10 Conclusion

Reflections on Excellence

The research for this book was sparked by the observation that institutions, policymakers, and ranking schemes around the world have held up a particular standard – namely, the world-class university model – as the pinnacle of academic excellence. And for some institutions, world-class status may be a perfectly reasonable aim. Who can begrudge an institution for setting its sights on significantly expanding research output; securing external resources to attract talented faculty, administrators, and students; or building state-of-the-art laboratories and facilities? But it's important to keep in mind that the world-class university model is only one conception of excellence, and it comes with tradeoffs. It is a form of excellence that can lead to perverse incentives, among them the privileging of research over teaching. It rewards the production of peer-reviewed journal articles while turning its back on expressions of scholarship that might be more accessible and relevant to broader audiences. It is an idea that requires spending precious resources burnishing an institution's reputation among academic peers while offering no incentives to address the needs of community members right outside its doors. Such norms are the cornerstones of the main ranking schemes even as debates about the reliability of rankings have led a few, mainly elite, institutions to bow out and stop providing data. In short, the world-class university model is a reasonable conception of excellence, but we can do better.

The institutions in this study show us that there are other paths to excellence. Each has a profound impact on students and the world in a way that is distinctly suited to its context. These alternative conceptions of excellence deserve our attention. The portraits in this book describe how

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the eight institutions have defined and lived out their own unique purposes. At its heart, their work is a response to a critical question, "What difference are we trying to make in the world?" Their answers to this question – informed by their ideals and larger contexts – are what make the work of these eight institutions so remarkable. Their practices and the guiding ideas that shape their work can serve as a lodestone for other institutions.

CONCEPTIONS OF EXCELLENCE: EXPRESSIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL BELIEF SYSTEMS

The institutions profiled in this book share an important commonality: each has a conception of institutional purpose that is deeply understood and embraced by the people who work there. These purposes are commonly expressed as a broad idea or theme that acts as a compelling narrative and shapes the norms and values that permeate institutional life. These purposes inform institutional answers to questions such as: Who are we and what do we value? How should we work together? What's important to us?

We are looking past formal institutional missions to focus instead on the beliefs that drive institutional priorities and define what an academic community is trying to accomplish (Tierney, 1988; Hartley 2002). These beliefs set the standard an institution uses to measure its performance – to assess if it is achieving excellence. Taken together, they form a belief system that promotes a deep sense of meaning for those who work there. At the eight institutions profiled here, these beliefs were evident in conversations we had with people about what they were proud of, what they cared about, and how they knew their efforts were pointing their universities towards success. We also heard stories about key turning points in the institutions' histories. Some of these belief systems are anchored in the institutions' founding; others have arisen from new efforts to reimagine an institution's work. They are informed by the larger national contexts within which these institutions operate – contexts that vary in terms of how institutions are both funded and regulated.

While the work these institutions are engaging in is impressive and impactful, the activities they have engaged in are not especially novel. Activities such as improving student progress, widening access, and conducting community-engaged research are common practices at many institutions around the world. Further, the organizational forms these institutions have taken are common models in higher education. Nazarbayev University (NU) and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile are research universities. Asian University for Women (AUW) is a women's liberal arts institution. The

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School of Advanced Studies is a liberal arts college nested within a large regional university. The Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) is a discipline-focused institute, like many others in India. What makes these institutions' work distinctive, however, is the way they respond to their unique contexts and the students they are committed to serving. Like musicians working within the framework of a particular genre, these universities have found ways to beautifully express themselves – to improvise and adapt to meet the needs of their students and the wider world. The players have learned to work in concert, conscious of one another's moves. They have developed a pattern of activities aimed at advancing their shared understanding of the outcomes they are hoping to produce.

THIS WE BELIEVE: THE POWER OF SHARED VALUES

What allows each institution to coordinate its efforts is a shared understanding of what is important. In the absence of wealth, these institutions pursue excellence by articulating and trying to adhere to a core set of institutional values. These values provide clarity on institutional priorities. They also provide people with a powerful sense of meaning about their work. Some of these values are enduring and constant. Continuity and consistency in core values give stability and certainty. Often they are evident from the institution's beginnings. These values shape decisions about whom to recruit, whom to admit, and what activities to value. Further, the core values of the institution may be adapted or interpreted in different ways over time. For example, Qatar University (QU) has shifted its focus from the pursuit of international recognition to serving the local populace as a means of reinforcing national identity and preparing leaders for tomorrow. Pontificia Universidad Católica's work in Chile, while informed by its faith-based origins, has evolved to embrace service to the community and country. Values may also be a point of contention and debate, as we will discuss shortly.

