PSU’s ability to generate incredible social mobility for its students, even without the financial resources afforded to larger institutions.

Between 2016 and 2019, PSU experienced two presidential transitions, plus associated transitions at executive leadership levels including the provost. But despite these shifts in leadership, the university’s commitment to student success remained notably resilient. APLU and USU have worked with PSU over the course of the Frontier Set project with the goal of better understanding how major leadership changes affect the university’s capacity for institutional change. This exploratory case study will address and explore:

1. factors that drives institutional transformation;
2. how student success infrastructure can be designed and implemented despite leadership transitions; and
3. specific strategies and resources that may be applicable to other institutions experiencing similar leadership transitions.

6-year Graduation Rate	2011-12	2014-15
Black	18	50
Hispanic	38	53
Asian	47	58
American Indian/Alaska Native	23	50
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	47	57
Total	38	49

Enrollment	2011-12	2018-19
Hispanic	7	16
Pell Recipients	43	51
Retention Rate		
Full-time	73	76
Part-time	50	52

⁷ <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>

⁸ <https://www.socialmobilityindex.org/>

All figures listed are in %. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>



Causes of **TRANSFORMATION**

Colleges and universities are constantly facing internal and external pressures to adapt and change to improve student success and keep their competitive advantage. However, throughout the last decade, higher education institutions have continued to grapple with their ability to become a change-ready organization. As budgets are cut, significant leadership transitions occur, and the needs of tomorrow's learners are constantly evolving, what ultimately pushes an institution to move from its current state to its ideal future state?

While leadership transition may certainly drive aspects of institutional transformation, PSU has demonstrated a core commitment to student success and an overarching vision of the future of PSU.

Even as leadership transitions occurred, PSU's dedication to student success remained notably resilient. That success is largely thanks to the continued commitment of key change agents, including staff, faculty, and board members, and the fact that PSU leverages internal and external resources, human capacity, and collective efforts across its stakeholder groups. PSU's work to improve the lives of its students is providing a rich reserve of information useful to other institutions that may be seeking strategies to prepare for leadership transitions and ensure the resilience of their efforts as this transition takes place.



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Building a Strong Foundation

How each institution navigates transformation efforts varies due to institutional culture, previous change efforts, resources, goals, and timelines. However, the driving factors behind the need for transformational change are often parallel. Changes within an institution can occasionally be spurred solely by the realization of an opportunity for growth and improvement. However, higher education has historically positioned itself to react to developments versus using strategic foresight to anticipate future developments. It is indisputable that, in order to endure, higher education institutions will be required to shift in significant ways for years to come, especially amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing social uprisings against pervasive systemic racism.

Over the last decade, there has been a significant shift in how institutional leaders define and discuss student success. It appears as though there has been an awakening of empathy across higher education for what students experience both inside and outside the classroom and how their experiences affect their overall satisfaction as a student at an institution. Shifting student demographics, needs, and learning preferences have driven institutions to reprioritize, adapt, and, sometimes, completely alter the ways it meets students where they are.



PSU Initiatives

It is undeniable that PSU has experienced a significant amount of change at all levels of the organization in the last five years. However, its commitment to institutional transformation can be seen through several key initiatives, all of which helped to build a solid foundation that withstood leadership transitions, including the Futures Collaboratory, the Students First initiative, and the Re-Think PSU initiative.



PSU Futures Collaboratory

To continue to evolve and meet the needs of its student body, PSU founded its Futures Collaboratory in 2019. Futures Collaboratory is a campus-wide, interdisciplinary group of students, professors, and staff that have come together to consider the future of student success, the role of faculty and adult learning, the future of work, and the changing role of technology. The group is intentional about evaluating where a focus on student success may be missing in different areas of work at PSU.⁹ The goal is to build a vision of PSU's future and deepen its foresight in order to improve equity, access to higher education, and principles of academic freedom. PSU's Futures Collaboratory is an example of how an institution can position itself to be more proactive about sustainable change.



Students First

Students First is an initiative that identifies students who are encountering barriers and connects them with services and resources. The Student Success Advocacy program is an example of a Students First initiative which identifies students who are encountering barriers, etc. The initiative began with executive support from the university president and the Board of Trustees. The provost led the design and development of a framework that aimed to achieve these goals.¹⁰

The Students First initiative is organized into four focus areas—Persistence, Academic Success, Affordability, and Student Experience.¹¹ The wide and strategic network of people who serve on the four committees of Students First allows PSU to not only carry the momentum of their student success work through the COVID-19 pandemic

but also to pivot to address the immediate needs of their students and community. The Students First Leadership Council's work to bring the campus together around student success ensures that PSU has the structures in place to listen, reflect, and act upon urgent issues and opportunities, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic and growing activism for racial justice.

