

Higher education is infrastructure: Taking the long view to align institutional mission with operations

Higher education institutions are strange beasts.

On the one hand, they're mission-driven organizations that take the form of communities "with a culture of belonging, collegiality and support" (Yakoboski et. al, 2023).

On the other hand, despite being not-for-profit, they're businesses with ever-increasing challenges to maintaining a healthy balance between revenue and costs to perpetuate that mission. Decades of declining funding for students, the recent pandemic, increases in costs around health care and technology, the looming so-called "demographic cliff," and declining public confidence in higher ed are all significant structural challenges to institutions' ability to operate.

These two aspects of higher ed institutions—mission and operations—are often in tension. Resolving this tension often falls to frontline staff and administrative personnel, who have to figure out how to advance the mission despite operational challenges.

Belief in higher education's mission can be a great advantage when it comes to recruiting and retaining employees who give their best effort while employed because of their dedication to an institution's mission. But their dedication isn't a panacea that gives administrations permission to neglect other crucial aspects of what their employees need to do their best work.

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The mission and financial sustainability operations of higher education institutions are often in tension.

For example, data shared in the recent TIAA Institute report, "[Why would someone want to work for my college or university? An Employee Value Proposition for higher education](#)" (Yakoboski et al., 2023), indicates that while three-quarters of employees are "satisfied" with the institutional culture, only one-third of employees report that the institutional mission is one of the top reasons for choosing to work at a higher education institution. Interestingly, managers and administrators significantly overrate the strength of the draw of the institutional mission for employees, with nearly half saying that it's a top reason for employees to choose the institution.

This divergence of opinion is a sign of a mission-operations disconnect. While managers believe they're working from a place of assumed goodwill toward the work of the institution, employees aren't so certain.

This commentary is meant to provide a framework for making operational decisions that are consistent with the overall mission, and to help build trust not only with employees, but with the broader public as well.

In my view, colleges and universities would benefit from taking a more expansive view of their own missions. They aren't just higher education institutions. They're examples of infrastructure.

Institutions as infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the systems and services that allow a society to operate. Roads and bridges, police and fire, sewer, schools, and municipal services are all examples of infrastructure.

Higher education institutions are also infrastructure. More importantly, they're *local* infrastructure.

While some have impacts on a national or even international scale, the vast majority of colleges and universities have a primary sphere of influence in their immediate locality and state. Higher education institutions contribute to the local economy as employers, serve as hubs of activity around culture and technology, enhance access to social mobility, and fuel workforce development. Higher education institutions are examples of long-horizon stability and sustainability.

The many ways communities benefit from the existence of a local higher ed institution are innumerable, and because institutions are infrastructure, even those who don't have direct contact with the institution benefit from its presence.



The view that higher education is a form of infrastructure isn't widely held. This turns a college or university into little more than a service provider, i.e., a degree store.

Being viewed as infrastructure comes with significant benefits, because the public tends to see infrastructure as something that deserves support. Unfortunately, the view that higher education is a form of infrastructure isn't widely held. Some of this is the fault of an increasing belief that a college education is a private good that conveys to an individual. This turns a college or university into little more than a service provider, i.e., a degree store. As more and more people express concerns about the value of a college degree, belief that the degree store is doing a good job declines.

A single institution can't hope to undo these attitudes about an entire industry. But a higher education institution focused on its role as a local institution stands a better chance of maintaining public faith and tangible support—and at recruiting and retaining a robust workforce.

Acting like an institution that's critical to local infrastructure requires embracing three core principles:

1. Take the long view on operational decisions

Most higher education institutions in the United States are at least 50 years old. Many are more than 200 years old. Yet it often seems decisions are made with very short-term concerns in mind, rather than considering how today's choices may impact the institution's ability to fulfill its mission down the road.

The TIAA Institute's Employee Value Proposition research found that 36% of higher ed employees feel "higher ed has changed for the worse" in recent years. Kevin McClure, an associate professor of higher education at University of North Carolina Wilmington, has been studying the sources of employee dissatisfaction and burnout. His analysis has identified two key drivers of the trend: under-compensation and "job creep," where employees are asked to take on additional work without additional consideration (McClure & Taylor, 2023).

Employers are risking burnout, or worse, "demoralization" a condition to which mission-driven individuals are more vulnerable than others. Burnout is operating in a depleted state of overwork. Demoralization is a loss of belief that the work is even worth doing.

When employees see splashy new initiatives rolled out to generate a burst of positive publicity without the concomitant investment in the personnel who will be required to bring those pledges to fruition, trust in leadership is further eroded.

Strong belief in mission can turn from an asset to a detriment as the employee not only experiences frustration at work, but something closer to an existential crisis. In this state, well-meaning programs (e.g., self-care initiatives) meant to benefit employees may actually start to take on negative connotations as they look like attempts to paper over major problems.

