



TRANSFORMATIONAL UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

A Case Study for 21st Century Leaders and
Aspirational Research Universities

Hilary L. Coulson, Yali Zou
and Frank Fernandez

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TRANSFORMATIONAL UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For the University of Houston on the eve of its centennial
anniversary.*

HLC, YZ, FF

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The pandemic affirmed our personal beliefs and then our empirical findings on the importance of good leadership in higher education. Although the University of Houston experienced its own challenges adapting to the multiple challenges that arose starting in spring 2020, we witnessed as Renu Khator's leadership team made tough – but prudent – decisions, which other universities often emulated. Ultimately, the exigencies of the pandemic made it impossible to interview Dr. Khator for the book, but we are grateful to her nonetheless. Her example of leadership during a prolonged crisis added a new and unanticipated dimension to this book.

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INTRODUCTION

University of Houston exemplifies the American tradition of higher education. In less than a century, University of Houston went from its founding as a community college to being recognized as a major research university. The story of University of Houston fits a broader pattern of US colleges and universities, but what makes it unique is the leadership that facilitated the university's rise to global prominence.

For decades, former college and university presidents – as well as scholars of academic leadership – have lamented that the academic presidency has become weaker in the US. When they bemoan the weakening of the academic presidency, they variously blame increasingly difficult challenges caused by internal and external factors. As much as authors fret about the powerlessness of the presidency, the fact remains that the model of the twenty-first century American research university is emulated around the world.

David Labaree describes the rise of American colleges to global prominence as “a perfect mess” (Labaree, 2017). By that, Labaree means a largely unregulated and, often, under-funded group of colleges and universities rose from humble

beginnings to become the standard by which other higher education systems would be measured. The rise of higher education in the US was not centrally planned nor was it widely expected. Through entrepreneurial leadership and a good deal of opportunism, US colleges independently secured positions as global leaders during the mid-twentieth century – an era of unprecedented state and federal financial support for higher education and during mass economic and demographic expansion. The American university model (previously, referred to as the *multiversity*) became a global standard (Kerr, 2001). The multiversity not only stood for higher learning, it also served utilitarian purposes. The mid-twentieth century universities trained workers for jobs, promoted scientific and economic development, and increasingly offered broadened access to higher education (Drori, 2000; Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003; Fernandez & Powell, 2022). The model of the American multiversity diffused throughout the globe as evidenced by the proliferation of universities around the world seeking accreditation from US organizations (Barrett, Fernandez, & Gonzalez, 2020; Blanco-Ramirez, 2015; Cheng, 2015).

Compared to the mid-twentieth century, universities in the twenty-first century are operating with relatively scarce public funding and increasing competition for enrollment. At the same time that the context for leadership in higher education have changed, the standards for success – and the perils of failure – have increased. Among globally prominent research universities, zero-sum competition increases whereby a university can only ascend in global rankings by displacing other universities (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). Conversely, at the less prestigious end of the higher education system, nearly 600 public and private US colleges closed between the 2017–2018 and 2020–2021 academic years (Lederman, 2021).

So what about the contemporary university that aspires to achieve prominence in an increasingly competitive field? As we previously argued, the goalposts continue to move. It is not enough to aspire to the mid-century multiversity model. Instead, there is an “emerging global model” of the twenty-first century “super research university” (Baker, 2014; Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008). In the twenty-first century, internationally prominent universities produce ever-increasing amounts of research, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. They seek to monetize intellectual property by securing patents and supporting technology transfer from the academic to private sectors. They recruit international faculty. Their leaders spend much of their time fundraising and diversifying revenue streams to achieve and maintain prestige.

The US colleges that rose to prominence during the mid-twentieth century were typically led by White men, and the stories of those universities and their leaders have been written and studied in higher education administration and leadership classes for decades (Padilla, 2005). Often, in-depth case studies of academic leadership and how universities attain global prominence focus on private universities in the Cold War period, such as Stanford (Gillmor, 2004; Lowen, 1997). In this study of twenty-first century leadership, we argue that aspiring leaders may learn as much, if not more, by examining an atypical rise to research prominence from a leader who does not fit the typical mold of white, middle- or upper-class male. By studying University of Houston as an example of twenty-first century leadership, those seeking to enhance their status on the increasingly competitive college market may see the benefits of diverse leadership and the approach of a leader who stems from another background.

Specifically, we focus on University of Houston under the leadership of Renu Khator, an immigrant from India and one

of the only women in the country to hold the prestigious title of President of a major public research university and Chancellor of a public university system. Only two years after arriving at University of Houston, Khator led the institution to achieve the country's highest classification for research activity. On top of the typical challenges facing higher education in the twenty-first century, Khator assumed the university presidency in January 2008, around the beginning of a major global economic recession, and she continues to lead the university as of this writing. In an age when the average college presidency lasts only about 6.5 years (Seltzer, 2017), Khator's 14-year presidency is remarkable.

SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book presents a case study of university leadership in the twenty-first century by focusing on Khator's leadership at the University of Houston and its increasing research reputation both in the United States and around the globe. We used a case study approach to consider four overarching questions about academic leadership: (1) *How can a leader put a team together to facilitate transformational leadership?* (2) *What does transformational leadership look like in the twenty-first century?* (3) *How can transformational leadership be used to achieve the goals of the super research university?* (4) *What does transformational leadership look like in times of crisis?* Although our case study is bounded by its focus on a university that continues to aspire to achieve new levels of research production and higher rankings, we argue that our findings about Khator's leadership offer important, transferrable lessons to leaders and aspiring leaders in any type of college or university context.

In the next chapter, *From Humble Beginnings*, we introduce both the institution and the leader. We discuss how for most colleges and universities, University of Houston is a more relatable case than private universities like Stanford, Notre Dame, Princeton University, or University of Chicago, as well as public universities like University of California that achieved national prominence more than a century ago (Gillmor, 2004; Lowen, 1997; Padilla, 2005). We also provide a portrait of Khator who was the first president of a comprehensive US research university to have been born in India and the first woman to lead a higher education system in the US state of Texas. Then, in *Leadership Theories and Case Study Approach*, we briefly review prior literature on the academic presidency and discuss our approach to collecting and analyzing data for this book.

We organize the remaining chapters, thematically, to draw transferrable lessons and anecdotes for aspiring college and university leaders. *Organizational Architecture: Building a Leadership Team* discusses Khator's approach to recruiting and hiring, as well as setting goals for her senior administrators. *Creating a New Campus Culture* focuses on Khator's calling to create a new culture that permeates different groups on campus (e.g., students, staff, and faculty), and the methods, large and small, that Khator herself uses to build, mobilize, and sustain a university community. *Revitalizing Research* discusses how, under Khator's leadership, University of Houston achieved state and national recognition for its research profile. We discuss Khator's specific initiatives, such as "50-in-5" and "Building a Top 50 Public University." *Beyond the Billion* tells the story of how, contrary to advice from professional consultants, Khator wielded the university's fundraising apparatus to lead the "Here, We Go" campaign to raise \$1 billion. The campaign was so successful, that it was extended and rebranded as the into a "Beyond the Billion"

initiative to raise scholarship money and fund endowed professorships. *Leading during Crisis* details how Khator has developed and displayed resilience through multiple natural disasters and the global pandemic that have affected University of Houston under her leadership. In the *Conclusion*, we revisit the various strategies Khator took to build a leadership team, change an institutional culture, and fundamentally transform University of Houston from a regional, comprehensive university to a nationally and internationally prominent research university.

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