

DECISION GUIDE

# How Leaders of Higher Ed Institutions Should Approach Institutional Transformation

By Michael Jortner



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# Introduction

Earlier this year *Inside Higher Ed* partnered with Hanover Research and [surveyed 442 presidents](#) from public, private nonprofit and for-profit institutions on topics ranging from financial stability to mental health, virtual learning to public image. When we asked them about institutional change an interesting contradiction emerged.

While the majority of presidents (72 percent) believe “fundamental transformation” at their schools is necessary (as they emerge from the pandemic), the data also reveal a disinclination to make (or perhaps foresee) some of the most dramatic changes that may be necessary if their schools are to thrive.

This four-part decision guide begins by exploring that contradiction. In part one we ask what might be behind presidents’ hesitation to affect change, but we also get reactions to key findings from the survey. Second, we look at the bold moves some presidents are taking to transform their institutions. Partnerships can be vital; we’ll delve into different types in part three. And we close with tangible advice on how best to approach institutional transformation.





**Dr. Jacqui Spicer**  
Baker College



**President Dr. Thomas Mills**  
Hill College



**President Anne Kress**  
NOVA

## Responses to the Data

First let's unpack whether higher ed leaders are averse to Big Change. Why do presidents recognize the need for transformation but simultaneously admit a hesitation to affect it?

"Change is scary," says [Dr. Thomas Mills](#), president of [Hill College](#) in Texas. "As a president, there's so many way things can unravel. So you've got to make sure you've got a sound plan and a sound strategy before you pull the trigger on things."

President of [Baker College](#) in Michigan, [Dr. Jacqui Spicer](#), agrees that strategy is paramount when presidents have so much to accomplish. What do they prioritize?

Because competition is no longer confined to a local geography, Spicer says via email, "Presidents must be more strategic, forward-thinking, transparent, able to build partnerships, navigate the political and regulatory landscape, execute a multi-year vision, and foster a culture committed to student success."

"Ultimately," she adds, "it requires presidents to move faster, be more agile, and execute a vision at a pace that is more closely aligned to industries

outside of higher education." Uncertainty indeed.

### Mergers and Acquisitions

According to our survey, presidents are twice as likely (18 percent to 9 percent) to say that they are at least "somewhat" likely to acquire another institution in the next five years than to say they will be acquired or merge into another college. And more than a quarter of presidents (27 percent) think their institution should consider merging with another college or university in the next five years.

"Merging or partnering is part of our future strategy," Spicer says. "The challenge is finding a partner that aligns culturally and strategically with our vision."

While Mills says he would "probably stop" at merging with another institution, he admits consolidation could make sense for some schools. As long as "it can better serve the community and better serve students."

### Shrinking Campus Footprint

One in five presidents report that their institution is "somewhat" (14 percent) or "very likely" (7 percent)

to shrink its physical campus footprint in the next five years, while 50 percent say they are not at all likely to do so.

Despite Hill College having multiple locations that are suburban or rural, Mills is open to evaluating the size of its campus footprint “when it’s in response to employer and student demand.” A “huge footprint” isn’t necessarily required. “My college is a great example,” he adds. With an original campus serving a county of only 33,000 people, and the next county they serve with 187,000, Mills feels one of the worst things would be to “create massive footprint comprehensive community colleges.”

Spicer says, “Many institutions will conclude there is no longer a need to maintain the current footprint, and will need to make a difficult, but necessary decision.” Educational offerings continue to migrate online, the workforce is embracing flexible or fully remote schedules, and the number of college-bound students continuing to shrink.

Pros to this type of change, she says, include: “Reduced operating costs, potential to repurpose space and establish partnerships.”

While cons might be: “Displaced current or future students, impact on faculty and staff, or the potential negative impact on communities.” Though this last point “is potentially a pro if an employer acquiring the property is a benefit to the community.”

### Remote Work

52 percent of respondents indicate their institution has altered its employment policies to give employees somewhat more latitude to work remotely now that the pandemic has ended.

But that doesn’t include all staff on campus. “We are piloting in our IT division,” Mills says, “100% remote



KATERYNA ONYSHCHUK/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

work. It's gone exceptionally well [but] we have not yet expanded that.”

