University Leadership Under Conditions Of Uncertainty

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Biography

Allan Cahoon, PhD, became President and Vice-Chancellor of Royal Roads University in 2007. He is the University’s third President and was re-appointed as President in 2012. Cahoon started his undergraduate education at the University of Calgary before transferring to the United States to complete his BA in history and political science, a MSc in International Administration, and eventually he completed his PhD at Syracuse University. As president, Cahoon has attended executive education programs at Harvard University and Oxford.

Cahoon taught at the University of Saskatchewan in Commerce and Political Science and in 1976 joined the University of Calgary, was promoted to a full professor and served in various administrative positions within the Faculty and University. In 2002, Cahoon moved to the University of Regina, where he held the positions of vice-president, research and international and acting president. As a professor, he specialized in executive development, organizational theory and building best-practice, high-performance teams. He has conducted a longitudinal research project on the experience of women and men in organizations, and published on that topic as well as in areas of organizational stress and burnout, and cross cultural negotiations.

Cahoon currently serves as the President of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE) as well as President of the University Public Sector Employers Council of British Columbia. He serves as a member of the selection committee of the 2016 Premier’s Innovation and Excellence Awards for the BC Public Service. Other responsibilities include serving as a member of Universities Canada International Committee and well as a member of the International Advisory Board of the Chair Academy.

Cahoon has served on the editorial boards of six journals, authored or co-authored more than 40 articles and edited or contributed chapters to numerous books on organizational development. He has presented more than 85 adjudicated conference papers throughout his academic career. He was named an outstanding academic by the Inter-American Organization of Higher Education and is a successful federal research grant recipient. In May 2015, Maple Leaf Educational Systems awarded him its highest recognition, the Medal of Excellence and Honour.
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Post-Secondary Education in Canada – a time of uncertainty

The post-secondary sector in Canada and British Columbia (BC) continues to operate at a time of significant operational and organizational change and fiscal restraint. There is increased pressure across the post-secondary sector to do more with less, to be more labour-market responsive and to make do with diminishing public sector support. Caps on tuition and increasing labour unrest by faculty and staff place additional pressure on university leadership. Pedagogy is changing and technology enhanced education options are becoming the norm. Sector leadership is under continual pressure to identify efficiencies in operations and finances as we have been forced to respond to the fiscal pressure of imposed executive wage freezes, tuition caps, and enforced system differentiation. We face annual mandate letters from the province defining the responsibilities and expectations of all its colleges and universities, with mandated emphasis and targeted funding on government’s jobs and skills projections in BC Skills for Jobs Blueprint.

The focus in the government’s BC Jobs Plan is on expansion and investment in trades training and does not anticipate new or expanded investment in universities. System-wide core reviews have been undertaken to identify opportunities for more efficient and effective delivery systems. We face pressures to differentiate. In BC we have colleges focused on trades with limited undergraduate degrees; teaching universities which were formerly colleges and now offer both trades and undergraduate and limited graduate program; special purpose universities; and research intensive universities. We are mandated to collaborate, to create operational synergies and ‘share services’.

Faculty and students increasingly feel that, as presidents, we are not advocating enough with government and supporters, or protecting our institutions from increasing amounts of government control or budget cuts. There is less understanding in the community as to the value of university education, with the business community increasingly critical of the performance of the sector, viewing it as entitled, elitist and inefficient with a lack of labour market focus. They don’t understand or support tenure, or the concept of sabbatical.

At the president’s table, organizational, operational and financial uncertainty has become the norm. The result has been an increasing number of presidents who are leaving their positions after serving three years or less, and nearly half of them have been female even though female presidents make up barely 20% of Canada’s university presidents. The average length of presidential service has decreased steadily. In a study on Canadian universities, the Canadian University President’s Project led by Dr. David Turpin, currently President and Vice-Chancellor at the University of Alberta, he found that between 2005 and 2010 nearly 20% of presidents served for three years or less, compared with only 7% between 1999 and 2004.
A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale and former Commissioner of Baseball. ¹ wisely observed:

“Being president of a university is no way for an adult to make a living which is why so few adults actually able to attempt to do it. It is to hold a mid-nineteenth century ecclesiastical position on top of a late-twentieth century corporation.”

We are operating under increasing levels of ambiguity and uncertainty with respect to funding, governance, labour relations and student expectations. We face increased frustration by faculty, staff and students and the community at large. We are confronted with increased levels of employee disengagement and degenerative work cultures. The consequence is greater executive turnover augmented by an increasing disconnection by university leadership from their institutions.