As employee jobs are organized and designed, care should be taken to make sure the positions are stable, sustainable and capable of being done well without undue employee sacrifice that ultimately leads to burnout, or worse.

While all organizations should expect employees to desire advancement and career development, positions must be designed in ways that will make good and valuable employees at least content in the positions they have. While important, advancing up the ladder need not always be seen as a prerequisite for a sustainable position.

Further, employees' faith in mission shouldn't be considered a substitute for sufficient compensation or the existence of necessary resources and conditions to do their job.

Upper administration and management have a responsibility to make sure individual employees are empowered to deliver on the promise of the institutional mission, not the other way around.

ESTABLISHING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Take the long view on operational decisions
- Focus on stakeholder concerns and needs
- Provide stakeholders what they need to execute their part of the mission

2. Focus on the concerns and needs of all the institution's stakeholders

There's no question that institutions serve many different populations in many different ways. Students, faculty, staff, administration, local citizens, the state, government officials—all have a stake in the fate of the institution. Inevitably the needs of some stakeholders may be in conflict. Nonetheless, when the institution is truly focused on its mission (rather than operations) and the various stakeholders believe in the value of the mission, such conflicts become easier to negotiate.

Much of this work can be accomplished through open and honest communication between and among stakeholders. One of the long-view principles that should be put into constant practice is building trust with each category of stakeholder. Institutions should be proud to champion their contributions to the well-being of different stakeholders, but these communications should always be rooted in the tangible, not just empty PR.

National surveys about sentiment toward higher education are meaningless as applied to individual institutions. They are measurements of perception divorced from experience, and often perceptions not rooted in reality. This is why individual higher education institutions should regularly monitor their

perceived alignment with the mission for both internal (faculty, staff) and external stakeholders (local community, government officials).

For external stakeholders, benchmark measurements unique to the local context should be established. Essentially, what does the public expect from the institution? These benchmarks must be tied to tangible goals that will be visible to those external stakeholders. The mere act of community dialogue with external stakeholders often increases goodwill independent of any action taken from outside insights.

For internal stakeholders, particularly employees, questions could include:

- How well is the institution doing as a whole to fulfill its mission?
- How confident are you in your ability to execute your job as part of the institution's mission?
- What are the most significant institutional barriers to fulfilling the mission?
- What are the most significant individual barriers to fulfilling the mission?

Findings can be used to gauge any perceived mismatch between mission and actual operations. In some cases, gaps may be illusory and closing the distance may be a matter of improved communications. In other cases, a gap may identify a tangible but remediable shortcoming.

Involving the community in a bigger-picture discussion on the problem of delivering on the mission can reveal small issues before they become larger, generate fresh ideas from those closest to the problem and create an overall sense of community collaboration. And if we believe that employees are invested in the mission and that their belief contributes to institutional health, it only makes sense to involve them in these discussions.

3. Provide what stakeholders need to execute their part of the mission

This principle encompasses many different considerations, but the easiest way to evaluate them is to understand the base level of security, autonomy and support every employee needs to successfully execute their part of the mission.

I admit that I'm coming from a personal place on this final point. For nearly 20 years I taught as a contingent faculty member across five different institutions. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who believed more in the instructional mission of the university—which did not make me unique among my nontenure-track colleagues and the myriad staff and employees I worked alongside. The work was both fulfilling and important, exhausting and energizing, but for me, and the vast majority of those I worked alongside over the years, it ultimately became impossible to continue from a simple economic perspective.

I was never paid more than \$35,000 per year as a full-time lecturer/instructor, and many years I was paid much less than that. Over time I lost track of the number of high-quality, dedicated employees who left higher education for the same reason.

Employees need sufficient pay and appropriate time off. Instructors need classrooms with working physical infrastructure. Everyone needs supervisors whose first instinct is to support, rather than monitor and punish.

When employees are treated as interchangeable or replaceable, turnover increases, hiring becomes more difficult and, over time, the local reputation of the institution begins to decline as it looks like a less-than-desirable place to work. Institutions can't be viewed as infrastructure deserving of public support while also burning through their local labor force.

Final word

Rather than trading on belief in mission as a recruiting and retention advantage as a short-term aid to bring people in the door—an advantage the TIAA Institute's Employee Value

Proposition notes is not as powerful as some perceive—belief in mission should be seen as a measurable indicator of the employees the institution wants to recruit, support and retain. The goal is to create a virtuous circle wherein mission-driven employees are given the support necessary to execute the mission, and their hard work, in turn, enhances the mission, which increases belief in the mission, and so on and so on. Over time, a mission-oriented mindset, rather than operations-focused perspective, will become a natural way of thinking about the challenges of the institution.

This will likely entail a shift in how finite resources are apportioned, but the reduction in turnover, the benefits in continuity and the increased dedication of a mission-aligned workforce will pay significant dividends in the long run for institutions that are meant to last in perpetuity.

Recruit mission-driven employees and give them the support needed to execute the mission, building their belief in the mission and a mission-oriented mindset.



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