One value embraced by all eight institutions is the desire to serve society and the common good. Some saw a particular city, country, or region as the locus of their efforts. TISS has a longstanding commitment to partnering with communities throughout India. Fieldwork projects draw on the expertise of community members as well as TISS researchers and students to solve pressing real-world problems. Community-based teaching and research is integral to the institution's ethos. The faculty of Universidad Católica are involved in many research projects across Chile aimed at

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addressing the various social, environmental, and policy issues. Dublin City University, while doing impactful research regionally and internationally, also has focused considerable attention on the Northside community of Dublin.

Another commonality across many of the institutions is a commitment to access. At AUW, this means building trusting relationships with poor, marginalized communities to educate their most promising young women. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) – the first Maryland public university to admit students of all races from its founding – has demonstrated its ability to prepare students of color to reach the pinnacles of the STEM fields. Dublin City University has made a commitment to admitting and financially supporting students who otherwise might not be able to attend. In sum, the institutions see themselves as places of learning and inquiry that are open to all, regardless of race, gender, wealth, or caste.

Three institutions in our study were established to pursue a particular national goal – an end identified by the State. NU was founded to become a model research-intensive university in Kazakhstan, an institution committed to innovating and disseminating best practices and to preparing successive generations of leaders and professionals. NU has been able to conduct its work with complete institutional autonomy granted by national law and through the generous funding of the State. Its international connections and partnerships have also raised its profile globally. The goal of the School of Advanced Studies, a beneficiary of the Russian Academic Excellence Project, is to become an internationally ranked institution while also serving as an example of student-centered, interdisciplinary liberal arts education for Russia. In its early years, the goal of QU was to prepare Qatari students according to international standards and to promote national development. This led to a second act aimed at competing in the wider international context – English-medium-of-instruction programs and the recruitment of research-active faculty. After the Arab Spring (late 2010–2012), the emphasis was again recast, giving priority to preparing Qatari citizens for professional lives and encouraging them to engage in the local economy and their communities.

Another key value that informs the work at these institutions is a desire to understand, support, and challenge the students they serve. Universidad Católica de Chile and Dublin City University were founded to provide exemplary professional education for the young people of their country, including those from poor families. That commitment to excellence, access, and preparation for professional success continues to this day. NU at its founding partnered with elite international research universities and created

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an admissions system to ensure that most academically talented Kazakhstani students would be admitted based on academic merit alone. AUW built relationships with low-income, rural, and marginalized communities, seeking to understand their cultural needs in order to establish admissions pipelines of talented young women for its liberal arts degree.

Many of these institutions have impressive systems of support for their students. The faculty at AUW embrace their role as student advisors as strongly as they embrace their teaching and research activities. The School of Advanced Studies' curricular pathways emphasize "individualization" along with the notion that each student should be the "actor and key decisionmaker" in shaping their program of study and subsequent career options. Further, they have continually innovated to improve the ways they are serving their students. To help students gain relevant professional work experience, Dublin City University has built an impressive internship program that allows students to work in their field of study during their third year. Many are subsequently hired after graduation. UMBC's Meyerhoff Scholars Program was piloted to show that all students – including those from historically marginalized backgrounds – can and should succeed in STEM. The program used an array of advising and support programs to produce success. Furthermore, UMBC then used the principles learned in this program to dramatically improve academic experiences and support for all students. This commitment to ongoing innovation to foster student success is central to each of these institutions.

Alongside these systems of support is a commitment to academic rigor and integrity. The faculty describe the School of Advanced Studies as a place of "intense learning," where students "work hard" and "want more." Its code of academic integrity makes clear expectations around effort and progress. AUW's admissions process specifically looks for prospective students who show "grit," whose lives demonstrate their ability to thrive in the most challenging of environments. They draw applicants whose desire to succeed places them at odds with their communities – for example, a young woman learning to sing in a community where singing is frowned upon. This expression of personal commitment is important because many of the young women who are admitted have not had access to education in English-speaking schools. AUW's Pathways program provides the academic scaffolding necessary to prepare students for engaging in critical thinking, analysis, and independent learning, which are all central to a rigorous liberal arts education. This commitment to academic rigor at many of these institutions has become a part of the institutional ethos – a point of pride perhaps best

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captured by a statement from UMBC's men's basketball team, which triumphed at long odds over their competition: "We stand on the shoulders of our chess team."

