Inspiration, Aspiration and Engagement: Strategy Making in Higher Education
An Address to the Board of a Private Institution, by Susan Frost

I am happy to be here with you today. When your Board Chair and your President contacted me about exploring strategy work in higher education with you—I thought "What a good idea." My hope is to share some ideas and experiences and then invite you to join a real conversation. I'd love your reaction to the ideas I share.

Before we talk about strategy, I want to offer a quick peek at some data points that are altering higher education in the US.

- By 2030 enrollment in higher education will increase by nearly 120 million students globally. (Envisioning Pathways) Continued increases in tuition costs and student loan debt combined with decreases in federal funding are challenging both students and universities in the US.

- Along with this news, in 2016-2017 both international undergraduate student enrollment and applications and first- time enrollment of international graduate students declined in the US (Chronicle). This decline continued in 2018 and 2019. While this year's decline was not as sharp, we may continue to see a downward trend in international student enrollment. The decline is sharpest among students from China and India.

- Also, the world population is aging. From now until 2030, 82 percent of population growth will occur in people aged 35 and older, reducing the slice of the population that is traditional college going age. (Envisioning Pathways)

- According to an MIT study, which to date is one of the most comprehensive studies of fake news, of 126,000 news stories published on Twitter between 2006 (when Twitter burst on the scene) and 2017, falsehoods are 70 percent more likely than accurate news to get retweeted. It seems clear that the acceleration of technology and social media is contributing to the spread of fake news. (The Atlantic)

- Maybe this is one reason employers are prioritizing soft skills—creativity, networking, critical thinking, communication—in addition to specific hard skills. (Bloomberg). They expect and need employees to make crucial judgments at every level every day.

- A last fact: now seven of every ten people are employed in jobs where the future of the career, the profession, or the industry is uncertain. (McKinsey Global). By 2030 about 60 percent of occupations worldwide could be automated as artificial intelligence and other technologies change the way we work. (Envisioning Pathways)

Now let's talk about strategy development for colleges and universities—organizations that face these pressures today. For years, leaders and boards have concentrated on HOW to build a stronger institution, asking *how* to ensure that the organization thrives, creates and bounces back successfully in its next phase. It was encouraging that these leaders routinely brought all their preparation and experience to the challenges. For example, they might study past successes and failures at other institutions to help them imagine a new frame for *how* to build and lead a thriving college that is resilient, exciting and outwardly relevant.

In light of new realities, however, now our question should not only be *how* but also *why*, *what*, and *who*.

- Is our approach to higher learning still the envy of the world? If so, why?

- If not, how can institutions capture and explain the full range of their value? What exactly is the value the institution creates and passes on?

- Who are the right receivers of these gains? What do we owe to our students and what to the communities that define us and help us succeed?

- Who makes sure the promise of the college is and continues to be fulfilled?

These are tough questions, and just vague enough to make most planners a little nervous. In general, planful people favor order. Their natural tendency is to design and execute a straightforward process—everything neat and tidy—when in fact I find that in the academy, a sanitized approach to strategic thinking often stifles the very bold ideas a planning process needs to produce.

This is a change for higher education, where straightforward planning used to be the Holy Grail. As recently as the 1990s, for example, developing a strategic plan meant asking all the academic and administrative departments to send in their list of needs and desires. Then these lists were rolled into one giant list—sometimes called a long-range plan—neatly formatted and most often put on the shelf.

However, now we know that the 150-page strategic planning document is not useful. With changes in conditions like the ones we just reviewed, colleges are having to adopt a more flexible, open-ended, continuous approach to strategic work.

This more organic approach exemplifies the ideas organizational theorist Henry Mintzberg explained in his classic article, *Crafting Strategy*. In this short piece, Mintzberg compares developing strategy to the craft of the potter. While as we said, generally planning is associated with orderly thinking, rational control and systematic analysis, crafting invokes a sense of skill, dedication, intimacy and mastery. For Mintzberg, strategies are both plans for the future and patterns from the past. The key to a craft (and crafting strategy) lies in the connection between

thought and action.