It is critical to recognize that institutional transformation takes time. If an institution's culture shifts to center on the prioritization of purpose and people, then its impact will be far greater than if it only focuses on data. While change can happen quickly, rapid change often comes at the cost of good communication and can cause missed opportunities for intentional inclusion of all voices. With the Students First initiative, PSU proved it is possible to include many voices while not losing momentum.

⁹ <https://sites.google.com/pdx.edu/futurescollaboratory/about>

¹⁰ <https://www.pdx.edu/student-success/>

¹¹ <https://www.pdx.edu/student-success/>



Through each of these initiatives, it is clear that there is a common vision for how PSU can better serve its students, staff, and community at large. That vision, and its pursuit, create a strong foundation to not only withstand leadership transition but also to drive sustainable change.



ReTHINK PSU

PSU has made significant strides in planning and implementing innovative projects that improve degree completion and reduce costs for students. ReTHINK PSU is a great example. The project aimed at addressing the growing challenges facing public urban universities, including the growth of online education, the rising cost of tuition, and an increasingly diverse and cost-conscious student body.

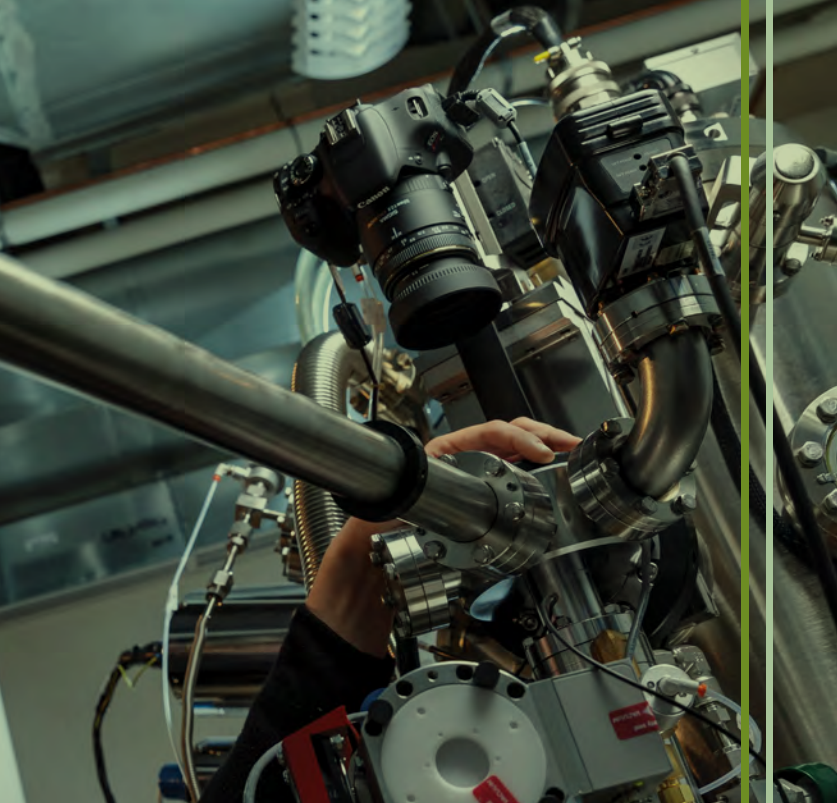
It has three main areas of focus: Pathways to Success, a coordinated route for community college students to pursue a PSU degree; Degree Completion, to advance Oregon's ambitious goal for educational attainment; and PSU Flexible Degrees, well-articulated pathways for undergraduates who attended college without receiving college credentials.¹²

ReTHINK PSU efforts have focused on:

- Creation of Transfer Degree Maps in partnership with faculty from PSU and local community colleges and high schools;
- Development of a program-specific budget model analysis tool to support the development of flexible degree programs (with more than 75 percent of courses being available online) to support adult learners;

- Prioritization and planning of twenty-one projects that will enhance experiences for both online and on-campus students;
- University process redesign to enhance the student experience;
- Planning and deploying interventions for a project to help students with excess credits graduate and a project to improve the persistence of transfer students;
- Selection of programs for flexible degrees and initiating this work;
- Planning and building PSU Online, a website aimed to inspire prospective graduate and undergraduate students to apply for admission to PSU's online and flexible degree programs;
- Building innovation platforms, including development of project management and design-thinking capacity in Academic Affairs and the creation of a project-management-practices guide, which is being used throughout PSU.