LEADERSHIP AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL QUALITY AND A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

There is no question that leadership has played an important role at these institutions. Several of them have had presidents with lengthy and successful terms in office – Katsu at NU (twelve years), Sanchez at Universidad Católica (thirteen years), Parasuraman at TISS (fourteen years), and Hrabowski at UMBC (a remarkable thirty years.) It is tempting to conclude that these institutions' success is due to the hand of a wise (and often charismatic) leader. In fact, many individuals we spoke with did reference the importance of having stable, effective, longstanding presidential leadership. That said, while "visionary leader" is a phrase found in many presidential job advertisements, the fact is that individual leaders are ephemeral. What matters is developing an enduring set of practices and beliefs that uphold widely shared values and will continue past one leader's tenure. This creates a fertile ground for leadership as a shared responsibility. These institutions have adopted systems and practices aimed at collaborative decision-making. They have found ways to empower people across the institution to launch new initiatives and advance the work. This approach fosters a deep sense of shared commitment. As one administrator from QU put it, "If we produce a culture that's focused on the students and their experience and producing really excellent citizens and excellent individuals that can contribute to society based on a shared sense of mission, based on data and evidence, then I can go back to teaching happy."

Sharing leadership responsibilities expands organizational capacity. After many successful years as the head of TISS, Dr. Parasuraman quietly commented to us that he knew the institution was well positioned "when the problems no longer came to my door." The leadership was shared across his senior team and across the institute. Indeed, most of the exciting initiatives at these institutions originated from faculty, administrators, or student leaders who saw a way to realize the institution's purpose more fully. Leadership had become an organizational value – shared work and a shared responsibility. Institutions used various ways to empower individuals and encourage new ideas. All had some system of shared governance to bring together the key constituents of the institution – administrators, faculty, and often students – to discuss important issues and

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make decisions about the allocation of precious resources. The senior leadership teams operated through discussion, debate, and consensus rather than through command and control. Or as one member of our research team summed up the approach at UMBC, "it's the power of we."

A shared sense of purpose fosters and maintains a cohesive belief system that individuals from across the institution feel they helped develop and own. This is beautifully captured by Professor Bharat's question that guided TISS's planning efforts: "Are we making some kind of a visible impact or not, and will we be counted among those who make a difference?" To breathe life into this purpose requires launching new initiatives. Admissions efforts need to seek individuals interested in what the institution is offering. Curricular and pedagogical approaches are adapted to support it. Faculty hiring practices are amended to identify candidates who understand and support the work of the institutions. Faculty promotion and retention guidelines are amended to incentivize activities consonant with the purpose. It is by shaping policies and practices that reflect the norms and beliefs tied to a shared sense of purpose that ideals become institutionalized. As Peters and Waterman (1982) describe this work, "it is meticulously shifting the attention of the institution through the mundane language of management systems."

We see and hear these values in the stories that people share and in their celebrations and events. These beliefs become a common theme in presidential speeches, in strategic plans, and, yes, even in mission statements. But it is not this formal articulation of purpose that matters the most. It is the belief that people carry in their hearts and into their day-to-day lives. If the mission statement is the creed, the shared belief system is the living faith.

Aligning policies and practices with this shared sense of purpose has the potential to produce a system of socialization that ensures that the work continues long past the tenure of any president or even past the generation that collectively devised this shared understanding of the collective work. Such policies also underscore that this work is everyone's responsibility. If we are going to achieve this important aim, it is up to us. Or as South African poet June Jordan (2005) memorializing the women and children who opposed apartheid expressed it: "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

SUSTAINING UNIQUE CONCEPTIONS OF EXCELLENCE

While shared values and belief systems are a powerful means of fostering creative and cohesive institutions, sustaining these systems is not easy.

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Several factors have the potential to derail institutions pursuing their own conception of excellence.

The first is that higher education institutions, even relatively small ones, are complicated organizations that depend on the professionalism of many people to operate. Most organizations are what Karl Weick (1976) termed "loosely coupled." They lack the rigid hierarchical control of machine bureaucracies, and individuals operate with a considerable degree of autonomy. As such, it's easy for alternative ideas to influence people's activities and, by extension, the work of the institution. Kegan and Lahey (2001) referred to such ideas as competing commitments. It's not that individuals are inimical to the shared purpose being espoused by proponents at the institution. It's that they see other priorities as equally valid or preferable. Competing commitments can become evident as the "founding generation" of a particular idea begins retiring. Unless there is a successor generation committed to these ideas, the pursuit of purpose will ultimately falter. The academic job market is incredibly competitive, and faculty jobs at stable institutions are precious. Moreover, most faculty are prepared at research universities where traditional academic norms are adhered to. Entering an institution with a particular sense of purpose can be perplexing. (Why should I get involved in community-based research when more traditional research takes so much less time to complete?). This is what is behind the sentiment expressed by new faculty members at Dublin City University who longed for a "normal university." Unless the policies and practices of an institution clearly point to a preference for certain activities, that "normal" ideal will become the default over time.

