



LEADERSHIP TALKS

Candid Conversations with Academic Leaders

By

**Frank Fernandez, Hilary L. Coulson,
and Yali Zou**



GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

LEADERSHIP TALKS

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To those aspiring leaders, may this book serve as a guide and
inspiration on your journey to effective and transformative
leadership.*

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When we published *Transformational University Leadership: A Case Study for 21st Century Leaders and Aspirational Research Universities* with Emerald, our goal was to offer a different perspective on academic leadership than what is usually taught in higher education leadership courses. That case study was compelling. Chancellor Renu Khator and University of Houston's success was hidden in plain sight – remarkable but taken for granted. We sought to share the story of how personal and institutional histories and ambitions were so well aligned that a university was totally transformed in athletics, culture, enrollment, fundraising, and research.

After *Transformational Leadership*, we knew we had only scratched the surface in our efforts to showcase how a new generation of aspiring academic leaders could go about their work. Once again we approached Emerald and asked them to work with us to publish a follow-up book that would profile a group of leaders working at different types of colleges and universities. We are forever grateful to Kim Chadwick and Emerald for supporting this effort. We thank Sashikala Balasubramanian for helping us prepare the manuscript for submission. We also acknowledge Kirsty Woods and Lydia Cutmore who worked with us to move the book to publication and market it so diligently.

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Finally, we acknowledge the leaders who allowed us to interview them for this book. Their candor served as inspiration for the title of this book. They were forthcoming and transparent, generous and graceful. We learned so much from them. We are glad to share those lessons now with those who read this text.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, the *New York Times* Editorial Board (2024) decried an “absence of steady and principled leadership” in higher education. Just as higher education seemed to have settled into a new normal and enrollments rebounded after the global COVID-19 pandemic (Cutlip et al., 2020; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024), US colleges and universities found that they were sites for increased anti-semitism and campus protest following Hamas’ attack on Israel beginning on October 7, 2023 and Israel’s subsequent retaliation. Beginning in December 2023, the US House of Representatives summoned groups of leaders from some of the nation’s most selective and research-intensive universities to testify about how they were addressing antisemitism and campus upheaval. University presidents sought to offer carefully nuanced, legalistic testimony specific to their campus contexts. Their responses were panned by leaders of both major political parties (e.g., Saul & Hartocollis, 2023), and members of congress openly called for university presidents to resign their posts (e.g., Herszenhorn & Yuan, 2023; Quilantan, 2024).

As the current crisis passes and congressional scrutiny finds new targets, it will still be difficult to be a leader in US higher education. An annual survey of college presidents found that

while leaders were optimistic about the state of affairs at their own institutions, they perceived a bleaker outlook across the landscape of higher education (Moody, 2024). Among 380 presidents who completed the survey, more than half (206) led public colleges or universities, while the rest (174) were at private institutions. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of presidents were concerned about diminishing public trust in higher education. Almost one-fifth (18%) of presidents did not express confidence that their institution would be financially stable five years into the future. Around one-quarter of presidents at private, nonprofit institutions stated that their leadership team had at least discussed a merger or campus closure. As presidents face persistent challenges like financial constraints, enrollment management, and political scrutiny, nearly one-third of presidents said they were more likely now than in the past to discourage aspiring leaders to pursue a college or university presidency.

WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP?

When we wrote *Transformational University Leadership: A Case Study for 21st Century Leaders and Aspirational Research Universities* (2022), we set out to offer a novel portrait of an academic leader and how she facilitated University of Houston's rise from a regional public institution to a national prominence. We selected Chancellor Renu Khator and University of Houston because the university and its leadership team were more similar to a broad swathe of higher education leaders and institutions than prior portrayals of mid-20th century leaders of highly selective, elite research universities. Padilla (2005) offered wonderful insights into the lives and times of men such as Clark Kerr (University of

California), Father Theodore Hesburgh (Notre Dame), and William C. Friday (University of North Carolina). However, the mid-century era has passed. After the “pathbreaking leaders” reshaped American higher education in the 1950s and 1960s, [Kerr and Gade \(1986\)](#) argued that the era of the student revolts from the late 1960s to early 1970s was characterized by presidents who served as “scapegoats” and bore the brunt of campus unrest. Then, the latter decades of the 20th century saw campus presidencies populated by “managerial leaders” and “survivors” who weathered an era of slowing enrollment growth and declining resources.

