

# LEARNING AGILITY AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Date 19 May 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in  
Teachers College, Columbia University

2021

## ABSTRACT

### LEARNING AGILITY AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Learning Agility (LA) is catapulting our understanding of the relationship between the measurement of LA and leadership success, a critical component for succeeding in a volatile, uncertain, complex (VUCA) environment. While the business sector has benefited from the research and practice around LA, this exploratory study takes an initial look at the applicability of LA to higher education leadership through in-depth interviews with eleven college presidents, coupled with the results of the Burke Learning Assessment Inventory (BLAI). Administered to the presidents and their senior teams, the BLAI was created by W. Warner Burke to measure nine dimensions that demonstrate specific behaviors related to LA. Overall, both the interviews with the presidents and BLAI scores evidenced strong LA views and behaviors. A close examination of the senior team roles and the need for LA revealed strengths and alignment with key dimensions of the BLAI, while noticeable gaps surfaced between the presidents' views and BLAI self-ratings, illuminating opportunities for growth and further research. A strong relationship was revealed between presidents' BLAI scores and those she deemed higher performers across the critical dimensions, providing a snapshot of the LA behaviors of successful higher education leaders. All presidents acknowledged a relationship between LA and higher education leadership success, with 64% stating that there was a strong relationship, and the remaining 36% stating that there was a relationship, but to varying degrees, identifying some of the key dimensions as less applicable to higher education.

While the overall LA framework was embraced and substantiated, a theme that surfaced and was then supported by the BLAI dimension scores was a schism between being learning agile within an environment that was described as “steeped in tradition” and one with “inherent structural impediments to change.” Given that presidents consistently ranked highest in all BLAI dimensions coupled with the state of the sector and the urgency to evolve and keep pace accordingly, presidents can take the lead in being explicit about LA behaviors, reward and incentivize those behaviors, and claim LA as an institutional priority. Furthermore, the LA literature is expanded by the inclusion of research on this sector.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Jeff Dale Barker. There are many ways to love and support, and to guide and challenge, but there is only one way I can imagine it with such perfection and joy, and this process of researching and writing a dissertation illuminated my great fortune to have Jeff by my side.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any major activity, you never go it alone. This study afforded me the opportunity to interact with many great minds, some of whom were new to me, while others were steadfast friends and colleagues

First, to those college presidents who gave me their time, their insights, and their frank opinions about the sector, the roles on their leadership teams, and their views about Learning Agility and its role in their own leadership practices.

Thank you to Warner Burke, my dissertation sponsor. You are a giant in the field, and the opportunity to test the waters in a new sector with your work was a remarkable gift. Having the opportunity to ponder, discuss, and react in real time was an unforgettable experience.

Professor Debra Noumair, your training as a counseling psychologist and as leader in change management, your patience, care and knowledge guided me throughout. I am incredibly grateful, honored, and blessed to have been mentored by your brilliance and savvy.

To my wonderful friend and colleague, Scott Rubin, thank you for being by my side throughout and for your unflappable approach which always steadies the ship while mitigating any of those moments of uncertainty and doubt.

Thank you to my boys, Timothy and Michael: You rooted for me all the way to the finish line! Lastly, to my parents, Kathy and Arthur Murphy for your unwavering support and encouragement, and a special recognition to my sister, Kathy, who would ask me ever so gently, “So how is that is paper coming along?” to which I can now say, “It’s done.”

Thank you!

S. M. M.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I—INTRODUCTION .....	1
Higher Education Overview .....	1
The Business Model of Higher Education .....	3
Rising Costs .....	4
Impact of Debt .....	5
Impediments to Innovation in Higher Education.....	6
Public Trust.....	7
Students in Charge .....	8
Loss of Global Prestige.....	9
Era of Deregulation.....	10
Student Success Upfront.....	10
The Challenges for Leadership .....	11
Higher Education Leadership—The Chief Navigators: The President and Her Senior Team.....	12
Chief Academic Officer.....	13
Chief Financial Officer .....	14
Chief Advancement Officer.....	15
Chief of Staff.....	16
Chief Enrollment Management Officer .....	16
Chief Student Affairs Officer.....	17
Chief Diversity Officer .....	18
General Counsel.....	19
Higher Education Leadership and Change .....	20
Chapter II—LITERATURE REVIEW .....	22
Learning Agility.....	22
Learning Agility: Its Origins and Framework .....	24
Defining Learning Agility Today .....	30
A New Measure: The Burke Learning Agility Inventory.....	33
The Current Study.....	35
Chapter III—METHODOLOGY .....	37
Context.....	37
Participants.....	38
Presidents’ Demographics .....	39
The Roles and Makeup of the Senior Staff.....	40
Design .....	43
Measures .....	43
Interview Protocol.....	44
Procedure .....	45
Data Analysis .....	46
Content Analysis.....	46

Quantitative Analysis.....	47
Addressing Reliability and Credibility .....	48
Chapter IV—FINDINGS .....	50
Summary of Findings.....	51
Interview Quotes: Finding #1, Most Salient Issues in Higher Education.....	55
1.1A Changing Demographics.....	55
1.1B Business Model .....	56
1.2 Impediments to Innovation .....	58
1.3 Student Issues.....	60
1.4 Federal and State Mandates .....	60
1.5 Online Learning .....	61
1.6 Value of a College Degree.....	62
Interview Quotes: Finding #2, How College Presidents Learn and Keep up with Salient Issues in Higher Education .....	64
2.1 Senior Team .....	64
2.2 Networking .....	65
2.3 Publications and Periodicals .....	66
2.4 Students.....	67
2.5 Conferences.....	67
2.6 Consultants.....	68
2.7 Faculty.....	69
Interview Quotes: Finding #3, What Do College Presidents Look for When Hiring a Senior Staff Member? .....	70
3.1 Relevant Experience .....	70
3.2 BLAI Dimensions .....	71
3.3 Other Skills .....	71
Interview Quotes: Finding #4, The High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents.....	73
4.1 Academic Affairs/Provost.....	73
4.2 Enrollment.....	74
4.3 Student Affairs .....	76
4.4A President.....	77
4.4B Strategic Initiatives/Innovations.....	77
4.5 Vice President for Finance and Administration.....	78
Finding #4, High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents: Quantitative Analysis of Learning Agility in Roles .....	79
Interview Quotes: Finding #5, Which Roles Identified by College Presidents Have Exceeded Expectations?.....	85
Provost .....	85
President.....	86
Chief Enrollment Officer .....	87
Vice President for Strategic Initiatives/Innovation.....	88
Vice President for Finance and Administration.....	88
Chief of Student Affairs.....	89
Chief Advancement Officer.....	89



Chief of Staff.....	89
Chief Diversity Officer .....	89
Vice President for Communications and Marketing.....	90
Vice President for Strategic Partnerships .....	90
Interview Quotes: Finding #6, Presidents’ Views on the Relationship Between Higher Education Leadership Success and Learning Agility .....	93
6.1 Direct Relationship .....	93
6.2 Relationship, but to Varying Degrees.....	96
 Chapter V—DISCUSSION .....	99
Finding #1 .....	100
Finding #2 .....	108
Finding #3 .....	111
Finding #4 .....	116
Chief Academic Affairs Officer/Provost .....	117
Chief Enrollment Officer .....	121
Chief Student Affairs Officer.....	126
President.....	129
Finding #5 .....	130
Finding #6 .....	133
 Chapter VI—IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH .....	136
Limitations .....	136
Implications.....	138
The President’s Views on Her Senior Team Highlighted Some Key Considerations Around Structure, Roles, and Responsibilities .....	140
Learning Agility in Higher Education Leadership: Considerations for the Field.....	142
Implications Around Learning Agility and Senior Leadership in Higher Education .....	142
The General State of Higher Education Was Filtered Through the Eyes of Eleven College Presidents, and as such, the Following Implications Are Put Forth for Consideration.....	146
Summary of Implications for Practice and Future Research .....	147
Conclusion .....	148
 REFERENCES .....	150

APPENDICES

Appendix A—Interview Protocol for College Presidents .....155  
Appendix B—President’s Letter .....156  
Appendix C—Demographics Questionnaire .....158  
Appendix D—Learning Agility Dimensions and Definitions.....160  
Appendix E—Core Senior Team BLAI Score and Rankings .....161

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Demographic Characteristics of the Presidents .....	39
2	Institutions by Senior Staff Chief Roles .....	42
3	Participant Response Rate, by Senior Staff Role.....	43
4	Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Participants’ Variables, Overall BLAI Percentile Scores and Dimensions Percentile Scores.....	52
5	Outline of Finding #1, The Most Salient Issues in Higher Education.....	54
6	Outline of Finding #2, How College Presidents Learn and Keep up with Salient Issues in Higher Education .....	63
7	Outline of Finding #3, What Do College Presidents Look for When Hiring a Senior Staff Member?.....	70
8	Outline of Finding #4, The High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents.....	72
9	Results of Test of Logistic Regression Showing High Impact Roles.....	80
10	Means and Standard Deviations of BLAI and Dimension Percentile Scores, by Performance and Impact.....	82
11	Means and Standard Deviations for Overall BLAI and Dimensions Scores, by Job Role.....	84
12	Outline of Finding #5, Presidents’ Views on Top Performers.....	85
13	Results of Test of Logistic Regression Showing Employee Performance .....	91
14	Outline of Finding #6, Presidents’ Views on the Relationship Between Higher Education Leadership Success and Learning Agility .....	93

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	The Learning Agility Conceptual Framework.....	29
2	Conceptual Framework of Learning Agility.....	31
3	DeRue et al.'s Learning Agility Model.....	33

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Learning Agility research and Warner Burke's accompanying instrument, the Burke Learning Agility Instrument (BLAI), have enlightened the field of organizational leadership and created a new body of research that has advanced the understanding and measurement of Learning Agility and its role in leadership. A deeper understanding of Learning Agility is of particular importance in our multi-faceted, interrelated, global world. The rapidity of change is often cited as the leading challenge faced by CEOs and business leaders. All aspects of running a business—including strategic planning, hiring, and organizational structures—are affected by this variable. Leading, managing, and navigating in these times of rapid change requires leaders who are learning agile—meaning leaders who are flexible, adaptable, and highly attuned to the external environment. Indeed, these qualities have become key attributes to look for when recruiting and retaining talent. In recent studies, Burke (2016) and other researchers demonstrate a significant correlation between Learning Agility and leadership success. The leadership and Learning Agility paradigm cannot be underestimated in its applicability to business and industry today.

However, to date, we do not have an understanding of the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education in general, and even more specifically to higher education leadership. Given that the higher education landscape is also undergoing a significant

period of upheaval and change, one might surmise that Learning Agility is just as important in higher education leadership as it is in business.

In order to explore Learning Agility in relation to higher education leadership, this exploratory study focused on interviews with college presidents. Findings from these interviews include the college presidents sharing their overall views on the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education leadership as well as their assessment of whether some senior leadership roles require higher Learning Agility more than others. This initial study also explored the relationship between higher performers as identified by their respective college presidents and higher Learning Agility scores. It is important to note that data collection occurred prior to the global pandemic; thus, the data do not reflect the vast impact COVID-19 has had on all institutions.

### **Higher Education Overview**

As noted by Marsick and Watkins (2003), an individual's capacity for ongoing learning and development is an expectation in the workforce today because organizations and the contexts in which they operate are rapidly changing. This has become apparent beyond the business sector and is in fact evident in higher education across all institutions and classifications. In a whitepaper, *The Future of Higher Education*, Mrig and Sanaghan (2018) describe the state of play as follows: "In every boardroom, cabinet meeting, professional conference, news outlet, and whitepaper, the most talked about theme in higher education is the avalanche of impending changes confronting our institutions." They go on to say that even the brightest and most capable leaders will be challenged by these issues for years to come.

In the journal article, "Developing Leadership in Higher Education: Perspectives From the USA, the UK and Australia," Kay Hemsall (2014) notes that her research was prompted by a concern that leadership in higher education was not displaying the

capability or readiness to react to the challenges presented today. Hemsall expands on this idea by stating that “the types of challenges individuals and organizations face in this era require the capacity to adapt and respond to continual fluctuations and change,” citing the Joiner and Josephs (2007) term of the “agility imperative.”

### **The Business Model of Higher Education**

Mrig and Sanaghan (2018) draw upon the work of Seltzer, Finney, Cavanaugh, and Kaufman Hall to demonstrate that the business model for higher education has been called into question by economists, the public, legislators, and most importantly by presidents at public and private institutions:

Nearly all presidents believe that additional colleges will merge or close this year, with 30% predicting that between 1-5 colleges will close, 40% predicting between 6-10 will close, and 29% predicting that more than 10 will close ... [and] thirteen percent of presidents say they could see their own college closing or merging in the next five years. That is higher than the 9% of chief business officers who answered that question in an *Inside Higher Ed* survey last summer. (p. 4)

More and more, institutions are faced with a diminishing pool of traditional-age students and rising tuitions, while also offering deep discounts to maintain enrollments. These factors put pressure on a growing, unsustainable business model. Net tuition revenue can no longer cover the cost of educating students; therefore, institutions need to rely on subsidies from a variety of sources, including philanthropic support. An alternative for some is a reliance on the endowment as a way to sustain the business model, but the reality is that hundreds of institutions have endowments below \$100 million, leaving them particularly vulnerable (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2018). Public institutions are experiencing their own challenges, with state financial support on the decline, and some states imposing limitations on tuition increases (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2018).

What is clear is that these pressures remain a constant area of concern for college presidents, as indicated by the same recent survey by *Inside Higher Ed*. The survey finds that:

Most presidents, 69 percent, strongly agree or agree their college needs to make fundamental changes to its business model, programming or other operations. Presidents at public and private, two-year and four-year colleges are about equally likely to express this view. (Jaschik, 2020, p. 7)

### **Rising Costs**

Additionally, headlines in major media outlets, such as *The Atlantic's* September 2018 article, “Why is College So Expensive in America?” point to growing public concern about the links between cost and student indebtedness (Ripley, 2018). According to the author, the United States spends “about \$30,000 per student a year—nearly twice as much as the average developed country,” but as noted, pundits, politicians, and a clamoring sector of the American public are asking if it is really worth the investment.

Related to those costs, other major disruptors to higher education include the impact technology has had on distance and competency-based learning, and the development and implementation of personalized education that 25 years ago would have been science fiction.

Higher education is a rapidly evolving, dynamic landscape.... In 1997, the internet was in its infancy ... [and] distance education was only beginning to transition from analog to digital delivery.../ And a mere 3.67 per 100 people subscribed to mobile phone service. Today, we live in a much different world, with over 3.49 billion internet users and half of all web traffic generated by mobile devices. And colleges and universities around the world are turning to digital learning as a way to expand educational access and improve quality—almost 80 percent of students recently surveyed by Global Shapers reported having taken an online course. (Blackboard, 2017, p. 2)



Such technological demands require more of institutions than just infrastructure and technical expertise, as highlighted by Dr. Susan Aldridge, president of Drexel University Online:

What's more, next-generation digital learning environments must bridge the divide between the faculty-directed instructivist model our colleges and universities have always favored and the learner-centric constructivist paradigm their students have come to expect and the economy now demands. (Blackboard, 2017, p. 11)

And it is not enough simply to participate in the accelerating technology race among peer institutions. Senior leadership is expected to understand how to engage with the online market within the framework of five- or ten-year plans that cannot adapt to the rapid changes and advances in the technology (Blackboard, 2017). As a result, there will be even more differentiation between second- and third-tier institutions and those that are able to provide personalized, mobile-friendly, compartmentalized, and asynchronous educational offerings (Blackboard, 2017).

In recognition of these accelerating costs as they relate to operations, “three in 10 presidents say their campus’s leaders have had serious discussions about consolidating operations or programs with another college” (Jaschik, 2020, p. 7).

### **Impact of Debt**

A natural side effect of rising tuition costs is the increasing indebtedness of today’s students. In an article in *Forbes*, Zack Friedman (2018) describes this latest crisis with hard statistics: “Today, student loan debt is now the second highest debt category—it’s higher than both credit cards and auto loans, and behind mortgage debt.” Ann-Marie Slaughter (2017), in “The Broken Promise of Higher Education,” points out another key factor tied closely to the level of indebtedness of students:

America has a college-completion crisis. Among traditionally aged bachelor’s degree students, the U.S. Department of Education reports that

only 59 percent graduate within six years, nevermind four. For students in two-year institutions, completion rates are even lower. Put those numbers together and a majority of American students who enter college do not complete their degrees in the time allotted, or indeed ever.

Failure to complete college has multiple impacts for both the institution and the student. The lost opportunity cost is borne by both, as clearly illuminated by Judith Scott-Clayton (2018) in a Brookings Institution report, positing that the loan default rate for borrowers who do not complete their degree is 40% versus only 8% for those with a bachelor's degree.

### **Impediments to Innovation in Higher Education**

Change and innovation within higher education are notoriously slow, as the “sector has been insulated from the need for rapid innovation, because higher education has long been the sole grantor of the credentials that mattered” (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2018). But Fortune 500 companies are now seeking partnerships with groups like Udacity to provide nanodegrees in newly created fields that are not yet available in university curricula, and alternative credentialing continues to be an alternative. This is emphasized in Holland and Kazi's (2018) research, which indicates the importance and relevance of students seeking their own specialization for both career advancement and lifelong learning. Students now have multiple options and alternative pathways to credentials in the emerging and rapidly changing market. This is a major disruptor to degree-granting institutions, as noted in a report by Berry Driessen (2017).

Furthermore, as seen in the *2020 Survey of College and University Presidents* (Jaschik, 2020), presidents, trustees, and senior administrators understand the challenges their institutions are faced with and recognize the need to change and adapt; however, “in fact, twice as many presidents disagree as agree that faculty members understand their institutions' challenges, and the need to make changes to address them” (p. 14).

This is further underscored by a follow-up question in the survey:

More presidents (54 percent) think their college has the right mindset to adapt to needed change than think it has the right tools and processes to do so (45 percent). Presidents at four-year public colleges are less likely than those at other types of colleges to think their college has the right mindset, as well as tools and processes, to effect change. (Jaschik, 2020, p. 14)

### **Public Trust**

Public opinion about the value of a college education has shifted, and recent reports from both independent and partisan sources indicate that the public's trust in colleges and universities has declined. As described in AGB's (2018) *Guardians of Public Confidence* in a 2017 Gallup survey, the issues cited most frequently for the lack of confidence include:

- Too expensive;
- Too liberal/political;
- Not allowing students to think for themselves/pushing their own agenda; and
- Students not properly educated; teach wrong stuff; not relevant.

While public trust in higher education is increasingly viewed through a partisan lens, overall public confidence is threatened by continuing concerns about cost and access (AGB, 2018).

In the *2020 Survey of College and University Presidents*, presidents were asked about the American public's understanding of the purpose of higher education, "with 50 percent disagreeing and 11 percent agreeing that most Americans understand its purpose" (Jaschik, 2020, p. 8). Furthermore, "Fifty-eight percent of presidents believe that concerns about college affordability and student debt are 'very responsible' for declining public support for higher education" (p. 8).

Presidents note that it is not only a misconception about the purpose of higher education, but also a general misunderstanding by Americans of what exactly is occurring in the sector. For instance, 85% of presidents believe that the focus on student indebtedness has led to a widespread perception that college is not affordable. The

confusion around tuition sticker pricing and tuition discounting further complicates the public's understanding of college affordability (Jaschik, 2020).

Another key source for examining the volatility of the sector is the March 2018 report from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that identified ten trends having the most impact on college campuses throughout the United States. A respected source for higher education news, the *Chronicle* describes the landscape as follows:

At a time when colleges, like much of the nation, are experiencing deep political and social upheaval, it's easy to become distracted—and reactive. But instead of putting innovation on hold, some college leaders are seizing the opportunity to respond to pressing problems in imaginative ways—making a stronger case for the value of a degree, removing obstacles to graduation, helping improve job prospects for doctoral candidates, and more.

Areas that receive specific attention and that are of particular relevance to the research study include: Students in Charge; Loss of Global Prestige; Era of Deregulation; and Student Success Upfront. These trends represent a cross-section of challenges that need to be addressed now as well as for the long term and will require the input and coordination of the institution's president and her leadership team to develop appropriate policies and strategic plans to navigate them effectively and successfully.

### **Students in Charge**

Many members of this generation of college students are outspoken activists who can influence and even dictate their demands to trustees, administrators, and faculty (Biemiller, 2018), thus shifting the balance of power and decision-making on campuses away from the traditional hubs. As a result, colleges and universities have had to upgrade their amenities, revisit or institute policies about hate speech in and out of the classroom, and/or create safe spaces for women, students of color, and LGBT students. Examples of student activism span prior generations as well, from the Civil Rights era through the Vietnam War, but in an era of the #metoo and Black Lives Matters movements, there is a heightened sense of publicity, accountability, and immediacy that puts additional pressure

on campus leadership. College presidents are particularly aware of race relations on their respective campuses, as noted in the *2020 Survey of College and University Presidents*:

Presidents' assessments of race relations on U.S. college campuses and on their own campus are the least positive they have been in the seven years Inside Higher Ed has been asking about them. (Jaschik, 2020, p. 22)

Perhaps more importantly, students are also impacting the way institutions react to this changing environment through their application and admissions decisions. At a time when state support has decreased significantly, most public institutions are increasingly tuition-dependent and are having to compete with private colleges for students (Biemiller, 2018). Building suite-only residence halls or serving sushi in the dining hall are ways in which some public universities have tried to bridge the competitive divide, but as one consultant, David Strauss, a longtime principal at the Art and Science Group, states:

“The more interesting question is the extent to which colleges do things at the core of the academic mission that are market-reactive,” he says. He’s talking about requiring the faculty to add or drop academic programs, for example, and maybe talking less about the liberal arts and more about competencies, skills, and career readiness. For administrators, it’s a delicate balance between long-established missions and the latest market demands. (Biemiller, 2018)

### **Loss of Global Prestige**

Multiple factors, including but not limited to the change in the U.S. political climate, the cost of a U.S. education, political instability in areas around the world, and shifts in the global economy, have had a direct impact on international student enrollment, which had previously been a surging revenue source for many colleges and universities (Gluckman, 2018). Overall, top-tier institutions will likely not see significant changes in numbers because of their reputations overseas, but this plateau of enrolled international students is already impacting secondary and tertiary schools that rely on the tuition revenue these usually full-paying students provide to their bottom line (Gluckman, 2018).

Another area that has been highlighted as problematic and having an impact on foreign perceptions of American higher education has been the current administration's profiling of foreign scholars, where "fifty-two percent of presidents believe the Trump administration's increased scrutiny of foreign scholars results in racial profiling of Chinese faculty members and graduate students" (Jaschik, 2020, p. 8).

### **Era of Deregulation**

The previous presidential administration took the position of eliminating practices created by the Department of Education under the Obama administration, including guidance on how colleges should handle sexual assault and protections for gay and transgender students, as well as other regulations that were expected to have a deep impact on for-profit colleges (Kelderman, 2018). Within this climate, there is also the possibility of re-authorizing the Higher Education Act, and the resulting changes in policy and practice through the bill, so campus leadership must monitor the eddies of legislative shifts while answering to accrediting institutions to effectively demonstrate positive student outcomes.

Furthermore, the DeVos administration's new Title IX rule, which went into effect in August 2020, creates additional modifications for institutions around how they address sexual harassment.

### **Student Success Up Front**

A number of issues related to retention and degree completion are becoming more magnified during this period of increased public accountability related to both high tuition costs and potential appropriations tied to graduation rates (Supiano, 2018). Despite the societal benefits of increasing the number of students with a college degree, the institutional benefits of additional tuition revenue, and the personal benefits for a student's financial future, only 57% of students complete their degrees within six years of enrollment, and that percentage decreases for low-income students and underrepresented

minorities (Supiano, 2018). Improving completion has become such a complex problem that some institutions have added “student success” as a senior, cabinet-level responsibility, sometimes through the creation of a new position such “as a chief student success officer or as part of the vice president for enrollment management’s portfolio” (Supiano, 2018).

### **The Challenges for Leadership**

All of the above trends are clear examples of the complex and multifaceted challenges that higher education leadership must address on a daily basis. Beyond these, there are other macro-level questions of access and affordability related to shifting demographics, meeting market demands while staying true to academic mission, keeping up with ever-changing technology, and competition from non-traditional degree-granting institutions that have tremendous impact on the decision-making and planning for any institution. At the campus level, all kinds of local, idiosyncratic pressures, challenges, and opportunities exist that influence the day-to-day affairs of running a college or university effectively and efficiently.

To summarize: With spiraling tuition costs, federal and state budget cuts, political distractions, and increasing public skepticism about its value, the current higher education landscape is in a state of volatility and uncertainty. These are challenging times, with multilayered and multifaceted problems infiltrating higher education in every functional area of its organization. The issues are not confined to or isolated in any one domain. For example, student completion cannot only be assessed through academic advisement; rising tuition costs cannot be understood purely through financial modeling; and academic innovation cannot solely be left to the chief academic officer.

With that said, the chief person from each area remains accountable for her particular areas of responsibility and must lead the charge to adapt appropriately. Hence,

an understanding of the key leadership roles and how they are impacted by the volatility summarized above is an added value to college presidents and to the industry at large. Furthermore, as Hemsall's (2014) global study in leadership in higher education notes, leadership is no longer seen as the "heroic" activities of a single leader, but instead must reflect the knowledge and participation of those who make up the leadership team. Hemsall also found in her interviews with those in senior roles in higher education that leaders often describe their work in relation to their specific role, while leadership skills are now seen to span and interact more freely with the other senior management roles. For each of these functions, content expertise and an ability to weave in and out of other roles are important factors in the ability to lead an institution well in these changing times.

While the president of any institution embodies the roles of chief visionary, motivator, and driver, she needs to have a strong, robust senior team to provide the necessary expertise and input to inform, align, and actualize her vision. This president's "Cabinet" or senior team (a parallel structure to a C-Suite in industry) co-creates the plan of action, executes it, and sets the appropriate policy and incentives. Its members serve as confidantes, partners, and decision-makers. Senior team members are the most influential administrators who work in tandem with the president and each other to ensure that the institution's strategies and operations remain aligned with established plans and policies.

### **Higher Education Leadership—The Chief Navigators: The President and Her Senior Team**

Much of the earlier research in other industries has focused on the C-Suite, and in higher education there is a similar structure of leadership and management. While the senior team may vary among institutions, it is likely that members of a president's senior cabinet at a mid-sized institution would include the following roles:



- Chief Academic Officer
- Chief Business Officer
- Chief Advancement Officer
- Chief of Staff
- Chief Diversity Officer
- Chief Enrollment Management Officer
- Chief Student Affairs Officer
- And often the General Counsel and/or Chief Human Resources Officer

Though each senior administrator represents their particular area of expertise, the president relies on the collective work of the senior administration to chart a course of action for the organization as a whole and to set policies, structures, and incentives to drive institutional success.

The senior cabinet also has the unique and increasingly important responsibility of translating priorities to board members in their respective committees. They serve to educate, reinforce, and direct the work of the board, in alignment with the president's vision and institutional objectives (Hampshire-Cowan, 2015). While the overarching areas of responsibility and titles have not changed for these senior level positions, the actual work has evolved to meet the changing needs of institutions. Some discussion and examples follow.

### **Chief Academic Officer**

Depending on the size and type of institution, the role of Provost or Chief Academic Officer (CAO) may be characterized differently. Often the second in command at an institution, the traditional role of a vice president for academic affairs, can be summarized in the following ways: to promote and maintain a distinctive academic vision, which means leading the intellectual community on the campus, playing the role of visionary, and, when necessary, defending lofty principles (Maghoori & Powers, 2007). Further, "chief academic officers have always played a key role in running the day-to-day affairs of their campuses, but that role has grown even more prominent as presidents spend more time away from campus, tending to fund raising and other external duties that make up growing portions of their jobs" (Gardner, 2015). The CAO also needs

to be able to speak to an institution's core values and objectives, and is likely responsible for complicated administrative processes related to budget, hiring, appointments of deans, etc., while also serving as an arbiter and leader in the shared governance model of higher education (Maghoori & Powers, 2007).

Moreover, the CAO is asked to steward innovation and the advancement of the academic agenda and garner institution-wide support for change (Gardner, 2015).

Gardner goes on to say that the CAO role has expanded to include strategic thinking and broad managerial experience. As such, Academic Affairs offices have added staff to reflect institutional strategic priorities, which allows the CAO the space to facilitate and shape change across campus (Gardner, 2015). The role also needs to be able to utilize technology and integrate and synthesize data collection and analysis to make decisions.

Marketplace and industry advances have required CAOs to inspire, motivate, and encourage faculty to develop new courses and revise academic programs. Gardner (2015) points out, via José L. Cruz, the new provost at the University of Cal-State Fullerton, that the role serves as the "chief discussant," with meetings occupying the majority of his days, and often scheduled months in advance. This emphasis on consultation with colleagues, deans, and others, and on cultivating those relationships, is an important factor for success. Gardner plainly states, "If a campus is going to change a provost will most likely be directing the charge."

### **Chief Financial Officer**

The role of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) has always been broad and would likely include responsibility for finance, human resources, facilities, auxiliary services, information technology, and public safety. As Ayers and Goldstein (2015) point out in "Becoming a Renaissance CBO" in *Insider Higher Ed*, the new pressures facing colleges today have expanded the CFO role in significant ways, including:

- Guiding strategic planning and associated implementation;
- Creating entrepreneurial partnerships to develop new revenue streams;
- Ensuring emergency preparedness;
- Convening campus leaders to build cross-functional teams to produce more effective services.