External pressures can also reshape institutional behaviors and norms. For public institutions, this may be pressure from the government to serve the State rather than pursue international acclaim – pressures that all public institutions in this study have experienced to some degree. QU has struggled with reconciling aspirations to become an internationally recognized institution – with international faculty and instruction in English – with its desire to serve Qatari students. NU is facing similar pressures today with plans for government spending to decline and enrolment revenues to take its place. External accountability is causing some leaders at NU to focus on research production and placement of findings in high-impact peer-reviewed journals. While this approach is a common metric for institutional success, the devaluing of work aimed at local audiences (published in Russian or Kazakh) has shut off NU's product from the very society sponsoring it.

Private institutions may find that their original operating model must be adapted to give the institution financial stability. This occurred as AUW

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realized it could not sustain its status as a donor-supported institution in perpetuity. It needed to begin admitting students from families that are able to pay tuition. While the commitment to serving young women from marginalized communities continues, it is no longer the sole emphasis of the institution. Promoting gender equity and women's leadership is the ascendant purpose. Furthermore, as institutions either proved successful after their founding or found new strength through institutional efforts to redefine their purpose, they have faced the temptation to compete in more conventional measures of success, including rankings. The pursuit of higher education global rankings was a stated aspiration by leaders of two of these institutions. Of course, many did participate in rankings, and for public institutions, their positioning in international, regional, or national rankings was an important way of validating their efforts to external stakeholders. That said, what was clear at all these eight institutions was that placement in the rankings was a byproduct of their pursuit of their own conception of excellence, not an end in itself to be pursued. But paying attention to rankings can cause an institution's purpose to drift, or lurch, towards conventional measures like raising research money and being even more selective in admissions. The institution's distinctive purpose fades and is replaced by more generic goals like more research publications or a higher global reputation as world class. The likely outcome of such efforts is a loss of focus and mission distortion, which leads institutional members to skew the core values of the organization (Clover, 2018).

One of the principal means of maintaining a shared belief system is sustained dialogue about purpose: a conversation focused on the question, "What we are seeking to accomplish together?" Ultimately, excellence is the byproduct of a dynamic and ongoing dialogue about priorities and efforts aimed at realizing them. This underscores the importance of establishing robust governance systems. In these eight cases, the forms of collegial decision-making bodies differed from institution to institution, but they all recognized the importance of giving voice to key constituents – faculty, administrators, and students. Many leaders saw a well-functioning collegial body as central to the institution's success. For example, while leading AUW, Vice Chancellor Nirmala Rao worked to establish effective "deliberative bodies" involving faculty, administrators, and students in academic decision-making. AUW also made use of "town halls" – open forums to discuss emergent issues facing the academic community. While consensus was not always possible, allowing people to give voice to their issues and concerns was a powerful means of creating a sense of belonging and purpose for those who work and learn there.

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LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

One of our goals when undertaking this project was to shed light on the remarkable work being done by some institutions of higher learning. Often this work is overlooked because it assumes forms that are different from those typically associated with "excellence." We believe that these cases offer important insights for national and State policymakers and others charged with allocating funds to universities and colleges. In the past fifteen years of our work together, many times we have seen politicians, government officials, and consultants advance the idea that concentrating resources among a small number of research-intensive universities will yield important economic benefits for a nation. We hope we've made clear that wealth, selectivity, and a focus on narrow metrics (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles, grant dollars) are but one pathway to excellence.

Research, reputation, and wealth are the academic equivalent of the tip of the iceberg for understanding "excellence." Such metrics are blind to work that is responsive to local communities or that values and rewards teaching. World-class metrics of excellence also disregard fundamental facts, such as the notion that engaging in community-based research – work that requires establishing trust with community partners and that relies on them to help formulate worthy research questions – takes far more time than traditional scholarship.

Policymakers should actively look for and support institutions that are addressing a clear purpose and succeeding in their pursuit of that end. That support can take many forms. Money, of course, is useful and welcome. But so are land and facilities, as illustrated by the cases of NU and the School of Advanced Studies. Institutional autonomy – freedom from regulation and ministerial control, as illustrated by AUW's charter – gives institutions the ability to innovate in ways that are most responsive to their context. As we hope to illustrate with these profiles, recognition matters as well – explicit acknowledgments of the contributions of an institution validate the institutional culture that has led to success. Recognition signals the support of the institution's purpose and mission, and it legitimizes its practices.