In other words, strategies can form as well as be formulated. As Mintzberg says, "a realized strategy can emerge in response to an evolving situation, or it can be brought about deliberately, though a process of formulation followed by implementation."

At its core, Mintzberg's thinking honors those who really know a place and are willing to work thoughtfully, patiently and collaboratively to shape its next phase. Note that I use the word *shape*, and not *plan* or *organize*. After helping colleges and universities evolve for many years, I believe that careful measuring, analyzing and comparing may be necessary, but these actions are certainly not sufficient.

What is sufficient—and required—is the deep knowledge, brimming energy and insight people who know the place bring to the work.

In "Crafting Strategy," Mintzberg goes on to describe a creative organization as a place marked not by incremental evolution, but by balanced patterns of stability and change. Most high-performing leaders have creative aspirations, and Mintzberg's thinking can help to organize the chaos of developing a creative organization. When a leader works in this vein, she or he learns that the people they lead have the knowledge and good ideas to craft a strategy and the motivation to succeed. It is a very good way to start.

So, what are the signs of a healthy strategic process? ***In my experience, a strong sense of chaos characterizes the first phase of a successful strategic project.*** By this I mean that new ideas are coming from everywhere, and the forces at play seem more circular, competing and messy than linear, aligned and organized. Generally, ideas seem to diverge—to fly apart in all directions.

And then there is a powerful moment when divergence changes to convergence and more orderly thinking prevails. This moment marks a new phase of the work where progress is clearer, cleaner, and more organized.

But it is critical to let the messy phase play out. Over eight summers some years ago, I visited 14 top-ranked higher education institutions that seemed to be thriving and asked about thirty to forty individuals at each place what was working and why.

Soon I developed a private internal chaos scale. The institutions that seemed chaotic—with more ideas than the institution could pursue —were moving forward more successfully than the institutions that seemed more buttoned down.

How sad for a place of higher learning to be able to pursue all its good ideas. The most active institutions had ideas falling off the tables! This kind of abundance is what we are looking for. They are the building blocks of the future.

And just because a process seems chaotic, don't think the work does not require dedicated, skilled support. As strong strategic work unfolds, a president and many others are hard at work.

The messy phase of a strategy project is also useful because it assures the various actors—faculty, students, board members, alumni and friends—that the called-for strategic work is authentic and open. The flip side is undesirable to be sure—a belief among some constituents that outcomes are pre-determined, and that their participation is a sham.

As an example, when your Chair was planning this session for you, she took care to ask you to accomplish authentic work AND to make sure the faculty would not perceive that your work is somehow reducing their opportunity and need to weigh in. She is devoted, I believe, to making sure all the constituencies in this process are engaged in authentic work. ***I applaud this approach because I believe that authenticity is another crucial sign of a healthy process.*** Authenticity is most powerful at the beginning, because it's very hard to overcome early suspicion that work is not authentic. It's much better to avoid that particular suspicion in the first place.

According to Karl Weick—another groundbreaking thinker of organizational design—higher education institutions are loosely coupled systems, where individual elements have more autonomy than the whole. As a result, leaders must worry about the various parts as they relate to the whole and how to integrate the right ones while maintaining quality across the board. Plans are critical, but those plans and the processes that produce them "must FIT the characteristics of the institution they lead" (Gilmore and Hirschhorn 2).

As one member of a provost's top team recalled about the strategy classes she took in graduate school, "How can anyone come to a campus in planning role and have any idea what the place needs? That information resides in the people who are there, not in the practices some professional might use."

Then her provost—believing in his bones that faculty passion shapes a college—shared his aim to increase the faculty's influence on the future of the place. If leaders impose programs out of their own interests, he explained, the programs will fade when the leader leaves.

This provost believed that academic leaders should reveal the passions of scholars, connect thinkers who need to work together, and untangle red tape that gets in the way. Academic leaders should also try to achieve economies (of scale and otherwise) so that the college can afford the support faculty need.

Another important study—of higher education culture this time—focused on staff members at institutions that were pulling back resources. In this study, Stanford researcher Patricia Gumport found that when staff members believe they have a voice in the future of the place, they are more likely to compromise on changes the institution needs to make—and the opposite is also true. When staff members believe they have no voice in the future, they become hyper-attached

to the status quo, causing them, for example, to vigorously oppose any change in where they park, what time they arrive in the morning, their options for lunch, and what kind of chair they sit in.