The Challenge of Managing and Leading a University Today

Cohen and March observed 30 years ago that the challenge of leading a university is that “It does not know what it is doing. Its goals are either vague or in dispute. Its technology is familiar but not understood. Its major participants wander in and out of the organization. These factors do not make a university a bad organization or a disorganized one; but they do make it a problem to describe, understand and lead.”²

What has become more obvious to those leading our post-secondary institutions today, is that our most important leadership role is not focusing solely on “what we do” and our role as centres of teaching research and service, but on “how we do it”. We spend increasing amounts of time consulting with governments, alumni and key stakeholder, addressing issues of governance and board relations, developing our strategic direction and addressing risks. The educational mission gets lost, as do the needs and issues of students, faculty and staff. The realities of the uncertainty and changing circumstances in which we find ourselves distract from our ability to develop organizational cultures that support change, encourage innovation, build trust and reinforce the pride across our institutions for the work we do. We are challenged by the immediate focus on the work of the day, and lose sight of our responsibility to support and build work cultures that focus on the process issues of our work—the “how we do things” over the “what we do.”

Our institutions were created to serve our students and our communities. Critically, an underlying value has been the search for truth supported by the protection of academic freedom and the right to disagree and challenge. It is not easy leading institutions where dissent, critique and challenge are celebrated. There is no common basis for evaluation or assessment of worth; in fact, efforts to account for performance or defined outcomes are strongly resisted. We oversee institutions made up largely of

self-perceived independent contractors whose first loyalty is to their own academic discipline. We lead institutions where an individual’s success may or may not be tied to the institution’s success or evolution. Most importantly, we lead institutions in which process trumps all else.

This unique organizational reality defines our leadership directly and ominously. The roles of key members of staff and faculty are self-defined and often independent of institutional objectives. Further, the authority of the president is both acknowledged and challenged by core professional staff. An increasing number of failed presidents owe their failure to one or more members of their own senior executive! Finally, we face an organization culture that is based upon a clear division between the academic nature of the institution and the administrative operations necessary to ensure that our institutions remain sustainable and responsive to our Boards, our governments and social contract.

Organizational Culture Typology—How to Ensure a Sustainable Work Site

A helpful way to describe the leadership dilemma facing university presidents today is to use an organizational culture typology that we developed as a result of a longitudinal study that I directed looking at the experience of women and men in organizational leadership and management. Two opposing work cultures were identified; a degenerative, bureaucratic, resistant-to-change work culture and a regenerative, energizing, engaging work culture.

Degenerative work culture characterized by:

- One-way, closed communication: “Be careful of what you say and be conscious of who is around you!”
- Work is assigned, controlled: “Do it as it has been done before.”
- Risk/innovation discouraged. Rampant culture of blame.
- Low trust, both in the university and with colleagues.
- Low levels of pride in the workplace: “Keep your CV current.”

Regenerative work culture characterized by:

- Open, two-way communication, “Faculty and staff have the right to know!”
- Internalized sense of ownership of the work to be done; a feeling of empowerment. “Leaders delegate work, they don’t micro manage!”
- Staff are supported to take risks, innovate. “We can learn from our mistakes!”
- High levels of trust within the university and for colleagues
- A strong sense of PRIDE in the institution and in the work it does.

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Without conscious attention to organizational process—how things get done in the workplace—organizations, by default, move to the degenerative side of organizational culture dichotomy. Leading under conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity and change tends to focus university leadership efforts on what is to be done, on what is at hand, and not on how it is to be done or attending to what energizing and engaging processes are required to ensure that tasks faced are dealt with effectively. Longer term success of university leadership requires attention on how to create and support a regenerative work culture!

**Royal Roads: Not a Traditional University**

RRU is a special purpose research university located in the far west of Canada on Vancouver Island, in BCs capital city of Victoria. As of 2013 the provincial population was 4.45 million, of whom 750,000 live on Vancouver Island, and of those, 350,000 live in the greater Victoria region.

RRU is not a traditional public university and was established by the Government of British Columbia with its own legislative mandate with a distinct academic, governance and business model. For example, it is fully interdisciplinary with no departments. Faculty are organized into 8 schools and 2 faculties. It has a small, flexible continuing faculty (61) with a large number of scholar practitioner associate faculty (450). 80% of its staff is non-unionized. It offers program and supports research in solely applied and professional areas. 70% of its students are graduate students and 75% work and study in a blended learning format—a combination of intensive on-campus residencies with online courses taking in an integrated cohort learning format. Distance learning technology is focused on providing education that is convenient to working learners and oriented to provide relevant education to professionals in the workplace.

**What Else is Different?**

RRU education delivery relies extensively on the use of technology enhanced learning (IT online, a Centre for Teaching and Educations Technology – FacultySTUDIO concept to support teaching faculty). RRU pioneered the use of blended learning and extensively incorporating the use of learning outcomes in its delivery. It has created a Centre for Dialogue, a state of the art distance conferencing capacity. Through its commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry it has developed a problem / issue focus program. Thanks to its reliance on core faculty in a coordinating role and associate faculty for much or its curriculum delivery, it is able to be demand driven (not supply focused) with respect to program offerings.

