1 Introduction

Why This Book?

There are over 17,000 universities globally and many thousands more colleges. Of these, a small number, say 2,000, have name or brand recognition by the general public. These are the institutions that compete for prestige, revenue, and talent. They aspire to be in the top places in national and global ranking schemes. We appreciate why this is the case. Many students and their parents use rankings to make sense of the bewildering choices in the higher education marketplace.

However, rankings gauge quality or high performance against a narrow set of criteria. Even the most comprehensive international ranking schemes emphasize admissions selectivity, research productivity (as measured by the number of high-impact peer-reviewed articles in journals in English and grant monies secured), and reputation among peers, all of which are significantly influenced by institutional wealth.

In our view, rankings are poor guides for the vast majority of institutional leaders seeking to improve the performance of their universities – the other 15,000. Rankings disregard the quality of teaching and nurturing that students receive. They ignore efforts aimed at admitting students who have been subject to an education with a lower academic standard. They don't capture initiatives aimed at working with the local community to solve pressing real-world problems. They are blind to the very qualities that make working at many of these institutions a matter of professional passion and deep commitment – a shared understanding of who we serve and what work we are trying to do in the world. In short, they are oblivious to organizational culture and institutional purpose.

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While rankings are a blunt tool used by governments to set policy goals – and in some cases allocate resources – they are also problematic. They focus attention on about 10 percent of the global pool of universities. The twentieth edition of QS World Univeristy Rankings reported the results of 1,500 institutions. Collectively this 10 percent serves a small percentage of the global higher education student population. Further, there is great disparity in resources across national contexts. Universities in less affluent nations can't compete with institutions from wealthier nations that have accumulated assets and capital, often over centuries and at the expense of others.

Wealth, reputation, and talent are all factors that influence the operational life of a university. A new greenfield university is not going to overtake Oxford or Harvard anytime soon. A good reputation attracts students and faculty; wealth provides state-of-the-art libraries and laboratories and resources for research, which leads to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, which in turn burnishes reputation. Yet this seemingly virtuous circle has limitations. It does little to improve teaching and learning and student engagement. It makes no mention of community needs. It encourages mimicry, efforts to emulate the practices of more successful peers.

In the cases that follow we describe institutions that are pursuing a distinct mission – who have a clear understanding of "who we are and what we are trying to achieve in the world." These institutions offer us alternative conceptions of excellence that we can learn from. They point to strategies for institutional improvement that ranking fails to provide. Along with their successes, we also explore the challenges they have run into advancing their missions. Each case points to tensions that can occur when an institution innovates to pursue its own conception of excellence.

A significant shortcoming of many aspirational efforts aimed at pursuing a "world-class" future is an indifference to place – the locale in which the institution works and the wider community of which it is a part. As John Douglass (2015) has forcefully argued, it makes more sense to judge universities by how well they serve national (or regional or community) interests. Being a good steward of place "does not mean limiting the institution's world view: rather, it means pursuing a world view in a way that has meaning to the institution's neighbors" (AASCU, 2002). The institutional profiles that follow underscore the importance of context, both as an enabling environment that supports an institution and as a milieu of competing needs and values that shape its academic priorities. For many faculty working at these institutions, efforts that improve the lives of others are a truer marker of scholarly relevance than peer-reviewed journal articles.

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In understanding the work being undertaken at these institutions, our thinking has been significantly shaped by organizational theory that speaks to the power of shared values and norms that influence institutional life. Some of these values are culturally influenced. Others stem from ideas about who is being served and what constitutes "important" work. In our explorations we have found especially useful the ideas of four scholars.