To me, this finding points to the great value of authenticity. When we are setting direction for the future, those who inhabit a place need active, important voices.

I have often thought that one important difference in a college and other types of business is that the people in a college—the students but also the faculty and staff—experience the organization as a home. It is common for faculty and staff members serve the same college for years. The campus is the site of their work and also a nexus for their social and recreational lives.

In fact, at the end of last year, you had an impressive number of faculty and staff members with 30+ years of service, a few of those with 40+ years, and one legendary retiree with 50 years of service. Those long timers know that change brings many differences. In fact, what we change might be less important than what we intentionally preserve.

Another sign of a healthy process is a clear link between strategy development and the promise of new funds. In fact, I have found that the promise of new funds never fails to give a leader and a board unusual permission to move forward, and at a pace that faculty and staff might resist without the promise of new funds. There can still be a mandate to reallocate existing resources, but if this is the only possible way to fund new ideas, resistance will be loud and persistent because faculty, especially, suspect that long-cherished programs and practices will be sacrificed. Faculty and staff need constant assurance that fundraising is part of the plan.

Another sign of health is the notion that new ideas can evolve in the culture of an institution—or in the counterculture. The cultural route activates governance pathways, making the outcomes more intentionally representative of the whole.

The countercultural approach might resemble a coalition of the willing—a group that wants to come together to realize some kind of dream. With this approach, one would gather the people who are likely to contribute to or gain from a specific new idea—and make it painfully clear that everyone on campus need not join in. The leader's role is to help the willing realize dream—and to help those not captured by this dream accept the work.

President's Role

If I had to choose one word for the president's role in a strategic setting—I would choose INSPIRATION. In any successful strategic process I have been part of, it is the president who has inspired others to take part and think big. It is the president who lives and breathes life into the eventual plan to push it forward. By this I mean lifting up the components of the adopted

plan constantly and connecting its ideas to academic practice, hiring, budgets and all kinds of everyday things.

I find that this work leads to a new kind of partnership between the leader and the faculty, and between the faculty and the board. When board members, a leader and faculty members roll up their sleeves and collaborate to imagine and develop the ideas that will shape the future of an institution they all love, a bit a magic occurs.

Bob Kegan is a creative psychologist I got to know at Harvard some years ago, and I love his idea that conflict can be a useful tool. If people are passionate enough about their ideas to defend them vigorously, then exciting common ground is in store.

From Kegan's insight and my own experience, I developed the notion that the best strategic processes engage each and every force and condition—the positive, the not so positive, and the downright problematic—as building blocks for the future.

In this design, managers of a strategic process need to keep ideas on the table, lift up the points of contention, clarify those points, and insist on more talking. It's tough work, but I have seen great plans emerge from this sometimes uncomfortable back and forth.

Another critical lesson is the importance of the active leader. Many presidents find it easy and fun to ride bikes with students or play golf with board members, but that is not what I mean by active leader. By active leader, I mean a leader who acts strategically and authentically to form, guide, and empower more task-oriented groups across campus and beyond.

This active work is required not only during the formal strategy process, but every day. In fact, leading a singular process is relatively easy compared to instilling a new way of thinking and acting that results in continuous strategy development and change. This kind of leading calls for knowing when to intervene, when to pull people together, when to cheerlead, and when to get out of the way.

Over the years, I have noticed two other types of presidents—the passive leader and the reactive leader. It is easy to be a passive leader, disbelieving in strategy and thinking that there is little one can do to change a loosely-coupled system. The passive leader might say, for example, that a president of a college is more like the mayor of a town—charged to keep it in the road and see what evolves. In fact, a passive leader hires passive people, who, though they are busy, get little done. A passive leader is dangerous as he usually survives a mostly calm five- or eight-year term, but with significant lost opportunity costs.