Expanding on this notion, Kim et al. (2018) emphasize this by stating:

As part of small leadership teams, [CFOs] have assumed essential leadership oversight for the whole enterprise, not just the finance function. They partner with the president and provost to help realize the institution's mission. Their boards of directors encourage and sanction this partnership, lending the weight of sufficient authority and structure to the CFO's expanded role. That role includes informing and helping guide decisions, adding a strategic component to existing operating responsibilities. These chief executives actively participate in strategic visioning and decision making in collaboration with the board.

### **Chief Advancement Officer**

The role of the Chief Advancement Officer has continued to evolve to adapt to the changing needs of institutions. In the 2013 article, "Stick the Landing," geared toward newly appointed chief advancement officers, Mary Ellen Collins notes that in addition to the traditional attributes of needing to be "a very effective development officer, a strong strategist, and a strong communicator," these individuals now need to be "almost into business development ... with big public-private partnerships and relationship-building with government officials." And since the role has continued to expand, the Chief Advancement Officer "has become a more prominent member of the president's team and is in a position that entails more than fundraising" (Collins, 2013).

For example, a major public research university recently used a variation of the following to promote the role:

The Chief Advancement Officer will join the XXXX Center at a time of exciting transformation. As a member of the Center's senior leadership team, she/he will formulate, coordinate, and drive the execution of a comprehensive fundraising strategy to advance the national mission of the Center. The Chief Advancement Officer will have the opportunity to build a program, making critical decisions about campaign planning, staffing, and messaging. This position will have primary responsibility for strategically

connecting with and securing philanthropic support from individuals and organizations nationwide. In addition to taking responsibility for the vision and narrative of the Center's contribution to the University's capital campaign, this role will be responsible for adding ongoing strategic insight to public programming and how we communicate the Center's strengths.

Campus leadership, strategic planning, communications, stewardship, cultivation, and interactions with the public have become essential skills that have transformed the role from its origins in straight fundraising to a much more multifaceted and multidimensional role. Collins (2013) is emphatic on this, stating,

[You need] to know everything in advancement—alumni relations, advancement services, stewardship. As a member of the president's senior management team, [the president] expects [you] to be part of thoughtful discussions about everything that's happening at the university, not just fundraising.

### **Chief of Staff**

The Chief of Staff (COS) role in higher education has become critical to the management of the senior team, the overall university, and in interfacing with governing boards. Patrick Sanaghan (2012) describes the role as an “individual [that] can expedite day-to-day tasks, manage the president's calendar and schedule, and generally help keep things running smoothly.” In clear escalation of its inherent responsibilities, David C. Hood (2017), in his recent dissertation on the topic, explains that the role has “expanded beyond the clerical duties of an administrative assistant and now reflects a position in which one must work on behalf of the president, both in his or her absence or when he or she is unable to complete responsibilities due to time constraints” (p. 4). Hood in turn ties this evolution of the management structures within higher education directly to similar structures in the business world.

### **Chief Enrollment Management Officer**

The Vice President for Enrollment Management (EM) is responsible for “a process that brings together often disparate functions having to do with recruiting, funding,

tracking, retaining, and replacing students as they move toward, within, and away from institutions” (Kurz & Scannell, 2006). The development of this role signified an important shift in the business model for colleges and universities because of the shift in demographics after World War II, changes in pricing, and competition from the for-profit sector (Kurz & Scannell, 2006). In discussing how the emphasis on EM has shifted, Kurz and Scannell state that “today, enrollment management has further mutated and evolved into an industry bellwether,” and with a critical need for “linkages, shared goals, improved communication, and synergy as opposed to isolation...unit objectives need to be tied directly to enterprise-wide goals, rather than functioning as stand-alone systems” to meet overall institutional enrollment goals. Probably most telling about the role of the Vice President for Enrollment Management is the insistence on the importance of leadership as the most crucial aspect for success.

Leadership is critical. Enrollment management almost always means change—in structure, reporting lines, communication, goals, etc. The challenges and risks of change should never be underestimated. However, effective leaders like those mentioned here are willing to accept the risks where they see the need for change. (Kurz & Scannell, 2006)

### **Chief Student Affairs Officer**

The Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) is often responsible for all student-centered, co-curricular activities at a college or university and might be known alternatively as the Dean of Students. In the position’s earliest forms, these “Deans of Men” or “Deans of Women” on college campuses focused their efforts on both housing and discipline (Hevel, 2016). These responsibilities evolved from that more limited view of Student Affairs in the 1920s and grew over time to include career development, student health and well-being, fraternity and sorority relations, and management of student government and organizations (Hevel, 2016). Today, CSAOs are asked “to partner with chief diversity officers ... and foster cross-campus collaboration to raise retention and graduation rates” (Cook et al., 2017). The volatility of the current moment

of increased student activism and race-centered consciousness means that CSAOs are “living in times when agility is critical, and[they] have to be good at sorting out what’s important,” and that “in student affairs, constant and rapid change is the new norm” (Cook, et al, 2017).

### **Chief Diversity Officer**

The Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) function has grown significantly in all types of institutions, with a common effort to lead broad diversity efforts across the campus. In the 1970s, this function was included as a set of responsibilities for a vice president of minority affairs, but they have expanded to:

guiding efforts to conceptualize, define, assess, nurture, and cultivate diversity as an institutional and educational resource. Although duties may include affirmative action/equal employment opportunity, or the constituent needs of minorities, women, and other bounded social identity groups, chief diversity officers define their mission as providing point and coordinating leadership for diversity issues institution-wide. (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006, p. 2)

As Williams and Wade-Golden go on to say, the chief diversity role is unique in that she will likely not hold formal authority to command, reward, or punish, and instead must achieve her goals through persuasion and influence. She must insert the diversity agenda in all other functional areas and infiltrate important cabinet discussions around budget allocation, hiring, and academic program development, for example (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006).

The role has evolved significantly over the last four decades, says Gretchel Hathaway (2013) in *Diversity Then and Now*. While once primarily focused on issues of affirmative action and compliance with federal mandates, today’s CDO must take into account the immediate and long-term effects of campus climate and cultural competency on the education of students (Hathaway, 2013).

The diversity of the students and their demands have awakened colleges and universities and forced them to examine the role of CDO and amplify its work and explicit outcomes. Hathaway (2013) further underscores this shift by stating:

[The CDO's} areas of responsibility have also broadened, reflecting not just on race, gender and culture but on blending the goals of the institution with efforts to be more inclusive. By embracing marginalized groups, diversity offices are tasked with addressing a myriad of topics and issues such as LGBTQ populations, disability etiquette, transgender culture and campus climate, and "interfaith vs. multi-faith paradigms."

Such areas are not confined to the CDO, as Cabinet meetings across the country have been dominated at many points in recent years by topics like Title IX, sexual misconduct, and issues of inclusion and equity.

### **General Counsel**

The General Counsel's role is responsible for advising the president and her team on all legal matters pertaining to the institution. As such, the role requires a "working knowledge of the statutes, regulations, and court decisions that are unique to the field and that form its foundation, and also ... a keen understanding of the specific institution that she represents" (Meloy, 2014). Meloy categorizes two major functions for the role—counseling, meaning advising clients on the interpretation, and applicability of legal documents (contracts, laws, institutional policies, and regulations) that relate to specific legal problems and formal dispute resolution. Second, she asserts that the role has changed to encompass broader responsibilities of "holistic counseling" as it relates to business matters, political relationships, strategic planning and other top priorities of the institution's leaders."

## Higher Education Leadership and Change

In summary, while roles within a president's senior team might vary somewhat among institutions, they are essential drivers to how the organization functions and performs. While these roles vary in terms of the primary constituencies they serve and/or the degree to which the role is either outward- or inward-facing, each has its own demands, complexities, and urgencies. Regardless of the degree to which each role is on the front line for responding to change, what is crystal clear is that we need flexible learners to staff these leadership positions.

What is also abundantly clear is that higher education is undergoing a period of turmoil and rapid change. The pressures being felt are both internal and external, both deep and wide. Few, if any, colleges and universities can stand still; even those with significant resources and stellar reputations are not insulated from the current period of uncertainty. An unprecedented number of small, private liberal arts colleges have closed their doors in recent years, with great scrutiny of and interest in their downfall. As a recent report from Parthenon-EY (2016) states, 800 private colleges' futures are currently at risk. Public universities have also had their fair share of instability, with a number of consolidations within systems and sweeping changes in financing that have shifted the burden of funding to students and their families, as well as to other private funding sources.

While there are many educational experts, scholars, and practitioners assessing, researching, creating, and implementing solutions and pathways to stabilize higher education locally on campuses and in the industry at large, this important work would benefit from a factor that is essential in adapting during volatile times: Learning Agility (LA). The business sector continues to benefit from an understanding of LA and its role in recruiting, developing, and retaining leaders, as well as from its impact on remaining relevant and responsive in a complex environment. The degree to which a president and



her senior team need to be learning agile cannot be overstated, and an understanding of the roles most impacted by the rapidity of change will help to illuminate how important it is that LA be applied to the recruitment and development of senior team members.

An understanding of the senior leadership roles in higher education and how they are affected by environmental shifts will inform the field and support future research on the ways in which Learning Agility can be applied to them. Understanding the leadership team and how it functions is essential because it is the leadership team that drives institutional change, and given the mutable environment, a leadership team that is able to understand, assimilate, and respond to change is necessary in the 21st Century. The individual roles that make up the leadership team might vary in the degrees to which they must be nimble and responsive to the rapidity of change, but the team as a whole must display those qualities.

Given the intense fluctuations that are occurring in higher education, and the need for educational institutions to respond to them, the circumstances magnify the focus on the leadership team as the drivers of change. In order to successfully navigate such flux, institutions need the combined expertise and wisdom of the leadership team, with a focused understanding of which roles are particularly consequential to responding to that change. Therefore, this exploratory study includes a deeper examination of senior leadership roles in the current environment.

As noted above, in the business sector, leading, managing, and navigating in a volatile environment require leaders that are learning agile. Given the state of the higher education landscape, understanding the Learning Agility framework is a critical initial step to examining its relevance to higher education leadership. A review of Learning Agility and its history is explored in the following chapter.

## Chapter II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, a review of the Learning Agility literature is discussed with a focus on the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) and its utility and efficacy in assessing leaders' Learning Agility in the business sector. Learnings from the private sector that are relevant for higher education are identified.

#### **Learning Agility**

The concept of Learning Agility (LA) has skyrocketed in popularity and study among organizational practitioners—especially those professionals in Human Development, leaders in talent acquisition, and more recently among scholars and researchers in Social, Organizational, and Industrial Psychology (De Meuse, 2017a). In an article, “Learning Agility—Beyond the Hype: What Science Has to Say,” De Meuse describes a recent study of business professionals that revealed that LA was the most frequently cited criterion to measure leadership potential, where LA was cited 62% versus culturally fit at 28%, and emotional intelligence at 24%. Research by Church et al. (2015) focuses on talent management practices and on the assessment and development of current and future leaders. In their article, “How Are Top Companies Designing and Managing Their High Potential Program? A Follow-up Talent Management Benchmarking Study,” they found that 56% of sampled businesses used LA as a way to identify high achievers, and 51% used it as a criterion for selecting senior leadership.

These results put LA ahead of other content domains used to identify high achievers or senior executives, including cognitive skills, communication and verbal skills, and functional and technical skills. A further example in terms of LA's growing popularity was demonstrated by De Meuse (2017b) through a recent Google search of the term Learning Agility, which resulted in 18.2 million entries in comparison to Emotional Intelligence at 13 million entries, although the latter is a much more recognized and established term.

Understanding, defining, and measuring Learning Agility as a key indicator of leadership success is particularly relevant in today's business environment, as noted by David F. Hoff and W. Warner Burke (2017) in *Learning Agility: The Key to Leader Potential*:

The pace of change which organizations experience today has only quickened in recent years. The challenges of change that organizations experience today may be political, economic, social or technological, or a combination of these. The one constant among the white-water rapids that are rushing at us every day is our ability to recognize or anticipate a change (speed) and to apply or create a different set of filters (flexibility). What Learning Agility allows us to do is to keep moving forward with the current. (p. 12)

Chief Executive Officers note the rapidity of change and identify keeping up with those changes as the most challenging part of leadership today. To stay relevant and remain competitive in today's market requires learning agile leaders, and as such, these leaders need to be able to learn new concepts and adopt new practices rapidly, while adapting previous knowledge and experiences to their new experiences (Mitchinson & Morris, 2012). Or as noted by global futurist, speaker, and author, Jim Carroll (2007), the high velocity of change and disruption is overwhelming and taking hold of every industry and every organization. In *Ready, Set, Done: How to Innovate When Faster is the New Fast*, Carroll describes a fast-paced and sometimes unrelenting/unforgiving business environment that not only requires innovation, but moreover enforces an imperative to

respond faster and with more complexity and foresight, because sometimes the degree of the problem cannot even be fully understood in its current configuration. In his keynote to NASA's senior executives on transformational leadership, Carroll (2018) stressed the importance of great leaders working fast to shape the focus of the team, and refocusing them on opportunities of the future by crystallizing innovation.

De Meuse (2017b) cites studies from the '80s and '90s conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) that looked at how executives learned from their work experiences, with the results summarized in the book, *The Lessons of Experience*, wherein 200 executives were asked to identify pivotal experiences in their professional lives. The findings demonstrated how respondents differed greatly in how they learn from their experience; that learning and development required that people move from their comfort zones and norms; and that such experiences were challenging and difficult, but while it may be unpleasant, individuals have to present a strong drive for growth (De Meuse, 2017b). Furthermore, this research illuminated that "the willingness and ability to learn from experience separated high-potential talent from others" (De Meuse, 2017b). CCL scientists further analyzed the difference between successful executives and those who derailed. While there were numerous aligned characteristics among the respondents, derailed executives "were unable or unwilling to adapt ... [they] relied too heavily on a narrow set of skills developed early in their careers" (De Meuse, 2017b).

### **Learning Agility: Its Origins and Framework**

The theoretical construct of Learning Agility can be traced back to two major strands of research: Social Psychology and Learning Theory. An examination of each domain situates how Learning Agility was built out of theoretical constructs.

Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is considered the most prominent and influential social psychologist in our era and is noted by many as the Father of Social Psychology. His

classic concepts describe the dynamic interrelations between the *influence of an organization and its culture* and *the people who make up the organization*. Lewin (1935) explained behavior from the standpoint of an interaction between the person and her environment. In his famous formula, “Behavior = the function between the person and their environment” or “**B=f (P,E)**,” Lewin theorized that both the organization and the people working in it reflexively shape each other.

Lewin (1935) encouraged social scientists not to simply focus on a single variable and its impact on behavior. Instead, he emphasized the importance of understanding behavior within the context of the multiple variables that could influence behavior. He also stressed that the understanding of behavior must include an understanding of the interactive effect of personality variables and how an individual perceives his/her environment. Lewin uniquely combines personality and social psychology, and his work serves as the foundation for understanding a theoretical basis for studying Learning Agility (Burke, 2016). It is the agile learner who will have a more comprehensive understanding of a social interaction, the consequences of his/her behavior in said interaction, and how the situation has affected the person. It is the agile learner who will experience, understand, and integrate the cues of that situation to further learning (Burke, 2016).

The work of social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) expands on the importance of the interaction between a person’s environment and behavior resulting in what he coined “Reciprocal Determinism.” According to Bandura, Reciprocal Determinism is a model composed of three factors that influence behavior: the environment, the individual, and the behavior itself. Bandura posits that an individual’s behavior influences and is influenced by both personal characteristics and by the social world around him/her. This relationship is bi-directional and interconnected.

Bandura’s work is further expanded by psychologist John Kihlstrom (2013), who breaks down Reciprocal Determinism even further to include three differentiating factors:

1. The role of a person's individual state and disposition/personality traits, i.e. beliefs, emotions and moods;
2. The dialectic between the environment and the behavior; how the physical environment can affect behavior or how behavior can affect environment;
3. The relationship between the person and the environment and how one can influence the other. (p. 787)

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) also serves as an important backdrop to understanding the theory behind Learning Agility. John Dewey (1938), the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, was a primary figure in teaching us the importance of experience, experimenting, and purposeful learning. In his book, *Experience and Education*, Dewey emphasizes the social and interactive process of learning and the idea that learning is a process by which individuals understand and incorporate knowledge and experience into an existing set of ideas or meta-cognitions. Some of Dewey's statements demonstrate the ways in which his thinking is a backdrop for understanding the origins of today's definitions of Learning Agility. For example, "We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience," (Dewey, 1933, p.78).

Jean Piaget (1936), developmental psychologist, created a comprehensive theory on cognitive development that emphasized it as an ongoing recalibration of mental processes resulting from biological maturation and environmental experiences. Piaget enlightened scholars and psychologists on the idea that intelligence is not a fixed trait, but instead developmental—that humans advance through stages where they acquire knowledge, construct it, and then apply it. This reinforces how Learning Agility grew out of some of the most prominent research on ELT.

David Kolb (1984) further expanded the profession's understanding of experiential learning through his conviction that there are distinct ways in which individuals take in and process information. Moreover, Kolb describes a model of individual learning as a four-stage cycle; within this cycle, each individual will observe an experience, reflect on

that experience, form a hypothesis or theory, and, in turn, think/ behave accordingly. Kolb further describes four learning styles that draw on the belief that learning is a process, and that it is that process that generates knowledge. He states, “Learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38).

According to Kolb (1984), a person will ideally progress through these learning styles, but each individual will likely gravitate toward one over another. One person, for instance, might be more prone to learn better by doing an actual task, while another will increase her learning through post-activity coaching and reflective thinking. While individuals will rarely master any one learning style, Kolb posits that individuals learn more when they are able to incorporate multiple modes of learning. It is the person able to both do and reflect who will be able to learn more readily and with flexibility. Hence, according to the ELT, an agile learner is someone who can navigate multiple modes of learning (Burke, 2016).

While ELT and Kolb help us understand how an individual’s mode of learning affects the learning process, it is attention on the actual experience or types of experience that an individual engages in that further illuminates an understanding of agile learning. While it is important to overall understanding, and in provoking an individual to move seamlessly from various learning modes, it is equally important to understand the individual’s willingness to embark on new situations where learning can take place (Kolb, 1984). Learning Goal Orientation (LGO) theory guides us through an understanding of how individuals approach and engage in experiences that are goal-oriented and has influenced the body of work on Learning Agility.

Learning Goal Orientation research, originated by Carol Dweck (1986), described why and how individuals strive to accomplish goals. Dweck’s research focuses on the workplace and how understanding LGO impacts performance. In her work, she outlines two categories of orientation to reveal how tasks are chosen, how learners approach the

projects, how they react to the outcomes, and in the end what they learn (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Those categories are as follows:

1. **Learning (Mastery) Goals:** Learning-oriented students are interested in increasing their competence. As Kaplan and Maehr state, it refers to “a purpose of personal development and growth that guides achievement-related behavior and task-engagement” (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007, p. 151).
2. **Performance Goals:** Performance-oriented students are interested in demonstrating their competence. Studies show that performance-oriented goals foster avoidance of challenging tasks due to anxiety about failure. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p. 262)

A major difference between the two is that an individual who demonstrates a goal-oriented approach believes that learning is a process and that one’s ability can be developed, whereas a performance-oriented approach suggests that one’s ability is innate and difficult to develop.

The study of individuals’ goal tendencies has been illuminating in that it has shown that individuals will approach tasks and situations based on that tendency. As Kroll (1988) points out, those with a learning goal tendency will gravitate toward new learning experiences to being reflective and open-minded, whereas the person who is more focused on performance goals will resist situations that are less defined, vague, or reveal ambiguity. As a result, the latter will more likely avoid challenging tasks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

These concepts were described by Dweck as “fixed or growth mindsets,” and her analysis of these approaches led to additional research with Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania on the specific qualities that lead to success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Duckworth describes a growth mindset as “having a belief—a theory, if you will—that the nature of human abilities is that they are malleable, not fixed. In the most general terms, having a growth mindset is believing that people are by nature learning, growing creatures” (McGregor, 2016). Building on Dweck’s work, Duckworth



further develops the theory that those with a growth mindset are also “grittier,” with an ability to persevere through challenges and failure, and she links the two concepts together, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Learning Agility Conceptual Framework*



Source: Duckworth (2016, p. 192)

As Hoff and Burke (2017) suggest, “the specific behaviors that are related to learning goal orientation are likely to be integral to the concept of Learning Agility ... we conclude that a measure of Learning Agility should assess an individual’s tendency to behave in ways that align with a strong learning goal orientation” (p. 24). While the experiential learning and the learning goal literatures provide a deep understanding of how learning takes place while engaging in various situations, other important variables to consider are environment and the degree to which individuals can process and respond to new learning, and an individual’s willingness to seek out and persist with new and different experiences. Specifically, an environment needs to be conducive to learning; it needs to support and reward learning and must encourage risk taking and engaging in new experiences.

However, as noted by Hoff and Burke (2017), most work environments are focused on performance and productivity and on an individual’s ability to perform and respond with immediacy. To that end, the job adaptability and performance literature describes in both depth and breadth behavioral indicators of job performance in multiple work domains (Campbell et al., 1993; Pulakos et al., 2000). Most relevant to the discussion around Learning Agility is the focus on dealing with new and challenging experiences. For instance, effective job performance depends on an individual’s ability to stay calm and measured when dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, and an understanding that

information need not be ‘black and white’ or precise in order for her to proceed and produce. Thus, the individual is not paralyzed by ambiguity and uncertainty (Pulakos et al., 2000). However, as Burke (2016) points out, in order for learning to take place, an individual needs to manage such stress. For while challenging situations can be ideal for learning, if they are not managed well then learning will be interrupted. Pulakos et al. (2000) suggest that effective management of work stress includes behaviors such as not blaming others when things go wrong, not lamenting on a bad situation but instead looking for constructive resolutions and actions, and redirecting a negative situation into an opportunity for growth and change. As Hoff and Burke (2017) contend, an individual’s ability to handle such pressure is an important factor in the Learning Agility process.

### **Defining Learning Agility Today**

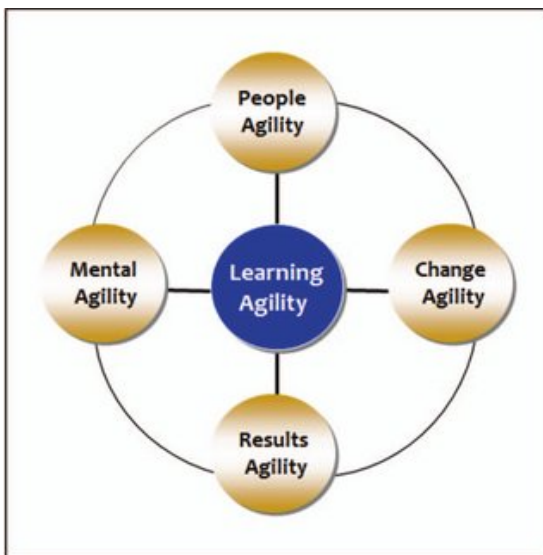
While Learning Agility continues to grow in importance as an essential element of successful leadership, there is no agreed-upon or consistent definition of it, nor a definitive tool or instrument to measure it, and confusion remains about the extent of its relationship to leader success (De Meuse, 2017). As noted, there are varying definitions of Learning Agility, but it was in the seminal work of Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger in 2000, in their published journal article, “High Potentials as High Learners,” where they first coined the term “Learning Agility” and demonstrated a relationship between LA and leadership. It was this work that first highlighted that potential cannot be predicted or understood by past performance alone; instead, potential is more related to a person’s ability to learn new skills or do something new in often demanding and novel situations.

Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) further describe LA as “the willingness and ability to learn from experience, and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully

under novel or first-time conditions” (p. 323). In other words, it is a person’s ability to learn from past experiences and apply them to new and different environments. They developed a conceptual framework that consists of the following four factors:

- *People agility*: the extent to which individuals know themselves well, learn from experience, treat others constructively, and are cool and resilient under the pressures of change;
- *Change agility*: the level to which individuals are curious, have passion for ideas, like to experiment with test cases, and engage in skill-building activities;
- *Results agility*: the extent to which individuals get results under tough conditions, inspire others to perform beyond normal, and exhibit the sort? kind? of presence that builds confidence in others;
- *Mental agility*: the degree to which individuals think through problems from a fresh point of view and are comfortable with complexity, ambiguity, and explaining their thinking to others. (p. 326; see also De Meuse, 2017)

Figure 2. *Conceptual Framework of Learning Agility*



Source: De Meuse (2017, p. 270)

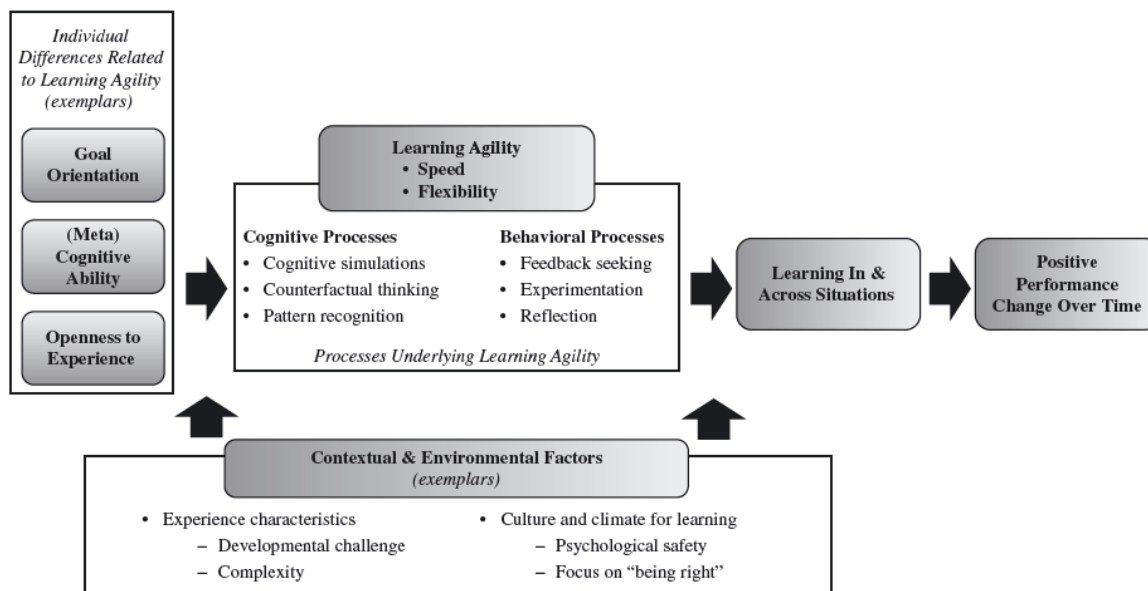
What differentiates high potential leaders from others is their ability to learn from their past experiences. As a result, they are more likely to be flexible and agile in unfamiliar situations. In “Learning Agility as a Prime Indicator of Potential,” Lombardo

and Eichinger (2004) further demonstrate that people with higher Learning Agility scores perform better when promoted and asked to meet new challenges. They correctly hypothesized that those with higher scores would be more adaptable and willing to successfully confront different and unknown situations.

DeRue and his colleagues (2012) further expanded the definition of Learning Agility to create a conceptual base for theory development and measurement that turns the focus primarily on flexibility and speed. Speed is defined as being able to take in large amounts of disparate information, to synthesize and prioritize its importance, and then respond accordingly. In terms of flexibility, DeRue et al. emphasize the importance of being able to change one's context and perspective to help understand how information is related or connected, and how that information is used to explain a given situation.

DeRue et al. (2012) further explain the difference between Learning Agility and Learning Ability. These distinctions highlight the fact that while a basic amount of learning ability is an important factor in being agile, after a certain threshold of ability is reached, the relationship between ability and agility diminishes. DeRue and his colleagues introduce a critical variable that affects our understanding of Learning Agility, which is the learner's antecedents or individual differences. This model demonstrates that individual differences like goal orientation, openness to experience, and cognitive ability along with context affect both Learning Agility and outcomes. (See Figure 3 below.) In this model, Learning Agility occurs between antecedents and outcomes, and serves as either a moderating or mediating (or both) variable. Examples of this model might include the circumstance that a person's level of Learning Agility is parallel to her willingness to take on new experiences. The model also suggests that there is a relationship between organizational climate and culture (contextual factors) and Learning Agility and outcomes.

