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***Opinion: New College Leaders Face Prickly New Dilemmas
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By Terry O'Banion

Community colleges, closely connected to their communities and responsible for the toughest tasks in higher education, are subject to more change than most institutions of higher education. Providing leadership in a community college in the early years of the 21st century is like dancing with porcupines: all the challenges are prickly ones.

I have been working in community colleges and with community college leaders for 48 years. When I first started as a young dean of students at Central Florida Community College in 1960, leadership and change were major themes for community colleges—but the challenges were not so prickly. Community colleges were opening weekly across the country and planning buildings, creating new programs, hiring faculty and establishing identity were the challenges of the day. We had been summoned to the dance of the Community College Movement, and there were willing partners in every corner of the hall. Working in a community college was fun.

After 23 years as president and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College, I retired Dec. 31, 1999, ready to begin the new millennium the next day. During the League years and over the last eight years of semi-retirement, I have seen the challenges for community colleges and community college leaders change drastically. Working in community colleges today does not appear to be as much fun as it used to be. Being a leader in today's environment and dealing with enormous change are challenges that require special skills and abilities, patience, humor and courage that exceed by far that required of leaders 40 years ago. There are some exceptional leaders who gracefully navigate the current challenges.

Steve Mittelstet at Richland College (Texas) is an example. And there are some exceptional programs such as Achieving the Dream, the Ford Foundation's Bridges Project and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, as well as excellent organizations, such as the American Association of Community Colleges, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development and the League for Innovation, which all champion student learning, institutional effectiveness and evidence-based processes. But for the most part, the challenges today compared with those of earlier decades are more complex and less amenable to solution. We have become more political and more legalistic, and we have become less civil. We are beginning to reflect the malaise of the larger society we had hoped to serve and improve. Today's community college leaders are dancing with porcupines.

It is an exhausting dance, and sometime leaders need to take a break to reflect on the drummers they march to and the new steps they need to take to make required changes. The following questions were crafted to stimulate discussion and reflection regarding some of the major challenges of this decade. They can be used by leadership teams, faculty groups, trustees and strategic planning committees to examine key issues related to leadership and change. The answers are idiosyncratic to the specific needs and culture of a specific community college. There are universal questions, but there are no universal answers. Presidents and other leaders are encouraged to use these questions as an invitation to their colleagues to join the dance with porcupines:

• **How many paradigm shifts can we manage at the same time—shifts in learning and teaching, in governance and management, in federal and state funding, in our basic mission?** To what extent are these shifts the fads of the moment? If these are substantive and long-term shifts, how do we prepare our institutions, faculties, trustees and communities for the changes? How do we prepare ourselves to provide leadership for these changes? How can we reward and honor staff for embracing change?

• **What are the limits of our mission as a college of the community?** What should we emphasize? Give up? Add

on? What does the community want and need? What can we afford? How far are faculty members willing to go? How far are trustees willing to go? How far are the leaders willing to go?

• **How do we plan for technology knowing that our costly equipment will be out-of-date in a few years?** Will our faculty use the technology to improve teaching and learning in dramatic new ways or only to extend what they are already doing? Where can we find and how can we afford the expertise to help us create technology plans and staff training programs? How much should we invest in distance education? How can technology help us manage change

• **How do we change the policies that limit our ability to lead change—federal and state policies, policies embedded in traditional education, policies we have created ourselves?** Can we take a vacation from some of the limiting policies to experiment for a while? Would we know what to do if there were suddenly no limiting policies?

• **How do we fund the changes?** Have we become more entrepreneurial than we already are? Do we have to seek more support from the community? Do we create more beneficial alliances with business and industry? Can we become creative capitalists?

• **What is our role as leaders in the political arena?** Do we try to directly influence the political power base in our community, our state or province, the nation? If so, how do we do this without getting caught in the crossfire of partisan politics?

• **Where can we find and how do we hold on to a core leadership team to help manage the change?** Where will we find program managers and department chairs to lead front-line changes? Where will we find the new faculty to replace the retirements? Where will we find the diverse faculty and staff we need? What kinds of staff development programs can we create that really make a difference?

• **What is the nature of change?** Can it, should it be managed? How is today's change connected to the change addressed yesterday and to the change to be addressed tomorrow? What are the consequences of ignoring change? How much change can an institution tolerate? Is chaos our friend? What are the limitations on individual change? How do we honor and provide for those who cannot change or who resist the changes our institution needs to make?

• **What is the proper role of a leader in managing institutional change?** What are the limits of leadership, authority and power? Who has the right and the responsibility to summon the institution to embrace change? How do we tap into the natural needs for change that exist in all organizations? Does the leader herald change, herd change, ride change, follow change or lie back and enjoy change?

These questions raise thorny issues for community college leaders, issues for which there are no easy answers. The instructions for dancing with porcupines have yet to be written. But the leaders of the 21st century community college have been invited to the dance, and dance they must—awkwardly or gracefully—and always very, very carefully.

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