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## Redefining Transformative Change in Higher Education

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This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education* is devoted to—*The Power of Higher Education to Transform Lives, Communities, and the World*—the theme for the investiture of Dr. Jeffrey S. Vitter as the 17<sup>th</sup> Chancellor of the University of Mississippi. With a core focus on transformational education and leadership, this issue seeks to inspire members of the campus community to improve the socioeconomic trajectories, health, and well-being for all who are serviced by and seek knowledge within institutions of higher learning. Building upon the institutional challenges and opportunities identified by Chancellor Vitter on November 16, 2016, this edition demonstrates how those who listened to him made sense of his charge for higher education generally, and the University of Mississippi, specifically. In the global era that has come to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such a charge for personal reflection, professional accountability, and institutional action is transformational in and of itself—which is why this special issue is so very timely and important.

This issue is comprised of seven, original essays which examine the authors' experiences and understandings of the transformational aspects of higher education. On an individual level, the essays invite readers to explore teaching, research, and service in different fields of study—Business; Education; Engineering; Health, Exercise Science, and Recreation Management; Integrated Marketing and Communications; Journalism; and Social Work. As a collective, the essays provide analytical lenses for approaches to change through higher education—suggesting strategies that will serve and promote the greater good by expanding opportunities for educational access and success.

The lead essay is written by Chancellor Jeffrey S. Vitter and contains excerpts from his investiture address. Chancellor Vitter's essay serves as the nexus for contemplating the issue's focus—in his words, “building vibrant lives and communities through higher education.” Vitter recounts examples of signature activities and accomplishments of the University of Mississippi to demonstrate how the University and the Medical Center enliven the academic mission and even more importantly, respond to the considerable social responsibilities for the state, region, nation, and now, the world as a Carnegie R-1 university. To exemplify how higher education changes lives, the Chancellor tells the story of an alumnus, the late Marion McManus, who used poverty as a formative experience to motivate himself to complete his degree and succeed in business. In addition, Vitter previews new activities intended to tap into the power of interdisciplinary research and creative collaborations among scholars and various partners, to promote economic and community development, to expand engagement and outreach, and to serve others.

Building upon the ideals and examples set forth in Chancellor Vitter's essay, the remaining essays offer nuanced perspectives on transformational thinking and change-making in society through higher education. References to higher education within each essay are broadly defined and fully encompassing of the entire educational spectrum and / or continuum (i.e., secondary, postsecondary, and higher and continuing education). There is great intentionality in referencing *higher education* in this way because it conveys a greater sense of purpose, gives a broader lens for assessing the lasting value of the entire educational enterprise, and reminds all stakeholders of the continuous and holistic gains of education (in general) via the perennial and life-long pursuit of knowledge.

The second essay is written by Jonathan Blake Bostick, who serves as an Admissions Counselor at the University of Mississippi's DeSoto campus. His essay makes the case for understanding education as a basic and necessary civil right; arguably, a human right that enables and sustains life. Bostick briefly

reminds readers of the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that ostensibly ended legal segregation only to usher in a de facto era of segregation also with devastating implications. Mr. Bostick's essay explores (with great facility) the transformation and change that can be advanced via careful and focused attention to public policies and laws meant to eradicate educational disparities and discrimination, thereby upholding the civil rights and liberties of all to a high-quality education.

As a compliment to Mr. Bostick's essay, the third essay focuses intently on transformational thinking and ways of learning within the college classroom. Written by Dr. Amy K. Fisher, Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Mississippi, the essay offers critical linkages to Mr. Bostick's essay and the special issue's overall theme thought its emphasis on developing cognitive complexity in students, particularly graduate students, and the useful role of cognitive complexity in advancing the quality of learning for all. Dr. Fisher posits that cognitive complexity – as an educational imperative enables students to better engage and navigate multifaceted challenges, opportunities, and events within their personal and professional lives. Immediate and obvious outcomes include enhanced critical thinking and analytic ability, greater cultural competency and display of empathy, a heightened sense of discernment and global awareness, more complex funds of knowledge related to social agency and change, and more nuanced conceptualizations of reality. Each outcome is considered transformational because each promotes more socially responsible, thoughtful, and holistic decision-making and acting among students. The end goal is to foster, within graduates, a critical awareness and mindfulness of their actions along with their ability to serve as agents of positive and lasting, social change.