First, we were guided by the work of William Tierney (1988) and his definition of culture as "what is done, how it is done and who is involved in doing it" (p. 3). Tierney has described the importance of examining the "enacted environment" to "uncover how the organizational participants understand and construct their reality, and within that reality, how they perceive the environment" (2008, p. 14). To better understand enacted culture, we drew on the work of Edgar Schein from MIT, who has described organizational culture as consisting of three levels. There are "artifacts" (the tangible features of an institution that point to what is valued), espoused values (what an institution says it values and why it does what it does), and underlying values (the unspoken beliefs and norms that influence institutional life). In gathering data to develop these cases, we made efforts to understand each of these three levels to describe institutional cultures (Schein, 2010). Our work has also been influenced by Burton Clark's concept of the organizational saga – the institutional narratives that people internalize that form the basis of institutional identity. Each of the eight cases offers a particular narrative about institutional excellence that some leaders use (or even create) to promote stratagems for improving performance. Finally, we have benefited from Amartya Sen's (2004) essay that describes the importance of situating institutions in their cultural context – the enabling environment and place in the local community – to understand why they behave as they do.

Although we spent time reviewing various institutional documents, the heart of our work focused on talking with people about their lived experiences at these institutions. We asked them what it was like to work there. What mattered to them and what challenges were they facing? What key events or circumstances had influenced their lives while working there and shaped the history of the organization? How are important strategic decisions made? Whose voice counts? All of these questions enabled us to better understand how people make sense of their individual and collective work.

While these individual accounts brought various important norms and values to the surface, we understand that no single voice describes an entire culture. However, across the interviews, what became evident were points of

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similarity – recurring images, motifs, and stories that delineate some repertoire of behavior or core value – along with some interesting discontinuities.

This book documents how different higher education institutions in distinct national and economic environments pursue excellence, where excellence is significantly defined by their contexts, the people they serve, and how they define their collective purpose. The importance we place on context and mission means that we are not proposing a universal profile for excellence or a particular assessment rubric for measuring excellence or quality. Rather we are looking to describe the distinctive way these institutions have defined their purposes, how they have sought to align institutional behavior with their stated values or goals, what points of tension have emerged in these efforts, and, in some instances, how these extant values are being contested as other competing priorities are introduced by people within the academic community or by external pressures.

EXCELLENCE, QUALITY, AND MISSION

One of the challenges of this project has been to find a language that adequately describes and defines "excellence." A great deal has been written about the pursuit of "quality" in higher education. However, as Poole (2010, p. 7) aptly puts it, quality ends up being a rather "slippery word." In specialist usage, it assumes particular meanings. It has been used to label specific processes or to refer to acceptable standards of operation. In this regard "quality" can mean anything from acceptable to exemplary. In his review of twenty years of policy changes aimed at improving higher education, Vidovich (2001) notes the "chameleon like" character of quality, observing that "multiple and contradictory quality discourses ... [have] coexisted" (p. 249) with various terms such as excellence, accountability, assurance, and quality being used, often in ill-defined ways. Similar observations have been made regarding the variation in quality assurance in US accreditation processes across institutional types and, in some cases, in response to the preferences of different federal administrations (Wolff, 2016).

In their very useful analysis, Harvey and Knight (1996) offer five distinct conceptions of quality in higher education: (1) Quality as exceptional; (2) Quality as perfection and consistency; (3) Quality as fitness for purpose; (4) Quality as value for money; (5) Quality as transformation. In the 1990s, much of the policy debate about higher education quality in market economies was directed towards "fitness for purpose" and "value for money" (Harvey & Stensaker,

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2008, p. 432). Both were operationalized as accountability mechanisms, usually in a top-down, bureaucratic fashion with an emphasis on compliance and reporting. By the late 1990s, however, there was a shift from monitoring for accountability to an emphasis on continually "improving what is delivered to stakeholders" (Harvey, 1998, p. 251). The change came about in part because academic leaders realized that processes borrowed from other industries were problematic (Birnbaum, 2000) and had little to offer those working to improve students' experiences (Newton, 2010). This led scholars to search for promising practices grounded in university settings and to observe how academic communities used, reacted to, or resisted quality-related initiatives. Newton (2010) describes this conceptual shift as a movement from *"formal* meanings (quality as customer satisfaction)" to *"situated* meanings" grounded in the place or context and grounded in "greater realism" (p. 52). That realism leads to the proposition that quality is a complex idea that must be understood in the diversity of contexts in which it is being pursued and in multiple ways (Bergman et al., 2018).