¹² <https://www.aplu.org/news-and-media/News/aplu-and-usu-select-seven-urban-research-universities-for-innovative-pilot-grant-that-seeks-to-advance-transformational-change-within-public-higher-ed>



The Impact of PSU's Student-Centered Approach

PSU's transformation projects now intentionally embed student voice and feedback, and facilitate co-creation throughout all project phases, enabling the institution to improve how it serves students. In the long run, the university plans to measure the impacts of its projects by tracking the retention of transfer students through the following categories: percentage of first-time, full-time freshman who have graduated either from PSU or a subsequent institution; percentage of first-time, full-time freshman who are still enrolled at PSU or a subsequent institution; and total graduated and retained.

Through PSU's efforts, the PSU Frontier Set transformation team, which consists of student success leaders across a variety of areas at the institution are helping to fundamentally shape and transform the mindsets and cultures at PSU and in the larger field of higher education. PSU's approach, with its focus on crowdsourcing, design, and execution through innovation platforms, has the potential to be implemented at other institutions.

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PEOPLE-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

A common thread through each of the above initiatives is that people are core to institutional transformation. The contribution of faculty, staff, and students to institutional transformation efforts is vital. If the people making up an institution's body ignore the transformation process, it can negatively impact the result. PSU has experienced significant organizational changes over the last several years, exacerbated by the pandemic that hit the world unexpectedly in 2020.¹³ The pace and frequency of change forced university leaders to quickly reimagine how they function to continue to serve the school's mission of providing access to equitable higher education. It also forced university leadership to reflect on what kind of place they want PSU to be long-term and how to get there.

Institutional transformation requires shifting the attitudes and behaviors of key stakeholders to focus on sustained cultural change. Each person with any role in an institution plays a part in the sustainability of that institution's transformation. PSU is distinguishing itself as an institution that is data-informed and people-driven, meaning that throughout its institutional transformation journey, those involved have made intentional efforts to prioritize purpose over metrics or external measures of success. While metrics are critical to holding an institution accountable, PSU

balances this with the lived experiences of students. For example, while increasing student retention and graduation is critical, the initiatives that drive that increase should not come at the expense of an inclusive and intentionally designed student experience. PSU's leadership realized early on in its transformation journey that it must leverage quantitative and qualitative data and implement initiatives to enhance the experiences of its students, staff, and faculty. The shift from solely examining the data to, instead, making it part of the process, has been integral to PSU's ability to respond to ongoing changes, including leadership transitions.

People at every level of an organization undergoing or seeking to undergo institutional transformation must know not only why the change is necessary but also how to actively contribute to change efforts. Despite limited budgets, PSU has creatively invested in campus-wide initiatives that encourage every employee at the university to play an active role in achieving improved results for students. This approach has proven effective for producing conversations, results, traction, and longevity, and PSU has found success in leading change efforts in this manner, rather than a top-down approach, which again serves to highlight why they have found success, even in the face of leadership transition.

¹³ <https://www.pdx.edu/covid-19-response>

Despite limited budgets, PSU has creatively invested in campus-wide initiatives that encourage every employee at the university to play an active role in achieving improved results for students.





The Cost of **TRANSFORMATION**

While transformative initiatives and scaling successful projects require funding, there are three core areas institutions should consider before diving in: growth and diversity of revenues; better understanding and leveraging of capital and investments; and available operating efficiencies and resource reallocation opportunities.¹⁴ Institutions that can intentionally develop strategies for each of these three areas will be better prepared to sustain transformation and revenues long-term. Strategies for the improvement of student outcomes can also help inform more creative and impactful capital campaigns. Creating synergies across an institution are not only critical to creating solutions that will

A primary concern that institutions have when thinking about institutional transformation is financial cost. This is a particularly salient issue, as well, since many institutions are facing decreased state and federal support. However, institutions that are not able to embrace change or meet the changing needs of students will face significant costs later in the form of decreased enrollment and revenue.

