

# Leadership in Times of Crisis



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One Dupont Circle NW  
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# **Leadership in Times of Crisis**

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## Introduction

Higher education leaders will face complex challenges, both in the present and in the years ahead. Ongoing national discussions about college costs and student debt are prompting a closer look at the long-term value of higher education, which continues to offer strong returns in earnings, employment, and civic engagement. As a result, colleges are under pressure to show a return on investment while also managing looming budget cuts. Further, the demographic cliff is no longer something in the distant future (Lane et al. 2024)—2025 marks the peak of high school graduates, with a 16-year decline ahead.

The recent actions of the current administration have brought added complexities: the freeze of federal research funding; the investigation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies; and the possible closure of the U.S. Department of Education.

Historically, crises have served as pivotal moments in higher education that offer valuable insights into effective leadership and reveal the complexities of creating change. A crisis in higher education is typically a temporary, large-scale disruption to normal university operations. Once rare on campuses, they have increasingly become chronic challenges (Gigliotti 2019), and this “permanent scarcity and permanent crisis” requires new models of leadership (Kim 2016).

Institutions of higher education have always been shaped by periods of crisis and cultural transformation. This brief examines leadership responses to past challenges, offers insights into how senior leaders navigated complexity, and outlines actionable strategies for addressing today’s evolving landscape.

# Lesson 1. Leading Through Legal Uncertainty: Collaboration and Counsel

## Historical Context

The Supreme Court of the United States' 1938 decision in *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* challenged segregated education by requiring that states offering state education to White students must provide equal opportunities for Black students.

Herman B. Wells, who served as president of Indiana University from 1937 to 1962, recognized the far-reaching consequences of the decision and consulted a lawyer to understand the university's vulnerabilities, including how the ruling might affect teaching programs, swimming pool access, military training, and housing policies (Henley 1940; Wells 1940).

He also collaborated with campus leaders to investigate existing policies (Beck 1959; Wells 1940). By anticipating the implications of the ruling and collaborating with campus leaders and trustees—some of whom opposed change—to revise existing policies, Wells led the integration of the athletics program, Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and campus housing at Indiana University, and he ultimately helped catalyze broader desegregation in Bloomington, where the university is located—including in local restaurants. He did not act alone in these efforts, and he was also under tremendous pressure from Black students and community leaders (Beck 1959; Gilliam 1985; Wells 1940; Wells 1980). Ultimately, though, his model of informed action prevailed.

## Current Context

This example is a model for how a senior leader might approach contemporary political realities and legal challenges through proactive investigation, campus engagement, and consultation with legal counsel. Today, university counsel has a critical role as colleges and universities respond to shifting political agendas. Their ability to stay ahead (or abreast) of changes in federal and state regulations—including those related to student aid, accreditation, and civil rights protections—is imperative. Understanding the nuances of executive orders as well as how they interact with the law and institutional type (e.g., public versus private) is essential for university lawyers to craft effective and strategic responses.

## Lessons from Leaders

1. Consult legal counsel proactively to interpret executive orders, state laws, and federal rulings. Institutional leaders should establish a regular practice of consulting with legal counsel—not just in response to new regulations but also as a means of anticipating potential risks and opportunities. Legal teams can help institutions to understand how executive orders may apply differently to public versus private institutions, identify areas of vulnerability, and ensure compliance strategies are aligned with the institution's mission and values. Early legal insight also positions leadership to respond quickly and confidently when public scrutiny or legal challenges arise.
2. Engage internal leadership teams to assess implications across departments and operations. Executive action or legal shifts often affect multiple facets of campus life, such as academic freedom, hiring practices, student services, and facilities usage. Presidents and provosts should bring together cross-functional teams to identify operational and cultural implications. Whole-campus engagement ensures that policy changes are legally sound, practically implementable, and aligned with institutional goals. It also fosters a shared sense of responsibility in navigating complex external challenges.



## Lesson 2. Crisis with Conviction: Centering Students in Times of Uncertainty

### Historical Context

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, higher education institutions rapidly initiated campus closures and social distancing and transitioned to remote learning. Students, parents, and reporters scrutinized the decisions of college leaders, all while guidance on health regulations evolved daily (Coll and Ruch 2023).

One leader in the fray was Roslyn Clark Artis, president of Benedict College—a Historically Black College in South Carolina. She approached the crisis with empathy and student-centered decision-making. In interviews with *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* and ACE, she emphasized the importance of action with intention in addressing the unique needs of her students—of which 84 percent were eligible for Pell Grants and 71 percent were first generation (Pluviose 2021; Hughes 2020). The institution leaned into its identity as a family by meeting essential needs such as booking train and plane tickets for students to return home, housing those who stayed, distributing laptops, and offering emergency aid for childcare and basic necessities. As Artis noted, saying that Benedict is a family meant showing up like one.

Leadership became an act of service that was grounded in deep listening. For some, safety meant staying away; for others, it meant being allowed to return to campus. Benedict responded with COVID-19 testing, distance protocols, and support to ensure that students could learn safely wherever they were.