This approach to quality aligns with our understandings of organizational culture and how institutions articulate and pursue their missions. Institutions that define what they are trying to achieve in the world – for their students and through their research and activities, that seek to assess their impact in these areas, and that align their policies and practices to promote these ideals following a trajectory of continual self-examination, renewal, and constructive change. The foundation for the pursuit of excellence is the formation and maintenance of a culture whose norms and values encourage and reward the activities aimed at realizing the community's ideals. This culture-based approach allows for nuanced innovation. As Lanares (2011) explains, it "take[s] into account the diversity of contexts and leave[s] space for creativity, thereby offering opportunities to create new ways of giving concrete expression to quality" (p. 266). These observations have directed our attention especially to institutional missions – how organizations define them, act on them, and use them to create a sense of distinctiveness that distinguishes themselves from others.

Mission statements have a long history. Their ubiquity in higher education occurred in the final quarter of the twentieth century (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Today, accreditation agencies globally require them; strategic planning efforts are predicated on them; and the vast majority of institutions have mission statements readily available for review. Mission statements can be useful. They articulate priorities that can inform institutional decision-making. A clear sense of mission can also help individuals align their efforts

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to larger collective goals and can give people a sense of meaning about their work (Hartley, 2002). It can also help individuals new to the institution understand why it values some things more highly than others, and why it avoids certain activities (Mintzberg, 1987). Some have argued that mission statements are "both necessary and sufficient conditions for long term survival and market success" as they motivate and inspire institutional actors to work towards a common goal (Bart, 2001, p. 322).

We are somewhat agnostic about mission statements. While they are no doubt useful in some circumstances, what matters are the shared understandings and beliefs that people at the institution have about the work they are trying to accomplish together. If mission statements are the written creed that expresses values and beliefs, we are more interested in the enacted faith – how people see these ideas mattering in their lives and informing their work. In sum, we are interested in how a shared sense of purpose comes to be defined (and in some cases redefined) and enacted by an academic community and how this belief system shapes the processes that support their work. We are looking at ways in which the mission is a "theory in use" as an organization makes choices and sets priorities to achieve its goals and purposes (Argryis, 1976, p. 367).

In the chapters that follow, we describe a set of institutions that have made conscious efforts to define and enact an institutional purpose that they feel is distinctive (suited to their circumstances) and important. These stories describe how they are pursuing that mission and what tradeoffs they have made as they seek to realize their educational ideals. We have tried to also describe their strategies for improvement – what efforts are promising, and where they have fallen short. The struggles evident in each of these accounts underscore the challenges of pushing for constructive change in the world and make visible the pressures in the wider environment in which institutions operate – the norms and values at play in their national context and in the wider higher education marketplace. In our view, institutional efforts that lead to positive change in the lives of others are a truer marker of impact and relevance than peer-reviewed journal articles. For us, and the people working at these institutions, the pursuit of an ambitious and beautiful ideal is the surest pathway to meaningful work in the world.

The purpose of this book is to document how the eight higher education institutions, in as many national environments, define and pursue a particular conception of excellence. In each case, excellence is significantly defined by their context and the people they have chosen to support. The importance we place on context and institutional purpose means that we are not

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proposing a single, universally held profile or assessment rubric for measuring excellence. Rather these cases point to various ways an institution can choose to define its mission, how it can work to align institutional behavior with its shared values or goals, and how it protects and sustains its key principles and ideals over time.