The costs of transformation primarily stem from investment in infrastructure, people, and technology. Organizations that adopt a strategy for managing the costs of their transformational change processes will be more successful. Developing processes for reviewing initiatives, establishing calculations for returns on investment, and developing criteria for accountability are key to ensuring that all investments made are planned for, allowing for sustainability of the transformation.

Since joining the Frontier Set project, PSU's collaboration across offices regarding budget increased significantly. While PSU has consistently faced financial hardships, which created additional challenges during leadership transitions, it learned to leverage its tight funds in a way that maximizes student success.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) recently launched a case summary on PSU's work on the Frontier Set project. The case summary included senior- and mid-level leaders' descriptions of PSU's leadership transition processes and financial challenges. According to those descriptions, early on in PSU's participation in the Frontier Set project, there were leadership transitions that caused transformation to slow. However, with the new President's leadership, faculty and staff members have been collaborating to maximize efforts and reduce significant cost expenses.

have greater impact, but also for reducing redundancy, thereby increasing operational efficiency.

There are several strategies and mindsets that institutions can adopt to begin their transformation journey, regardless of their financial constraints. For example, the shift to a data-informed mindset has helped stakeholders across the institutions understand that having a clear assessment and evaluation plan can help identify when an initiative may not be having the intended impact. At that point in time, they can either adapt or pivot, thereby saving resources or reallocating those resources to more effective initiatives. Additionally, a commitment to leveraging technology where possible to ensure that human resources are being used in the most impact way possible is essential.

Working across multiple departments has been a key strategy to finding effective solutions for impediments to transformation. Working groups consisting of senior and mid-level leaders across PSU required leadership buy-in, and with the shift and turnover in leadership over the past several years, facilitating cross-campus collaborations between these leaders became challenging. However, PSU's commitment to student success increased faculty and staff buy-in—a critical component for successful implementation of initiatives and projects.

PSU's approach to transformation leverages existing human capital and an integrated system of supports—a great sustainability strategy. As a result, PSU's time investment to change institutional culture and priorities was not spending more or new funding, but rather a reallocation of existing resources. The cost of transformation cannot be understated. Institutions considering institutional transformation at scale must seriously consider how to develop a model that will function for both growth strategies and operational efficiency strategies to meet their needs.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-to-transform-higher-education-institutions-for-the-long-term>

¹⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-to-transform-higher-education-institutions-for-the-long-term>



Risks to **TRANSFORMATION**

Higher education institutions are often criticized for the speed at which they enact change. Therefore, when institutional transformation is considered, the task may seem daunting. Many institutions, especially those with long histories, may find themselves balancing tradition with a desire for change. A report published by Huron, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Georgia Institute of Technology summarizes the responses of 495 higher education leaders and finds that, “in many cases, administrators’ tendency to delay visionary planning is enabled by older constructs, such as accreditation timelines, leadership renewal cycles and institutional risk aversion.”¹⁶ The same report finds that nearly a quarter of the respondents were “not very confident” or “not confident at all” regarding their institution’s ability to respond to the top five market trends impacting higher education. Given this information, how are some institutions able

¹⁶ <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/The-Transformation-Ready-Higher-Education-Institution-Huron-ACE-Ebook.pdf>

PSU has mitigated risk through the widespread use of **crowdsourcing and design-thinking**, a process that centers the end-user’s emotions, needs, and wants to identify innovative solutions to complex questions. Faculty and staff are actively engaged in identifying problems and solutions, which are widely shared and disseminated across the campus community.

to overcome these barriers, and what influences an institution's ability to balance this perceived risk with the positive impact that transformation could produce?

The impact of leadership and the ability for an institution to implement change are two critical factors that can impact transformation. In many ways, the ability of an institution to transform is based on whether the institution is prepared to manage change. While the acceptance of change at the individual or project level is important, adopting enterprise-level change management is key. According to Smith, Hyde, Falkner, and Kerlin (2020), enterprise-level change management entails "an institution's roles, structures, processes, projects, and leadership competencies" all being on board.¹⁷ Without a clear strategy or institution-wide participation mandate, embarking on a transformation journey presents significant risk.

There are several strategies to mitigate risk. One of the most critical components of a college's transformation journey is a clear, widely held vision of what success looks like at that specific institution. That vision should be established by the president and shared by senior-level leaders. Without it, buy-in and implementation may not be wide-held, leading to duplicated or competing efforts, and ultimately, financial risk. Institutions like PSU have adopted a clear vision of student success and what it will take to get there. Through leadership transition, they have been able to rely on this vision to ensure effective strategies remain in place.