Figure 3. DeRue et al.'s Learning Agility Model



Source: DeRue et al. (2012, p. 265)

### A New Measure: The Burke Learning Agility Inventory

Burke's focus on one singular concept of LA versus DeRue et al.'s multiple types of LA led to his examination of LA from a behavioral perspective. His reasoning is that one cannot "see" learning through a cognitive process, but learning can be observed when associated with specific behaviors. As a result, Burke's research:

identified two other factors affecting LA: skill and motivation. By skill, Burke and his team identified 38 unique behaviors that contribute to LA. These items make up his new measure of LA. Motivation, on the other hand, involves the willingness to take risks and, from time to time, move beyond one's comfort zone. (Hoff & Smith, 2020, p. 493)

Based on the previous research model of DeRue, Burke (2016) devised his own definition of Learning Agility:

Learning Agility is dealing with new experiences flexibly and rapidly by trying new behavior, getting feedback on these attempts, and making quick

adjustments so new learning will be realized when you do not know exactly what to do. (p. 12)

His work closely aligns with DeRue et al. with its emphasis on flexibility and speed, but their research departs in a significant manner in that DeRue et al. define LA as a cognitive and behavioral process, while Burke's body of work homes in on the behavioral aspects of LA. Burke (2016), with his students at Teachers College, Columbia University, identifies nine dimensions of LA:

- **Flexibility** – Being open to new ideas and proposing new solutions.
- **Speed** – Acting on ideas quickly so that those not working are discarded and other possibilities are accelerated.
- **Experimenting** – Trying out new behaviors (i.e., approaches, ideas) to determine what is effective.
- **Performance Risk Taking** – Seeking new activities (i.e., tasks, assignments, roles) that provide opportunities to be challenged.
- **Interpersonal Risk Taking** – Confronting differences with others in ways that lead to learning and change.
- **Collaborating** – Finding ways to work with others that generate unique opportunities for learning.
- **Information Gathering** – Using various methods to remain current in one's area of expertise.
- **Feedback Seeking** – Asking others for feedback on one's ideas and overall performance.
- **Reflecting** – Slowing down to evaluate one's own performance in order to be more effective. (p. 14)

Utilizing these nine dimensions, Burke (2016) and students developed the first measure of LA that was focused on behaviors. This 38 item Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) categorized these nine dimensions and included a seven-point rating scale ranging from 1 "not at all" to 7 "very frequently" for individuals to rate themselves on each item. The BLAI instrument proved to be reliable, with results showing internal consistency across multiple types of sample groups (Hoff & Burke, 2017). The validity of the instrument developed by Burke, the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI), has been studied rigorously in subsequent years and has been proven to demonstrate "significant correlations between Burke LAI scores and leader potential and performance" (Burke, 2019). Thus, measuring the "right things" and measuring them consistently were demonstrated through these rigorous studies. Furthermore, while

self-assessment ratings can be questioned or inflated (Dunning et al., 2004), as additional data were collected over a period of years, the distribution of results mirrored a normal distribution pattern, demonstrating the efficacy of the instrument (Hoff & Smith, 2020).

These dimensions can be framed to describe the various characteristics exhibited by those that are learning agile. Hoff and Smith (2020) developed the following summary as a helpful snapshot:

LA as a multifaceted concept and is demonstrated by a range of behaviors that broadly allow individuals to seek out, manage, understand, and ultimately learn from new and challenging experiences. His [Burke's] review suggests that learning agile individuals display an enthusiasm for learning, proactively seeking out challenges, new experiences, and feedback from others. Furthermore, an individual must also be able to effectively take in and process relevant information, integrate new ideas with previous perspectives, reflect on new insights, generate multiple solutions to problems based on data, and experiment with new ways of doing things. Finally, for this learning to be possible, an individual must be able to effectively manage the situation at hand, creating conditions that will allow learning to occur. Such individuals will persist even when outcomes are unclear, remain calm when faced with challenging situations, stay positive when confronted with failure, and ultimately perform well under new conditions. (pp. 494-495)

### **The Current Study**

A college president and her leadership team are key influencers in leading organizational change. They set and drive institutional priorities and chart strategic directions, and just as important, they create a reward system to align with these goals and objectives. Given that all higher education leadership teams must lead during these turbulent times, an exploratory study of Learning Agility in higher education and its applicability would inform the field while expanding the Learning Agility paradigm beyond the business domain.

Furthermore, drilling down on the roles of the leadership team members of the president's senior cabinet to understand which of these roles might be most affected by

the volatility of the current climate—hence which roles require higher and stronger Learning Agility—also proves beneficial as higher education leadership teams adapt to the new normal. For instance, has the chief academic officer role changed dramatically in this current environment? Has the chief enrollment officer been impacted by the volatile enrollment markets? How much has the chief financial officer role been impacted?

From a college president’s perspective, this study illuminates two integral aspects of higher education leadership: first, which roles are experiencing the most rapidity of change; and second (as in business and industry), are the most successful leaders learning agile? The individual senior members’ scores on the Burke LAI provide insight to the president about her perception of the changing roles and the alignment of those occupying those roles.

The following research questions were explored:

1. To what extent is a measure of Learning Agility applicable to higher education?
2. According to college presidents, which higher education senior leadership role is changing the most rapidly and therefore requires the most Learning Agility?
3. In higher education, to what extent is there a relationship between the highest performers and those who are the most learning agile?

The explanation of and responses to these three questions provide the fundamental basis for this study about Learning Agility and leadership in higher education.



## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

In order to study Learning Agility and its applicability to higher education, the purpose of this study was to specifically examine Learning Agility through the lens of college presidents and their senior leadership teams. This chapter will delineate the methodology used to study Learning Agility in higher education by first describing the context, the participants, and their demographics. The procedures, design, and measures of the study will follow.

#### **Context**

The institutions in this study were all small or mid-sized, 2- and 4-year public and private colleges and universities, and they shared an organizational structure of being led by a president, with a senior leadership team that met regularly.

Borrowing from the Carnegie Classification system (Indiana University School of Education, 2017), the study included a range of institutions from a public Associate's college serving nearly 15,000 students to a suburban, private, liberal arts Baccalaureate college with 2,500 students.

## Participants

The data were retrieved from presidents and associated senior teams at 11 institutions of higher education. Though each president's senior team varied in membership, the following leadership roles were included in a majority of institutions: Chief Financial Officer/Vice President for Finance and Administration; Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs; Chief Enrollment Officer; Chief Diversity Officer; Chief of Staff; Chief Development/Advancement Officer; and Chief Student Affairs Officer. The institutions are not identified by name but only description, i.e., "a small liberal arts college in a suburban environment...."

College presidents were invited to participate based on the researcher's extended network of colleagues connected to various institutions. A convenience sample of 14 presidents were asked to participate, and 11 agreed to join the study and be interviewed by the researcher. Of those that did not participate, two would only agree to the interview and not involve their senior staff, and the other never responded to outreach.

The 11 college presidents presided over the following types of institutions, and for descriptive purposes, the researcher has chosen the Carnegie Classification system as defined below:

The Carnegie Classification® has been the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education for the past four and a half decades. Starting in 1970, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education developed a classification of colleges and universities to support its Program of research and policy analysis. Derived from empirical data on colleges and universities, the Carnegie Classification was originally published in 1973, and subsequently updated in 1976, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2018 to reflect changes among colleges and universities. This framework has been widely used in the study of higher education, both as a way to represent and control for institutional differences, and also in the design of research studies to ensure adequate representation of sampled institutions, students, or faculty. (Indiana University School of Education, 2017)

Reviewing these classifications, there were three public colleges, all community colleges, and the remaining eight were private institutions. Six of the eight private institutions offered Master's degrees, and the other two offered Bachelor's degrees only, and of this same group, four were inclusive and four were selective in terms of their selectivity. In terms of setting, four of the private institutions were suburban/rural and four were in urban settings, and while seven were residential, one was non-residential. Comparing the size of the private institutions, seven institutions had enrollments of 5,000 or less, and one had an enrollment above 5,000.

The three public community colleges offered Associate's degrees, and all were in an urban setting with open admissions policies. As for enrollment at these institutions, one had an enrollment of 5,000 and above, and two had enrollments of 10,000 and above.

### **Presidents' Demographics**

A total of 11 presidents participated in the interviews with the researcher, and a breakout of their demographics is detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Presidents*

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	6	54.5%
Women	5	45.5%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White or European American	8	72.7%
Black or African American	2	18.2%
Hispanic or Latino	1	9.1%
<b>Age Range</b>		
41-50	1	9.1%
51-60	4	36.3%
61-70	4	36.3%
71-80	2	18.2%

Table 1 (continued)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Education		
1 (Bachelor's)	0	0.0%
2 (Master's)	2	18.2%
3 (Doctoral)	8	72.7%
4 (Other professional degree)	1	9.1%
Years of Experience		
2-10 years	4	36.3%
11-20 years	5	45.5%
21-30 years	2	18.2%
Year Since Starting Position		
1996-2005	2	18.2%
2006-2015	6	54.5%
2016-2020	3	27.3%

Note. N = 11

### The Roles and Make-up of the Senior Staff

Each college president was supported by a “senior staff.” The total number of *individuals* on senior staff, across the 11 institutions, was 121, with the mean at 11.2, and the mode at 9 for the senior team. (See Appendix A for a full list of all roles.) The total number of senior staff *roles* at the 11 institutions was 126, 80.3% (102) of those were identified as the person with final accountability over a functional area (“chief”), and in most cases had a vice president title. (It is important to note that four of the 102 individuals held dual chief roles.) The remaining 19.6% (25) were direct reports, “other roles,” to one of the chiefs. The majority of these “other roles” were in the Academic Affairs area, followed by Finance and Administration.

Analyzing all institutions, 50% or more had the following roles: President (100%); Provost/Chief Academic Officer (100%); Chief Financial Officer (91%); Chief of Student Affairs (81%); Chief Enrollment Officer (81%); Chief of Staff (54%); and Chief

Diversity Officer (54%). Based on this frequency, those roles have been designated as the “core senior team.”

Table 2 on the following page provides a full breakdown of the chief role overseeing each functional area. For a complete list of roles, including other roles represented on the senior team, see Appendix E.

Senior staff members were asked by their respective presidents to participate in the study and to take the BLAI. Moreover, each college president was asked to take the BLAI. The overall response rate for the BLAI was 64%.

Table 3 provides the details of the response rate by role.

Table 2. Institutions by Senior Staff Chief Roles

Participants	Roles															Senior Staff Total		
	President	Provost/ Acad Affairs	Finance & Admin	Advance ment#	Enrollment	Student Affairs	Chief of Staff	Chief Diversity Officer	VP Strat Initiatives/ Innovation	VP Mark & Comm	General Counsel	VP Human Resources	VP Strat Partnershi ps	VP IT	Chief of Instit Effecti venes s		Dir of Athletics	Other Roles
ZM	X	X	X	X	X	X	X											7
JD	X	X	X				X		X	X		X	X					8
GD*	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X				X			10
SC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X			12
WK	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X		X				11
FC#	X	X	X	X	X	X								X				10
BD*	X	X	X	X	X	X		X										7
PM	X	X	X		X	X			X				X			X		8
HC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		19
LT*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X						12
DH	X	X		X			X	X	X		X							7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>18%</b>		

\*Three institutions combined the roles for Enrollment & Student Affairs.

#One institution combined the Advancement & Enrollment roles.

Table 3. *Participant Response Rate, by Senior Staff Role*

Role	Responses		%
	#	Respondents	
Student Affairs	9	9	100%
Chief of Instit Effectiveness	3	3	100%
VP Strat Initiatives/Innovation	5	4	80%
Advancement	9	7	77%
Enrollment	9	7	77%
VP Strat Partnerships	4	3	75%
President	11	8	72%
Other Roles	25	16	64%
Finance & Admin	10	6	60%
VP Mark & Comm	5	3	60%
Chief Diversity Officer	6	3	50%
General Counsel	4	2	50%
Dir of Athletics	2	1	50%
Provost/Acad Affairs	11	5	45%
Chief of Staff	6	2	33%
VP IT	3	1	33%
VP Human Resources	4	1	25%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>64%</b>

\*Note: Two of the respondents held dual roles on their respective senior teams.

## Design

A mixed methods approach was employed involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The case study method was chosen to allow for a detailed examination of multiple sites in order to build a baseline of research that would allow for further large-scale study.

## Measures

The BLAI inventory consists of 38 items that differentiate agility from behavior, and assess Learning Agility through nine dimensions (Burke, 2016) (see Appendix F).

Two of the nine dimensions specifically focus on speed and flexibility, and the other seven dimensions focus on learning behaviors, including collaboration, experimentation, feedback seeking, information seeking, interpersonal risk-taking, performance risk-taking, and reflection. For each item, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they engaged in the following behavior during the past six months using a seven-point scale (1=not at all, 4=occasionally, 7=very frequently). An overall Learning Agility score was generated based on an average of all 38 items (see Appendix D). The self-rating responses from participants showed a large variance; there was a wide range of scores across each of the dimensions.

### **Interview Protocol**

The conversation focused on the rapidity of change in higher education, and on the importance of the senior team being flexible and adaptive.

The researcher asked for each president's perspectives on the most salient issues in higher education in general, and amongst peer institutions. After the president identified the salient issues, she was asked how she, as president, keeps up with the changing times (see Appendix B for the interview protocol).

The president was asked specifically to identify which senior role had changed the most in these fluid, dynamic, and changing times—i.e., “For each of the members of your senior team, which domain has exhibited the most change and variability?” The objective was to elicit more information about the president's perspective on the domain(s) that are under the most duress to change and adapt.

The researcher handed the president two laminated index cards, which included the definition of Learning Agility and the nine dimensions (see Appendix D), and she was given a few moments to read through the definition and dimensions. The president was asked if she thought there was a relationship between Learning Agility and higher



education leadership success. Follow-up questions included: “Do you see a relationship between higher performers and Learning Agility on your senior team?” “Why do you think that is the case?” “What issues or factors led you to this perception/conclusion?”

A final question was for the president to identify the top three positions that were impacted by the changing times, and therefore required the most Learning Agility. While the researcher’s intention had been to invite confidential performance appraisals from the college presidents, a proxy was utilized instead as the presidents were unwilling to share evaluative data. As a result, the researcher used a proxy derived from the interview process to assess the members of the senior team (see Appendix A for Protocol Questions).

### **Procedure**

The request for participation guaranteed confidentiality. The individual institution is described demographically and never mentioned by name. Data on individuals through both the qualitative and quantitative surveys were only connected to specific roles/domains, and individuals were never identified by name or affiliated with a specific institution. The aggregate BLAI score of the senior team was given to the participants and to the president, while the individual scores were given solely to the respective members. No individual scores were shared with anyone other than the person who took the BLAI.

The president was sent a request to participate in the study, and if the president agreed, a letter and consent form were sent to the senior team (see Appendix B: Sample Letter).

Each college/university president was interviewed by the researcher. The researcher requested permission to audio-record the conversation, which, upon completion, was transcribed solely for the researcher.

The president and the senior team were asked to take the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) to obtain individual Learning Agility scores. The aggregate score of the senior team was given to the participants and to the president, while the individual scores were given solely to the respective members. No individual score was shared with anyone other than the person who took the BLAI.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Content Analysis**

The researcher performed a content analysis of the transcript of the recorded sessions with the individual presidents, identifying themes related to the changing landscape of higher education, how the presidents go about their own learning, the impact on the senior leadership roles, and on the relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success.

The content analysis approach followed the guidance of Linda Dale Bloomberg and Marie Volpe (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), as delineated in their book, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Roadmap from Beginning to End*. The process began by building a conceptual framework that would serve as the tool to organize and analyze the data. The framework was compiled from the overall research design, and specifically informed by the research and interview questions. Subsequently, corresponding categories and sub-categories of plausible responses taken from both the literature review on Learning Agility and the literature on the higher education sector context served as holding places for the analysis. In addition, given that this was a new field of inquiry on the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education leadership, an inductive approach was also taken, allowing the data to identify additional categories and themes. Overall, the researcher employed a semantic approach to analyzing the data, adhering closely to what the interviewees said *vis à vis* interpreting their words.

Each category and sub-category/descriptor was assigned an alphanumeric code and noted when reviewing the interview transcripts; this process also led to additions and deletions of categories based on the data. The mapping of responses led to the creation of distribution charts and frequency charts, the ultimate organization of the findings.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

The researcher also included a quantitative analysis to provide additional insights into the data at hand. This analysis focused on the high impact, senior team roles and Learning Agility, and performance and Learning Agility. To that end, the president's perception of the role most impacted by change was noted separately and was a key variable in the quantitative analysis.

The senior staff individual BLAI scores were compared to their president's rating of the senior role that had changed the most in recent years, referred to as "high impact roles" going forward. The researcher examined the data for consistency/inconsistency between the president's rating of the role that had changed the most and the corresponding score of the individual. This analysis answered the question, *Do those in high impact roles overall rate themselves higher in agility and/or in the nine dimensions, than those not in the high impact roles?*

The individual senior staff BLAI scores also were compared to those the president identified as the higher performers on her senior team. The relationship between the president's assessment of performance and the individual's score answered the following questions: *To what extent do the higher performing individuals, as identified by the presidents, have higher BLAI scores? Did the higher performers rate themselves higher in certain dimensions more so than others?* The average score of the senior team also was computed and given to the president.

The methodology, design, measures, and protocols provided a framework for the study and established a strong foundation for the data collection and analysis. An

in-depth examination of the presidents' responses to the interview questions, a review and comparison of BLAI self-rankings, and a statistical analysis of the significance of the findings will follow to address the study's main research questions.

### **Addressing Reliability and Credibility**

While validity and reliability do not neatly describe the qualitative aspects of the research, the researcher adopted the idea of creating trustworthiness in the study by looking at its validity through the lens of credibility and reliability through the lens of dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The dependability of the research, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is defined by the researcher's ability to show that the findings are consistent and dependable with the data previously collected. To that end, the researcher carefully and notably documented a highly detailed coding scheme and at various times throughout that process enlisted her professional and academic community to review and comment. If inconsistencies were questioned, then discussion ensued, resulting in a more refined conclusion. Furthermore, as Merriam (2009) describes a "transparency of methods," it is also imperative to document a detailed account of how the data were collected and analyzed. This audit shows how decision-making was derived.

To achieve credibility and dependability of the content analysis, best practices were employed to ensure that the method was grounded in solid criteria for evaluating the "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the research and its findings. The credibility of the study relies on the logic of the methodological validity, how well matched the logic of the method is to the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the ensuing explanations revealed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In this case, to take a first look at understanding the applicability of a leadership framework in another sector, the president's views were employed as the primary way to assess said framework, and with

that understanding, those views included an assessment of those roles that made up her senior team, i.e., the key policy and decision makers in the sector. A focused discussion on the respective roles would seed insight on framework and on the individual senior team roles. While a true and tested assessment was employed to initiate an understanding of senior members' roles and the relationship to performance, the president's views on the relationship between higher education leadership success and this framework was imperative to document the specific reactions, descriptors, and prose around the applicability to this new framework.

In terms of internal validity, the researcher made clear from the onset what exactly she was studying, why it was of interest, and the assumptions being made; according to Merriam (2009), these upfront assumptions lay the groundwork for internal validity. The letter to the presidents reflects the above, with precision. Furthermore, in creating categories and sub-categories for the content analysis, and then placing respondents' answers accordingly, the researcher utilized a peer/colleague review approach to test her interpretation, which allowed for discussion resulting in multiple views informing the findings. The interpretive validity of the research was ensured through multiple reviews of the recordings of the interviews, detailed notetaking of the transcripts, and adherence to the constructs of the research design.

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## Chapter IV

### FINDINGS

To develop an understanding of the relevance of Learning Agility for higher education leadership, interviews with college presidents were conducted. This chapter provides a content analysis of their responses. This exploratory study examined to what extent a measure of Learning Agility is applicable to higher education through the lens of the president and the roles of the senior leadership team.

This chapter first will provide the six key findings that emerged from the participants' responses to the research and interview questions through a content analysis to examine patterns and themes. Furthermore, this chapter will present a complete analysis of the BLAI scores in relation to the research questions, including a comparison between the individuals' BLAI scores to the presidents' responses regarding which senior roles have changed most notably and thus require higher Learning Agility. Specifically, the question: *Do those in high impact roles have higher Learning Agility scores?* was answered.

In addition, the individual senior staff BLAI scores of those who were identified as high performers were examined to review the relationship between the president's assessment of performance and an individual's score. This comparison answered the question: *To what extent do the higher performing individuals, as identified by the presidents, have higher BLAI scores?*

## Summary of Findings

As reported by college presidents, the higher education sector is in a state of volatility and uncertainly mainly driven by the imminent demographic cliff of traditional-age, college bound students, and because of an unsustainable business model. In regard to their own learning and keeping up with these changes, presidents first turn internally to their respective senior teams, and then to the external environment through an array of networking activities to stay abreast of and responsive to those issues. When looking to hire senior staff members, presidents first put the most emphasis on direct and deep experience in the functional area followed by key attributes noted in Burke's Learning Agility dimensions, including Flexibility, Feedback Seeking, and Risk-Taking.

According to college presidents, the positions that have been most confronted by the changes in higher education and thus require higher levels of Learning Agility are in descending order: the Chief Academic Affairs Officer, the Chief Enrollment Officer, and the Chief Student Affairs Officer. Those in these roles did not rate themselves higher in LA based on their overall BLAI scores when compared to the "other" senior staff roles. These high impact roles did rate themselves higher in some of the dimensions, including Collaborating and Reflecting.

Presidents highlighted those on their senior team they considered high performers. There was not a significant difference between those identified as such and other performers, but there were mean differences of note between the two groups in the following dimensions: Interpersonal Risk-Taking, Collaborating, and Flexibility. Furthermore, these same dimensions among the high performers mirrored the Presidents' top three self-rated dimensions.

One hundred percent of College presidents enthusiastically agreed that there was a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, while 63% suspected that Speed and Flexibility were less likely to be as relevant as in other

sectors. This was mainly due to the sector being steeped in tradition and norms, operating in a shared governance model, and priding itself on narrow ways to understand information (disciplines), and on the dominance of Reflecting over Speed.

Included as part of the analysis are descriptive statistics containing the correlation, means, and standard deviation of the nine BLAI subscales, overall LA score, age, and work experience.

Table 4 provides an overview of the correlations between participants' overall percentile score and dimension BLAI percentile scores as well as the mean age and years of experience of participants.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Participants' Variables, Overall BLAI Percentile Scores, and Dimension Percentile Scores

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	52.58	9.70											
2. Experience	23.11	9.97	0.49***										
3. Speed	57.78	28.26	0.04	-0.11									
4. Reflecting	66.27	26.26	0.22*	-0.01	0.46***								
5. Perf Risk Taking	59.51	27.67	0.20	-0.11	0.51***	0.23*							
6. Inter Risk Taking	57.77	29.92	0.26*	-0.10	0.58***	0.43***	0.53***						
7. Info Gathering	58.21	30.54	0.07	-0.13	0.46***	0.41***	0.26*	0.41***					
8. Flexibility	65.00	28.18	0.10	-0.12	0.70***	0.57***	0.44***	0.60***	0.49***				
9. Feedback Seeking	40.58	27.72	-0.01	0.00	0.34**	0.22	0.06	0.43***	0.39***	0.22			
10. Experimenting	57.18	29.40	0.11	-0.22	0.65***	0.43***	0.47***	0.58***	0.45***	0.64***	0.32**		
11. Collaborating	67.57	27.32	0.05	-0.19	0.63***	0.58***	0.41***	0.71***	0.43***	0.71***	0.36**	0.51**	*
12. Overall BLAI	54.57	27.85	0.13	-0.20	0.81***	0.61***	0.55***	0.74***	0.60***	0.78***	0.57***	0.77**	0.76***

Note. N = 77. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

Six major findings emerged through examination of the interviews of the 11 college presidents:



- (1) An overwhelming majority of participants (91%) indicated that the most salient issues facing higher education today are the changing demographics and the rising costs associated with operating the college.
- (2) A majority of college presidents (73%) described their own learning to keep up with salient issues in higher education by collaborating with their senior teams.
- (3) While a large majority of college presidents (81%) identified relevant experience as the most important criterion when hiring for their senior team, 72% identified Burke Learning Agility dimensions as important criteria.
- (4) While a strong majority of participants (73%) indicated that the Chief Academic Affairs/Provost role requires the greatest need for Learning Agility; a lesser number (55% and 45%, respectively) described Enrollment and Student Affairs as warranting the most Learning Agility. The overall BLAI scores of those listed above were not significantly different from those in low impact roles.
- (5) While a majority of college presidents identified the Provost as the senior cabinet member that exceeded expectations (45%), a lesser number (36%) identified themselves as exceeding expectations, followed by Enrollment (27%), and Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (27%). The mean overall BLAI score of the high performers was 63.19 versus 51.34 for the “other” roles, though when controlled for age and experience, there was not a statistically significant difference between the two performance groups.
- (6) A strong majority of participants (63%) said there is a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, and 36% stated that there is a relationship between the two, but to varying degrees. None of the participants stated that there was *not* a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education Leadership success.

The six findings are detailed numerically below, as follows: they are first described in a chart that displays the presidents' frequency of responses in descending order, which are then exemplified by quotes that support the findings for each research question. The descriptive and statistical analyses are integrated throughout the chapter. Research questions 4 and 5 also include the results of quantitative analyses.

Table 5. *Outline of Finding # 1, The Most Salient Issues in Higher Education*

**FINDING # 1**

**1.1 An overwhelming majority of college presidents (91%) indicated the most salient issues facing higher education today are: *Changing Demographics (1.1A)*, and an overall vulnerable *Business Model (1.1B)*.**

College presidents described the other salient issues in higher education in the following ways, in descending order:

**1.2 Impediments to Innovation (9 of 11, 82%)**

Steeped in tradition

Slow to change

Tenure system/Structural Organization

**1.3 Student Issues (7 of 11, 64%)**

Mental health

Multiple roles and responsibilities

**1.4 Federal & State Mandates (5 of 11, 45%)**

New statewide scholarship program

Mandates and Oversight changes

**1.5 Online Learning (5 of 11, 45%)**

How to incorporate

Online competition

**1.6 Value of a College Degree (5 of 11, 45%)**

Public scrutiny

Not an investment

## Interview Quotes: Finding #1, Most Salient Issues in Higher Education

### 1.1A Changing Demographics

Demographic changes were described as the most salient issue facing higher education today. This was best described by ZM, a college president in upstate New York: “The single biggest one would be demographics ... and where we are with the Baby Boom and their kids.”

The imminent demographic shifts in student enrollment were noted as especially challenging. Another president, DH, serving an urban institution in the Northeast, described the coming “storm” in more detail:

This is where the demographic storm is going to happen. It’s going to happen here. We already know that. And of course, when you then combine that with, you look at, it’s such a compelling map. Your map of the United States, the Mississippi River really divides the country in half. On the Eastern side is where you see all the private undergraduate, and small universities. And, on the West of the Mississippi, there are virtually no private entities. It’s almost all state. I mean, think about it. And, all those Western states, they don’t look like, they’re not 37 colleges and universities in one city ... if you’re small, if you’re in those states, if you don’t have big endowment, it’s just, I think the issues are truly survival.

These demographic changes force colleges to look at different enrollment markets, as JD, a college president at an urban institution said: “The enrollment in traditional colleges are declining over these 10 years just because of birthrate and demographic and all that and you should go into adult education. Go after the adult market.”

The demographic shifts require a “significant order change,” as PM, a college president at a rural Northeast institution stated:

Significant order change is needed, as opposed to nipping around the edges and saying, “Let’s just make admissions work harder, or let’s do a different view book.” And if we do a few small things, it’ll solve our problems. It’s tackling the 900-pound gorilla in the room, whatever that is, and being able to be okay with it.

Demographic changes require “white institutions” to understand that growth will come from underrepresented populations, and to fundamentally change a culture to

ensure that students feel welcomed and included. BD, a college president from upstate New York, described it best:

Historically white institutions need to understand that if there is growth, it's going to be in what are currently the underrepresented populations. And adapting to that is very difficult for schools. I mean, we can talk about diversity, and we can get the numbers. But the issue isn't just bringing in students, it's how do you fundamentally change the culture to one that's truly focused on belonging, and inclusion, and making sure that students not only feel welcomed at the place, but that all students gain from the benefits from being in a diverse environment.

College presidents also spoke to the impact of the softening of the international student market. WK, a college president from an urban institution, spoke to how those institutions that do not enroll international students still feel the impact because of the "food chain idea":

Even if you don't have international students, you are going to be impacted because of the food chain idea ... we are already seeing a place like Big City U for example, they went to their wait list, not in July. They went in April with scholarship awards. To the next college below them to grab those enrollments and that college is in turn, dipping down.

### **1.1B Business Model**

Overall, the rising costs at institutions were noted as a significant salient issue in higher education today. These escalating costs were not limited to tuition, as best said by GD, the president from an urban, public college: "It's more than tuition, it is transportation, food, childcare...." This was recapitulated by SC, another urban college president: "The hidden costs of education force our students to multitask. The pressure on student support services has grown exponentially."

Another example of a rising cost is keeping up with technology and its impact on operational efficiencies. An urban, private college president, WK, noted:

The cost of keeping up with technology is unsustainable for some colleges, and the impact of a technology lag is significant ... just operationally speaking, when I look around the college and think about operational efficiencies, they're all tech-based, all of them. If our workflow

is still happening with paper and if we're still using Excel spreadsheets to do our accounting, then we don't have efficiency. We are pulling our people down into the bottom half of their job descriptions. I think of jobs as columns and so you try to stay in the top half but we get pulled down to the bottom half. The operational impact of having a technology lag is significant. Even if like us, your business is bricks and mortar, you still need to evolve.

The rising costs in higher education sector were compared to what was previously seen in the healthcare sector, as explained by DJ, a college president from the Northeast:

This was a huge issue in the past for health care, and I was walking into that becoming a huge issue in education.... Trying to control cost in their control utilization and it changed the way I was literally in health care when it happened and it changed our behavior. Believe me they were not cost conscious before that, they just weren't because they were passing all the cost on to the insurance company.... There's been tremendous oversight and criticism, deservedly about the cost of education coming from all sectors. Heavily from the feds. Questions about using phrases like the value proposition of your degree is it worth it. Is it going to return the 1.2 trillion dollars in national education debt and how fast it's growing.

College presidents also cited flaws in the business model of higher education, and one college president, DH, questioned whether we had come to "the end of life of what has long been recognized as an unsustainable model." An urban college president, FC, continued along these same lines:

Because we're very dramatic, but actually it's been the grinding consequences of inevitably escalating costs and inadequate public support. So, people talk about it in dramatic terms only because we are clearly getting to the end of the life of what has long been recognized as an unsustainable model.... I just think that inevitably, smaller institutions have fewer elasticities, less flexibility. And we are hitting the wall a half step ahead of larger institutions, not because of demography. The pressures are the same. There are fewer 18-year olds and there are certainly fewer 18-year olds with family resources sufficient to the demand.