Pursuing a shared purpose benefits institutions in several ways. First, it avoids the trap of isomorphism – slavishly following what one's peers or aspirant institutions are doing and saying (or what rankings choose to reward). Second, a compelling sense of purpose can give staff, faculty, and even students a sense of meaning about what they are trying to collectively accomplish. Much of what these institutions are doing is not unique. Nor is uniqueness the reason many people at these institutions express satisfaction in the work they are doing. Rather the sentiment flows from the fact that they have defined a collective life that is important to those who work and learn there. This process of self-reflection and self-determination is available to any institution. It allows a pursuit of excellence distinct from rankings, which are a zero-sum game doling out prestige in an exclusionary or rivalrous way. It frees institutions to live life on their own terms, although, as we will see in these cases, external factors continue to constitute a significant pressure and, indeed, threat to some of these institutions.

SAGAS, PORTRAITS, AND ETHOS

As we discussed earlier, our inquiry began with a set of questions about how "excellence" is defined in higher education, by policymakers and institutional leaders. How have institutions of higher learning defined and sought to enact their educational ideals – the work they aspire to do in the world? How do they support this work through institutional policies and practices? What challenges do they face in pursuing conceptions of excellence that in some respects run counter to prevailing ideas of quality and distinction such as the "world-class university" model?

In describing the remarkable work being undertaken by these institutions, we are not presenting formal histories. Our approach has been informed by three ideas. The first is the notion that colleges and universities often have narratives about how they came to be, what they have achieved, and where they are going. Burton Clark (1972) described this as the organizational "saga." While sagas may be based on real events, the myriad precise features of that complex history become shaped over time to fit a neater narrative, one

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that emphasizes a particular set of ideas about who we see ourselves to be. While we spent considerable time reviewing institutional documents, including accreditation self-studies, strategic plans (often across decades), presidential speeches, and various institutional reports, and have tried to ensure the facts of these cases are accurate, the stories presented here significantly reflect what individuals shared with us about the histories and work of their institutions. In sum, we wanted to lift up their voices and share their understanding of their institution.

Our work has also been inspired by the methodological work entitled "portraiture," which was developed by sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot at Harvard. In the preface of her remarkable book, *The Good High School*, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) notes:

> The portraits in this book are not drawn, they are written. They do not present images of a posed person, but descriptions of high schools inhabited by hundreds and thousands of people . . . I seek to capture the culture of these schools, their essential features, their generic character, the values that define their curricular goals and institutional structures, and their individual styles and rituals. (p. 6)

We have endeavored to do the same. If our approach falls short of the intensive and ethnographically inspired method described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), we too have attempted to develop portraits of institutions that capture their qualities, characteristics, and the narratives that live in the hearts of those who work there. We have not been cameras, "shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking" (Isherwood, 1939, p. 1). Rather, we have tried to illuminate the ideas, events, and actions that make these institutions distinctive and to explain some of the choices these academic communities have made that have led them on this path.

Other scholars have seen the value of this approach. For example, the school inspectorate in England decades ago attempted to capture the characteristics of "ten good schools," selecting that term in part because it transcended any conception of excellence (Department of Education and Science, 1977). Their report argued that school success "does not stem merely from the existence of certain structures or organization, teaching patterns or curriculum planning, but is dependent on the spirit and understanding that pervades the life and work of a school, faithfully reflecting its basic objectives" (p. 7). More recently, Hayhoe et al. (2011) examined four Chinese universities that were responding to efforts to promote mass participation in higher education and expanded access to higher education for the children of a newly enriched middle class. They too drew inspiration from Burton Clark, referred to their

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case studies as portraits, and hoped that readers "will see these universities as personalities, that share a common source of civilizational values, yet have responded differently to the opportunities, threats and challenges of the massification process" (Hayhoe et al., 2011, p. 15).