“Student-facing,” he adds, “yeah, that's gonna be hard to do while we're still trying to staff a full campus.”

Spicer says, “We have refined our policy a bit to enable additional roles to have greater flexibility. Ultimately, our decisions consider who, how, when and where we work is dependent on ensuring our students and constituents can receive the support in the way that fits their needs.”

Mills acknowledges the future is hybrid. “Tarrant County College has a [Connect Campus](#) that's their online campus.” He believes that’s where all schools are headed. “Whether it's 50 percent or 75 percent distance and 25 percent face-to-face.”

### Digital Transformation

Most presidents indicate digital transformation efforts at their institution are “high priority” or “essential.” As long as they relate to data/student success (83 percent) and leveraging student data for better learning of retention insights (82 percent).

“It's extremely true,” Mills says. “We are within days of going to 95 percent performance funding. Everything is about student success as it always should have been.”

“And that's not to say that focusing on access the way community colleges have done in the past was incorrect or misguided.” Essentially, times are changing and “we all need to adapt and focus on those two things in parallel.”

Spicer agrees. “Leveraging data to enhance student success is a priority for Baker College,” she says. “We are focused on leveraging our existing technology or acquiring tools that enable us to proactively and predictively forecast when intervention strategies are needed to improve learning outcomes and retention.”

[Dr. Anne Kress](#), president of [Northern Virginia Community College](#) (NOVA) with six campuses and 70,000 students, brings it down to the palm. Most of NOVA's students access online services via smartphone, “not on a terminal” or a laptop. So, post-pandemic, the school's investment “in having huge computer labs on campus” is being called into question.

### **Fundamental Changes Are In Order**

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72 percent) say they believe their institution needs to make fundamental changes in business models, programming, or other operations.

“I believe in that 100 percent,” says Mills. “[ChatGPT](#) is just the beginning of the disruption we're going to feel. We've got to be ready to think of whole new models to help us survive again.”

Spicer: “It is essential for colleges and universities to respond to shifts in the market, and Baker College is making significant changes to respond to needs of our students, partners, and communities by providing

degrees, upskill opportunities, certifications, and employer retraining. All of which requires multiple student support models and delivery modalities.”

Kress takes a different view, saying, “I don't know if I would say ‘fundamental changes.’” She believes schools' missions are the same.

“But I do think there's an opportunity for all of higher education to look at our business practices,” she adds, “to look at some of our processes.” She wants colleges and universities to “do a better job” at reducing costs and finding efficiencies. Why? Because the priority should be “serving our students and supporting our faculty and staff.”

### **Business Models**

“There's a couple different avenues that we could pursue,” says Mills, “and quite possibly we could pursue different ones at different locations.”

Even though Hill College is a public community college Mills wonders about “a more entrepreneurial model where we figure out different ways to make money and bring in revenue from different streams in the process of educating people.”

Mills also talks about “doubling down on the program-based model as opposed to just having students...take a bunch of basic courses.” He wants to “get students in a program and move them towards completion.”

Which he says, “Absolutely aligns with the [Pathways Model](#), but it also aligns with a traditional athletic model where we actually have scholarships for different programs, and we allow program directors and leaders to go out and recruit students very much like athletic coaches do.”



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# How Presidents Are Transforming Their Schools

Spicer mentions “future” six times during the course of our interview. And Mills says, “My job is to get our institution in position to be successful ten years from now and 20 years from now.”

So, what will it take to create the higher ed institutions of tomorrow?

## **Culture First, Then Strategy**

“The biggest thing we’re working on is twofold,” Mills says. “We need to double down on building our culture and building strategy...aligning those two things.”

Why both? Because “culture eats strategy for lunch,” he adds. “If you don’t have the right culture set up, then strategy is pretty meaningless.”

But what does “culture” mean? For Mills it’s about creating a safe space for dialogue and “speaking truth to power.” If faculty, staff, leaders and students can’t “lean into difficult conversations” or examine their “habits and mindsets,” then whatever strategy exists will fail.