President FC went on to detail how both large and small institutions are facing a "relentless logic" related to the percentages of non-instructional costs as part of the overall operation:

That pressure's on large institutions as well as small. On average, the non-instructional costs at institutions larger than 5,000 run roughly 50% of

operations. On average, the non-instructional costs at institutions below 2,250 or so, on average run between 65 and 68%. That those figures are national shows that there is a relentless logic, some schools have responded more effectively and other schools less well, but there is a relentless logic to it. There are irreducible truths, means that you have to meet and that's what ... some are meeting them better than others, but those percentages do not vary a lot.

While student debt is often covered in the media, having a financially sustainable business model is multifaceted, as ZM noted: "We often read about the student debt problem, but upkeep of facilities and upkeep of faculty, staff, and having a financially sustainable model is equally complex."

## **1.2 Impediments to Innovation**

A majority of college presidents noted a challenge around institutional change, an emphasis on historical underpinnings, and the length of time it takes to for a new undertaking. One president, ZM, described this as a "bias toward measured approaches, and more guarding of the past than what I have seen in business." Another president, BD, concurred:

But to me, the biggest challenge, and this gets to your initial issue about agility, and that is that fundamentally higher education is too slow to change. In fact, I've often thought if I ever write a book about my experience, which I probably won't, but if I do, the first chapter's going to be the irony of higher education. Is that, we want to bring in students, and have them transformed while they're in college, and we want them to go out and change the world. But as institutions, we are so resistant. There are structural impediments to change. The challenge is to get them to see that change is important, and it's got to occur a little more rapidly. And I don't have a formula for how do you do this, but part of what I needed to do was keep pushing.... Get the input, but also keep moving forward.

A New England college president, PM, stated that historically academia had not changed, hence it attracted professionals comfortable with this type of environment:

Human beings have a real hard time with it [change] anyway, but higher ed ... it was a place where, for many, many years, nothing ever changed. And so, the academy attracted people who liked that consistency, and that kind of wonderful cocoon environment.

Several presidents described frustration with the length of time it takes to accomplish anything new. President DJ stated:

Speed can be difficult in academia. The way you have to move faculty and the speed that we have to get things done. Seriously, it's like we can't go from idea to operations in three years! It's way too long.

Another president, BD, highlighted adapting to the changing world around us so that we don't become "dinosaurs."

And the faster the world around us changes, the more it'll be apparent that we're dinosaurs, and we're either going to have to adapt to that change.... In ways that preserve the values and missions of the institutions. But, recognize that we can't take three years to start a new program. We can't take three years to come up with a new academic calendar.

An urban president, GD, stated that institutions must "keep up and act more swiftly" in a fast-paced, changing world, where students will have 10-15 jobs in their lifetime, and went on to add:

We are the first generation of educators who are responsible for providing, training and education to people on careers that haven't even been affected yet. And that is daunting. The world is changing at such a pace that the young people that are coming into this institution now are going to have 10, 15 jobs before they finish their careers, and we must keep up and act more swiftly as an institution, and that isn't easy.

Some college presidents stated that tenure factored into why higher education institutions were less agile than other industries. President BD noted:

One of the interesting things would be to figure out what are the structural issues that may make it harder for higher ed to be agile than for businesses. Tenure does play in there. Again, I'm a supporter of tenure, but it does play in.

One college president, DH, clearly labeled the tenure system as a detriment to higher education's viability:

I think the tenure system is the death out of higher education, as we know it. I really do.... There's no incentive to learn ... [if] are you brought up to believe that hard work and trying to do your best matter or, [you're eager to learn, but] there's an awful lot of willingness to settle for the status

quo. It's good enough. And, I don't think it is good enough, I think for the students it's not good enough.

Another college president, BD, spoke to the challenge of how colleges are organized and the degree to which departments are becoming "narrower and narrower in focus" at a time when the "rapidity of change" warrants a "broader focus":

Part of the challenge is the way we are organized. So, we're organized by departments. Within departments, we're narrowly focused. So it's not just that you get a PhD. Someone once said this, and it really stuck with me. It's not that you get a PhD in history. You get a PhD in history, and what your expertise is, you've studied the two years before the Civil War. You get narrower and narrower in focus. And it seems to me that we need to be broader in focus. Especially given the rapidity of change.

### **1.3 Student Issues**

Presidents described students coming to campus with a multitude of issues, with their mental health being the most prominent of the issues affecting college campuses today. One president, BD, said, "The other big issue now that we're all struggling with is this mental health issue. And it's frightening how many kids have mental health issues."

Another president, LT, pointed out that colleges now must "deal with the diverse areas of students' mental health." One urban college president, WK, also described these students' complexities:

The students are much more complex; they come to school with a multitude of issues. Creative institutions have a higher incidence of mental illness and there's two populations. You can look it up. It's 50%.

Presidents of commuter schools highlighted their students' particular challenge with multiple roles, and President SC said, "Most of my students here, they've got two jobs. They've got eldercare. They've got childcare."

### **1.4 Federal and State Mandates**

Federal and state mandates were also noted as pertinent issues confronting higher education today. New York college presidents highlighted the Excelsior Scholarship program as an example, as college president FC noted: "We have seen the Excelsior



Scholarship in New York as a threat to our enrollments.” This was reinforced by an upstate, rural college president, who stated that “political factors such as free tuition in New York State have been another added pressure.” JD, a Northeast college president, described new legislation that added another layer of oversight: “Massachusetts is the first state to enact a state legislation providing a different level of oversight because a small liberal arts college closed in the state with a couple weeks’ notice and the students were gone.”

### **1.5 Online Learning**

College presidents underscored the impact of online learning. JD described how online learning was disruptive to presidents’ “legacies” around the emphasis on bricks and mortar.

We just build, we just build, we just build. presidents’ legacies were buildings. That was also a phenomenon. So what? A lot of these places did build and build and build and can’t fill the dorms.... That was part of a culture. You’re not a great president if you haven’t built a new science building, built a new dorm, built this, built that. Online disrupted that. You don’t have people in seats, you don’t need to build that much.

College presidents at residential campuses grapple with how to incorporate technology and online learning into the curriculum. President DB noted:

I think for schools, like any residential campus, I think another challenge is going to be how to incorporate the changing technology in meaningful ways so that you can preserve the value of a residential campus, not become an online school. But we need to figure out how to incorporate all that in meaningful ways.

DJ, an urban college president, described the sector being disrupted by online education: “It was clear we were in the midst of some kind of disruption that was impacting the sector. It was the most ... the clear and obvious issue was the development of online.”

Another president, FC, has reservations about online learning because it will depersonalize learning and take away what makes “colleges successful at having an educational impact on kids.” He stated:

Education is a very personal thing, and the more they try to industrialize it and homogenize it, the more they’ll be disappointed at what isn’t achieved.... Why are small colleges more successful at having an educational impact on kids? Smaller class size, individual attention and accountability. It’s no great revelation.

### **1.6 Value of a College Degree**

The value of a college degree also was described as a salient issue, especially as it relates to public opinion. DJ, an urban college president, noted:

The noise, the sound, what we were talking about at conferences...it was clear that this kind of clear, public, scrutiny and criticism of higher ed was not something this sector had not been accustomed to. Absolutely not in 2010, 2011. The conferences were almost indignant about the idea that some people were questioning the value of a degree. Nobody says that anymore.... Watching over the next eight to ten ... again, I was coming in as an outsider, so I was observing a lot, I wasn’t deep in it.

Another college president, GD, stated that the cost of education is not seen as an investment:

Rather than see it as an investment, people see it as an expense, as a debt ... remind people that higher education is no longer a luxury. Higher education is a not a source of indebtedness. It is an investment. A college graduate will go and drop \$30,000 on a car loan, but you won’t put \$30,000 into your education, which may yield millions over the course of your life? And for students like the ones I serve who are coming from abject poverty, this is important.

College presidents were asked what the salient issues were in higher education today, and they detailed the pertinent issues and challenges facing their institutions and the overall sector. While the presidents preside over a variety of institutions as described above, the responses illuminated shared views on the issues at varying levels. While the majority of college presidents described changing demographics and the vulnerable business model as the most salient issues at 91%, impediments to innovation at 82%

followed by student issues at 64% also prevailed as salient issues confronting higher education today.

Table 6. *Outline of Finding #2, How College Presidents Learn and Keep up with Salient Issues in Higher Education*

**FINDING # 2**

**2.1 A majority of college presidents (73%) rely on their Senior Teams to keep up with and to respond to salient issues in Higher Education.**

College presidents further described keeping up with the salient issues in higher education in the following ways, in descending order:

**2.2 Networking (7 of 11, 64%)**

Networking outside the sector

Chamber of Commerce

Board of Trustees

**2.3 Publications & Periodicals (7 of 11, 64%)**

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

*Inside Higher Education*

*Wall Street Journal*/Business books

**2.4 Students (5 of 11, 45%)**

Formal and informal engagement

Student surveys

**2.5 Conferences (4 of 11, 36%)**

National conferences

Local chapters

Ivy U Leadership seminar

**2.6 Consultants (4 of 11, 36%)**

Online education

**2.7 Faculty (3 of 11, 27%)**

Cross-disciplinary groups

## **Interview Quotes: Finding #2, How College Presidents Learn and Keep up with Salient Issues in Higher Education**

### **2.1 Senior Team**

The majority of college presidents rely on their senior teams to stay abreast of the salient issues in higher education. As HC, a New England college president, succinctly stated, “I rely mainly on my senior team. I hire well, I invest in them, I learn from them.”

FC, an urban New York president, looks to his senior team to be “problem solvers” and focused on the institution’s future:

I expect them to bring ideas. I expect them to be problem solvers in the area. By and large, no matter what at the top says, everything is illusionary. No institution can change on a dime. So I expect them to have ideas and suggestions of what might make the institution’s future brighter.

Another urban New York college president, GD, relies on his “senior leadership council” to work in teams to “propose solutions”:

I learn from others. I surround myself with really smart people.... I think we are also, and this is something that I pushed when I first got here, we have a group that is called a senior leadership council. It’s the people below the cabinet level, the deans, the directors. Extraordinarily bright, talented people. And they were everything but a leadership council. We’d have a monthly meeting and they would report what was happening in their areas. So we reconstituted that leadership council around the critical portions of our strategic plan and have them work in teams to propose some solutions.

ZM, an upstate New York college president, counts on “bringing [his] team together to review what is working and not working” as a way to evaluate success. He expanded on this, stating:

This allows how to build on the plans for next year, where some get orphaned and others get fast-tracked.... Always going back to the plan, reevaluating success, and going to senior staff to assess progress. Going back to the plan to decide if some will be orphaned or magnified ... it is easier then to hold yourself accountable.

## 2.2 Networking

College presidents discussed networking as an important activity for keeping up with what is happening in the external environment. HC, a New England president, stressed networking with those “outside the field,” saying, “I network a lot with those outside the field. We often get stuck in the same old, and we have to look out.”

Another college president, BD, described the importance of being involved in the local community, and how that can result in opportunities for the college:

My job is to be in the community ... when I came here, one of my trustees was very active on the chamber board. He said, “You should be on the executive committee of the chamber.”... And it was because I was on that board that we got three \$1 million gifts within a month because of stuff that was going on in the community. There was a talk about building a major arts center downtown, at a smaller.... I kept saying at these board meetings, “We’ve got an intermediate sized arts center. All we need is \$10 million to renovate it.”... And it’s really because of being in the community.

DH, an urban New England president, said, “It’s networking, it’s relationships, it’s a lot of that.” She went on to describe how her involvement in the Chamber of Commerce led to a new opportunity for her institution:

A mutual colleague of mine and the guy who ran the casino here, he was the president of a company in Boston. Colleagues said, you need to call the president at C College. Before he could even call, this is a really fun story, this one time, we were at the Chamber of Commerce and I see my friend and she comes over. “Bob is here!” She grabs me and we run to the other side of the room. And she says, “Bob, this is the president of C College.” And he says, “Oh!” He says, “When can we meet?” And within a week I have him in here with me and him. He put his guys on it, I put my guys on it, within a month we had an agreement.

GD, an urban New York college president, spoke about a discussion with a “wealthy developer,” at a local event he was invited to, about preparing students for a new field in “construction tech”:

We’re doing the same thing in construction tech. A very wealthy developer at a local event shared with me the notions, “The construction field is booming, but even the pyramids eventually were finished, so you don’t build forever.” You need to start thinking about managing these buildings. They’re high, they’re multi-million-dollar investments that are

very complicated in terms of their HVAC systems, their computer systems, they're green rooms, all of the things that go into modern buildings now that somebody has to manage.

BD, an upstate New York college president, described how a board connection led to a new programmatic initiative in Artificial Intelligence:

The whole AI thing came about because we started thinking about data analytics. And I started reading stuff about AI. And then we met with someone, a woman on our board is a senior VP at IBM, and she hooked us up with an IBM person who was in artificial intelligence. He said, "You know, data analytics is too narrow. If you want to really get into this, you should look at artificial intelligence, which is much broader."

### 2.3 Publications and Periodicals

College presidents described the importance of learning through reading publications pertinent to higher education and to those with a broader perspective. DH stated how important it is to be an "avid reader" as her mode to be a "life-long learner":

I got my master's degree in library and information science. I am an avid reader and I really, I behave like a librarian. I'm always sending articles around for people to read, and if I get intrigued by something, I pursue it. And, I'm very ... I'm very interested in sort of self-education, being a lifelong learner. I think that's, you don't have to go to class to be a lifelong learner, I don't think.

This same president listed the publications that she reads daily: "Every day, I read the *Wall Street Journal*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*." Another college president, PM, stated that she reads her go-to publications, such as "*The Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Ed* I'm always clicking on, reading, what's going on there." Similarly, LT, an urban college president, stated that daily "briefings" come from "*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Education Technology & Services*." President ZM relies on "insights from the business world" as part of his learning:

I draw insights from the business world, of being concrete so that you can measure what you're trying to accomplish. I really like *Measure What Matters: The Simple Idea that Drives 10X Growth*, by John Doerr.

## 2.4 Students

A number of college presidents detailed how they keep up with the salient issues on campus by talking to and spending time with students, as SC, at an urban college, said: “I spend a lot of my time just talking with students.” This description was echoed by WK, another urban New York president, who stated, “I learn from students. Students are external in that they are refreshed each year. You have new families and new students on an annual basis.”

President LT stressed the importance of speaking to students beyond the “student government leaders”:

I spend a lot of time with students. I like to get a temperature check. It’s critical not to just speak to student government leaders, but to walk around campus and ask them questions. What do you think about that? And then sometimes they say, “I think it’s fantastic,” and other times they say, “I think it’s silly.” So just trying to get that ‘man on the street’ perspective of what we are doing and if it makes sense from a student perspective.

President DJ learns from students through student data, including student surveys:

Honestly just staying abreast to what is going on in the field and this place is paying attention to our student data ... we do student surveys, so we look at those to see what students are saying about us.

## 2.5 Conferences

To a lesser degree, college presidents attend conferences to keep up with the salient issues in higher education. President WK spoke to participating in conferences as a way to learn what the “issues are” and to have conversations with colleagues that are “candid and confidential”:

I go to conferences, to talks to colleagues who are also my competition. Through listening and conversations, I understand what the issues are and figure out ways to address them.... That’s why you go to that Ivy U seminar. It’s not for the Ivy U seminar, it’s, “Do you feel that you can be in a cohort where you can have conversations that are candid and confidential?”

Another college president, FC, stated that while he still goes to conferences, he does so with a “healthy skepticism”:

I still go to them but you have to have a healthy and informed skepticism... A lot of it is still going to some PowerPoint presentation on the evils of lecturing. So, if you're not critically minded ... that's why I always say, "Those people who are going to want you to go to the Holiday Inn in Mamaroneck, if there is one, to teach you how to become rich with real estate, if they knew, they wouldn't be at a Holiday Inn in Mamaroneck, right?"

Another college president, DJ, spoke to the importance of conferences "in her early years" as a college president, but more recently, she has been active in her local chapters:

I would go to the CIC conference, the Council of Independent Colleges. I would go to the NAICU, National Association of Independent Colleges.... So I went to all those in the beginning, but over the recent years I just haven't. Just, honestly, just time. But I've been very active locally in AICUM, our local Mass association of Independent Colleges, and that's about, I don't know, 80 of us. Probably any given meeting there are at least 30-40 presidents. So that's become important to me and I also attended content specific professional development at the Ivy U Leadership Initiative.... I was trying to build relationships and learn.

A New England college president, PM, echoed the same preference for local chapters versus national conferences, stating, "I still go to conferences, but I prefer my local chapters instead of the larger national ones."

An urban college president, DJ, read a lot about the role and followed the recommendation of attending professional development prior to starting her tenure:

I Googled all these books about being a college president. I went to Ivy U's institute for presidents with a colleague. It was wonderful, it was one of the best pieces of advice I got from a colleague before I started.

## **2.6 Consultants**

College presidents also stated the role of consultants as a way to learn and keep up with the salient issues in higher education. As one college president, HC, said, "I am big on consultants and outsourcing. Why drain the staff if someone else knows better ... the team must manage those relationships."

Another college president, DJ, spoke to how she utilizes consultants to assess matters at the college: "A lot of my currency, if you will, is talking to colleagues,



consultants. I've brought over the years a number of different consultants to take a look at things in the college.”

Two college presidents described the important role of consultants in embarking on an online educational presence. President MC described the process, stating:

Outsourcing and consultants have been important to me ... so the nice thing about the rev share model is that you can still make a lot of money, and they'll take the majority of the revenues. But you also don't have any marketing expense. They've got the call centers. So we would do the course development, and we'd control the curriculum, course development, and faculty. But they did the marketing.

Another president, DH, expanded the use of consultants as “partners” in this work:

Lucky for us really early in the game, we partnered with a great partner and they have done a fabulous job with us. We make all the admissions decisions. We create the curriculum, we deliver the curriculum, they provide the technology. They're a great partner. I've never seen any aspect of this partnership that I didn't think was really to our advantage. And, if you think about it, really for us it was an infusion of capital. That we just did not have. Because, we could never have invested in the caliber of marketing opportunity. There's just no way. We went from making \$4 million in 2014 to \$80 million in 2017.

## 2.7 Faculty

Another method that college presidents described for keeping up with what is happening is through their faculty was stated best by WK, an urban New York college president: “I rely on a cadre of key faculty and cross-sectional faculty groups.” Another college president, SC, described how she relies on faculty as part of her “classroom for keeping up with changes,” adding, “The campus is my classroom for keeping up with changes. If I stay connected to my students and faculty, I can keep up with the changes.”

When college presidents were asked about their own learning and keeping up with the salient issues in higher education, the majority at 73% stated that they rely on their senior team to keep them abreast of those issues, while 64% spoke to the importance of networking with the community, boards, and others to keep up with the salient issues.

Sixty-four percent rely on publications and journals that are industry-specific, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education*, and other major periodicals that cover daily events as a means to support their learning, and to a lesser extent, 45% of the presidents rely on students, followed by attending conferences as a way to stay abreast at 4%. Also at 4% was the use of consultants, followed relying on faculty at 3%.

Table 7. *Outline of Finding #3, What Do College Presidents Look for When Hiring a Senior Staff Member?*

### **FINDING # 3**

**3.1 A strong majority of presidents (81%) identified relevant experience as the most important criteria when hiring for their senior team. 72% identified dimensions from the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) as the second most important criteria.** College presidents then identified the following criteria as most important for hiring for their senior team, in descending order:

#### **3.2 Dimensions of the BLAI (8 of 11, 72%)**

Flexibility  
Feedback Seeking  
Risk-Taking

#### **3.3 Other (7 of 11, 63%)**

Drive  
Take their work seriously, but not themselves seriously

### **Interview Quotes: Finding #3, What Do College Presidents Look for When Hiring a Senior Staff Member?**

#### **3.1 Relevant Experience**

When college presidents were asked what they look for in hiring a new senior staff member, they first focused on the importance of direct and relevant experience and a proven track record. Most then also went on to describe characteristics and attributes around functioning behaviors.

President JD noted the importance of experience, stating, “You get in the door because we looked at your résumé and you passed the threshold. Your background looks as though you have the knowledge, the skills, and the experience.”

Another college president, FC, also emphasized that match in experience: “I look for expertise, relevant experience, and those come from similar sized institutions.” President WK had similar sentiments, stating that she hires “from within and from without, but I look for direct and relevant experience so that there is a short learning curve when they get the job.”

### **3.2 BLAI Dimensions**

When searching for a new senior team member, President ZM searches for “a professional that is concrete in goal setting and judging his or her own performance, as well as someone that is straightforward and able to have honest conversations with.”

President GD looks for “those who come to it with the skillset and the predisposition to doing things differently.”

President HC identifies candidates that are willing to take risks. He said he “looks for those that aren’t set in their ways; someone that is willing to take risks and collaborate with others ... and a willingness to put in the professional development and support services to build the skillset.”

President JD stated the importance of flexibility for her team: “I look for people who are flexible and open in the way they think about issues, challenges, and opportunities.”

### **3.3 Other Skills**

When evaluating a potential candidate, President BD stated, “I look for people who take their work seriously, but don’t take themselves too seriously.” Another president, DH, says that she is looking for someone “that can match my drive and energy to achieve.”

Overall, a majority of college presidents (81%) look for specific functional area experience when hiring for their senior team. Moreover, 72% of the presidents identified qualities included in Burke's Learning Agility dimensions (Burke, 2016) as key attributes when recruiting a new senior staff member.

Table 8. *Outline of Finding #4, The High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents*

**FINDING #4**

**4.1 A strong majority of participants (73%) indicated the Chief Academic Affairs/Provost role as changing the most rapidly and requiring the greatest need for Learning Agility.** College presidents then identified the following roles as requiring the most Learning Agility, in descending order:

**4.2 Enrollment (6 of 11, 55%)**

Well-versed in national and international markets

“All things to all people”

Ability to recruit the right number of students and the “right” type of students

**4.3 Student Affairs (5 of 11, 45%)**

Areas of responsibility have grown by an “order of magnitude”

Mental health & wellness

**4.4A President (4 of 11, 36%)**

Multifaceted role, with an external focus

Balance risks with innovation

Traditional trajectory to president in question

**4.4B Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (4 of 11, 36%)**

Emerging role

“Swiss Army Knife”

Flexible and agile

**4.5 Finance and Administration (3 of 11, 27%)**

Role has become more creative and strategic

Partner on presidential priorities and “go-to” cabinet member

**4.6 Other (3 of 11, 27%)**

Advancement

Communications & Marketing

## **Interview Quotes: Finding #4, The High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents**

### **4.1 Academic Affairs/Provost**

The Chief Academic Affairs officer was described by college presidents as being the role that has been impacted most by the salient issues in higher education, and thus requires the most Learning Agility on the senior staff team. One college president, WK, described how the role has changed from “sedentary” to one that must focus on programs that will thrive and solidify a college’s “market position”:

I often think about how much the chief academic affairs officer’s role has changed over the years. It’s no longer a sedentary role, a place to think, ponder and develop. The VP for academic affairs position has changed the way the college as a whole has changed and that is, it now has to think about what programs are going to thrive. While ensuring that your programs will thrive in the marketplace and position you the way you want to be positioned.... But that recruitment now is all about bringing in faculty who help you solidify your market position and your brand.

President BD succinctly said:

I would say the academic vice president also needs to be the most agile.... I think the most difficult role on a college campus like ours because they have to deal with the day-to-day minutia and try to also keep an eye on the big picture and what’s coming down the line. That’s the biggest difference.

Another college president, FC, described the Provost’s role as the “most complicated” and the need for that role to look “internally and externally... to bring about change.” He stated that:

A Provost has to deal with the most complicated problems internally and externally. The Provost needs to look externally, and bring about change, though this change is often met with resistance and angst. The role now needs to think about initiatives that will keep the institution relevant and attractive to students, but also needs to convince the faculty of that too.

A New England president, PM, said it is the Provost that needs to “embrace innovation;” but “that is not always the case,” citing “[the] need to change, and the need

for the academic side of the house to be a major part of that change. Which isn't always the case."

An urban college president, LT, said that it is the Provost needs "to be innovative," not afraid to fail, and able to take risks that might make "some folks uncomfortable." He described the role:

I think it's the provost. The provost needs to be innovative. He needs to not be afraid to fail. There's lots of things that we do well and I think that we can continue to do well and serviceable for the foreseeable future, but if we really want to move the needle on student success, if we really want to open up some new opportunities for students, it's going to involve taking risks that might make some folks uncomfortable, offering courses in new modalities, developing programs in emerging fields, reaching out beyond the campus to assess the needs of employers and industry partners that'll inform academic decisions. This is something that I think is almost under the provost.

President DH described a major shift in the Provost's role, stating, "The Provost was once the keeper of the experience, but now needs to understand the business they're in, and I think that is a major shift in the role."

President DJ, an urban college president, stated that the volatility in higher education has been felt most by the Provost, but she feels it is the "hardest role to change." She said:

The role I think has been impacted the most is the Provost. They're the ones ... the hardest role to change, the most with their feet stuck in the concrete of tradition in a college. Not even because of their attitude, it's the institution, it's the history of higher ed. They own the legacy of this sector. I think more than the president. I think that role has been the one that should be of the greatest impact, and the question is in the institution, "Do they feel it?"

## **4.2 Enrollment**

The chief enrollment officer was described as a role that has borne the brunt of the salient issues that have impacted higher education and requires a high degree of Learning Agility. President ZM summarized this by stating:

Enrollment, like at most other institutions, has become a salient issue and we are no exception. Growth in international recruitment, expanding into NYC, and advanced modeling are all important and complex work demanded from the chief enrollment officer. Having a sensibility for global markets, and many unknowns, plus she needs to determine how the institution fits within the international marketplace. Our enrollment person needs to pinpoint the right students, not just recruit them, but ensure that they persist successfully and graduate. Moreover, she needs to understand, expand and infiltrate new markets.

President FC described the chief enrollment officer as needing to be “all things to all people.” He elaborated:

The chief enrollment officer has to be all things to all people. You need the latest in marketing and outreach, you need to gain the confidence of the faculty, and you have to answer to your colleagues, and you have to be able to do this well in a very complicated marketplace.

Another college president, DB, stated the enrollment person as needing to have “a laser-focus” and an ability to look into the future and respond accordingly. He explained:

With the significant demographic changes, the enrollment person needs to be laser focused on how to set us apart from the competition. So, you need an enrollment person who can read their horizon and change ... that person needs to be very entrepreneurial, and very data-driven.

Two college presidents spoke to the importance of the enrollment manager to both find the right number, but also the “right” students, and the importance of this role being able to work “under pressure.” President HC stated:

Understanding today’s marketplace, and ensuring that you are keeping up with best practices is crucial to meeting enrollment goals. The chief enrollment officer has to not only recruit the right number, but also the right students. The enrollment person has to be comfortable being under pressure, and those pressures are greater today than they ever were before.

This was reinforced by another college president, DG, who described:

When you talk about the impact, I would separate that into impact defined as pressure. The most impacted would be S-D-E-M, student development enrollment management. You got to find the numbers, you have to register the students, they have to provide the academic advisement, they have to provide the financial aid, packaging....

PM, a New England rural college president, highlighted how the chief enrollment officer's work has changed:

It's not just who's blowing up the balloons and giving the tour. It's more about how do you get to the student, get to them early, get them engaged early, get them admitted, packaged, and leaning toward depositing?

### 4.3 Student Affairs

College presidents also identified the Student Affairs role that has been changed over the years, and has "grown by an order of magnitude." ZM, an upstate New York president, spoke to how this role has grown significantly:

The VP of Student Affairs has grown by an order of magnitude; a huge issue is health and wellness because it is major investment. Are we doing enough for public safety? You need to think holistically around health and wellness, and you need to coordinate with the other internal functions, i.e., is public safety properly staffed and trained. Needs to look at the faculty development to ensure that they are creating camaraderie and community. Chief Student Affairs person needs to go beyond their silos to benefit from the range we have on campus.

Another urban college president, WK, discussed the "dramatic changes" to the student affairs role as being more complex, and said that professional needs "to wear multiple hats." She stated:

While the VP for student affairs is a fairly new role in higher education, it has indeed changed dramatically. The students are much more complex; they come to school with a multitude of issues. Creative institutions have a higher incidence of mental illness and there's two populations. You can look it up. It's 50%. Depending on how you structure the position, that person now needs to wear multiple hats, and be comfortable in dealing with multiple constituencies.

One college president, HC, described how the student affairs role has been "hit hard over the years," and the responsibilities of a student affairs is much more complex, and is no longer just about "parties and events." He stated:

The student affairs role has been hit hard over the years, and I think a whole new skillset. They need to deal with the diverse areas of students' mental health, the complexities of title IV, and the legal issues of pertinent to



students, and they must be skilled at conflict resolutions with students, families and the administration. It's no longer about parties and events; it has become a high-stakes position.

#### **4.4A President**

Some college presidents described their role as the one that has changed the most and needs the most agility. One college president, HC, directly stated:

Look, the president's role has changed the most, I just wish the people doing the hiring would understand that. The president needs to be externally focused, but hiring the best senior team, and must negotiate between innovating, taking risks, and preserving what makes the institution pertinent and relevant in today's times. The president can no longer just sit around and pontificate.