Finally, our methodical approach has been informed by a holistic understanding of organizations that some have termed an "ethos" (Rutter et al., 1979). An ethos emerges as individuals work together and delineate "rules, values and standards of behavior" that result in a "culture or pattern" (Rutter et al., 1979, p. 184). Ethos is more than the aspirations of official statements or symbols and displays of celebration and "team spirit" but ultimately involves "inward attachments" that are manifest in "individuals' deep-seated thoughts, feelings and perceptions" (Donnelly, 2000, p. 151). We believe that capturing how people make sense of their institution through the nuanced and layered way they describe their work is the best means of painting institutional portraits that convey the richness of organizational life.

SELECTION OF CASES

We have visited many colleges and universities over the past two decades. The institutions profiled in this book are ones where we have either visited or know individuals who work there. This enabled us to purposefully select institutions that fit our criteria for inclusion. None appear in the top 100 of any of the major international ranking schemes. We chose institutions that are not widely known, although several are deeply respected institutions within their countries and even their wider region. None are wealthy. The largest endowment in the group is approximately USD250 million, and most have far fewer reserves. All rely on tuition money, the generosity of donors, or the government to survive. Because of this, they are not immune to the stresses and strains of the larger environment in which they operate, and many of the cases describe how they are attempting to actively navigate that difficult terrain while staying true to their shared sense of purpose. Finally, each of these academic communities has defined for itself the path to excellence and each is in some way distinctive.

We purposefully assembled cases from different parts of the world to encompass a diverse set of political systems, cultural contexts, and regulatory and funding arrangements. There are different degrees of formal autonomy across the cases, and where this seems pertinent, we have drawn attention to how it shapes the institution's work. We also selected a range of institutional types – research universities, comprehensive universities, an institute, and

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liberal arts institutions. Among the eight there are national universities, public and private institutions, and selective and open-access institutions. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile is a faith-based institution, while the other seven are secular. Our cases include institutions at various stages of development. Some are young (in the first fifteen years of their existence), while others have operated for many decades or, in one instance, since the nineteenth century. The cases reveal the extent to which these disparate qualities have impacted their work.

It is important to note that there are no cases from two continents: Africa and Australia. We are very familiar with institutions in both countries, and one of us (Ruby) has visited many. Ultimately we felt that higher education institutions in Australia are relatively well documented already in the literature. With Africa, this is less so. We actively explored possibilities in Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa. Unfortunately, the institutions we spoke with, for a variety of reasons, indicated that now was not a propitious time to participate in such a study, often due to recent difficulties in their operating environment. A study of our size and scope cannot hope to touch on the diversity of higher education globally. However, we regret not having found an institution that would highlight some facets of the diverse and important work being undertaken in many institutions in countries across Africa.

Finally, we feel it is important to say that we do not see these institutions as representative of their type or region or system. Tata Institute for Social Sciences is but one of the several Indian institutes that we have visited, all doing impactful work in their own ways. Católica is but one example of the diverse constellation of faith-based institutions in South America (and globally). Asian University for Woman is but one expression of the liberal arts college ideal. However, we do believe that each has a compelling story about how they have developed a sense of collective purpose. We believe they are places that warrant study by those who hope to improve their own institutions, or by policymakers who have the capacity to allocate resources and shape laws and regulations to help universities and colleges be more effective in pursuing the common good.

The final set of cases is, therefore, a product of many factors; they are a set alike only in their distinctive pursuits of excellence that they have defined on their own terms. The cases are:

Asian University for Women, Chittagong, Bangladesh

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan

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Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen, Tyumen, Russia

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Maryland, United States

MAKING THE PORTRAITS

To construct our portraits, we began by reaching out to contacts at each of the institutions. We explained that the purpose of our study was to explore a variety of institutions that are following their own conceptions of excellence. While many governments hold up the "world-class university" model as the ideal to aspire to, there are other ways to do truly important and impactful work. This concept resonated with all of them, and we were fortunate enough to be invited to visit eight. After receiving permission to conduct the study, we began by reviewing institutional documents. These included information on websites regarding their mission and history, major academic programs of study, campus resources, and so forth. We read strategic plans, speeches, accreditation reports, presidential speeches, and various institutional reports.