Perverse outcomes flow from policymakers' setting parameters of success solely in terms of the metrics of world-class universities, reputation scales, and citation indices. The notion that excellence means attaining and holding a position on a rankings table adjudicated by some external agency is toxic to organizational culture. Recognizing and honoring many conceptions of

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excellence is a formidable step towards building a stronger national system. Such an approach also reasserts national sovereignty over who determines the purposes and intentions of higher education and who arbitrates "excellence." Nations would do well to reward and recognize purposes that address the aspirations of their own families and communities. They ought to honor institutions committed to producing new knowledge focused on addressing pressing real-world problems in the local community. These types of problems often have wider relevance and thereby enable institutions to contribute to the funds of knowledge that will benefit others around the world.

LESSONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

These eight institutions of excellence also offer important lessons for leaders elsewhere. First, it's important to have a clarity of purpose. Who is the institution serving, and why? What is the rationale for our work together? What do we value? The experiences of these eight institutions suggest that developing a shared sense of purpose has a potential to produce an institutional ideology that can be a far more powerful lever for change than most strategic plans. Second, discussions about purpose and values must be an ongoing dialogue. Ideals challenge us to reach higher, but we do so in steps. What is the next step in our journey to realize this ideal? Of the various approaches we might take, which have priority? Organizations are dynamic. People come and go and the external context changes. Leaders need to continually ask, How should we live out our ideals today? Third, leaders must scrutinize the policies and practices of an institution. How is our purpose being enacted in our day-to-day work? Are our actions aligned with the stated purpose? Do they support and even incentivize activities that advance it? This includes the systems of socialization. How do we talk about our work at student orientation? How do we present it to prospective faculty and staff in our job advertisements? Finally, leaders need to recognize that even when a particular institutional purpose is dearly held by many, conditions may arise that require it to be revisited or reinterpreted. The important thing is to convey to the future leadership of the school the broad principles under which you have sought to realize the mission, and not to advocate for specific programs or ways of doing things. Pursuing excellence is an act of ongoing adaptation and improvisation. Focus on the core values, but be willing to give up on the specific activities the previous generation put in

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place to out live them. Create your own activities that meet the contingencies of the times.

IS THERE A MODEL OF INSTITUTIONAL EXCELLENCE?

In this book we've tried to paint eight compelling portraits of excellence. Each has value and each is unique. That said, we are not proposing that their rhetoric and behaviors be copied by others. As we've tried to make clear, their work is embedded in a specific place, history, and circumstance. That said, we do believe they are instructive. They show the importance of having a clear moral intent – a shared purpose aimed at making a difference in the world. Cohesive and powerful belief systems help people at all levels of an organization make decisions about what to do and what not to do. These belief systems also attract and retain motivated individuals with similar values, all committed to a common conception of their work together. While it would be tempting to create a checklist for success, we believe that if the collective purpose is clear, if people can name their shared values – the things that are important to them – then whatever is written in a mission statement, or even a comprehensive strategic plan, is more or less irrelevant. Formulas are mechanistic and ignore the importance of place, the past, and the people who constitute these academic communities and the external constitutents who are served by and support them. There is no template that works everywhere, every time, and for everyone.

Nor is there a single measure of success that applies to all institutions or even to the totality of an institution. In the eight cases, we saw success defined variously. At AUW, success was often couched in terms of how many young women returned to become leaders of their communities. At UMBC, they took pride in the increased completion rate in first-year science subjects and the number of graduates who went on to do advanced degrees in STEM fields. There were other less visible marks of success. Dr. Parasuraman spoke of knowing that TISS was succeeding when the government began coming to them to solve problems – a sentiment likely shared by the rector of Universidad Católica in Chile. At NU, which aspires to be highly ranked globally, success is also judged by the prominent roles its graduates take in creating national volunteer organizations in a country context that doesn't have a long tradition of community engagement. These are all legitimate,

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powerful, and meaningful ways to gauge success. They may appear disparate and irreconcilable, but all seek to convey how well the organization is enacting its purpose. They are measures of success grounded in the ethos of the institution. Success is most likely to be realized by people working together, dealing with competing demands, responding to circumstances, aiming for a shared goal, monitoring progress, and adjusting direction as needed. The pursuit of institutional excellence is not a simple linear pursuit of a singular output – be that more money or more publications – but a conscious act to do some good in the world.

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