PSU has mitigated risk through the widespread use of crowdsourcing and design-thinking, a process that centers the end-user's emotions, needs, and wants to identify innovative solutions to complex questions.¹⁸ Faculty and staff are actively engaged in identifying problems and solutions, which are widely shared and disseminated across the campus community. Additionally, the university's use of design thinking approach helps identify opportunities that otherwise may have been missed and provide strategic insight for developing transformative projects.¹⁹ Projects intentionally embed student voice and feedback in all project phases, enabling PSU to improve how all students are served.

PSU serves as an exemplar of how institutions can demonstrate resiliency in their transformational journeys, even during leadership transitions. A familiar face on campus, the new president was able to take the helm quickly, minimizing loss of momentum in transformation. Given that the new president was apprised of all institutional priorities, already engrained in the culture of always putting students first, and trusted by faculty and staff, his appointment allowed institutional transformation to continue full steam ahead.

Over the past decade, PSU has rebuilt its data infrastructure from the ground up. As technology improved and PSU began taking steps to ensure equity, senior leaders utilized data as a powerful key tool to identify and serve students at risk of falling behind in their studies. Establishing a culture of data literacy always remained a top priority, despite three executive leadership transitions and overhauling the existing data infrastructure (a slow and costly process).

In summary, the biggest risk related to institutional transformation is whether an institution is prepared to embrace change. Institutions willing to have conversations about change, intentionally develop pilot programs to test new ideas, and accept risk are better suited to undertake transition. PSU, while facing multiple leadership transitions over the past decade, was able to maintain its commitment to change due to the strong obligation to student success that is deeply embedded in its institutional culture and mission.

¹⁷ <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=educationpub>

¹⁸ <https://www.invisionapp.com/inside-design/what-is-design-thinking/>

¹⁹ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1154158.pdf>

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Open and ongoing communication among university stakeholders is vital to the advancement and sustainability of change efforts. It is important to authentically reflect on the university's current culture and state, especially as it relates to leadership transitions universities that can impact student success efforts. The questions below can help guide critical discussions among university leaders and possibly spark new ways of approaching institutional transformation efforts.

Q1

Where are there opportunities for stronger communication with your university? How will increased communication impact the university's ability to embrace change amid leadership transitions? Identify the key campus leaders involved in advancing support despite leadership transitions and consider joint efforts to create ongoing communication channels for increased transparency and collaboration.

Q2

What are common links within your institution's existing strategic plan and the on- and off-boarding of leadership?

Q3

What are existing feedback loops available for capturing student voice and understanding lived student experience?

Q4

How does your institution define equity and student success? Does the definition align across the institution, and is it embedded in the university culture? How can equity-focused practices ensure departments meet metrics amid leadership transitions?

Q5

What role does the chief financial officer play in decision-making practices for universities experiencing leadership transitions?

Q6

What mechanisms (e.g., townhall, surveys) allow faculty and staff to provide feedback on changes to university goals, purposes, etc. amid leadership transitions?





Resources for Practitioners

The below topics and resources can serve as a starting point for practitioners within institutions that are considering how to begin or foster institutional transformation, especially in times of leadership transition.

Leadership Transition:

Martin, J., Samels, J. E., & Samels, J. E. (2004). *Presidential transition in higher education: Managing leadership change*. JHU Press.

Change Management:

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About APLU

APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of 244 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, its 201 U.S. member campuses enroll 4.2 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate students, award 1.2 million degrees, employ 11 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$46.8 billion in university-based research.

About USU

The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) is a president-led organization committed to enhancing urban university engagement to increase prosperity and opportunity in our nation's cities and to tackling key urban challenges. The Coalition includes 41 public urban research universities representing all U.S. geographic regions across 25 states. Annually, member campuses enroll over 1 million undergraduate and graduate students. The USU agenda focuses on creating a competitive workforce, strengthening student success, building strong communities, and improving the health of a diverse population. The Coalition of Urban Universities (USU) has partnered with the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) to establish an Office of Urban Initiatives, housed at APLU, to jointly lead an urban agenda for the nation's public universities.

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban-Serving Universities have been an intermediary member of the Frontier Set since its inception in 2015. This case study, in addition to two other reports produced on institutional mergers and state performance-based funding, is a joint effort of the two organizations in fulfillment of one of the Frontier Set's goals to share best practices related to institutional transformation.

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