The fourth and fifth essays focus intentionally on differentiated strategies of leadership and instruction, along the continuum, which the authors believe lead to transformational change and increased equity in higher education. The fourth essay is authored by Dr. Denver J. Fowler, Assistant Professor of

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at California State University-Sacramento, and offers a personal analysis and reflection on the role of higher education in transforming the lives of individuals from historically underrepresented and/or socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. In sharing his account as a low-income, first-generation collegian, Dr. Fowler offers a candid discussion of the many obstacles students can and often do encounter when attempting to expand their horizons through higher education pursuits. Within his essay, Dr. Fowler uses the identified obstacles to help frame a broader discussion of the need as well as the opportunities for more transformational and equity-based leadership within institutions of higher learning. He offers differentiated leadership as an effective change strategy to help transform the educational experiences of all students and to ensure equitability regarding student access and success.

The fifth essay is authored by Dr. Brenda Hutton-Prager, Assistant Professor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Mississippi, and details the importance of instructional innovation and differentiated teaching and learning within the college classroom. Dr. Hutton-Prager uses the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classroom as an analytic lens for examining ways to improve the quality of higher education via personalized or differentiated learning – which seemingly allows for more expansive and intentional thinking about broadening the pathways of educational participation and advancement for all students. In her essay, Dr. Hutton-Prager challenges readers to employ multi-disciplinary and student-centered, active learning approaches to improve learning in STEM and broaden access and participation in higher education (across disciplines).

The final essays within this special edition offer more varied perspectives of transformational education and leadership—perspectives which encourage readers to contemplate the roles of discursive and institutional leadership in promoting

transformative, change strategies in higher education and society at large. Dr. Milorad M. Novicevic, Associate Professor of Management at the University of Mississippi, examines retrospectively the recorded catalog of official statements (both written and oral) and social media posts of Chancellor Vitter, asserting that he is a higher education leader whose communication style and leadership abilities, especially when advancing organizational and institutional change strategies, are congruent with the core principles of discursive leadership as advanced by Fairhurst (2007). Dr. Novicevic aptly defines the conceptual framework of discursive leadership within his essay to make sense of and give meaning to the Chancellor's communications. As a whole, the identified practices are deemed exemplary by Novicevic—from a higher education stance—because they promote sustained, constituent engagement and collaboration during organizational change-making processes.

As a follow-up to Dr. Novicevic's essay, Drs. Alicia C. Stapp (Assistant Professor of Health and Physical Education), Melinda W. Valliant (Associate Professor of Nutrition), M. Allison Ford (Associate Professor of Health Promotion), and Kristen A. Swain (Associate Professor of Journalism) provide a concluding essay on the types of synergistic interaction and collaborative teaching, research, and service endeavors that can be advanced institutionally to promote the general health and well-being of Mississippi's citizens. Their essay examines unique programs, practices, and opportunities made available at the University of Mississippi to show how the institution can channel its diverse resources (both human and monetary) to help eradicate health disparities.

This body of essays have been selected because of their attentiveness to and appreciation for the subtleties of transformation made possible through higher education. We are confident that this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education* demonstrates the overarching need for imaginative thinking, innovative approaches,

and inspired leadership that will make higher education institutions more vital and lives and communities more vibrant. Just as the investiture of the University of Mississippi's 17<sup>th</sup> Chancellor summons both symbol and substance, this special issue seeks to do the same and to remind us all of the greater and longer-lasting purpose of higher education—to be a beacon of hope that lights the way toward greater prosperity, equality, and enlightenment for all.

publications reflect these interests and have appeared in the *International Journal, Higher Education Teaching and Learning; Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research; Today's College Students: A Reader*, and *Expanding the Donor Base in Higher Education*. **Dr. Wells Dolan** can be reached at [aewells@olemiss.edu](mailto:aewells@olemiss.edu).

### References

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**Dr. Phillis George** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Higher Education within the School of Education at The University of Mississippi. Her research concerns issues related to democratic engagement and social responsiveness among colleges and universities along with the promotion of social justice, equity, and ethics in college teaching and learning and higher education administration. She also conducts focused research on civic engagement and academic service-learning. Dr. George earned a doctorate in Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis (with an emphasis in Higher Education) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's degree in Sociology from Oxford University (United Kingdom). **Dr. George** can be reached at [plgeorge@olemiss.edu](mailto:plgeorge@olemiss.edu).

**Dr. Amy Wells Dolan** is the Associate Dean of the School of Education and Associate Professor in Higher Education. Her background includes Student Affairs administration and fundraising and her research focuses on the history of higher education in the South. She is deeply involved with the development and implementation of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) doctoral program with an emphasis in Higher Education as well as the larger CPED initiative in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi. Her recent