We developed an interview protocol aimed at eliciting the narratives these individuals carried that would help us understand how they experience institutional life. Each interview began with an open-ended invitation to share how they came to the institution and what they do there. The interview often took the form of a conversation. The protocol served as a kind of checklist of areas to cover. Our aim was to surface the stories that individuals carry about the institution's history (key turning points) and its culture (a favorite question is: "How would you describe this institution to a colleague who has never been here?") and their place in institutional life. We also asked about their governance practices, how they made important decisions – whose voices count.

Our approach was informed by our experience in the field involving numerous visits to universities, colleges, institutes, national and provincial ministries, and various coordinating agencies. We learned that asking people about their own lives and eliciting their narratives paints the clearest picture of what is happening inside an organization. Our approach was also shaped by the theorists and practitioners referenced above. We sought to understand

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both the belief and the actions that reveal the true priorities of individuals and the organization. We also benefited from the advice and counsel of our colleagues. All of these helped us develop a protocol that was versatile enough to elicit institutional and professional narratives from our participants across different cultural contexts.

Our decisions about who to interview were initially coconstructed with our institutional contact. There were some individuals who we invariably asked to meet with us (e.g., president/rector) and most were generous with their time. We spoke with other members of the senior leadership team. We reached out to formal faculty leaders. We also spoke with faculty and staff who oversaw major initiatives or centers engaged in work that the institution felt was distinctive and valuable (although that sense of value shifted in a few of the cases). Several times, individuals we interviewed suggested others for us to talk with, and we reached out to them, a variation of snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). We spoke with other key groups as guided, for example, students, alumni, and board members. We conducted between ten and twenty interviews at each site. In total we interviewed more than 130 individuals for the project.

Our initial plan was to visit all eight sites. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic intruded. We were unable to travel. So, like millions of others, we found ways of compensating. We found ourselves digging into print and web-based materials to get a better sense of these institutions. How were they laid out? What were the various buildings? We looked at pictures of campus life and watched videos of campus events. This gave us a better sense of the lived environment. We also added a question to our protocol to understand better their sense of place by asking, "What directions would you give me on how to find your office or meet you on campus?" It was surprisingly successful – eliciting much about how they make sense of space and leading to some amusing responses, such as "then you turn left at Lenin's statue."

Because of the differences in time zones, the number of hours available for interviews was limited. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic added much to people's workloads and so time was precious. Ultimately this resulted in interviews being conducted over a far longer period than would be the case if we had conducted a site visit. It produced something of an episodic quality to the process and some loss of immediacy. However, this was perhaps offset by the opportunity to reflect between interviews and identify points to be explored more fully.

While the online fieldwork was far from ideal, we felt the process produced interviews that are qualitatively comparable and as revealing as in-person

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interviews. In short, there were tradeoffs. Interviewing on Zoom did perhaps require more casual introductory talk to establish rapport. But we were gratified by how engaged people were in our discussions and how thoughtful and honest their reflections were. It may even be that for some participants the distance created by online interactions lends a greater sense of safety. Henshall (2020) in his survey work in India on user experience found that people from lower caste and income groups felt they had more control and seemed to "feel freer and safer to share a point of view." Concerns about the format being awkward soon faded; as Henshall (2020) reports, "people are very practiced in using digital connections." That may be the case. However, we would be remiss if we did not say that what was lost were those chance encounters with students, faculty and staff, the delights of reading hallway bulletin boards, studying display cases in the rector's office, and seeing how people interact over lunch. All are opportunities to identify the symbols and rituals of an organizational culture and during COVID-19 we were unable to benefit from that. As if a pandemic were not enough, even after the vaccine was discovered and the pandemic subsided, the Russia–Ukraine War prevented a trip to the School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen, Russia.