There is now widespread recognition that we need to cultivate leadership for multiple types of colleges and universities beyond research universities – and for multiple positions of academic leadership across campuses. For instance, the American Council on Education (ACE) is committed to preparing “leaders who are adept at navigating not only problems with conventional solutions, but also the demographic, economic, and cultural transitions taking place” ([Crandall et al., 2017](#), p. vii). The [ACE Fellows Program \(2024\)](#) counts more than 2,000 participants as alumni who apply lessons from the program to take academic leadership positions around campus, including presidencies, vice presidencies, and deanships.

As the times have changed, so too has the path to academic leadership. Campus presidents are becoming more diverse. Between 2006 and 2022, the percentage of women presidents increased by nearly 10 percentage points. In 2022, nearly three in ten (28%) presidents identified as racial or ethnic minorities, including 13% who identified as women of color ([Melidona et al., 2023](#)). In *Transformational University Leadership*, Chancellor Khator and University of Houston offered a compelling glimpse into the changing presidency. Khator was the first Indian-born woman to serve as president

and chancellor of a public, comprehensive US research university. She was also the first woman to lead a public university system in the large, populous state of Texas. However, as much as *Transformational University Leadership* built upon prior profiles of presidents (e.g., Padilla, 2005) and large surveys of presidents (e.g., Kerr & Gade, 1986; Melidona et al., 2023), we still hoped to capture a richer understanding of how a diverse group of individuals provide leadership at different types of colleges and universities.

OUR APPROACH

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), John Dewey postulated that “social life” is “identical with communication” and that “all communication . . . is educative” (p. 6). Dewey proposed that communication is “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (p. 14) and that “to be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience” (p. 6). From this perspective, education is a social process that facilitates communication – the transition of knowledge gained by experience – across generations.

For this book, we took a Deweyan approach to learning new lessons about leadership.

In *Transformational University Leadership*, we used a case study approach to understand Chancellor Khator’s leadership. We reviewed the University of Houston’s history, the Chancellor’s own contemporaneous written and spoken words, and interviewed members of her cabinet. Compared to a case study approach, our new approach came with a series of tradeoffs. We sacrificed familiarizing ourselves with institutional histories and contexts. However, we (and the reader)

gained by collecting, editing, and reproducing direct communication with college and university presidents.

For new professionals and aspiring leaders, this book offers a chance to learn from the experience of a diverse group of leaders at different types of institutions around the country. Over a century ago, Dewey claimed that “as societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need for formal or intentional teaching and learning increases” (p. 11). Learning about another’s experience through communication is imperfect. Yet, when “one shares in what another has thought and felt” the learner “meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified” (p. 6). Communication is not a total substitute for experience, but it may help flatten the learning curve. If new professionals had six lifetimes to live and six careers to devote to higher education, they might not need this book. We hope that the conversations in this book will help early career professionals learn basic lessons – and avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls – that many encounter on the path to senior academic leadership.

SUMMARY AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book profiles a half dozen current and former academic leaders from different backgrounds who worked at a range of institutions. We were fortunate to talk with three men and three women of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. They worked at a mix of public and private institutions that ranged from two-year, open access institutions to selective four-year universities. They worked in six states across the US. Despite the challenging climate for higher education leadership, each of these leaders expresses enthusiasm, passion, and optimism. They recognize the struggles of working in a resource-constrained

environment when potential students, their parents, and policymakers all question the cost and value of higher education.

Each chapter begins with a short preamble that introduces the leader and her or his institution. We explain the niche the institution inhabits in the larger landscape of US higher education. Then, we provide a short description of the institution, such as its mission and the community it serves. Finally, we introduce the leader before we reproduce our conversation.

We lightly edited the interview transcripts for length and clarity. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews took place over Zoom. We were extremely fortunate and grateful that (with Institutional Review Board approval) the leaders were willing to forego pseudonyms for themselves and their institutions. In the chapters that follow, readers can learn more about leaders and campuses across the country. Then, if they so choose, readers may continue to follow their progress as they navigate new institutional and societal challenges.

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