Another college president, BD, discussed the role as being the one that has been impacted the most because of the volatility in higher education, underscoring that the president needs to be the "rainmaker" and "face of the institution." He said:

I think the president's role has been the impacted the most. We need to be the rainmakers. We need to be the ones looking, we need to hire well and manage well. We can't rest on our laurels. I don't care who you are, I don't care which institution we're talking about, the president's role has changed. You are the face of the institution. You need to decide how to build its brand and make sure it remains dynamic while still relevant.

An urban college president, DH, spoke to the changing role of the president and the importance of academia "accepting ... non-traditional presidents" as successful ones. She explained:

I believe the role that has changed to most has to be the president. This is hard for academia to accept, but I believe non-traditional presidents, meaning not an academic, can succeed. The president needs to be forward thinking. If you don't see what's happening there, than you're obviously not offering what the outside world is interested in.

#### **4.4B Strategic Initiatives/Innovations**

College presidents detailed creating a new role that directly responds to the opportunities and current needs to function productively as an institution. One college

president, DJ, described several roles that were “designed because of the changes we’re facing,” stating:

This role was created for that. Vice President for Innovation Strategic Initiatives. We were beginning to identify a number of areas that were new for us in response to interns that were staying in the marketplace among our students, and I needed it owned by someone because we were getting things all over the place and I said, “Hey, what’s going on here?” Ideas were coming from different places and I needed an owner. That [other] position was designed to facilitate flexibility and agility, ability to move quickly and respond to what’s going on in the marketplace with our students and with the employers. They’re our customers.

Another urban college president, WK, detailed the creation of the “most important position” on her cabinet:

The position that I created, VP for Strategic Initiatives, is one of the most fluid and most important on my cabinet, especially at a smaller institution. That position requires, someone that is “Swiss army knife.” That person needs to be able to step in and build capacity on a whim.

PM, a New England college president, developed this role to for agility and an ability to “plan, create, and implement.” She said of this role:

The VP for academic alliance needs to be agile and a quick learner. You don’t know what’s coming your way, but you had better be ready to strategically plan, create and implement. Nothing is set in stone. They need to be ready to learn and act.

President DH spoke to the Strategic Initiatives role that by “its very nature” is agile. She said:

This is the role by its very nature that requires the most agility. This is the person that has to take a risk, fail, do it again and do it better. This person needs to communicate up and down, and must be driven and strategic.

#### **4.5 Vice President for Finance and Administration**

A smaller number of college presidents deemed the Finance and Administration role as changing the most. President DG stated:

I think the CFO’s job has changed greatly in the last ten years. It’s no longer good enough to make sure the financials and administration are intact,

that the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed. You now need to be creative; you have to create budgets that allow for presidential priorities and professional development. Managing budgets and people has grown ever more complex.... While a CFO tends to operate within the established rules and policies of the university, the CFO also needs to understand where the president wants to go, and be able to say, "Okay, let me figure out how to get you there." I think this role is even more complicated at public institutions.

A New England college president, HC, identified the VPFA as his "go-to person," and as one of "most crucial roles on the cabinet." He described the role in this way:

My VPFA has to be my go-to person. He has to be able to figure out how to make my initiatives work financially. Of course he has to follow the regulations, but that does not preclude that person from being strategic and creative. That role has changed a lot over the years, it has become one of the most crucial roles on the cabinet.

#### **Finding #4, High Impact Roles Identified by College Presidents: Quantitative Analysis of Learning Agility and Roles**

When College Presidents were asked which role on their senior team has been most affected by the salient issues in higher education, a strong majority (73%) identified the Chief Academic Affairs Officer as being the most exposed and requiring the most Learning Agility, while 55% identified the Chief Enrollment Officer, followed by the Chief Student Affairs position as needing the most Learning Agility. At 4%, the President identified his/her role as the one that has been most impacted by the salient issues in higher education and needing higher levels of Learning Agility, while 4% identified their Chief Innovation Officer and 3% identified the Chief Finance Officer as the role that has been most exposed to the changing issues in higher education today.

To further understand the Presidents' views on those roles that have changed the most, and therefore require the most Learning Agility a statistical analysis was conducted to determine if those in the high impact roles did indeed have higher learning adaptability than those in the low impact roles. This analysis showed that there was not a significant

difference in learning adaptability between those in high impact roles from those in the low impact roles.

Based on those responses, an analysis was conducted to see if those in high impact roles had higher Learning Agility. To understand the relationship between Learning Agility and those in high impact roles from those in other roles, the researcher performed a logistic regression analysis. This initial model accounted for the control variables, gender, age, and years of experience. Also, in this model, the demographic variables, ethnicity, job role, education, or years since starting position were excluded, as these variables did not contain enough participants at each level to allow for accurate results. The model showed acceptable linearity between the log odds of high impact roles and BLAI Percentile Scores, Age, and Experience variables. Further, it was confirmed that these data did not contain any influential or outlier observations, and that the continuous variables of interest did not have a high amount of collinearity. As such, Table 9 provides an overview of the results. The overall logistic regression model was not significant,  $\chi^2(4) = 2.7, p < 0.60$ . Based on these results, it was determined that those in the high impact roles did not have higher Learning Agility scores. Learning Agility did not distinguish those in high impact roles from those in other roles  $\chi^2(1) = 0.15, p < 0.70$ .

Table 9. *Results of Test of Logistic Regression Showing High Impact Roles*

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	P Value	Odds Ratio
<b>Predictor</b>				
Overall BLAI Score	0.00	0.01	0.67	1.00
<b>Control</b>				
Gender				
Female [Reference]	--	--	--	--
Male	-0.29	0.51	0.57	0.75
Age	0.02	0.03	0.62	1.02
Experience	0.02	0.03	0.41	1.02

Note. N = 77.

Examining the mean overall scores and the dimension scores between those in high impact and low impact roles (see Table 10), there are a few key points that stand out. Those that were in high impact roles rated themselves highest on the dimensions Reflecting (69.88) and Collaborating (69.12) and rated themselves lowest on Experimenting (55.92) and Feedback Seeking (40.48). Those in the lower impact jobs also rated themselves highest on Collaborating (66.83) and Reflecting (64.54), and they rated themselves lowest on Interpersonal Risk-Taking (56.25) and Feedback Seeking (40.63). The largest difference between mean scores by dimension was in Performance Risk-Taking, with those in high impact roles rating themselves at 61.48 and those in low impact roles rating themselves at 58.56.

Table 10 illustrates differences in overall BLAI and dimension percentile means between the levels of performance and high impact roles.

In Table 11, the mean scores of the dimensions by role reveal additional information. While the Provost role was identified as the first ranked high impact role, (73%), the overall mean BLAI score for Provosts (53.20) was the fourth highest among the senior members of the core senior team (eight total roles, including the President), defined as the roles represented on at least 50% of the institutions surveyed. Collectively, the Provosts rated themselves the highest in the following dimensions: Collaborating, Performance Risk-Taking and Information Gathering (tied), and Reflecting. Conversely, they rated themselves the lowest on the following dimensions: Feedback Seeking, Flexibility, and Interpersonal Risk-Taking.

While 55% of presidents identified the Chief Enrollment Officer as the second ranked high impact role, the overall mean BLAI score (42.40) for these individuals ranked seventh among the core members (8 total, including the President) of the senior team. Chief Enrollment Officers ranked themselves highest on the following dimensions: Experimenting, Flexibility, and Collaborating. Conversely, they ranked themselves

Table 10. Means and Standard Deviations of BLAI and Dimension Percentile Scores, by Performance and Impact

Variable	<i>n</i>	Overall BLAI	Speed	Reflecting	Performance Risk Taking	Interpersonal Risk Taking	Information Gathering	Flexibility	Feedback Seeking	Experimenting	Collaborating
Performance											
High	21	63.19 (28.16)	66.48 (26.07)	69.81 (23.79)	66.43 (25.25)	67.57 (29.81)	67.52 (30.03)	75.52 (26.27)	46.38 (24.61)	66.62 (28.62)	77.33 (25.67)
Other	56	51.34 (27.28)	54.52 (28.57)	64.95 (27.21)	56.91 (28.30)	54.09 (29.39)	54.71 (30.26)	62.18 (28.57)	38.41 (28.70)	53.64 (29.15)	63.91 (27.23)
High Impact Role											
Yes	25	51.92 (27.91)	58.96 (27.12)	69.88 (22.65)	61.48 (27.28)	60.92 (30.52)	61.68 (30.19)	63.60 (28.67)	40.48 (25.49)	55.92 (28.81)	69.12 (26.98)
No	52	55.85 (28.00)	57.21 (29.03)	64.54 (27.87)	58.56 (28.07)	56.25 (29.81)	56.54 (30.89)	65.67 (28.19)	40.63 (28.96)	57.79 (29.94)	66.83 (27.71)

*Note.*  $N = 77$ .  $n$  = the number of participants at each level of the dependent variables. Mean percentile scores are placed above parenthesis, which contain the standard deviation for each mean.

lowest on the following dimensions: Feedback Seeking, Interpersonal Risk-Taking, and Performance Risk-Taking.

While 45% of Presidents identified the Chief Student Affairs Officer as the third ranked high impact role, the mean overall BLAI scores for these individuals (48) ranked sixth among the core members of the senior team. Chief Student Affairs Officers ranked themselves highest on the following dimensions: Reflecting, Collaborating, and Information Gathering. Conversely, they scored the lowest on the following dimensions: Feedback Seeking, Experimenting, Performance Risk-Taking.

Presidents' overall BLAI scores (78) were the highest of all members of the core senior team. Collectively, they ranked themselves highest in the following dimensions: Interpersonal Risk-Taking, Collaborating, and Flexibility. Conversely, they ranked themselves lowest in the following dimensions: Speed, Information Gathering, and Performance Risk-Taking.

In response to the question about which role on the senior team had changed the most, "the high impact role," and therefore needed a higher level of Learning Agility, Presidents identified the Provost (73%) as the most impacted role. Subsequently, Presidents identified the Chief Enrollment Officer position (55%), followed by the Chief of Student Affairs (45%). While the Provost role was identified as the first ranked high impact role (73%), the overall mean BLAI score for Provosts (53.20) was the fourth highest among the senior members of the core senior team. Though 55% of Presidents identified the Chief Enrollment Officer as the second ranked high impact role, the overall mean BLAI score (42.40) for these individuals ranked seventh among the core members. Furthermore, while 45% of Presidents identified the Chief Student Affairs Officer as the third ranked high impact role, the mean overall BLAI scores for these individuals (48) ranked sixth among the core members of the senior team.

Table 11 illustrates the average BLAI and dimension percentile scores for participants by the role they held in their organization.

Table 11. Means and Standard Deviations for Overall BLAI and Dimension Percentile Scores by Job Role

Job Role	<i>n</i>	Overall BLAI	Speed	Reflecting	Performance Risk Taking	Interpersonal Risk Taking	Information Gathering	Flexibility	Feedback Seeking	Experimenting	Collaborating
President	8	78.00 (17.70)	65.63 (23.07)	81.25 (17.95)	75.25 (30.87)	93.88 (4.82)	72.50 (21.14)	84.25 (14.22)	47.88 (27.34)	80.13 (18.12)	88.13 (11.96)
Provost/Academic Affairs	5	53.20 (28.15)	56.00 (33.93)	64.00 (14.35)	67.00 (17.51)	54.40 (37.67)	67.00 (27.64)	53.40 (23.50)	44.20 (28.16)	55.20 (33.77)	71.00 (24.28)
Chief Financial Officer	6	76.67 (19.27)	87.00 (13.62)	90.67 (5.24)	58.33 (37.46)	67.80 (30.13)	84.00 (9.10)	89.17 (9.70)	49.00 (37.80)	71.17 (30.56)	79.83 (23.00)
VP of Advancement	6	61.00 (36.27)	65.17 (31.88)	65.50 (32.54)	68.67 (34.59)	56.33 (35.99)	51.33 (40.01)	71.00 (36.62)	38.33 (37.13)	67.67 (40.67)	73.50 (33.93)
Chief Enrollment Officer	5	42.40 (25.56)	52.80 (29.48)	53.00 (11.22)	41.60 (34.03)	36.80 (29.94)	42.60 (33.16)	61.00 (16.54)	33.80 (14.67)	61.40 (18.50)	55.60 (20.38)
Chief Student Affairs Officer	8	48.00 (27.58)	59.13 (30.55)	75.13 (22.64)	51.13 (20.40)	61.50 (24.86)	64.50 (33.20)	59.88 (29.55)	34.50 (31.05)	49.25 (23.38)	70.38 (30.65)
Chief of Staff	2	47.00 (18.38)	61.50 (12.02)	40.00 (14.14)	62.50 (12.02)	47.00 (7.07)	27.00 (5.66)	60.50 (41.72)	59.50 (4.95)	37.00 (25.46)	54.50 (55.86)
VP Strategic Partnerships	3	47.33 (23.97)	46.67 (20.21)	42.33 (14.98)	6749.33 (4.04)	44.00 (37.99)	74.67 (12.10)	62.33 (22.72)	47.67 (23.50)	46.00 (9.00)	51.00 (34.12)
General Counsel	2	54.00 (33.94)	66.00 (18.38)	57.00 (38.18)	64.50 (38.89)	46.00 (43.84)	77.00 (9.90)	79.50 (19.09)	20.50 (27.58)	58.00 (39.60)	45.50 (21.92)
Chief Diversity Officer	3	17.00 (18.03)	6.00 (6.24)	35.67 (37.82)	22.00 (22.11)	32.67 (39.55)	47.33 (41.02)	35.00 (32.60)	12.67 (15.01)	23.67 (27.59)	40.67 (39.50)
Chief Marketing & Communications	3	58.33 (33.08)	53.67 (32.33)	72.00 (24.25)	62.67 (25.03)	74.00 (38.12)	46.00 (33.15)	49.00 (38.31)	33.00 (20.07)	80.67 (15.01)	77.67 (20.11)
Chief Strategic Initiatives/Innovation	4	48.25 (29.43)	46.50 (13.89)	61.50 (40.53)	64.50 (30.05)	60.75 (23.94)	47.50 (31.13)	65.25 (34.22)	40.00 (0.00)	52.00 (41.67)	60.25 (34.85)
VP for Human Resources	1	35.00 (N/A)	79.00 (N/A)	17.00 (N/A)	87.00 (N/A)	87.00 (N/A)	31.00 (N/A)	96.00 (N/A)	4.00 (N/A)	86.00 (N/A)	72.00 (N/A)
Chief Information Officer/IT	1	89.00 (N/A)	91.00 (N/A)	76.00 (N/A)	71.00 (N/A)	52.00 (N/A)	94.00 (N/A)	96.00 (N/A)	86.00 (N/A)	63.00 (N/A)	94.00 (N/A)
VP for Institutional Effectiveness	3	44.00 (6.56)	48.67 (31.09)	76.33 (14.43)	90.00 (10.15)	57.00 (8.66)	56.33 (37.22)	42.67 (20.21)	22.33 (2.89)	41.00 (37.16)	64.33 (20.60)
Director of Athletics	1	33.00 (N/A)	44.00 (N/A)	23.00 (N/A)	71.00 (N/A)	67.00 (N/A)	31.00 (N/A)	57.00 (N/A)	19.00 (N/A)	30.00 (N/A)	41.00 (N/A)
Other (see sub-category role code)	16	52.38 (29.69)	54.63 (29.40)	68.44 (26.29)	53.31 (24.24)	46.63 (26.25)	49.94 (32.76)	60.13 (30.91)	48.50 (30.16)	50.06 (28.50)	64.56 (26.58)

Note.  $N = 77$ .  $n$  = the number of participants in each role. Mean percentile scores are placed above parenthesis, which contain the standard deviation for each mean.

N/A = Standard deviations could not be computed for roles with single observations.



Table 12. *Outline of Finding #5, Presidents' Views on Top Performers***FINDING #5**

**While a majority of college presidents identified the Provost as the senior cabinet member that exceeded expectations (45%), a lesser number (36%) identified themselves as exceeding expectations, followed by the Chief Enrollment Officer (27%) and Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (27%) roles.**

College presidents listed the following roles as exceeding expectations:

**President (4 of 11, 36%)**

**Chief Enrollment Officer (3 of 11, 27%)**

**Vice President for Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (3 of 11, 27%)**

**Vice President for Finance & Administration (2 of 11, 18%)**

**Chief Student Affairs Officer (2 of 11, 18%)**

**Chief Advancement Officer (1 of 11, 9%)**

**Chief of Staff (1 of 11, 9%)**

**Chief Diversity Officer (1 of 11, 9%)**

**Vice President of Communications & Marketing (1 of 9, 9%)**

**Vice President for Strategic Partnerships (1 of 9, 9%)**

**Interview Quotes: Finding #5, Which Roles Identified  
by College Presidents Have Exceeded Expectations?**

The relationship between performance and Learning Agility has been shown in the for-profit sector. To reach an initial understanding of that relationship in higher education, presidents were asked to identify and describe their high performers on their senior teams. These high performers were examined in relation to their overall BLAI scores by dimension, and then also compared to the overall BLAI scores of those not identified as the high performers.

**Provost**

A New England college president, PM, described the Provost as someone that understands “the need to change,” and the “need for the academic side” to be part of that change too. She said:

He is superb, because not only is the keeper of the keys of academic program and quality and of course managing the faculty, who are very fond of him. And he was promoted from within. But he totally gets innovation.

The need to change, and the need for the academic side of the house to be a major part of that change. Which isn't always the case. So he is very creative, very innovative. And he has the trust of the faculty. So it's a perfect world in that regard.

Another college president, DB, spoke to the importance of having "credibility" with the faculty and being "skilled at moving faculty along," stating:

Vice President of Academic Affairs is important to this. She's very big in this. And she's, both the woman who was here before was great, but the woman now is really, really good. The faculty love her, she's got a lot of credibility. She is also incredibly skilled at moving faculty along.

An urban college president, FC, described his Provost as being one of the best because of her patience, and a "problem-solver." He also credits her for "half the things" he achieves, saying, "She is a problem-solver, and very patient. She's one of the best on my team. I couldn't get half the things that need to be one without her."

Another college president, DH, described her Provost as being "very bright and capable" as well as being "patient working with faculty." She quoted her Provost, who said, "I'm a faculty and I love faculty," and followed it by stating, "She has the patience for that type of work."

GD, an urban college president, described his Provost as being a "risk-taker" and being able to "look out and look in." He said, "She is superb, and courageous ... she takes risks, and writes well. She has a tremendous work ethic. She hires well, and she looks out and look in. She will be a college president."

## **President**

BD, an upstate New York college president, spoke to his success in creating "a vision" for the college that focused on "strengthening the academic program" versus "climbing walls or fancy dorms." He noted his success, stating:

The three fundamental roles of the president, first, help set the vision. Two, become a champion for the vision, so you're the chair leader. And third, the most important thing is, empower others to maximize their support for the vision. And I think I have been very successful in that. We had a vision to establish an ancillary program for AI; that's what I'm good at,

setting the vision. We made a decision to put our effort in academic programming, as opposed to climbing walls or fancy dorms. So for the last dozen years or more, we have invested heavily in facilities that are needed for academic programs, and faculty that are needed for academic programs.

This same college president told how his work was recognized by auditors as standing out among other, similar institutions; he related the following anecdote:

Our auditors are a local CPA firm that does about 60 colleges in New York. After our last audit the guy said, “You know, you seem to be doing a lot better than many of our other schools.” So I said, “Well why do you think that is?”... Out of the clear blue he said, “Well it seems to me like what you’ve done is you’ve invested in academic programming, whereas a lot of the other schools are investing in sort of nice dining halls, and nice dorms. At the end of the day, people are coming to get a degree, and get a job.

A New England college president, PM, described her background in enrollment as it taught her “how to produce” in a “quantifiable, functional area.” She noted:

I think I’m successful because I came up through a quantifiable, functional area, enrollment, so I know how to produce ... I am creative, and I have developed skills to recognize a real opportunity where it presents itself. I see something and grab it, whereas my colleagues say, “It doesn’t seem like a big deal to me.”

Another college president, HC, spoke to his non-traditional route to the presidency, and how his college “has benefited from that,” as described in a local journal of higher education. He said:

While my background did not lend itself to a college presidency, my experience in creating and implementing made me the perfect choice. What I do for a living is learn, and my institution has benefited from that. Just read the *New England Journal of Higher Education*, they say it better than me. I’ve turned this place around, and I have loved every minute of it. By all indicators, my college has transformed under my leadership. I can’t imagine going anywhere else.

### **Chief Enrollment Officer**

ZM, an Upstate New York college president, spoke about how pleased he is with his Chief Enrollment Officer, especially in “reversing eight years of declining enrollment.”

FC, an urban college president, described his Chief Enrollment Officer as being “among the best.” He stated, “She’s fantastic ... she is among the best enrollment and advancement people.”

### **Vice President for Strategic Initiatives/Innovation**

College president, DJ, spoke to her “go-to staffers to get things done,” both of whom occupy newly created positions on the senior team. She stated:

The new things are being driven by these two positions and I’ve just been really fortunate because everything, the insularity and the need to build bridges with employers, with community organizations with the non-profit world. These two guys drive a lot of program development together. P building the parameters of this partnership, and M often building the content of what we’re doing. So we now probably have four or five partnerships where we are literally custom designing training programs for them. We’re in the middle, it’s stuff that estimates that we’re doing it at a huge scale. They are my go-to staffers to get things done.

PM, another New England college president, described her vice president for innovation and strategic initiatives as one of the best on her team as her “go-to guy”; she said:

And so without him in the role that he played, in terms of the go-to guy for the merger, we would probably not have.... I don’t know that we would have succeeded. With every new project or problem, he’s one of our best on the team.

### **Vice President for Finance and Administration**

GD, an urban college president, described his vice president for Finance as “bright and innovative,” and as being “the best.” He noted:

Extraordinarily bright and innovative in terms of how to handle the budget.... When she came, long before I arrived, this college had a history of over 10 years of deficits in the budget. We have not had a single deficit since Esther has been here, and generally we were on a surplus ... because of E’s management of the budget, the university funds two sabbaticals at each college. Anything over that, the college has to fund. Since I have been here, I have never awarded fewer than 10 sabbaticals. How do you think that happened?.... She’s damn good. She is the best.

A New England college president, HC, described his executive vice president and CFO/COO as a “superstar” with the skills to be a future “college president.” He stated, “He is a superstar, he doesn’t say no. He helps us to think about how. He’s so good he could be a college president.”

### **Chief of Student Affairs**

An urban college president, WK, said of her Chief of Student Affairs, “I think we’re taking a really great approach to it. We have a great leader ... she really is terrific.”

Another urban college president, LT, called his Chief of Student Affairs a “standout.” He said, “The person I hired for Student Affairs is a standout. The next president better hold on to her tight.”

### **Chief Advancement Officer**

ZM, an upstate New York state president, when speaking of his Chief Advancement Officer, stated, “We’re lucky to have him ... we were able to recruit him back, and he has exceeded all my expectations.”

### **Chief of Staff**

SC, an urban college president, when discussing her Chief of Staff, described her as her “go-to person” who can “step into any job.” She said of her:

My acting VP for advancement and chief of staff is successful on so many levels and can step into any job. I recently made her the interim chief of advancement while we conduct a search. She is my go-to person.

### **Chief Diversity Officer**

A Chief Diversity Officer was described by WK, an urban college president, as a “rock star” who produces a high volume of work. She said:

I currently have a chief diversity officer, Title IX coordinator who is doing a rock star job and has a huge amount of work that she does and programming that she does. And she’s amazing.

### **Vice President for Communications and Marketing**

SC, an urban college president, described her vice president for communications and marketing as “outpacing the rest, “ and she added, “While a new hire, she is clearly outpacing the rest. She has demonstrated an ability to plan and execute with precision.”

### **Vice President for Strategic Partnerships**

A New England college president, DJ, described her vice president for Strategic Partnerships as the one she turns to on “a project that was stuck.” She said, “What became clear in all of my work with him was that he was the go-to guy for me. I began, actually, to, if I had a project that was stuck, I could send him.”

When reviewing roles for job performance, 45% of college presidents identified their Provost as exceeding expectations in their performance, while 36% of the college presidents identified themselves as exceeding expectations in their own performance. The chief enrollment officer and the chief innovation officer were identified as exceeding expectations at 27%, followed by the chief student affairs officer and finance officer at 18%.

Throughout the interviews, college presidents identified their high performers on their senior team. The BLAI scores of those identified as high performers were compared to the scores of all “other” senior staff members. To understand if there was a difference between the scores of those in high performing roles and “others,” a logistic regression analysis was performed (see Table 13 below). This second model also accounted for several control variables, including gender, age, and years of experience (see Table 13 for these correlations), as it was reasoned it is possible that these variables played a role in whether a person was determined to be a high performer or not. Demographic variables including ethnicity, job role, education, or years since starting position were excluded, as these variables did not contain enough participants at each level (e.g., 4 participants had education level 4—other professional degrees, and 43 had education level 3—doctoral degrees) to allow for accurate results. Once this logistic regression model was calculated,

the statistical assumptions of the test were analyzed. The second model showed acceptable linearity between the log odds of Performance and BLAI Percentile Scores, Age, and Experience variables. Further, it was confirmed that all other assumptions of the logistic regression model were satisfied. That is, the data did not contain any influential or outlier observations, and our continuous predictor variables did not have a high amount of collinearity. Thus, the researcher was able to interpret the results of the logistic regression for hypothesis 1. Table 13 provides an overview of the results. The overall logistic regression model was not significant,  $Wald = \chi^2(4) = 4.70, p < 0.32$ . That is, no variable in the model significantly distinguished between high and other performers. Learning Agility did not distinguish other performers from high performers  $\chi^2(1) = 1.90, p < 0.16$ .

Table 13. *Results of Test of Logistic Regression Showing Employee Performance*

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	P Value	Odds Ratio
<b>Predictor</b>				
Overall BLAI Score	0.02	0.01	0.10	1.02
<b>Control</b>				
Gender				
Female [Reference]	--	--	--	--
Male	-0.17	0.54	0.76	0.84
Age	0.04	0.03	0.26	1.04
Experience	0.02	0.03	0.45	1.02

Note. N = 77.

Examining Table 10 again (see page 82), the overall BLAI score for high performers was 63.19, *vis-à-vis* an overall BLAI score of 51.34 for the “other” performers. The high performers ranked themselves highest on the following dimensions: Collaborating (77.33), Flexibility (75.52), and Interpersonal Risk-taking (67.57).

Conversely, the high performers ranked themselves lowest on the following dimensions: Speed (66.48), Performance Risk-Taking (66.43), and Feedback Seeking (46.38).

Those not identified as high performers rated themselves highest in the following dimensions: Reflecting (64.95), Collaborating (63.91), and Flexibility (62.18).

Conversely, they rated themselves lowest on the following: Interpersonal Risk-Taking (54.09), Experimenting (53.64), and Feedback Seeking (38.41).

Comparing these groups, both ranked themselves highest in Collaborating and Flexibility, and agreed in terms of their ranking of the lowest dimension, Feedback Seeking. The greatest difference in the means by dimension was in Interpersonal Risk-Taking (13.57), closely followed by Collaborating and Flexibility. Though both of these groups ranked themselves in Collaborating and Flexibility, there was still a significant difference between them.

Table 10 illustrates differences in overall BLAI and dimension percentile means between the levels of the variables performance and high impact roles.

Overall, college presidents identified the Provost as the senior cabinet member that most exceeded expectations (45%), a lesser number (36%) identified themselves as exceeding expectations, followed by the Chief Enrollment Officer (27%) and Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (27%) roles. Those roles identified by the presidents as exceeding expectations did not have significantly higher overall BLAI scores, and these higher performers had notable differences in their mean scores in the following dimensions: Interpersonal Risk-Taking, Collaborating, and Flexibility.



Table 14. *Outline of Finding #6, Presidents' Views on the Relationship Between Higher Education Leadership Success and Learning Agility*

**FINDING #6**

**6.1 A strong majority of participants (63%), said that there is relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success.**

College presidents described their qualifications in the following ways:

**6.2 Relationship, but to varying degrees (4 of 11, 36%)**

Structures & silos (tenure system)

Situational leadership

Historical underpinnings of academia

Applicability of speed, flexibility and reflecting

**Interview Quotes: Finding #6, Presidents' Views on the Relationship Between Higher Education Leadership Success and Learning Agility**

**6.1 Direct Relationship**

All college presidents interviewed stated that there is a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success. Some college presidents unequivocally endorsed the relationship, with one president, HC, enthusiastically stating, "Hell yes! At the end of the day, it is all about each of these dimensions."

Another president, JD, also emphasized the relationship, saying, "I don't know how you run an organization before without these dimensions." She went on to say about this relationship:

Successful leaders in higher education must be able to recalibrate, regroup and get on with it. My team and I got the program up and running in about three months ... and that was about both risk-taking, speed, agility, flexibility.

One college president, LT, described how they are "inextricably linked," saying, "So leadership and Learning Agility are inextricably linked in higher education. Making quick adjustments so new learning will be realized."

President DH also agreed, stating:

Yes, I agree 100%, but I don't necessarily think that everybody has demonstrated agility even though, learning is basically compulsory. I mean, you can't keep up with these jobs if you're not learning.

President DH continues to speak about the tenure system as a detriment to new learning and accepting the "status quo." She said:

I think the tenure system is the death out of higher education, as we know it. I really do.... There's no incentive to learn ... [if] are you brought up to believe that hard work and trying to do your best matter or, [you're eager to learn, but] there's an awful lot of willingness to settle for the status quo. It's good enough. And, I don't think it is good enough, I think for the students it's not good enough.