Most of our interviews were in English, although some were in Spanish and Russian. We used later interviews to crosscheck facts, an example of the "overlap method" described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314). The interviews were transcribed. We initially reviewed a small set of interviews to identify key ideas and concepts. We developed a common set of codes. We then coded another set of interviews to determine intercoder reliability.

Our codes helped us identify several themes that informed our understanding of various conceptions of excellence, including leadership, sense of purpose, communication, and so forth. We heard many examples of individuals attempting to live out the mission of their institution in specific and often thoughtful ways. We looked for "signature stories" that were "intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message" about the organization (Aaker & Aaker, 2016, p. 50). We also looked for what Jansen (1998) called "critical incidents" that help us understand how institutions act, why they act that way, and "how far an institution has travelled in the direction of what it may call 'transformation'" (p. 106). Like Kurt Lewin's invocation that "[i]f you want truly to understand something, try to change it," critical incidents challenge the status quo, reveal much about the various factors that produce it, and, therefore, shed light on even the unspoken and tacit understandings that make up the deepest levels of culture (Tolman et al., 1996, p. 31).

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Each of us took the lead on various cases, with the other reviewing and extensively commenting on and revising drafts. It has throughout been a collaboration. After having a professional copyeditor review our final draft and making further revisions, we sent copies of draft chapters to each of the eight institutions, a means of member checking. We are grateful for the thoughtful comments we received and delighted that a number expressed appreciation that the accounts reflected the institution and their lived experience.

INSIGHTS INTO EXCELLENCE

The eight cases that follow have much to teach us about the possibilities for institutions of all kinds to find their own important work in the world. Each one offers a conception of excellence that shapes institutional priorities and decision-making. Each has areas where they are innovating and finding ways to serve their students or society in novel ways. They show us that there are many pathways to excellence and distinction. If you are clear about your purpose, you can orient your institutional efforts to realize it in many ways.

What these cases also suggest is that where a sense of purpose is widely held (across many faculty, staff, and students), a mission constitutes something more than a mere set of operating instructions. It points to a set of values and norms that form a kind of institutional belief system that can be incredibly powerful. It socializes new members, guides decisions, and gives people a sense of meaning about their work. This shared set of beliefs also helps align the decisions of many people, promoting organizational cohesion (Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983). Ultimately, an institution that fosters open dialogue and has a governance systems in place to give voice to the people and allow ideas to flow freely may become an environment where leadership becomes an organizational quality; a broad intellectual pool is cultivated and used to find productive ways forward and to continually strive for excellence.

The cases also underscore that defining a clear institutional mission is continual work and ephemeral. It requires constant maintenance. Many of these institutions have found ways to accomplish this in their policies and practices. Over time there is the possibility of competing ideas to enter and challenge the norm. In some cases the pressure is external as governments seek to promote a particular form of "quality." It is important for institutional leaders to be aware of such pressures and to work with others to define how they want to make a difference in the world or, in the words of one participant, to decide whether they should be a "terrier or a wolfhound."

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The eight cases highlight the immense pressures that institutional leaders face today. It is hard to make explicit the ways in which you want to have a positive impact on your students or the world. These institutions must pay attention to an array of stakeholders (government, students and their families, alumni). These groups have their own sets of expectations and little patience. It is also hard when the path forward cuts across existing norms and modes of operation, the prevailing academic, or administrative culture. These institutions have found ways to try to navigate this terrain, and not always successfully. The tension between innovating and conforming is one that weaves through many of these accounts.

CONCLUSION

Our hope is that these eight cases do justice to the remarkable work being undertaken by these institutions. We feel that they point to a path that other institutions can learn from. In producing these institutional portraits, we are aware that the line between portrait and caricature is a faint one and easily crossed. We hope we have stayed on the right side of that line. We hope their stories will stimulate others – policymakers and institutional leaders – to reimagine how institutions of higher learning can better serve society by focusing on their core values and shared purpose.

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