## **Address Skills-Based Hiring**

“Short-term credentials,” Kress says, “are of pressing importance for so many individuals coming out of the pandemic as a connection to economic and social mobility.” Uncertainty wrought by two-plus years of Covid drove the message home that “tomorrow really isn’t promised.”

Plus, so many companies and organizations are asking for skills-based hiring. That demand forms “the basis of a lot of [NOVA’s] own partnerships with business and industry.”

## **Promote Education’s Value**

What kind of transformation would presidents make happen today – if they had a magic wand?

“My response is not focused on an individual institution,” Spicer says, “but higher education as a whole. The rhetoric ‘Is college worth it?’ requires we unify our voice and articulate the value of an education.”

“Solely focusing on earnings is myopic at best,” she continues. We, higher education, know there are



many, many more benefits of acquiring a degree or credential than annual earnings, including a longer lifespan, larger retirement accounts, stronger communities, business growth and increased innovation.”

### **Dismantle Silos**

When Mills answers the magic wand question, he replies: “My favorite answer to that is what I call the 80/20 model. Everybody on campus would basically have at least two jobs.” 80 percent of faculty’s responsibilities “would be teaching and 20 percent would be something completely different.”

“The flip side of that is everybody should do something in the classroom. Everybody should have to teach one class. Now that becomes limiting because of credentialing and things to that effect. But you can have people be instructional associates that assist in the classroom.”

His rationale? “I’ve always said that would really dismantle silos and just create a much more inclusive environment where we all understood each other better.” Which ties back to prioritizing culture before strategy. Meaningful discussion is more likely to

occur when faculty and staff know what it’s like to walk in each other’s shoes.

### **Connect All Students With A Coach**

Kress talks about how, during the pandemic, NOVA redirected some employees who had physical jobs like groundskeeping or those that were student-facing such as working a front desk to becoming “remote student support specialists.” They were the people checking in on students finding out why they were not coming to class or referring them to support services.

“Finding a way to connect students with someone who is a coach or a concierge who can really help them navigate our own sort of sometimes Byzantine hallways,” she says, laughing, “would be incredibly beneficial.”

And she has evidence, pointing to NOVA’s “advanced transfer partnership” with [George Mason University](#). Adding that it’s “nationally recognized for its success,” Kress says “students have dedicated coaches...folks they can turn to at any moment to find out where” they are in the transfer process and which services they can access.



# Leverage Partnerships

Spicer says, part of her transformation strategy involves “the partnerships we are building.” What can such partnerships look like?

Educational, for one. “I’ve been in situations,” says Mills, “where we’ve partnered with four-year institutions to bring a program to students that we couldn’t both independently do. That’s been very powerful.”

“Partnerships with ISDs [independent school districts],” he adds, can provide “pathways to technology schools that are basically dual credit for technical education.”

But business partnerships, Mills says, “are huge.”

Where alignment can be found “in terms of training incumbent workers or training new workers...creating pipelines for workers to support specific companies, for example, in manufacturing.”

Kress emphasizes “community partnerships” that can help the college support underserved students. For example, “working with [Capital Area Food Bank](#) on food insecurity” and “[Generation Hope](#) on identifying policies and practices that better serve parenting students.”

See our [sidebar](#) for a list of additional partnership resources.



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# Words of Wisdom

Finally, we asked Spicer and Mills for their advice. What do they want their peers across the nation to consider when undertaking transformation at their own schools?

Spicer's suggestions are pragmatic:

1. Solidify a clear and concise vision for the future, inclusive of measurable goals and objectives. Paint a picture of the future state of the institution.
2. Transparency – share the stories, both favorable and unfavorable news
3. Agility – be agile, adjust when needed, and continue to refine

Kress emphasizes the Big Picture:

1. Find one or two things that are most impactful for students. Build “a coalition of the willing around doing a good proof of concept.”
2. “Build for scale from the very beginning”
3. Ensure new programs and initiatives are financially sustainable beyond original grant dollars



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Mills highlights softer skills and personal values:

1. Be willing to really listen, listen, listen. And then listen some more.
2. “If you really want to be transformational, you've got to stay at an institution eight or ten years”
3. Finally, “If change is needed, let's do it for students”



## Partnership Ideas

### **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: Postsecondary Success**

Funds grantees to create a system of higher education that prioritizes student success, equity and sustainability.