PM, a New England college president, agreed that there is a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, and that relationship extends to the senior team. She described this by saying:

Absolutely. Absolutely. If our team members don't have every one of these aspects in their day-to-day job and activities and behaviors. We have to have it. It's also just the culture of the senior team.... Everyone has to be of the same mindset, ideally. Because if you've got somebody who's an outlier, it's dreadful. And you just can't have that. Everyone has to be on board to say change, growth, innovative, risk-taking, course analysis.

Another college president, HC, also spoke to the link between Learning Agility and the senior team, saying, "I believe every role has to have some degree of Learning Agility attached, and for some roles, it will be more of a stretch than others."

One college president, LT, focused on the collaboration dimension of Learning Agility as a catalyst for "effective leadership," in relation to silos:

I like collaboration for a lot of reason. I think higher education and if you look at an org chart, I think, for many years, it's been silos where Student Affairs doesn't talk to Academic Affairs. So I think if you want to have effective leadership, you need to break down those silos and have lateral as opposed to longitudinal.

Other college presidents spoke about the importance of Learning Agility and leadership success in relation to specific situations. President FC described it as follows:

Learning Agility is imperative because sometimes it's situational. So, given a certain type of situation, you're stronger, the balance among or the

relationship among these characteristics will play better than others depending on the nature of the challenge, or difficulty that you're facing.

President LT, also described this relationship in terms of the "situation," stating:

95

Well, I could sit here and tell you that I'm a transactional leader or a charismatic leader or a servant leader.... But what I've really learned is that the situation determines the type of leadership that is expected of you—and you need to be an agile leader. You need to recognize that certain approaches are going to work well in one type of situation and not at all in another situation. 95 You need to put your ego aside and realize that the situation determines the response. If it's disproportional or if it's rigid to a point of just cement, it's not going to advance the institution at all.

One New England college president, HC, highlighted how he encourages "new learning," saying that "rules and policies ... gets in the way," and added, "I'm a believer in squashing rules and policies because it gets in the way of new learning."

Another president, DH, talked about reflecting as a critical dimension for leadership success. She said:

I always like that one. Because I think it's such a, would that we would all have more time to reflect on our own performance. And, how we affect other people and all that kind of thing. I doubt that it's in the top three of most CEOs. I think it's a really great discipline if you can hustle it up.

President LT juxtaposed the corporate world and higher education in relation to bringing about change, and highlighted the need to "reconcile ... different voices" in higher education. He stated:

When I was a young administrator, one of my mentors had a previous career in Wall Street, and I asked him about change and how you change an institution especially one like higher education, which is.... That's why when I saw speed, I went, "What?" It's so slow to change. In the corporate world, the mantra was, "Change the person or change the person." You get them to see things your way or you find somebody else. That does not work in higher ed. That will not work. You need to be able to reconcile all these different voices into a narrative. If you think you can go in there and tell the faculty, who are the smartest guys in the room and never let you forget it, that you have a better way to do X, Y, or Z, you're in for a long and painful career or a short and painful career probably.

In relation to speed and leadership success, President DJ lamented over higher education's "very little sense of urgency" and that the "time ... a scarce commodity" is something that the academia seems to have "plenty of." She detailed this, saying:

Well, I do think that. I also think that higher ed has very little sense of urgency. In a time as this, is this a commodity that, I think most people in life are aware of? That time is a, it's a scarce commodity. But, somehow in the Academy we've got plenty of it. And, I find that to be, it's like one more way to say, no. Okay, we're going to study it, and next year we'll consider whether we're going to do this idea. Study for a year. Really? Is it worth it?

A college president acknowledged that taking "five years to come up with a three-year plan" is detrimental. FC warned:

Institutions do not change on a dime, but problems don't go away because you're not doing anything.... I mean, in general, the higher education way of dealing with things is to take five years to come up with a three-year plan. But if you take five years to come up with a three-year plan, you're sunk.

## **6.2 Relationship, but to Varying Degrees**

Other presidents expressed that while there is indeed a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, the Learning Agility framework might not be entirely as relevant in the "academic setting." President ZM, for instance, questioned the applicability of "speed and flexibility," stating:

Inasmuch as we thought of ourselves as constituents for change, I would guess that flexibility and speed are not going to correlate as well in the academic setting, whereas reflecting likely would be more applicable.

One college president, GD, pointed out that while Learning Agility is linked to leadership success, it is also important to understand the historical underpinnings of academia. He said, "We are more locked into traditions that date back to medieval times, including our graduation regalia, than we are to the current state of affairs."

Another president, BD, expanded on this point, referencing how scholars are trained:

You follow this process, and the reasons why we've been studying history for hundreds of years, or.... So there's almost this built in bias toward measured approaches and probably more guarding the past.

To emphasize his point about the leader "pushing" to advance the field, he said: "You have to keep pushing while getting the input. It is so important to change. It's no longer good enough to say 'the good old days.'"

Another college president, GD, stressed the critical role of the leader to elicit change because higher education institutions "are not agile" and are "narrowly focused" in their organizational structures. He described it explicitly, saying:

Higher ed institutions are not learning agile, they are not structured in a way that encourages change, so it is up to the leaders ... the challenge in higher ed is for the leader to convince people who are more narrowly focused, and who aren't really paying attention to what's going on other than their discipline, that this is something that we really need to think about.

An urban college president, WK, reflected on the role of "shared governance" and the schism between leaders and institutions' "appetite for rapid change." She said:

It's interesting to think about leadership as defined here in relation to shared governance. Good higher ed leaders must develop a definition of shared governance. While leaders might be eager for change, institutions don't always share the same appetite for rapid change. I find major change in higher ed comes from a crisis.

Some college presidents mentioned how being learning agile might be challenging in leadership success because of "structural issues" related to tenure. One college president, BD, described how the tenure system "may make it harder" for higher education to "be agile." He stated:

One of the interesting things would be to figure out what are the structural issues that may make it harder for higher ed to be agile than for businesses. Tenure does play in there. Again, I'm a supporter of tenure, but it does play in.

College presidents also discussed Reflecting as a critical component of Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, as President ZM stated, "We pride ourselves on being more reflective, making unbiased decisions."

One college president, GD, after reading through the Learning Agility dimensions, suggested that Flexibility and Speed are least important, but Reflecting and Perspective are more important characteristics to success, saying:

One of the best pieces of advice I ever got, interestingly at another institution when I was a young dean, and the senior vice president there was in his 70s at the time. He used to always.... Because I would get so mad, like rail in his office. And he would just sit there puffing on his pipe.... He says, "D, it's not that I'm not much smarter than you, but because I'm older I'm sitting a little higher on the hill and I just get a better view.... And as I've gotten older and reflected on that, that's an important characteristic. Being right isn't sufficient. Having the information isn't sufficient. Do you have the view and perspective, and that you have to force yourself to do at any level, including the president.... Those kinds of characteristics are more important and in fact, I would argue that flexibility and speed are the least important.

When College Presidents were asked if they thought there is a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, 63% responded affirmatively without qualification, while 36% stated that there was a relationship between the two, but with some caveats noted.

These six major findings and the subsequent analyses provide several clear implications for future practice for both higher education and Learning Agility research. Though only an initial study, there is enough information from the sample to provide a foundation for further exploration of the topic, whether that focuses solely on higher education roles, continues with specific dimensions and their impact on success, or perhaps a combination of both of these aspects. The following discussion will address some of the limitations of the study, these potential implications and recommendations, and provide a launching point for additional research that can be pursued by future researchers.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION

This dissertation set out to take an initial look at the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education leadership. While the relationship between Learning Agility and leadership success has been widely researched by scholars (DeRue et al., 2012) and has now been integrated into recruitment, professional development, and retention efforts by practitioners in the for-profit sector, the Learning Agility framework has not previously been examined in relation to the higher education setting. This mixed method exploratory study provides both quantitative and qualitative data to help build a new body of literature on higher education and Learning Agility, while contributing to the existing literature on Learning Agility and leadership success.

Chapter IV delineated the six findings from interviews with the eleven college presidents about the state of higher education, its impact on higher education leadership, and their views on Learning Agility and its applicability in this sector. The interviews were conducted in consideration with how senior staff members ranked themselves on the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) (Burke, 2016). Those self-rankings by role were examined across all roles of the higher education leadership team.

This chapter will provide an interpretation of the six key findings in relation to the literature as well as to the overall research question: *To what extent is Learning Agility applicable to higher education leadership?* In the next chapter, limitations of the study

and implications for practice and further research will be discussed, followed by concluding thoughts.

### **Finding #1**

*An overwhelming majority of college presidents (91%) indicated the most salient issues facing higher education today are: **Changing Demographics, and a vulnerable Business Model.***

The Learning Agility framework as a key component of leadership success is partially based on the premise of keeping up with a rapidly changing environment, which requires both adaptability and flexibility. As Hoff and Burke note in their 2017 book, *Learning Agility: The Key to Leader Potential*:

The pace of change which organizations experience today has only quickened in recent years. The challenges of change that organizations experience today may be political, economic, social or technological, or a combination of these. The one constant among the white-water rapids that are rushing at us every day is our ability to recognize or anticipate a change (speed) and to apply or create a different set of filters (flexibility). What Learning Agility allows us to do is to keep moving forward with the current. (pp. 11-12)

Higher education is not immune to the influence and impact of rapid changes. In their 2018 whitepaper, *The Future of Higher Education*, Mrig and Sanaghan describe the current state of the sector as follows: “In every boardroom, cabinet meeting, professional conference, news outlet, and whitepaper, the most talked about theme in higher education is the avalanche of impending changes confronting our institutions.”

Flexible and adaptable leadership would therefore also be warranted in higher education, especially given the volatility of the current landscape described both in the Higher Education Context in Chapter I, and in the interviews with the college presidents. Interview question #1 explored the salient issues in higher education; clearly the pressures and changes in the current environment weighed greatly on college presidents.



Their answers could have easily taken up the entire interview, and in almost every case, the researcher needed to direct the president to the next question.

Based on the presidents' responses, demographic shifts were at the top of the list of salient issues, which supports the contextual literature review. It is important to note that, according to the literature, demographic shifts are more prevalent as a salient issue in the Northeast and more relevant to small and mid-size, less competitive independent colleges, which defines a majority of the colleges represented in this study. What was most relevant during the conversations was how these institutions were confronting the demographic shifts, and to what degree this particular salient issue was dominant not only for the first question but throughout the duration of the interviews.

While institutions had different strategies for confronting the problem, what was consistent was the emphasis on growth—increasing enrollments, capturing new markets, and creating new programs (mainly at the graduate level) to diversify market share. No one spoke about shrinking the institution, and while the literature underscores colleges closing or merging, in fact only one institution's president spoke about a merger. In this president's description, she focused on her institution subsuming a small neighboring college—so even in that case, it was about her college growing rather than closing or shrinking.

Interestingly, none of the college presidents spoke about growth in more conventional ways, such as gaining a larger share of the traditional-age student market or garnering philanthropic dollars to offset tuition discounting. Instead, they consistently evinced strategies that would diversify their programs and their student body—for example, in recognition of the growth coming from underrepresented populations. Some also spoke about expanding their institution's footprint in digital learning.

The imminent demographic cliff, a term often used by the college presidents, has been identified as a crucial part of the overall business model in higher education, and its projected impact resonated as the most salient issue throughout the interviews. Indeed,

only one college president did not name it as an issue, stating that he was dealing with the opposite issue, as he was trying to identify additional space for his students at an urban community college.

What became increasingly noteworthy throughout the interviews was the degree to which the presidents seemed to be making proactive inroads toward mitigating the effects of the demographic cliff. Analyzed collectively and comparatively, it became apparent the degree to which some college presidents were more adept at communicating the demographic issue to the community, thus eliciting change and action from their colleagues. The more experienced presidents seemed to be less timid about sounding the alarm and pushing aggressive agendas to deal with enrollment shifts. Some of these more aggressive efforts involved incorporating digital learning through outsourcing and external partnerships (discussed below), while others were more focused on expanding graduate program offerings, even in the face of local community opposition.

College presidents also expressed concern about the overall business model. While this topic was far-reaching and dependent on the type of institution, key themes emerged and were identified throughout the interviews, revealing interesting points of intersection with the context review. The overall theme was that the sector could not stand still, simply do more of what they had been doing, and/or rely solely on what they had done in the past. A vulnerable business model required fresh thinking and innovative ways to strategize about both revenue and expenses. As pointed out in the literature, “69 percent strongly agree or agree their college needs to make fundamental changes to its business model, programming or other operations” (Jaschik, 2020, p. 7).

With regard to the rising costs, as expected, the list included technology and healthcare investments, physical plant maintenance, and, to a lesser degree, ongoing student support services. The public’s perception of rising costs was also discussed in light of the increased scrutiny about the value of a higher education degree. When speaking about student support services, the “hidden costs” passed on to students were

emphasized a number of times, including food, costs associated with transportation, and in some cases, even providing for their families. This was not only voiced by presidents of community colleges where the population is often juggling such demands, but also by college presidents of residential or mixed campuses.

Also of note: while student debt was highlighted in the literature as a major factor of a distressed higher education business model, it did not surface in the conversations about the business model or even when talking about students as a salient issue. Student unrest and student activism also did not come up as salient issues other than when talking about the role of the chief student affairs officer (discussed at a later point). In terms of the student debt issue, while college presidents did not speak directly to it, they did discuss the impact of costs for their students at a hyper-local level. They also indirectly addressed it in terms of a growth model, as in: “How can I increase revenues to be able to make college more affordable for some?”; or “How can I diversify my revenue streams to keep tuition costs growing exponentially?” While this could be interpreted as student debt being a factor in relation to the overall business model, it should be noted that college presidents did not discuss the overall indebtedness of their graduates as an issue related to rising costs.

Costs related to technology were mentioned often throughout the interviews. In terms of the costs associated with technology infrastructure, only one college president spoke about its drain on the budget and how the institution’s lack of up-to-date technologies impaired its administrative functioning and efficacy. As seen in the literature (Blackboard, 2017), likely technology expenses have gone beyond just hardware, software, and technical expertise. It appears that those expenses are built into the budget like any other consistent expense, i.e., healthcare benefits for employees.

The main focus when discussing technology expenses was instead on the costs associated with delivering online education. While this conversation would sometimes drift toward the investments in supporting the cultural shift to delivering online

education, it certainly was not a central theme. As described in the literature, dramatically shifting the teaching and learning paradigm from being a more faculty-directed teaching model to one that puts the learner at the center, constructing his/her own learning, is a significant investment for many colleges (Blackboard, 2017). Throughout the interviews, the emphasis around technology was either on it being a disrupter and therefore a threat to enrollment, or an opportunity to be incorporated carefully and strategically.

Furthermore, the digital divide between the faculty and students was not confronted head-on in the way it was described in the literature. College presidents who were engaged in online learning seemed to avoid the “heavy lift” of a wholesale reengineering of the community’s thinking around teaching and learning. Those that did enter the market put their efforts toward faculty who showed an interest in and a passion for delivering online education. In summary, while the conversations around online education investments touched on the cultural shift, the presidents definitely placed additional emphasis on increasing enrollments, how they wanted to capture the market, and which programs would be most attractive to a broad demographic. There was much less discussion about faculty buy-in and professional development, and instead, a focus on those faculty members who demonstrated a proclivity for and interest in the delivery of online education.

During the interviews, only one college president dismissed online education outright for his type of campus (residential urban), because it would “depersonalize” learning. In his opinion, this was the exact antithesis of what he believes his college excelled at, which was reaching first-generation students and underrepresented populations, and providing the personalization that drives his high graduation rates. He spoke eloquently and persuasively about why some students need an institution of his type: personalized, hands-on, and based on relationships. As online learning continues to expand and further infiltrates higher education as we know it today, replicating

personalized education for students in an online delivery model remains a challenge for institutions that are successfully serving first-generation college students.

Others spoke about online education as a disrupter, and saw it as a threat to their business model: it was viewed more as an outside force that could cannibalize enrollments and therefore decrease revenues. In these cases, the perspective had more to do with fending off the disrupter than actually “joining the playing field.”

While it is a small sample, the researcher noted a disconnect between the literature and some of the presidents’ views on the explosiveness of digital learning and its impacts. Moreover, the literature details the need for senior leadership to discern how to capture the online market within their typical practices for strategic planning (Blackboard, 2017), and a majority of the institutions were slow to adapt to these advances. This disconnect could be characterized in two ways. First, there was the fervent belief that there will always be a need for the residential campus or even a commuter campus, so collectively, colleges and universities need to be better about maintaining their historic share of the market and espousing the value of in-person learning. The second view was seen in those institutions that think they can tinker around the edges to garner online revenues without fully committing to the model.

On the other hand, some of the presidents spoke about their aggressive foray into delivering online undergraduate and graduate degrees, and they credit these strategic efforts for their continued growth and vitality. These same college presidents lamented that their faculty did not connect their positive financial status to this integration of online learning. One of these presidents proudly pointed out her window to a new student center, stating, “This was not as a result of traditional-age students, but opening new markets and garnering additional enrollment through online learning.”

The literature emphasized the impact of online learning, and the college presidents, to varying degrees, captured this level of urgency in their responses. It was clear that a president’s comfort level with the effect of technology on the business model rose

significantly when her institution seemed to be making headway in online education through partnerships with outside companies focused on the delivery and marketing of online programs. Some of these colleges mentioned above were highly successful in generating revenues from these arrangements. Other colleges were in the early stages of developing their own infrastructure and doing their own marketing.

Interestingly, the discussion around rising costs also dovetailed into a discussion around the public's increased scrutiny of the value of higher education. Presidents linked this directly to the publicized cost of attendance, and they pointed out the gap between the publicized cost of attendance and what most families actually paid to attend due to institutional support via scholarships and discounts. There was discomfort with this issue from the standpoint of how to better and more accurately explain what an average student paid in tuition and fees to attend juxtaposed against the publicized rates. Moreover, there was some caution expressed about presidents making that case to the public and to their students and families for fear of a backlash from those that do pay full price. Others proudly put their cost of attendance and the average that families pay to attend on their communication vehicles. The literature on the presidents' view on the topic of the public scrutiny around the value of a college degree coalesces with these discussions. In the *2020 Survey of College and University Presidents*, Jaschik (2020) describes it as follows:

From a financial perspective, 85 percent of presidents agree that attention to student debt has created a perception that college is less affordable than it actually is. 82% also agree that confusion over tuition sticker pricing and discounting contributes to misperceptions about college affordability. (p. 31)

It is also important to note that those college presidents who were at the end of their tenure were more likely to speak more dramatically about the unsustainable business model, while those just a few years into their terms were more focused on what they were doing at their own institutions to mitigate the issues.

Based on the variety of responses, impediments to innovation elicited the most interesting points made by the college presidents in relation to the most salient issues in higher education. While not explicit in the literature, all of the presidents acknowledged the impact of the culture and the environment of the academy as being “steeped in tradition,” “slow to change,” and “guarding the past.” One of the presidents even expounded on this point, stating, “The measured approaches in [higher education] attract those that like consistency ... [and] its structure can inhibit innovation and change because people are educated and rewarded for narrow academic pursuits.” However, as noted in the literature, while “presidents, trustees, and senior administrators believe that they understand the challenges that their institutions are faced with and recognize the need to change and adapt,” they feel strongly by a “2-1 margin” that the faculty do not share the same mindset (Jaschik, 2020, p. 14).

Often during the interviews, these observations would revolve around establishing a new program or offering related to their own campus in the microcosm, which would then lead to reflections and insights about larger, systemic issues, such as the tenure system for faculty. These observations were amplified whenever a comparison was made between higher education and the business sector. It is interesting to note that only one president actually advocated for the abolishment of the tenure system, while the others acknowledged its impact, but described ways to work within that structure.

The literature provides some insights into these types of cultural impediments to innovation when describing the advances of micro-credentialing and its impact on degree-granting institutions. That said, presidents never mentioned this specifically, but did substantiate the impact of changing anything related to academics through their ongoing concerns and frustrations about the length of time needed to bring a new academic program from concept to fruition.

Positing the idea that a learning organization needs to be institutionally “learning agile” in some cases seems to be almost oxymoronic given the presidents’ views around

the challenges of academic change and innovation. While a shared governance model is unique to the sector, in relation to senior leadership management, this points to an even greater need to recruit, develop, and reward higher education leaders that exhibit Learning Agility across the nine dimensions. When examining the results of the BLAI scores, what became apparent is that the dimensions of Speed, Performance, Risk-Taking, Interpersonal Risk-Taking, and Feedback Seeking were consistently the lowest in terms of mean scores across the roles. This aligns with and validates the presidents' views of the prevalence of the impediments to innovation and suggests that these dimensions will need to be emphasized for campus leaders in the future.

One topic that the literature focused on was how the role of the student had shifted drastically, and that through their newfound activism and agency, students had directly impacted institutions and catalyzed significant changes. During the interviews, the presidents did not mention this as a salient issue, but instead focused on students' mental health as an area of major concern. When presidents spoke about activism on campus, it was with pride that these students could carve out the time to also focus on larger societal issues. This was emphasized further when discussing roles and which ones had changed the most, with many presidents pointing to the chief student affairs role as the one that is the most challenging, and thus requires the most Learning Agility. Further discussion of roles occurs later in this chapter in relation to Finding #4.

## **Finding #2**

*A majority of college presidents (73%) described their own learning to keep up with and respond to salient issues in higher education by Collaborating with their Senior Teams, while 64% of the presidents attributed their learning to Networking and Publications.*

Integral to this study was the effort to understand Learning Agility through the perspective of college presidents. Given that they preside over learning institutions (and



ones they described as dynamic and volatile), it was important to hear how presidents approach their own learning and how they keep up with the salient issues to illuminate what they deem as important learning strategies.

When asked “how do you keep up?” presidents often paused, and then answered methodically and thoughtfully. They took the question seriously. The majority of college presidents first pointed to their senior teams. This gave validation to the importance of the members of the senior team as being integral to this study and to understanding the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education leadership. This answer also underscored each president’s expectations of the members of the senior team to be active learners and for them to continue to educate their senior colleagues. They said, “I hire well, I invest in them, I learn from them.” When probed, they responded that they look to their senior teams as “problem solvers,” to “propose solutions” and to bring “big ideas and solutions” to the table.

This conversation about the senior team also laid the groundwork for understanding what college presidents want in a senior team and offered a glimpse into their expectations about how members go about their own learning, and what behaviors presidents want to see in a senior team member. Most importantly, this demonstrated that inquiry into Learning Agility in higher education leadership benefits from an examination of the senior team.

While 64% spoke to Networking and Publications as valuable ways to learn, and both of these areas spoke to the emphasis they put on looking outward and learning outside of their campuses, it was the discussion around Networking where the conversation was more robust, with the college presidents becoming more spirited and decisive in identifying these connections as imperative to staying abreast of salient issues. Networking was defined as being part of the community, joining local boards, spending time with trustees and their colleagues, and featured an overall emphasis on the importance of “looking outward” to build relationships and make connections. They

described Networking as both a chance to keep up and to learn, and emphasized that it was essential in helping presidents think about their own institutional priorities. What was interesting to note from these conversations was that, in every instance, the networking discussion turned to concrete examples of how networking resulted in developing relationships and partnerships that led to support of their institutions. It was a place where the president would most proudly explain the creation of new programs, philanthropic partnerships, or describe bringing expertise to campus to support new directions and strategic developments. However, it is also interesting to note that, after the senior team, the category of learning from their internal constituencies consisted of 45% looking to students to keep up, but only 27% spoke about learning from their faculty.

As mentioned previously, according to *The 2020 Survey of College and University Presidents*, college presidents do not believe that faculty members have the mindset to innovate, by a 2 to 1 margin, which might illuminate why presidents did not readily identify faculty as a group they turned to keep up with the salient issues confronting the sector (Jaschik, 2020, p. 14).

Based on the BLAI results, college presidents ranked themselves highest on Interpersonal Risk-Taking (93%) and Collaborating (88%). Some of that might be understood in relation to their focus on the external environment and bringing those viewpoints to campus, which could likely surface some difficult conversations, especially in light of the impediments to innovation, as noted above. The presidents' emphasis on the external environment as a way to bring about new work could be in contradiction to an environment that is more methodical, risk-averse, steeped in tradition, and structurally confined. Moreover, the presidents' self-described Collaborating scores may take into account their relationships with those from outside the institution as well as those internal relationships with members of their senior teams.

When the college presidents received their BLAI scores, two called to say that they thought something must have been incorrect because they received lower than anticipated scores on Information Gathering. Upon further analysis, it became apparent that they minimally attended conferences. What surfaced in the interviews was the role of local professional chapters of larger organizations as a way to learn, but uniformly, college presidents downplayed the utility of national conferences beyond their early years in office.

### **Finding #3**

*A strong majority of presidents (81%) identified relevant experience as the most important criterion when hiring for their senior team. Seventy-two percent identified dimensions from the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI) as the second most important criterion.*

Asking college presidents what they look for when hiring a senior staff member provided an opportunity to learn firsthand to what degree college presidents used language and descriptors integral in the Learning Agility definition and ensuing dimensions. At this early part of the interview, presidents had not seen the formal definition or the list of nine dimensions of Learning Agility. Hearing from college presidents about what they look for when hiring a senior staff member also provided an opportunity to relate those stated qualities to how the senior staff members ranked themselves on the BLAI within the various Learning Agility dimensions.

Clearly the most important qualification was specific, relevant experience, and in some cases that experience had to be from similar institutions. The emphasis was on recruiting a new member of the senior team who would have a short learning curve and could “get up to speed” quickly. When pressed with a follow-up question about relevant experience and the need to acclimate quickly, a number of the presidents described their preference for someone who has already held the position. “Getting up to speed” in their

definition meant that they knew the job and were familiar with the work, the language, the functional responsibilities, and more.

On the BLAI, senior staff members ranked themselves on the lower end of the spectrum for the Speed dimension. The president asked that her new hires get up to speed on new tasks or projects and looked for recruits that had relevant experiences that might on the surface represent speed. However, the Speed dimension translates to acting on new ideas quickly and moving onto other ideas more readily, and to reacting well to unexpected problems (Burke, 2016). The emphasis here is on grasping new ideas or concepts and being able to develop new solutions, not on hiring the person who “knows the drill” or has held the same the portfolio of specific responsibilities. As the literature points out, often executives are hired on their technical ability and not on their ability to learn new experiences (Hoff & Smith, 2020). This also seems to be the case in higher education. These lower self-rated results on the Speed dimension might suggest that, in addition to the sector being less accepting of discordant ideas and moving in new directions with speed, those steeped in a position, with a pedigree of learned behaviors and activities, might be less likely to discard what they know and what they have done for many years in their respective positions.

Only one president spoke about hiring senior members who were on their “way up” from a career perspective. He elaborated by saying that, though they might not have had the exact position, he looked for someone who could be groomed for it. He even made a point of saying that he avoided those who might be “too set in their ways,” and that he looked for people he could “bring up and develop.” In this same vein, he spoke about looking for team members who are “hungry and a bit unconventional,” similar to how he described himself. He was also unapologetic about referring to there being too many “dinosaurs” in the sector and said that the only way he was able to stay viable was by surrounding himself with those far younger than him.

During this part of the interview conversations, the main takeaway was that the presidents needed someone with the ability to jump right in, to act within a reasonable amount of time, and to have a “deep bench” of similar experiences. Moreover, they were much less likely to comment on developing expertise or focusing on the “up and comer.” Therefore, they were less likely to focus on an important nuance and driver to Burke and his colleagues’ perspective that there is too much of a focus on the accumulation of experiences instead of what was learned from those experiences (Hoff & Smith, 2020).

When direct experience trumped all other qualifications during the recruitment of a senior staff member, 72% of the college presidents focused on other qualities, including those who were comfortable with goal-setting, accountability, and receiving feedback on progress toward stated goals. One college president spoke about the overall sector being uncomfortable with evaluation and assessments, but felt that in her position, she needed to model this behavior. Another college president spoke about a quarterly review that would include a review of progress toward goals. In this case, some of the language shared reflected the Feedback Seeking dimension, especially in relation to seeking feedback from the president and from her peers on the senior team.

Collaboration was mentioned a number of times by the college presidents as an attribute they look for when hiring, and overall, there was a positive synergy between that stated quality and how senior team members ranked themselves on the dimension of Collaborating. Core senior staff members had a mean score of 66.7%, which was the highest overall mean score among the nine dimensions and the second highest-rated dimension when including all respondents, at 64.94%. Again, just by the nature of the sector and how it is structured and governed, collaboration is a likely attribute to be highlighted by the president and then rated accordingly by the senior staff member. Furthermore, the presidents ranked themselves at 88.13% for Collaborating, and it is clearly an attribute that they want to see mirrored in their senior teams.

Presidents also spoke quite a bit about wanting to hire someone who “looked at things differently” and those who were willing to “take risks.” When asked to elaborate on how they saw this in practice, they provided many examples of what they took issue with when colleagues repeatedly approached problems in the same way, over and over again, and stated that given the state of higher education today, they emphasized the need to be forward-thinking and not overly cautious. These conversations seem to dovetail with a variety of dimensions, but often the term “risk-taker” was used. The dimension Performance Risk-Taking is defined as “engaging in new tasks that have ambiguous outcomes or engaging in work that is risky,” which was aligned with what the presidents were describing. Less obvious in their descriptions was a call for Interpersonal Risk-taking. The central point that was stated repeatedly was that risk-taking behaviors were going to drive change. The ability to take risks, whether they were linked to performance or interpersonal, is indeed an important dimension in being learning agile, as highlighted in the BLAI instrument. Overall, presidents rated themselves at 75.5% for Performance Risk-Taking, which was notably higher than the mean for the core senior team at 55.81%. While an important attribute, there was either a gap in how they hire or how the senior staff member performs when in the position.