A reactive leader is a bit different. This leader never controls her schedule—she lets it control her. She loses her footing easily, and sort of lurches from crisis to crisis. This leader gets toppled by faculty votes of no confidence, or by the inability to retain the confidence of the

board. Both passive and reactive presidents have long-term negative impact in terms of morale, reputation, and credibility.

In contrast, the active leader focuses on work to be done, not roles to be protected. Especially with the acceleration of change in the twenty first century, the active leader summons and empowers the right people at the right time to do the right work.

We often bemoan the siloes in higher education. Active leaders know how to use the silos when they are useful and how to resist them when they are not. But more importantly, active leaders create nimble alternative routes to achieve the best ideas.

Active leaders are also skilled at using all the pieces—losses as well as wins, difficulties as well as conveniences—to craft the next phase of development. When they invite community members into the act of crafting strategy, they situate the work in the academic frame, rather than the administrative frame.

This can be as simple as respecting the academic calendar when establishing the work of groups, meeting in academic and not administrative space, and when possible, using students to gather data and support group work. Such small adjustments signal, especially to faculty, that their participation is so critical that the leader is coming into their world to secure it. A powerful signal indeed.

Board's Role

What is the board's role in a strategy process? In a word, your role is ASPIRATION—setting it high, keeping it high, and encouraging all the actors keep an eye on the ball.

In fact, I find that more and more, boosting aspiration is a critical ingredient of successful strategy work, and it includes assurance from leaders and boards that the college is devoted to an inclusive, ongoing process for continuous strategic direction-setting. This means that ideas not supported in this round might be highly viable in the next round. Rather than developing a formal planning project every so many years, this approach is more of a rolling effort.

Another useful idea for boards and presidents is to encourage the development of the substance of a project before figuring out the eventual structure it will need. Typically, people want to nail down how a new entity will be managed, how it will affect existing entities, and how space will be allocated before they develop the substantive advantages the entity will bring.

For example, when scholars propose a new interdisciplinary program, their proposal might focus first on the need for an executive director, administrative help for that person, dedicated space, travel to visit similar programs, and a budget to support these items.

In other words, the tendency is wade into a minefield of dull organizational questions before considering the truly exciting learning or knowledge producing opportunities. But asking organizational questions too early usually leads to conflict—I have seen these negative forces end many a promising project before it started.

It is much better, I believe, to encourage planners to begin by pilot-testing ideas they want to pursue, perhaps in collaboration with newly-discovered internal colleagues. Before long, excitement builds as ideas move forward and volume increases. Finally—when the new program cannot take one more step without structural help, the institution can step in and meet specific needs.

I have seen this approach produce a winner time after time, showing that it is very difficult to plan a structure in a vacuum, and much easier to make the inevitable compromises when promising substantive progress is on the line.

It is also good to remember that the bigger and bolder the idea, the more likely it is to attract significant interest and support. In fact, presidents who have been through more than one campaign insist that the hard part is not securing funds to support great ideas but imagining and developing the ideas themselves.

I must agree. I also find that ideas get smaller and more conservative as they evolve. For example, a scholar or a small group might have a big bold idea, and when committee members get involved, the concept gets smaller, less ambitious and less exciting.

I routinely tell working groups to start with a big empty basket on the table and fill it with their very best and biggest aspirations for the college and for their own careers. This creates a promising start.

At the same time, ideas thrive when they fit naturally within the scope and definition of the institution—and not seem out of place or forced. It takes both depth and breadth of faculty expertise to design and sustain exciting, viable new programs and you need your most creative current faculty members to engage early and stay engaged. It is difficult and costly to add something completely new—especially with the kind of excellence and distinction you are seeking.

Faculty's Role

I would also remind a president and a board that ENGAGEMENT is the crucial faculty role—and a role to be encouraged and supported every day.

As just one example, when the ideas that make up a plan offer scholars an opportunity to pursue and enlarge on the questions and concepts that drive them each and every day, they will achieve

more than we can imagine now. I have seen bitter academic enemies compromise willingly when they are driven by exciting work.

I have seen also faculty members with no leadership experience take the reins of new academic programs and turn them into signature offerings any college would be proud of. Concepts like these are magnets for students, supporters and funds. It is wonderful to see and a joy to support.