<https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/postsecondary-success>

<https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/postsecondary-success/transformation>

### **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: Pathways**

Funds grantees that support students who are transitioning from high school to college.

<https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/pathways>

### **Boston Consulting Group**

A consulting firm that helps higher ed leaders build and implement new strategies focused on growth and differentiation.

<https://www.bcg.com/industries/education/higher-education>

<https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/higher-ed-transformation-in-the-us>

### **Completion by Design**

Helps two-year institutions guide students toward graduation and transferring to four-year schools.

<https://www.completionbydesign.org/s/>

### **Frontier Set**

A collection of colleges, universities, state systems, and supporting organizations focused on eliminating race, ethnicity, and income as predictors of student success.

<https://frontieraset.org/>



## Higher Learning Commission

An independent corporation founded in 1895 as one of six regional accreditors in the United States.

<https://www.hlcommission.org/About-HLC/partners-for-transformation.html>

## Huron Consulting Group

A global professional services firm that collaborates with higher ed clients.

<https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com/insights/deliberate-transformation-strategic-alliances-higher-education>

## Jenzabar

Provides digital transformation services and products to higher ed institutions.

<https://jenzabar.com>

## Kennedy & Company

Offers integrated solutions for higher ed, including strategic planning, student success and organizational transformation.

[https://kennedyandcompany.com/?utm\\_term=higher%20ed&utm\\_campaign=Nonbrand+-+General&utm\\_source=adwords&utm\\_medium=ppc&hsa\\_acc=1716632395&hsa\\_cam=9328524191&hsa\\_grp=94736523499&hsa\\_ad=418017254764&hsa\\_src=g&hsa\\_tgt=kwd-10015401&hsa\\_kw=higher%20ed&hsa\\_mt=b&hsa\\_net=adwords&hsa\\_ver=3&gclid=Cj0KCQjwmtGjBhDhARIsAEqfDEeObYJo1XZZ-Vpt2vN1HEDEeINypXXh956SIOeKy3wjtcBaxIYSM-6fcaAsVcEALw\\_wcB](https://kennedyandcompany.com/?utm_term=higher%20ed&utm_campaign=Nonbrand+-+General&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=1716632395&hsa_cam=9328524191&hsa_grp=94736523499&hsa_ad=418017254764&hsa_src=g&hsa_tgt=kwd-10015401&hsa_kw=higher%20ed&hsa_mt=b&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&gclid=Cj0KCQjwmtGjBhDhARIsAEqfDEeObYJo1XZZ-Vpt2vN1HEDEeINypXXh956SIOeKy3wjtcBaxIYSM-6fcaAsVcEALw_wcB)

## McKinsey & Company

Global consulting firm with a focus on helping colleges and university achieve transformation via best practices.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-to-transform-higher-education-institutions-for-the-long-term>

## Sea Change Capital Partners

Provides grants, loans and advice to nonprofit institutions.

<https://seachangeap.org>

## Transformational Partnerships Fund

Provides colleges and universities with support to explore student-centric partnerships and collaborations.

<https://www.higheredpartnerships.org>

## Tyton Partners

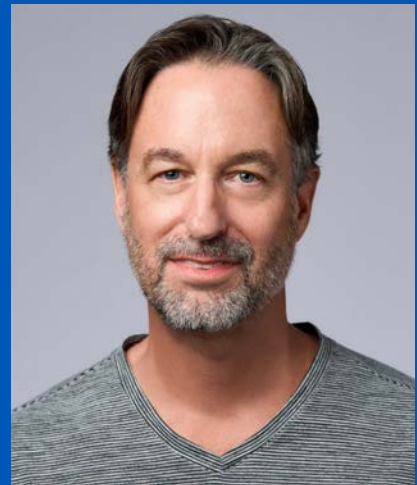
Helps higher ed institutions identify growth strategies, particularly around optimizing operations, partner identification and leveraging capital.

<https://tytonpartners.com/expertise/center-for-higher-education-transformation/>



# About the Author

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