The discussion also spoke to the importance of Experimenting. Interestingly, the presidents ranked themselves in the top third at 80.13% for Experimenting, so it aligns with what they would like to see in a senior staff member. However, the mean score for Experimenting for the core senior team members was 56.81%, which was in the middle third of the nine dimensions, while it was in the bottom third for all respondents at 56.54%.

Flexibility was also noted specifically by many college presidents. They spoke to the idea that they prefer colleagues who are not stuck in one way of thinking and are unwilling to look at things differently. They wanted senior staff members that would provide innovative solutions. There was a nice alignment between that as a stated quality

and how the core senior staff members ranked themselves overall, at 64.28%, the second highest mean among the nine dimensions; it was ranked at the top for all respondents at 66%. Presidents also viewed themselves as flexible, ranking themselves at 84.25%, the third highest dimension amongst the presidents' ratings.

While Feedback Seeking was stated as an important factor by some, the core senior team scored itself the lowest on this dimension, which was even the case for the college presidents. In fact, the overall mean dimension score for Feedback Seeking (37.17%) was the lowest among the nine dimensions for the core senior team as well as for all respondents to the BLAI (36.38%). To a certain degree, this could correlate with higher education culture, which has been slower to adopt formalized reviews and, as a result, would be less comfortable engaging in those discussions. Or it could be that the level of review stops with objective measures of a project, i.e., an enrollment target, the creation of a new program, etc., in relation to the institution *vis-à-vis* the personal efforts of creating, managing and executing. While college presidents may be reviewing the plans and strategies of their senior teams, the conversations might be less focused on the individuals responsible for the project and more on how the project is developing within the institution. Furthermore, if Feedback Seeking is the lowest ranked dimension by presidents, then it is not surprising that it is also ranked at lower levels by their senior team members. It is important to note that the self-ratings for Feedback Seeking are consistently the lowest of the nine dimensions in other sectors as well (Burke, 2019).

While college presidents look for relevant and direct experience as the most important qualification when recruiting a senior staff member, they also put a considerable weight on key characteristics of what comprises the definition of being learning agile. Specifically, the presidents look for individuals who are willing to experiment, take risks, and be collaborative, flexible, and open to feedback. These were all dimensions on which presidents ranked themselves highly, except for Feedback Seeking, and as such, there was a high level of synergy between the presidents' views

and how core senior members ranked themselves in the Collaborating and Flexibility categories. Conversely, there were some misalignments in the risk-taking dimensions.

#### **Finding #4**

*While a strong majority of participants (73%) indicated the Chief Academic Affairs/Provost role as changing the most rapidly and requiring the greatest need for Learning Agility, a lesser number (55% and 45%, respectively) described Enrollment and Student Affairs as warranting the most Learning Agility.*

An approach to understanding the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education was to examine higher education leadership roles (those roles that made up the college president's senior staff) in the current landscape. While each institution had its own challenges and the senior team make-up was variable, all presidents turned to their leadership teams to help set the direction for the institution. As they considered each role in light of those that have changed the most, it was clear they thoughtfully contemplated this question. Thinking about the roles in relation to Learning Agility also spurred deeper consideration about what was required to be successful in each role. When asked which roles required the most Learning Agility, they answered readily.

It is important to note that while there was no statistical significance in the differences between the Learning Agility of those in "high impact roles" and those in other roles, the data did illuminate relationships and differences between presidents' views of the roles and what was highlighted in the literature. This became most apparent when analyzing the self-rating dimension scores by role, and thus, these points of intersection and divergence are identified and discussed.

Moreover, as mentioned in the analysis of the previous finding, another key aspect of the results to note was that across all dimensions, including the presidents' self-ratings, the Feedback Seeking dimension was consistently the lowest self-rating. Specifically, those in the core team who took the BLAI rated themselves repeatedly within the three



lowest self-ratings. Given that consistency in these ratings, and to explore aspects of each role to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences between the roles as well as between the president and her senior staff, Feedback Seeking is understood as a low or the lowest self-rated dimension and therefore treated as a given by the researcher to allow for further description. Each role is discussed in detail below.

### **Chief Academic Affairs Officer/Provost**

The Chief Academic Officer/Provost (CAO) role was described repeatedly in nearly reverent terms. Whether the president thought the incumbent in the role was meeting expectations or described the role in aspirational terms, it was the role that needed to strike a balance between an external orientation in relation to new academic programs and markets, and an internal focus to lead, be a strong and fervent communicator, and drive change among the faculty. College presidents spoke about the role in almost heroic terms and shared a sense of relief that they did not have to manage or contend with the many issues confronting a provost on a day-to-day basis.

However, a few college presidents also spoke strongly about this role as not being occupied by someone living up to these lofty expectations. They lamented that things had gotten ahead of the current provosts, and that these critical leaders were not maintaining the pace necessary to keep up with the accelerating changes on and off campus. Although presidents identified the provost roles as changing the most and needing the highest level of Learning Agility, some were also quick to point out that a gap indeed existed. One college president went so far as to say that not only did that role change the most, and therefore need the highest level of Learning Agility, but that it was also the “hardest role to change” in terms of approaching things differently. She felt this was because it is the chief academic officer/provost role that serves as “the keeper of the college traditions ... that they own the legacy of the academy.”

The literature also points out the growing responsibility and the changing nature of the position of the CAO. As Gardner (2015) describes, the role now also includes even larger administrative portfolios, which has resulted in larger staffs so that the provost can better focus on shaping change across the campus. Gardner also points out that the provost role has become even more the face of the institution internally, as the president spends more time outside the institution. During the interviews, the presidents did not focus on increased administrative responsibilities, but mainly on the provosts' essential role in working closely with the faculty.

Interestingly, based on the BLAI scores, the chief academic affairs officers ranked themselves overall in the middle of the core senior staff in Learning Agility, yet a closer look into their dimension scores highlights points of intersection and synergy between the presidents' views on what is needed in the role and the possible gaps in what they would like to see in the role.

On average, provosts ranked themselves highest in Collaborating (71%), which in comparison to the rest of the core senior team was in the middle third. According to Burke (2016), Collaborating—the ability to find critical ways to work with others to elicit new learning—was identified as a key behavior by both the presidents and in the literature. The provost is in a unique position in that she must govern in a way that brings disparate areas of focus, academic areas of expertise, and philosophies together toward a common objective. She must gain the trust of her constituencies and demonstrate a commitment to learning from others to inform activity. As Gardner (2015) points out, the role “emphasizes consultation with colleagues, deans, and faculty members on cultivating relationships that are important for success.”

After Collaborating, the provosts ranked themselves highest in Performance Risk-Taking (67%) and Information Gathering (67%). During the interviews, presidents did emphasize the importance of risk-taking, doing things differently, and not accepting the “status quo”; therefore, there is alignment between what the presidents envision and how

the provosts think about their roles. In terms of comparison to the rest of the core team, the provosts are in the top third for Performance Risk-Taking. In the interviews, the presidents underscored the importance of the provost being someone who is “unafraid of taking risks” and someone who could take on challenging and perhaps ambiguous work, especially in light of the unknown and diverse set of issues that can arise. Not only does the president appreciate that as an important behavior for the provost; it also aligns with how the presidents rank themselves.

Provosts rank themselves in the bottom third of the core senior team for both Speed and Flexibility, the two dimensions that most closely correlate to Learning Agility (Burke, 2016). In terms of Speed, this may have more to do with the provost needing to be a “consensus builder” and a “chief discussant,” as noted by Gardner (2015). It could also have to do with the very nature of what is required of this position and what it takes to be successful in working with Deans and Faculty. The dimension of Speed, acting on new ideas quickly to activate change, while appealing in a period during which the sector is undergoing change and volatility, might result in unintended consequences and threaten the important balance between leading, facilitating and collaborating, and directing and imposing. Leading, facilitating, and collaborating to institute change, while likely a longer and more arduous process, is likely a strategy with better long-term results in terms of acceptance, implementation, and viability. While the president asks for speed, she appreciates the provost’s ability and patience to partake in and facilitate faculty deliberation and be attuned to process and culture when instituting change.

In terms of Flexibility, it would be interesting to understand that more fully. It seems reasonable that the provost would often be engaged in proposing new solutions that are either intellectually based and or administratively grounded. It is also just as likely that there is a realization that some of these suggestions would be accepted while others are rejected. Some provosts (perhaps related to years in the position) may find that even proposing a suggestion can come across as too heavy-handed and be counter-

intuitive; she might rely instead on sharing thoughts or asking a probing question so her suggestions might more organically stem from her faculty.

Of the lower-rated dimensions, Flexibility seems to jump out as one that could be better understood and developed. Perhaps there is too much caution, for while not all faculty and deans will appreciate directness, some might, and collectively they could institute and model meaningful change. Also, as one president said when speaking about working with faculty at his institution for over 20+ years, faculty do not necessarily want to be part of every single process or idea generated, but they do want to be assured that when something is proposed, there is a rationale behind it and comprehensive thinking around the idea. Furthermore, if the provost has a track record in being collaborative and performing due diligence in information gathering (a highly-ranked behavior by provosts), then likely she has gained a degree of trust and confidence and is more empowered to enact new solutions than perhaps is even recognized. Less clear is why a provost might not be open to new ideas, which is also part of being flexible. This could possibly be due to concern about setting precedents, selecting some ideas while throwing away others—so again it may really be about striving for a delicate balance between driving change and being seen as transparent and fair. Or perhaps it speaks to presidents' feelings of a disconnect between what is needed from a provost today to innovate and be externally focused with an eye toward change versus what they perceive.

In addition, a closer examination of Flexibility shows the difference in the self-rankings of the presidents (89.17%) and provosts (53.40%). This could be a source of friction, where the president is looking to be more adaptable and nimbler, and looking for the generation of new ideas and strategic directions, while the provost might be more confined to her traditional role “as the keeper of academic structure and governance,” as stated by one college president. Also, in comparison to her peers on the senior team, there was a gap between how they ranked themselves in flexibility and how the provost ranked

herself. The core senior team ranked themselves second highest in Flexibility, which draws even more attention to the provosts' self-ranking in this category.

It is not surprising that 73% of the presidents believe that the provost role is the one that has changed most in these volatile times, given the many remarkable adjectives they used to describe them. The presidents are asking them to be the communicators, while also asking them to innovate, take risks, and look externally for market opportunities. Moreover, this is in addition to managing a broad portfolio of academic administrative functions. While the provosts' overall BLAI scores were in the middle of their core senior team peers, they did rate themselves highest on Collaborating and Performance Risk-Taking, which indeed complements the presidents' expectations for the role. The lower rankings in Speed and Flexibility might contradict the presidents' views, and in turn cause friction between the roles. One could make a case that Speed could work against a provost's efforts in building consensus across a multitude of constituencies, and a lack of Flexibility could be tied to the interdependence of the role on those constituencies. It could be problematic for a provost to become too autonomous, getting out ahead of her constituents by launching into innovative strategies, programs, or proposals without the layers of approval and acceptance built into a shared governance structure.

### **Chief Enrollment Officer**

During the interviews, 55% of college presidents identified the Chief Enrollment Officer role as the one that had changed the most and thus needed higher Learning Agility as compared to the other core senior team roles. Presidents focused on the ability of the Chief Enrollment Officers to be both qualitative and quantitative in their understanding of the marketplace and in enrollment management, and on having the ability to be "all things to all people" in order to gain the confidence of both faculty and colleagues alike. The presidents spent most of their time during the discussion of the

enrollment position speaking to the marketplace, demographic shifts, and advances in marketing and outreach. This coincides with what Kurz and Scannell (2006) describe as the enrollment management function becoming “an industry bellwether,” and “being responsible to know and predict future trends.” Given that 91% of the presidents identified demographic shifts as the most salient issue facing higher education, it makes sense that when discussing the Chief Enrollment Officer, this was where most of the conversations started, and where they were looking to this role to lead the effort.

The literature also emphasizes the enrollment management role as an administrator “adept at bringing together disparate functions that are related to recruiting, funding, tracking, and replacing students to create ‘enterprise-wide goals’ rather than functioning as stand-alone systems” (Kurz & Scannell, 2006), which are important to meet institutional enrollment goals. In a departure from the literature, the presidents did not focus on the importance of the Chief Enrollment Officer as an internal leader or as a strong manager bringing together disparate functional areas; the main focus when speaking to internal responsibilities was on collaborating with faculty to meet recruitment and retention goals.

While the overall BLAI scores for the chief enrollment officers were in the bottom third of the core senior team, a deeper analysis of how they ranked themselves within the dimensions reveals interesting information that coincides with what presidents mentioned, while highlighting gaps and places for further examination and potential areas for growth. For instance, chief enrollment officers ranked themselves highly in the dimensions of Experimenting (61.4%) and Flexibility (61%), and both of these dimensions correlate to what the presidents said they are looking for in that role. Burke (2016) posits that one must experiment and try out new behaviors to determine what is effective, and this is indeed what presidents look to when navigating a volatile marketplace, complicated by shifting demographics. Flexibility, being open to new ideas and new solutions, also complements the presidents’ views on their ability to “read the horizon and change.” On the other hand, Chief Enrollment Officers also ranked

themselves lowest both in Performance Risk-Taking and Interpersonal Risk-Taking, which surfaces an interesting schism between the presidents' perspectives on the position and, to a certain degree, with the literature as well. From the presidents' perspective, sticking one's neck out and taking on challenging and ambiguous work might be part of what it takes to mitigate the consequences of demographic shifts. Taking risks when everything is not clearly spelled out might especially be required in a competitive landscape. At the same time, Performance Risk-Taking could also fly in the face of being focused and diligent at reading the tea leaves, having a laser focus on market, and being methodical in the execution. The literature also speaks to risk-taking, with the perspective of an internal focus on leading a complex internal enterprise. As Kurz and Scannel (2006) state,

Leadership is critical, enrollment management almost always means change—in structure, reporting lines, goals, etc., ... the risks of change can never be underestimated, enrollment managers must be willing to accept the risks where they see the need for change.”

In the literature, the explicit call for successful enrollment managers to be risk-takers (Kurz & Scannel, 2006), specifically noted in overseeing and leading the functional areas that are responsible for change, underscores the importance of having the capacity to discuss differences and to forge learning and change. Interpersonal Risk-Taking was also valued by the president. If there are external forces that point to program viability, market saturation, or lagging enrollments, the presidents saw these difficult conversations with faculty, deans, etc., as critical functions of the role. So again, while not focused on the administrative areas, the president does charge the chief enrollment officer with having the difficult conversations on campus. Part of those conversations involves admitting you do not have all the answers, that you need to learn more to execute accordingly.

The Chief Enrollment Officer position, as one president said, “has to be all things to all people,” which would be exceedingly difficult even during a more stable period.

Navigating the variety of challenges could be particularly complicated for the Chief Enrollment Officer, who might need to change course and take risks, all while maintaining a place of trust and confidence among her academic colleagues.

Furthermore, with many institutions experiencing precarious enrollment positions, where a difference of even 20 students could have drastic budget implications, it is not surprising that the Chief Enrollment Officers ranked themselves second to last among the core team for Performance Risk-Taking. Engaging in tasks that are ambiguous and risky in terms of their success and outcomes, as described by Burke (2019), is a particular threat to institutions that are tuition-dependent. Described from a practical standpoint, adopting a novel approach to recruitment might be detrimental to the institution, so having a more “steady hand” leading these efforts might be more beneficial. If Performance Risk-Taking were to be promoted, then these tuition-dependent institutions would need a safety net in place that would allow the enrollment professionals to assume some of these risks. From the presidents’ responses, what would be optimal for the role would be to meet enrollment goals while also being decisive about what is happening externally despite the difficult conversations and potential conflicts those decisions might bring internally.

The duality of the role, to be both collaborative and a risk-taker, would be an area to further explore with presidents and chief enrollment officers. As mentioned earlier, Interpersonal Risk-Taking was another dimension for which the Chief Enrollment Officers ranked themselves lower than their peers on the core senior team. To address this gap, these types of behaviors need to be cultivated and developed. As a leader of a major operation that manages multiple, disparate functional areas, it is important that the Chief Enrollment Officer can both have and facilitate open and transparent conversations with other administrative colleagues, but especially with her academic colleagues. Since the presidents ranked themselves the highest in Interpersonal Risk-Taking (93.88%), perhaps one scenario might be for the president to lead and deliver the more difficult



conversations with the faculty and deans with the enrollment officer present. This would allow the enrollment officer to implement and build on her strengths to experiment and propose new ideas and solutions. Moreover, given that the enrollment officer is limited as to the degree of academic change she can implement, collaboration between the president and the provost is essential since leading change academically must stem from those functional areas. It might also provide an opportunity to better understand why the enrollment position traditionally has such high turnover, because navigating between being a risk-taker and needing to be “everything to everyone” can lead to unmet expectations for both the enrollment officer and the president.

Another curious ranking that is worth noting is Information Gathering, where the Chief Enrollment Officers ranked themselves in the bottom third. The literature speaks to the importance of leading large administrative areas, and through this leadership, to adapt and change to meet lofty goals. In addition, the presidents described the role as needing to know what is happening in the field and stressed the importance of being up-to-date and cutting-edge in marketing and communications. In both instances, the lower ranking in Information Gathering surfaces a disconnect that is worth further exploration. Is it that the enrollment officer believes she will not learn from others, that she does not have the time or resources to garner information, or is it simply that she does not value that aspect of learning? Whatever is at the root of this, gathering information about the field, internally or externally, will instill confidence in all constituencies. For faculty and deans, it demonstrates a deep interest in a program that will result in new strategies or well-informed recommendations. From a president’s perspective, it gives her the confidence that the outreach is sharp and fresh.

Chief Enrollment Officers were in the bottom third of the core senior team for the Speed dimension, one of the most important dimensions that correlates with Learning Agility (Burke, 2016). As has been discussed previously for the provost role, it could be more reflective of the sector than an individual issue or related to the role; however, it

still surfaces an opportunity for further examination and likely professional development. This is further discussed in the Implications for Practice section of Chapter VI.

### **Chief Student Affairs Officer**

A total of 45% of college presidents identified the student affairs position as the role that has undergone the most change during these volatile times in higher education, and as the role that required higher levels of Learning Agility. College presidents spoke to how the role was once focused on student development and activities, and on providing opportunities for positive growth outside the classroom experience. They described it in direct contrast to today, where it has grown in “order of magnitude,” in both depth and breadth. Presidents highlighted their efforts in recruitment and retention, and how important they have become, especially in light of the changing demographics and the added pressure to retain current students. In the interviews, almost all spoke to the unrelenting pressures related to Title IX and other compliance areas that impacted the responsibility of the Chief Student Affairs Officer. Most college presidents, regardless of the type of institution, mentioned the changing student body, and described a student who comes to school who needs to multitask and juggle multiple responsibilities, for example, working more than one job, or having to care for their families. What dominated the conversations about the role was the degree to which students come to campus with mental health issues, and the degree to which the management of these issues impacted all of their other areas of responsibility.

While the literature touched on mental health issues, more of the focus was on the rise of student activism and the impact of students’ demands on and off campus. When asked about student unrest, demands, and activism, presidents proudly spoke about their own students’ engagement; however, they also tempered that by stating that the majority of their students did not have the space in their lives to be entirely immersed in these types of activities, which could be a reflection of the types of institutions in the sample.

Given the magnitude of change and growth in the Chief Student Affairs role, 45% of college presidents said that this role required higher Learning Agility. Student Affairs Officers' overall average BLAI scores (48%) were in the middle third of the core senior team. However, a more thorough analysis of the dimension scores reveals interesting points of intersection between the presidents' views and what the literature says about the role.

The Student Affairs Officers ranked themselves highest on Reflecting. Given the nature of the work and the formal preparation for a career in student affairs—one that focuses on development and growth—Reflecting is intrinsic to this work and is also apparent in what they hope to impart to their students: *to reflect* on their own behavior and actions. Given that this role was described by one of the presidents as “undergoing dramatic changes,” and one that requires the incumbent “to wear multiple hats,” this might suggest some dissonance between the Chief Student Affairs Officers' and the presidents' views on Reflecting during this period of volatility, especially if it stands in the way of action.

The Chief Student Affairs Officers also on average rated themselves highly on Collaborating. The presidents agreed with this assessment and emphasized in their comments the importance of this role working with other functional areas to enhance recruitment and retention, and to manage the newly mandated student-related compliance requirements. Presidents expressed concern when discussing the unrelenting nature of and immersion in compliance and legal issues that are now integral to the Chief Student Affairs Officer's portfolio. This was highlighted to underscore the importance of a close working relationship with the appropriate departments, especially given the degree to which those areas have also become such a focal point on college campuses.

On the other hand, Student Affairs Officers ranked themselves lower on Experimenting, followed by Performance-Risk-Taking. This might be explained again by the nature of the position, given that it too is governed by policy and procedure. The

student handbook is closely monitored and purposefully abided by for conformity and consistency. With that said, there could still be an opportunity for this role to think differently and break out from the written word—to perhaps rewrite the handbook to reflect today’s students, for example. The handbook could then capture and perhaps also reflect students’ experiences and ways of functioning, which in turn could have a significant impact on retention. If students are multitasking and their responsibilities go beyond just “being a student,” or they are challenged by mental health issues, perhaps experimenting with policies and procedures that take into account the “new student” would benefit both the institution and the student body.

Furthermore, the dimension Experimenting is where there is the greatest gap between the presidents and the chief student affairs officers. This could be understood in relation to Student Affairs itself, where these professionals are working within the bounds of specific student policies, procedures, and codes of conduct. With regard to their work with students’ mental health, Student Affairs professionals rely on specific protocols and well-designed practices, which are the antithesis of experimenting unless under the guidance of something like a clinical trial. While the presidents did not specifically speak to the importance of Student Affairs Officers experimenting, it would be interesting to explore where experimenting could be developed and what functional area(s) require it. Providing stable and consistent support to a broad student body is an imperative in this role, but the profile of today’s student also requires new ideas and approaches, as expressed by both the presidents and the literature. Since engagement and retention are issues that were focused on by the presidents, and echoed in the literature, perhaps these can provide the Chief Student Affairs professional with the opportunity to try new approaches that will have a broad benefit on campus. Given that the presidents ranked themselves highly on experimentation, it might be an opportunity for the president to build in opportunities for testing new ideas as well as recognition of well-thought out and strategic experimentation in support of these efforts.

In terms of the two dimensions that correlate highest with Learning Agility—Flexibility and Speed—the Chief Student Affairs Officers ranked themselves in the middle range in comparison to the rest of the core senior team. Both of these dimensions could belie their training and responsibility to provide consistency and transparency in procedures and practices. But again, it demonstrates an opportunity to continue building a functional area that needs to address each student who comes to campus with a different set of needs and experiences.

### **President**

While only 36% of the presidents identified their role as changing the most, it is interesting to note that they uniformly had the highest overall BLAI scores and ranked themselves in the top two for every dimension. Also of particular note was the high mean ranking of Interpersonal Risk-Taking at 93.88%. This ranking was consistent with the interviews. While perhaps a sampling issue, 8 of the 11 participating presidents were leading dynamic, forward-thinking, and innovative institutions that were thriving despite the volatility of the current landscape. They often spoke about change and taking risks, and described initiatives that require courage and perseverance. They were hyper-attuned to new academic programming (usually either graduate studies or in the healthcare arena), the integration of online learning, and to either officially or informally creating a role that assumed the responsibility of strategic innovations or external partnerships. In the interviews, those eight exhibited what seemed to be classic Learning Agility behaviors.

In conclusion, according to college presidents, the roles that have undergone the most change during the current volatile landscape in higher education and the roles that require the highest Learning Agility (the “high impact” roles) are, in descending order: Chief Academic Officer; Chief Enrollment Officer; and Chief Student Affairs Officer. While there was not a significant difference between the BLAI scores of those in the high

impact jobs and the “other” impact roles, a closer look at the dimensions pointed out consistency between the presidents’ views on what was required in the various roles and how they ranked themselves, whereas gaps were noted in other dimensions, as will be discussed below.

### **Finding #5**

*While a majority of college presidents identified the Provost as the senior cabinet member that exceeded expectations (45%), a lesser number (36%) identified themselves as exceeding expectations, followed by the Chief Enrollment Officer (27%) and Strategic Initiatives/Innovation (27%) roles.*

To understand the extent to which there is a relationship between the highest performers and those that are learning agile, a quantitative analysis was conducted. While the original intent for the research was to have the presidents confidentially rank their individual team members’ performance, because of the presidents’ ambivalence to do so, the decision was made to use the presidents’ references to performance as a proxy to document when they referred to a high performer and to note how the president described the individual. The scores of the higher performers according to the presidents were reviewed in comparison to the “other performers.”

While a statistical difference between the BLAI scores of the “high performers” and “other performers” was not significant, the overall average mean scores between the two groups, and the mean score differences by dimension, were of note. Further, there were interesting overlaps between the highest mean scores by dimension of the high performers and the presidents’ highest mean scores by dimension.

These higher performers had an overall BLAI mean score that was 11.9 points higher than the others, and across the board, there was a difference of more than 10 in all the dimensions, except the Reflecting, Feedback Seeking, and Performance Risk-Taking dimensions. It is in these dimensions that the high performers and “other” performers

most resembled each other. The largest differences between the higher performers and “other” performers were in the following dimensions, in descending order: Interpersonal Risk-Taking, Collaborating, and Flexibility. This complements what the President had to say about her higher performers. Throughout the interviews, Presidents emphasized needing to work with others, especially when it came to any activities related to mitigating the issues around recruitment and retention. For these issues, the president stressed the need for original thinking and taking calculated risks.

The fact that the presidents ranked themselves highest in Interpersonal Risk-Taking and that it was the largest gap between the high performers and others speaks to the value the presidents put on being able to have conversations with subordinates or supervisors in a manner that leads to learning and ultimately growth and change (Burke, 2016). The ability to have difficult conversations and confront differences is necessary to catalyze meaningful progress and change, for both the presidents and top performers.

Presidents ranked Collaborating as their second-highest Learning Agility dimension, and there was symmetry given that it was the second largest gap between the high performers and others. Collaborating was also an important attribute the presidents mentioned repeatedly throughout the interviews when discussing hiring, the high impact roles, and performance. The ability to collaborate was integral to any member of the senior team. Recruitment and retention were also noted as high priorities, and presidents emphasized the need for significant collaboration between a variety of administrative and academic functional areas.

Presidents ranked Flexibility as the third-highest dimension, and once again, this is mirrored in the high performers. Being flexible, remaining open to new ideas, and not being stuck in one way of doing things was also a sentiment shared throughout the interviews. The presidents stated this as an important qualification to being hired, and then described their high performers in this way as well. As Burke (2016) notes, Flexibility is a crucial dimension in agility and promoting change. Since academia is

steeped in tradition, the Flexibility dimension is particularly relevant as higher education as a sector responds to an ever-changing landscape. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine the sector making significant strides without a greater capacity to be flexible.

Overall, in terms of the roles that were identified as the higher performers, the Provost role topped the list at 45%, followed by the Presidents themselves, and then the Chief Enrollment Officers. This underscores the emphasis on the Provost and Chief Enrollment Officer roles because, not only were these considered high impact roles, they were also among the Presidents' high performers. Alternatively, while the Chief Student Affairs role was included as a high impact role, those serving in that role were not identified as high performers. This perhaps is not surprising given the gaps between the Presidents' rankings in the Risk-Taking and Flexibility dimensions and the rankings of those in Student Affairs. The Presidents described those attributes when discussing the high performers.

When the presidents spoke about themselves as high performers, they did so in the vein of what was rightly expected of them as president. When asked to further elaborate on their higher performers, they would often point to their own performance. They felt an obligation to be the "highest performer," that they owed this to their Board of Trustees, and to the senior team. In describing their own performance, they talked about the need to seed activities and leverage relationships that could then be shaped and implemented by the senior team. As noted previously, presidents had the highest scores across the board, and the most notable differences between them and the rest of their core senior teams were in the Risk-Taking dimensions.

In the Learning Agility literature, there is a direct correlation between those with higher BLAI scores and high performers. This analysis of the BLAI scores for the President and her senior team gives us a first look into that relationship in higher education. Repeatedly, Presidents' identification and descriptors of what makes a high performer borrowed from the language of the Learning Agility dimensions, using words



like “flexible,” “risk-taker,” and “collaborator.” For those they identified as high performers, there was a 10+ point difference in scores from the “other” performers, and this gap became even more accentuated when looking at the dimensions of Interpersonal Risk-Taking, Collaborating, and Flexibility. These dimensions were consistent with those the Presidents ranked themselves highest in, as well. Examining the higher performers through the lens of the descriptions that the President uses anecdotally, they are indeed the ones who are charting new directions for the college, driving change, and are open to creating, implementing, and leveraging opportunities for the institution—all particularly important endeavors considering the sector is experiencing such change and volatility.

In the for-profit sector, being learning agile is essential to keeping up with and being successful in an ever-changing global and interconnected environment. College presidents also described a volatile environment and identified these dimensions as crucial in higher education leadership success. What college presidents clearly expressed was that they knew who they could turn to in order to get the job done, and it was those roles that scored higher in the BLAI.

### **Finding #6**

*One hundred percent of participants said that there is a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success, while 36% of those had some qualifications.*

College presidents were asked if they thought there was a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership. This was one of the last questions of the interview; it was purposely the culminating question, where the president would address the central question of this study—the relationship between higher education leadership and Learning Agility—and would by then be well-informed, engaged, and likely more fluent on the topic.