### Current Context

In this era of continual crisis, student-centered leadership must remain the top priority. To maintain trust and stability, leaders must communicate consistently, act with transparency, and ensure that students are at the heart of every institutional response. As students navigate complex and multifaceted lives, persistent challenges around college access, affordability, and belonging continue to shape their ability to stay enrolled and complete their degrees. Effective leadership acknowledges these realities and then responds with policies and practices that foster inclusive, supportive environments in which all students can thrive.

From Artis's example, we learn the importance of acting in a way that reflects both legal compliance and institutional values.

### Lessons from Leaders

1. Balance legal compliance with institutional values. In a landscape where efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are scrutinized, leaders must navigate between what is legally required and what aligns with their institution's mission. Doing so includes understanding when actions are taken out of obligation versus when they are taken out of principle—and recognizing that both can be necessary.
2. Anchor decisions in mission and strategic intent. Effective leaders ground their responses in institutional documents such as strategic plans, trustee commitments, or foundational values—including faith-based principles, when applicable. These frameworks provide clarity and justification when navigating difficult decisions or facing external pressure.
3. Set the tone through values-driven leadership in moments of crisis. Campus communities watch closely during times of uncertainty. Leaders who remain consistent in their values—despite political, legal, or financial pressure—strengthen institutional trust and credibility. These defining moments reveal not only individual character but also the integrity of the institution as a whole.

## Lesson 3. Resilience: Positioning Institutions for Financial and Demographic Shifts

### Historical Context

Higher education has faced its share of financial struggles. The Great Depression was a period of economic collapse, yet college enrollment grew by 80 percent between 1939 and 1950 to reach 2.7 million students. This growth was driven by increased government support (e.g., the GI Bill) and post-war-time expansion—as college tuition rose (Thelin 2019).

During the Great Depression, junior colleges saw growth and expansion, adapting to the crisis by expanding low-cost, practical education. In 1933, Union County, New Jersey superintendent of schools Arthur L. Johnson established Union County Junior College (now Union College) through the use of federal emergency relief funds that were created to provide jobs and training for displaced workers. Others did the same and helped define community colleges as hubs for workforce recovery and lifelong learning.

During the Great Recession of 2008–09, Mildred García—the then-president of California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH)—faced massive system-wide budget cuts due to a \$24-billion state budget deficit (The Sun 2009). She led CSUDH, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, through an employee furlough and other cost-containment measures while maintaining a focus on student success. Her strategic plan repositioned the institution by developing the institutional capacity for expanded transfer pathways from community colleges; providing support for first-generation and diverse students; and cultivating investments in student retention, flexible learning modalities, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs.

### Current Context

While higher education historically has grown during times of economic distress, today's environment presents yet another complex and compounding set of challenges. Forecasts report a sharp decline in high school graduates starting in 2026 (Lane et al. 2024), and public confidence in higher education is waning. Colleges and universities are under pressure to contain costs while simultaneously expanding financial aid and managing inflation of operational costs. Federal funding remains in flux, and state appropriations have declined; these changes highlight institutional vulnerabilities and the growing reliance on student tuition and fundraising.

### Lessons from Leaders

1. Align higher education with public policy to expand access and economic impact. Union College's depression-era leadership demonstrates the importance of strong partnerships between higher education and government agencies. These collaborations not only expanded access but also positioned the college as a critical workforce engine during recovery. Today's leaders must continue to advocate for higher education as a public good essential to economic vitality.
2. Respond to fiscal crises with strategic vision for long-term sustainability. García's leadership during the recession demonstrates the critical role senior leaders have in navigating fiscal challenges. A forward-thinking, strategic approach is essential not only for short-term survival but also for ensuring long-term sustainability—particularly as institutions address changing demographics and evolving financial pressures.

## Considerations for Senior Leaders

A historical view of how leaders managed crises provides actionable approaches to today's challenges. Consider the following questions:

1. In what specific ways does your institution's strategic plan align with demographic trends and position the institution for future agility?
2. How are your decisions in times of crisis shaping the institution's long-term mission and commitment to equity, access, and student success?
3. Who at your institution regularly monitors federal or state actions, and how can they engage community stakeholders in shaping its response?

Senior leaders in higher education who are navigating continued crises should reflect on these questions in cabinet and board meetings as well as consider how the answers might inform current strategies and engagement with campus personnel and external partners.

The following resources may also be helpful:

- *The Agile College: How Institutions Successfully Navigate Demographic Changes* by Nathan Grawe addresses how institutions must become agile and strategic in recruitment and retention in order to navigate demographic changes successfully.
- *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice* by Ralph A. Gigliotti offers a theory-based framework for leaders navigating crisis.
- “[Higher Education & the Trump Administration](#),” an American Council on Education web page, provides updates on executive actions and links to direct sources.
- “[Legislative Tracker: Quality & Accountability](#),” a resource from the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, tracks and summarizes legislation related to financial aid, education quality, and the Department of Education.
- [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association](#) is an organization that works with its members to equip higher education leaders as they advance the value of education.



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