A resounding 100% of the college presidents said that there was a relationship. Of those, 63% said yes unequivocally and underscored how and why with examples. The remaining 36% highlighted certain dimensions over others as being more relevant to high education leadership.

Affirmative responses to the link ranged from “Hell yes” to “inextricably linked,” to “absolutely!” and then the respondents would refer to the importance of the senior team members engaging in these behaviors to promote change, innovation, and risk-taking. Some went on to highlight which of the dimensions stood out for them in higher education, including Collaborating and Flexibility. Collaboration is essential given the structure of higher education, with its various academic and administrative silos. Others focused on how important it was to be flexible because the plethora of rules and policies can work counter to growth and change.

Presidents could imagine how different situations might bring forth some dimensions more than others and commented that some higher education roles will more readily access these dimensions. Often, that discussion turned to how, regardless of the role, comfort and fluidity with these behaviors are essential in higher education leadership.

Interpersonal Risk-Taking was articulated well when comparing higher education and the business sector. One president went further with this comparison, pointing out that in higher education, since a leader cannot just “change the person” if they do not align with their priorities, they need to be willing to have challenging conversations and able to hear differing views. He was explicit in stating that having a high threshold for interpersonal risk-taking plays a particularly important role in higher education.

While describing their agreement that successful leadership and Learning Agility were related, some also described an overall concern about the lack of urgency and lack of speed in the sector. They spoke about the deep problems that exist in relation to how higher education functions, especially in relation to its inability to act efficiently and

expeditiously. Furthermore, their enthusiasm about the relationship was somewhat dampened by the gap between being aspirational and realistic, in what can be and will be in the key learning agility behaviors.

Those who spoke about the relationship with some caveats were mainly concerned with Speed and Flexibility, but they spoke to these dimensions from the standpoint of changing expectations; as such the researcher might not necessarily want to see those correlate as well as they do in business. So there was not much lamenting over deficits seen in these dimensions in higher education; these presidents were saying instead to “know your audience.” Higher education, they posited, is a sector structured in a way that inhibits change and innovation unless these efforts are academic, organic, and structured narrowly. The dimensions of Speed and Flexibility were not described in negative terms, but instead as incongruent to the sector when considering learning agility and leadership success. While some presidents encouraged a further analysis of how these structures and Speed and Flexibility could co-exist, a few were content to suggest that they were not the most important dimensions in higher education. In all, every college president stated that there was a relationship between Learning Agility and higher education leadership success. While some discussed certain dimensions being more relevant to higher education, overall there was agreement that being learning agile was critical to success.

Chapter VI  
IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS  
FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

**Limitations**

The findings of this exploratory study have to be seen in light of its limitations. First, there were some issues with the sample size, the sample type, and the selection process. Second, some aspects of data collection became problematic.

This study was designed to explore the topic of Learning Agility in higher education; it allowed for deep engagement with college presidents and, through those interactions, allowed the researcher to garner data from each of their respective senior teams. While the sample size was originally going to be between 5 and 7, college presidents responded favorably, bringing the total interviewed to 11, which was a positive development. However, while the response rate from the requests for interviews surpassed the intended goal, senior staff participation in the BLAI was 64%. Moreover, there were role inconsistencies between institutions, which challenged the researcher to generalize some of the results around the roles, an important aspect of the study.

Also, it was a convenience sample, initially chosen based on a geographic area that allowed for easier travel and access to in-person interviews. Given that the researcher was a veteran higher education senior administrator, she drew on her network to develop her list of institutions rather than sending out cold requests. Furthermore, the types of institutions were fairly homogenous in that they were mainly small and private.

Collecting the BLAI data from the senior teams proved to be a complicated task. One challenge stemmed directly from the presidents' collective unease with asking their team members to take the BLAI. In some instances, they asked for a waiting period (as long as four months in one case) before the request was made; in other instances, college presidents asked that a third party send out the request. Presidents also rewrote the proposed letter that would go from the president to the team members to underscore that the president would not see the results. One college president did not think the original request for participation in the study clearly delineated the involvement of the senior staff, and once she understood this factor as a result of my confirmation, vacillated over whether or not to conduct the interview. Another college president agreed to asking her senior staff to participate, but then a month after the interview reported that tensions were too high and she would no longer ask them to participate.

One idea to address such issues going forward would be to recruit senior staff members to participate and have them in turn ask their presidents to be interviewed. Another idea would be to separate the presidents' view from a Learning Agility study of the senior staff members and simultaneously cast a wider net to senior staff members across institutions.

The research question about a correlation between higher performers and higher Learning Agility was not able to be answered definitively because the researcher could not obtain performance data. Instead, the researcher used as a proxy the president's identification of her high performers gleaned from the interview. In the discussion about roles, the presidents would veer away from speaking specifically about the individual role and would instead organically speak to those in the role and describe them in terms of their performance. One possibility for a future study would be to have the senior staff members fill out a Likert scale about their own performance. Another would be to have a third party distribute it to the president, in order to depersonalize it and guarantee anonymity. Lastly, involving the Human Resource director as the point person at the

institution for data collection might help to alleviate any concerns about privacy and sharing information with an outsider. Also, given that self-assessments were the basis of the majority of the analysis, it is important to note that self-ratings have come into question (Dunning et al., 2004).

As with all studies, the design of the study contains limitations. In an exploratory study looking at an area for the first time, any information can prove useful, but to further the research and legitimize the work to fit into conventional research design and complementary statistical analysis, a larger sample is warranted. Furthermore, in order to better understand the relationship between performance and Learning Agility in higher education, presidents need to be assured and reassured that they are sharing this information in a safe and protected manner.

### **Implications**

An initial look at the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education through the eyes of college presidents—and through the utilization of the Burke Learning Agility Inventory—revealed valuable information about the sector and the role of senior leadership, as well as providing a deeper understanding of how the Learning Agility framework can inform higher education leadership to help chart a course through challenging and unpredictable times. Higher education as a sector, like business, is undergoing a period of change and volatility. As such, and similar to other sectors, keeping up with the rapid pace of such change is imperative for higher education leadership to achieve its stated aspirations and maintain the overall viability of institutions.

While demographic cliffs, a vulnerable business model, and the onslaught of on-line delivery models were highlighted by college presidents as the most salient issues, the impediments to change were what stood out as exerting the most underlying pressure

in the sector. Given the degree to which higher education was described as a sector steeped in tradition and practice, defined by academic silos and structures, and operating by a shared governance model, Learning Agility as a leadership framework was recognized as being particularly important, relevant, and time-sensitive. Given the state of the sector and the need for change, one might argue that Learning Agility is even more critical for higher education than for other sectors that rely on traditional operational and management structures dominated by leadership decisions and management of execution. An organizational culture that is built on autonomy and academic freedoms, coupled with a more conventional organizational structure made up of functional units, demands leadership that can deal readily with new experiences, emerging fields, and complex interactions and interpersonal dynamics. This study demonstrated that Learning Agility was relevant, especially when examining senior leadership roles, as it revealed weaknesses where growth and development were needed to support and inform higher education leadership for the future, as well as the field at large.

The literature on Learning Agility is robust, providing evidence for its applicability across a variety of for-profit sectors. Correlations between Learning Agility and leadership success have been established, and Learning Agility has been used for both recruitment and development. This study has provided insights into Learning Agility and the Burke Learning Agility Inventory as applied to the non-profit sphere, specifically higher education, which is arguably one of the more complex areas among non-profits.

This first look reinforces the idea that Learning Agility and leadership success are co-mingled; and based on the BLAI results, there was a normal distribution of self-ratings. The research identified interesting variances in learning dimensions, especially in the two that most highly correlate with Learning Agility: Speed and Flexibility. Where Flexibility was highly self-rated, Speed rankings were lackluster, either in the mid-range or lower range of self-ratings. While many explanations might illuminate this result, likely the industry itself conflicts with an approach of quickly discarding existing ideas so

new ideas can be explored. Its self-proclaimed and highly-valued premium on both deliberation and consultation can perhaps inform our understanding of how Speed applies to higher education. For instance, when a leader needs to act on a new idea quickly and discard those that are not working, Speed is also a factor to what degree and how quickly that case can be made and accepted by others, so communication and influence become paramount in understanding Speed in this sector. Furthermore, those specific practices around creating and discarding new ideas would also need to be reviewed, and/or, as some institutions have done, enacted by establishing separate units that are not governed by those practices that align for more expeditious development and execution.

The literature about Learning Agility is enhanced by this study in that it put a microscope on a sector that is indeed experiencing the same volatility as the for-profits, and it underscores the importance of higher education leaders displaying high levels of adaptability. Thus, the unique context in which this framework was examined has expanded the overall body of literature about Learning Agility and leadership.

### **The President's Views on Her Senior Team Highlighted Some Key Considerations Around Structure, Roles, and Responsibilities**

Though the Provost/Chief Academic Affairs role was identified as the position that has changed the most in scope, responsibility, and expectation, faculty development and academic oversight remained the primary quality that defined her success. A Provost's acumen in that respect is what gave the President the autonomy to create, innovate, and execute a strategic agenda. Protecting, reinforcing, and recognizing faculty development and academic oversight as the central responsibility of the Chief Academic Affairs Officer role will pay dividends when instituting change. Institutions that have preserved the very core of this position have realized better trust, transparency, and buy-in when planning and engineering significant change.

The creation of a senior cabinet position, the responsibility of which is to develop and identify strategic innovations and alliances, has magnified institutions' ability to



more rapidly adopt new directions. Such a position gives the President a singularly focused partner, a “go to” colleague for a potential new initiative, and it gives the Provost the freedom to substantively collaborate on these initiatives without being solely responsible for their execution. In turn, the Provost has the ability to deliberate and process through the appropriate channels to mitigate resistance and opposition, and to develop support and thought partners. Securing consistent cultivation of faculty while feeding and leveraging opportunities creates the balance needed to ultimately ensure strides toward a robust future that will require institutional change and supports building a more sustainable business model.

The Chief Enrollment Officer must have skilled capacities in bringing together disparate functional administrative areas to meet institutional and recruitment goals. While the President would first highlight market knowledgeability and market infiltration, the literature and the conversations kept pointing back to an accomplished leader with deep expertise in management and leadership as key attributes in succeeding in the position. Market research, marketing techniques, and overall strategy can be optimized through external partnerships with experts, but a skilled and trusted communicator, and a strong and accomplished leader, is needed internally to facilitate productive and constructive conversations with administrative departments, faculty, and deans. Enrollment officers with these skills are imperative in light of the demographic changes and new enrollment directions needed to sustain tuition-dependent institutions.

The Chief Student Affairs Officer has been asked by Presidents to create inclusive and responsive environments for today’s student, yet students coming to campus with mental illness dominated almost every conversation. Those institutions that have created partnerships and standalone units managed by trained professionals to oversee the mental health services were able to engage the student body to create more relevant and diverse programming, and saw a more direct and positive impact on student retention. The Chief Student Affairs role has grown exponentially, yet mental illness has dominated its

portfolio. Managing mental health issues with expertise, in collaboration with strong partners, allowed for programming for deeper student engagement and broader efforts that support retention and student satisfaction. In addition, teasing out the specific responsibilities that are not bound by a “student handbook” will allow for additional opportunities to demonstrate the Risk-Taking and Flexibility dimensions.

### **Learning Agility and Higher Education Leadership: Considerations for the Field**

Learning Agility behaviors and dimensions were already evident in the interviews with college presidents, from what they were looking for in hiring; descriptions of institutional strategies; addressing the uncertain and volatile environment; and the immediate connection to the Learning Agility terms and concepts, validated by their self-ratings on the BLAI. Moreover, presidents enthusiastically embraced the Learning Agility framework and the relationship between leadership success and Learning Agility. Presidents rated themselves highly on key dimensions around Risk-Taking, Flexibility, and Experimenting. While they stated that these were important qualities they looked for when hiring senior team members, their senior teams fell short in their self-rankings across some of these dimensions. Overall, presidents ranked themselves notably higher than their senior team members across all of the BLAI dimensions, which presents interesting opportunities for analysis, growth, and development for the sector. The core senior team (those roles that appeared in more than 50% of the institutions) also rated themselves differently than the other members that made up the overall senior team, also providing opportunities for future research.

### **Implications Around Learning Agility and Senior Leadership in Higher Education**

When hiring senior team members, college presidents might look less to past performance and more to how individuals learn when confronted with new experiences. An emphasis on how new learning takes place, and on what that looks like in relation to

taking risks, information gathering, and experimenting, for instance, might elicit a better understanding of how the person will behave when confronted with unknown situations.

Presidents value senior team colleagues who are flexible and collaborative, and they have by and large achieved those hiring goals. Perhaps the qualities of flexibility and collaboration in the senior team have actually allowed the president herself to exhibit more risk-taking and experimenting, and in that way supported some measure of change and innovation.

Presidents expect their senior team to look out for opportunity, to take risks and be forward-thinking; however, the real constraints of acting on new information or discarding ideas to adopt new ones can have detrimental effects if not done well and carefully. Presidents must take the lead in these activities. They have to be the chief communicators and influencers in these large-scale change activities and empower their teams publicly to experiment and to take risks accordingly. Letting the community know that there is an expectation that the team will step into these new roles and exhibit these new behaviors will also give the senior team the confidence to march ahead.

Written, articulated, and rewarded activities that identify key Learning Agility dimensions will support growth and development. For instance, if Flexibility, a low-rated dimension among provosts, is sought after by presidents, then stated goals should reflect that activity. If the Chief Enrollment Officer needs to engage more actively in Risk-Taking activities, then a clear articulation of those behaviors and a complementary plan needs to drive that work.

Since there is an inherent dichotomy between the overall sector and some of the dimensions of being learning agile, a careful and well-delineated plan to address those schisms should take into account how that will affect the growth and development of leaders becoming more adaptable. Both the cultural and structural differences in higher education can also shed light on how the development of the various dimensions plays out in different sectors.

Given that the Reflecting dimension ratings were high across the board, a personalized approach to professional development might best match developing leadership. For instance, one-to-one coaching or executive coaching might be the most productive way to enhance and promote skills development and actions.

Feedback Seeking was the lowest-ranked dimension among *all* roles; this is similar to other sectors (Burke, 2019) and therefore not unique to higher education. Feedback Seeking could be improved by adopting some of the standard evaluation practices used in the for-profit sector, but it requires further research to fully understand. Meanwhile, adopting institution-wide practices might not yield timely opportunities to “move the needle” in this dimension that is important for growth and improvement. Instead, as a stopgap measure and to model new behavior, the President might spearhead a strategy with her direct reports that generates pointed and reciprocal conversations around novel ideas and performance. Ideally this would start with the President asking for feedback on new efforts and/or her overall performance to set the standard for candid and formative discussions.

Given the importance of the Speed dimension as a key component of Learning Agility, a deeper examination into *how* the associated behaviors that drive Speed can co-exist in higher education remains an interesting area for further research. A model of Speed that fits into the higher education context must incorporate those behaviors that are essential to functioning and success in a fast-paced environment. Perhaps Speed will be closely tied to some positions more so than others, or perhaps it will be reexamined overall in the sector. However, simply discounting Speed as being counterproductive to higher education will stymie change and innovation. Furthermore, since the core senior team collectively ranked themselves highly in Flexibility, the other key component to being learning agile, any concerted approach to magnifying Speed should take into account the built-in capacities of Flexibility. This should be considered, especially since Flexibility stresses not only learning, but also unlearning, behaviors. It would be

advantageous to utilize that highly rated dimension as the foundation for productive dialogue around Speed and higher education.

Comparing the mean scores by dimension for the core senior team versus the overall senior teams surfaced interesting differences in the Performance and Interpersonal Risk-Taking categories, with the overall team ranking themselves higher in both of those dimensions. Perhaps the core senior team members allow their direct reports to take more risks and/or, as a potential corollary to that, the further you are away from the president's core team, the more likely you are to take risks. Furthermore, on the core team, those who rated themselves highest on the BLAI were the Chief Financial Officer and the Chief Advancement Officer. While not identified as roles that required the highest Learning Agility, they were indeed the ones who rated themselves accordingly. Perhaps this is because these are roles that perform predominantly in sync with and in the service of the President, and therefore have more autonomy to move freely across the Learning Agility domains. Leveraging this might enhance the overall trajectory of Speed, Flexibility, Experimenting, and Performance Risk-Taking. Consideration might be given to the idea of having the CFO and/or the CAO take a more prominent role as catalysts for change and innovation and also support the high impact roles as those roles skillfully tread more methodically through institutional change. For example, the need to change and/or make the case for a new opportunity, driven by a financially unsustainable model or through the wishes of a philanthropic partner, could be revealed by those officers as the impetus for change, while allowing the high impact roles the freedom to drive change through their Learning Agility capacities. The high impact roles will have likely turned to their colleagues to complement their efforts to incentivize and promote change, and this arrangement might be institutionalized in some way. These Performance Risk-Taking activities could be reinforced by the President, and perhaps be strategically planned and bolstered collectively as a senior team priority.

While this assessment of self-rated BLAI scores by dimension revealed interesting patterns and themes, additional research that included interviews with those occupying these roles would provide further texture and understanding to how these dimensions apply to their individual roles and responsibilities.

**The General State of Higher Education Was Filtered Through the Eyes of Eleven College Presidents, and as such, the Following Implications Are Put Forth for Consideration**

While there is a laser focus on mitigating an imminent demographic cliff, noted institutional accomplishments were those that focused on strategic demographic growth, expanded degree and micro-credential offerings (many at the graduate level and tightly connected to market demands), and alternative delivery models to identify diverse pathways for growth and vitality.

Most college presidents pointed to a growth strategy to strengthen a vulnerable business model, yet some were experimenting with decreasing non-instructional costs through collaborations with other institutions, outsourcing, and selling or leasing land/physical plant.

Presidents' approaches to learning and keeping abreast of a volatile landscape were varied and diverse. Institutions that were staying "ahead of the curve" were led by presidents whose learning was propelled by a focus on the external environment, through networking and forging relationships with the business and civic communities, and a reliability on information gathering that resulted in leveraging opportunities for their institutions. Presidents with the ability to be externally focused reaped a myriad of successes, but this was partially dependent on the support and reinforcement of their senior teams and boards of trustees.

Only 27% of presidents turned to their faculty to keep up with and learn about the salient issues. While information from faculty might trickle up through the provost, solidifying the information flow—especially with regard to their respective fields, in

relation to the changes in the market, and in relation to student interest and demand—would offer an intellectual arsenal of information that the president and senior team could integrate into their strategic plans and alliances. Given the strong bond between the faculty and their students, faculty input into the strategic direction is paramount. Furthermore, while faculty might not have an appetite to participate in institutional change, as the intellectual keepers of their fields their participation in and responsiveness to academic development are vital for change.

### **Summary of Implications for Practice and Future Research**

In-depth interviews with college presidents and subsequent BLAI self-ratings by them and their teams described the utility of the Learning Agility framework to higher education. The sector, while steeped in history, protocols, and practice, organized through a shared governance model, and designed purposely to function in academic specialties, still demonstrated a propensity and drive to be forward-thinking as well as relevant and responsive in these changing times. All presidents enthusiastically endorsed the premise that there is a relationship between Learning Agility and successful leadership in higher education, while some questioned the degree to which Speed would be a defining component given the organization and makeup of the sector.

While a schism exists between this sector and the practice of moving quickly, this study revealed the need to adapt rapidly and explored the dynamics around Speed and Flexibility in the sector. Presidents seem to be the drivers of change, experimentation, and risk taking, and they credit their senior teams for allowing them to be able to move freely and rapidly. However, they also described a sense of urgency for their institutions to be forward-looking, responsive, and relevant. The BLAI ratings give the field a snapshot of where the strengths are and where opportunities for further development exist.

## Conclusion

Understanding what makes some leaders successful and others not successful has been studied for many years, yet 67% of leaders still fail in their current positions, and two out of three leaders fail in their first positions (Hogan, 2009). While a staggering figure, especially given the substantial body of literature on the topic, scholars and practitioners alike have pursued new lines of research to better identify what made some succeed and others not and then devise how that knowledge would improve the overall state of recruitment and the development of successful leadership. The role of being learning agile, of being adaptable and having both the willingness and ability to learn in new and difficult situations, was first identified by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000). It was this focus on learning new competencies in new situations that was different and eye-opening to the field because it changed the focus from past experiences to learning new things in new environments. DeRue et al. (2012) further honed the definition to include the two key components that defined Learning Agility: Flexibility and Speed.

W. Warner Burke (2016, 2019), like others in the field, was never satisfied with the state of affairs around leadership and was determined to substantively build on the literature and improve both the research and practice around leadership success. As a result, an advanced definition of Learning Agility accompanied by the creation of an effective and validated instrument to measure Learning Agility, the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (BLAI), catapulted the field's understanding and the applicability of Learning Agility, its predictive use in leadership success, and its diagnostic abilities to support leadership succession and development. In support of that work, this study focused on the applicability of the Learning Agility framework to a new sector, higher education, and gave a first look into an industry whose main objective is to promote and expand learning.



Overall, as stated in the literature and affirmed by the presidents interviewed in this study, the higher education sector is indeed experiencing volatility, uncertainty, and complexity in similar ways as the for-profit industries. The willingness and ability of a leader to take action in these changing environments is paramount in higher education; thus, the study of Learning Agility and higher education leadership success was warranted to both inform the field of higher education and add to the body of research on Learning Agility.

In “Leadership and Learning Agility: A Lifelong Journey for W. Burke,” Hoff and Smith (2020) outline next steps for the field, including: the importance of context as it relates to Learning Agility; the implications of Learning Agility by industry; and whether there is a Learning Agility profile by industry that could lead to better results. This study helped to seed answers to some of these questions as it relates to higher education, especially in relation to the leadership roles that make up the C-suite of the sector: higher education’s senior team, high-impact roles help to build an industry profile that is both descriptive and instructive. Furthermore, the relationship between performance and BLAI scores in higher education was consistent with the research conducted in industries including healthcare, the financial sector, and others, though the results of the self-ratings for the Speed dimension certainly warrant further research in higher education.

The Presidents’ views on the topic endorse further analysis of the framework, but also suggest opportunities to leverage what has been gleaned from this initial look into the applicability of Learning Agility to higher education. Taking action will benefit the field in the here and now, especially because of the complex and rapidly changing environment that higher education is experiencing. Collectively, higher education must compete for relevance and students, and must fulfill a societal quest to increase the learning and the upward mobility of persons of all ages and backgrounds.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Protocol for College Presidents

Questions the research will answer:

A. What are the most salient issues in higher education today, among your peer institutions?

How do you keep up with those changes?

B. As you look at your senior cabinet, which roles might be most affected by the volatility of current climate?

Which ones have borne the brunt of these changes?

Which role has been the most exposed?

What do you look for when you recruit for a senior team member?

C. To what extent is Learning Agility positively correlated with leader success in higher education?\*

D. As discussed, higher education has been undergoing a period of rapid change and volatility, while all senior teams have been affected, some roles have been more affected than others. Please indicate the three roles that have undergone the greatest degree of change and adjustment and therefore require the highest Learning Agility?

\*Note: Researcher handed president the Learning Agility definition and the nine dimensions. The question was asked after the president had time to review.

Appendix B  
President's Letter

Dear President:

A widely accepted view of business leaders is that one of the most challenging aspects of leading organizations today is keeping up with the rapidity of change. As Hoff and Burke note in their 2017 book, *Learning Agility: The Key to Leader Potential*:

The pace of change to which organizations experience today has only quickened in recent years. The challenges of change that organizations experience today may be political, economic, social or technological, or a combination of these. The one constant among the white-water rapids that are rushing at us every day is our ability to recognize or anticipate a change (speed) and to apply or create a different set of filters (flexibility). What Learning Agility allows us to do is to keep moving forward with the current.

Higher education is not immune to the influence and impact of these rapid changes, and in their 2018 whitepaper, *The Future of Higher Education*, Mrig and Sanaghan describe the current state as follows: "In every boardroom, cabinet meeting, professional conference, news outlet, and whitepaper, the most talked about theme in higher education is the avalanche of impending changes confronting our institutions."

I am writing today to ask you to participate in a dissertation study which will explore the relevance and application of Learning Agility in higher education, and more specifically, to examine the president's views of Learning Agility as it relates to and impacts the roles and performance of her senior cabinet. The concept of Learning Agility has been examined extensively in the for profit sector, and assessing Learning Agility utilizing the Burke Learning Agility Instrument (BLAI) has proven predictive for leadership performance, and informs employee recruitment and advancement strategies.

This study will pioneer the examination of what Learning Agility means at an institution of higher education, and it will give the sector a first-time, in-depth look at the various roles of the senior team in relation to flexibility, agility, and adaptability.



Participating in the study requires the following:

- 30-minute, in-person 1:1 interview between the president and the PI. The interview will be tape-recorded and transcribed. Confidentiality will be maintained by storing the interview transcription in a password-protected file.
- The president and each senior staff member will complete the BLAI. The BLAI takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.

In order to maintain confidentiality of the BLAI results and minimize the risk of exposure of the identity of participants, the researcher will only share an average score for the team with the president, and will provide participants only with their own BLAI score.

Benefits of participating in the study include:

Each member will receive their individual BLAI results, which will delve into the key aspects of Learning Agility (see Table 1 for descriptions of each dimension) and provide strategies for growth and development, and a signed copy of the book, *Learning Agility: The Key to Leader Potential*, by David Hoff and W. Warner Burke,

The president will receive an overall average score for the Senior Team. The team score will provide the president with information related to leveraging team strengths and increasing team capacity for Learning Agility.

I will follow up with your office next week to discuss your participation and answer any questions you might have about the process or the goals of the study, or please feel free to respond to this email directly.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Suzanne M. Murphy  
Principal Investigator

Appendix C  
Demographics Questionnaire

**Instructions:** Please provide some demographic information about yourself.

Please indicate your gender: [pull down menu]

Male

Female

Other (Please specify \_\_\_\_\_)

Please indicate your race/ethnicity (select all that apply):

African American or Black

Asian or Asian American

Hispanic or Latino

White

American Indian or Alaska Native

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Other (Please specify \_\_\_\_\_)

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

Bachelor's degree

Graduate or professional degree

Terminal degree

What is your title? \_\_\_\_\_

What best describes your area of current responsibility (select all that apply)?

Academic Affairs

Business, Finance, & Administration

Chief of Staff

Development/Institutional Advancement

Digital Learning

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Enrollment Management/Services

Legal Affairs

President

Student Affairs

When did you start in your current position? \_\_\_\_\_ (MMM/YYYY)

How many years of work experience do you have in the area of your current responsibility?

1-5 years

6-10 years

11-15 years

16-20 years

21+ years

## Appendix D

## Learning Agility Dimensions and Definitions

<b>Learning dimensions</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Sample Items</b>
Collaborating	The extent to which an individual tries to broker the learning process for others in their environment.	Ask a variety of stakeholders for their point of view.
Experimenting	The degree to which a person tries out new ideas or ways to get work done, usually through seeking out new information in their environment.	Jump into action and learn by trial and error.
Feedback seeking	The extent to which an individual solicits feedback about his or her performance.	Ask my peers to provide me with feedback on my performance.
Information seeking	The extent to which an individual continuously updates preexisting knowledge with new information.	Seek new information on topics related to my job or field.
Interpersonal Risk-Taking	The extent to which a person admits failings, mistakes, and other issues on-the-job and tries to get help to right these issues.	Ask others for help when needed.
Performance Risk-Taking	The degree to which a person places himself or herself in ambiguous situations and is unclear about the process or the outcome of the situation.	Take on new roles or assignments that are challenging.
Reflecting	The degree to which a person reflects on an experience – how something happened, why it happened, how the outcome could have been different, and how to make changes in the future.	Stop to reflect on work processes and projects
<b>Agility dimensions</b>	<b>Definition</b>	
Speed	The extent to which an individual is a “quick study” and is swift but not hasty while operating at their full potential.	Switch between different tasks or jobs as needed
Flexibility	The extent to which an individual displays adaptation, fluidity, resilience, the ability to bend under pressure, and the ability to switch between different modes of operating in their work.	Quickly develop solutions to problems

(Burke W. W., 2016)

Appendix E

Core Senior Team BLAI Score and Rankings

<b>Role</b>	<b>Overall BLAI</b>	<b>Speed</b>	<b>Reflecting</b>	<b>Perf risk taking</b>	<b>Inter risk taking</b>	<b>Info Gathering</b>	<b>Flexibility</b>	<b>Feedback</b>	<b>Experimenting</b>	<b>Collaborating</b>
President	78.00	65.63	81.25	75.25	93.88	72.50	84.25	47.88	80.13	88.13
CFO	76.67	87.00	90.67	58.33	67.80	84.00	89.17	49.00	71.17	79.83
VP Advancement	61.00	65.17	65.50	68.67	56.33	51.33	71.00	38.33	67.67	73.50
Provost	53.20	56.00	64.00	67.00	54.40	67.00	53.40	44.20	55.20	71.00
Student Affairs	48.00	59.13	75.13	51.13	61.50	64.50	59.88	34.50	49.25	70.38
Chief of Staff	47.00	61.50	40.00	62.50	47.00	27.00	60.50	37.00	46.00	54.50
Enrollment	42.40	52.80	53.00	41.60	36.80	42.60	61.00	33.80	61.40	55.60
Chief Diversity	17.00	6.00	35.67	22.00	32.67	47.33	35.00	12.67	23.67	40.67
<b>MEAN</b>	<b>52.91</b>	<b>56.65</b>	<b>63.15</b>	<b>55.81</b>	<b>56.30</b>	<b>57.03</b>	<b>64.28</b>	<b>37.17</b>	<b>56.81</b>	<b>66.70</b>