The RRU Act articulates the university’s unique, special purpose mandate and labour market focus. As a result, RRU’s student population tends to be older (The average age of students is 43 with over 60% being female) and includes mainly individuals who are in the work force already and others who have decided for one reason or another, to start, complete, or further their post-secondary education.
Its distinction as a post-secondary institution in Canada is reflected in its unicameral governance structure, which insures that decision making is nimble, innovative and based on sound business cases. This business-model focused decision-making permeates the institution and allows it to develop more market-responsive programs and degrees.

**RRU Teaching and Learning Model**

RRU is a leader in Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR). PLAR is a process that recognizes and gives credit to what individuals have done in their careers that is considered along with, and complimentary to, whatever academic preparation they may have, to determine their suitability for admission into our degree programs. In some cases, as many as 20% of students in a program have been admitted through PLAR, which has been monitored carefully and has resulted in some outstanding graduates.

RRU operates on an integrated, outcome-based learning model and has developed an integrative teaching and learning model to evaluate its programs and serve as the basis for the design of new ones.
Future Strategy in Light of Current Situation

As part of its long term strategy, RRU will continue to accelerate learning programs for its primary market, those who wish to advance in their careers by offering options for completing degrees with specialization in less time than others. It will continue to embrace Prior Learning Assessment Recognition with credential completion with reformed, flexible admissions protocol where life and work experience count heavily toward the prerequisite of a credential. It will increasingly design programs that offer a dynamic, adaptive, personalized learning environment and respond to individual learning interests.

RRU will be increasing its student career development / job search support to assist those students who want to advance in the workplace. We are partnering with the regional economic authority to provide community incubators for entrepreneurial exploration.

As RRU's learning technology advances, we will be identifying new teaching and learning aids, such as the use of social and digital media, and e-books. We will also be adopting exemplary learning-by-experience practices, including online and in-class simulation, project work and project-oriented learning. Our study programs will integrate different places of learning, for example, dual study programs which combine company-based (cooperative) training with university studies, or integrated study programs for students with professional backgrounds which combine three places of learning: the university, professional practice and self-studies in a private setting (at home online).

It will also focus on mobile learning–ubiquitous learning–exploiting mobile technologies which enable learning at any place at any time. We will enhance the use of technology for learning and are embracing a ‘maker culture’. Our new learning technology will be based on supporting multiple devices and platforms for education and connectivity.

Although we have experimented with MOOCs, based on our belief in the importance of learning as a social action, we will increasingly introduce smaller, competency-based units of education and practice, based around the concept of ‘badges’, or modular, stackable credentials, demand-driven by employers.

University Leadership under Conditions of Uncertainty Requires an Ethical Approach to Governance

Assuming the role of president nine years ago, I inherited an institution that had lost its president as a result of actions by its Board of Governors, and had been led by an acting president who was at the time the Chair of the Board of Governors. Its credibility and viability as a post-secondary institution in the province of BC was being questioned. Faculty and staff felt considerable uncertainty with respect to the institution’s mandate, which was exacerbated by a lack of leadership certainty. I inherited a strategic direction that was boiler plate and unremarkable, but adequate to focus RRU’s direction. What I focused my attention on was reducing the uncertainty and ambiguity in terms of leadership and direction by
focusing on establishing and supporting a regenerative work culture. Engagement of faculty and staff with the support of students and government was essential to our success.

Leadership required a focus on values-based leadership, supporting and reinforcing the principles required for a regenerative work culture.

**Has it Worked? How do I assess our Leadership success?**

Last year was our most successful year in terms of financial operations, academic programing, enrolment growth and student services and support. How do we make this assertion?

1. **Leadership:** Strongly endorsed by the Board of Governors, senior management and our key stakeholder, the provincial government
2. **Life Changing:** Our students describe their learning experience as **Life. Changing.** Student satisfaction as measured by our NSSE and our graduate student surveys is very high.
3. **Enrolments:** Up 26% in the last five years
4. **Finances:** No debt/deficit and met or exceeded 5% reserves. This year we will do even better than we did last year.
5. **Programs:** We continue to develop new programs annually host an Academic Planning day to hear proposals for new programs
6. **Dynamic Change:** We have established a new school, are in the process of creating a new college to reflect the changing interdisciplinary interests of our students.
7. **Technology Refresh:** This year we initiate a new five year technology strategy reflecting the changing digital world in which we live.
8. **Alumni:** We completed a comprehensive alumni survey using a company that has undertaken such surveys across Canada that resulted in overwhelmingly positive feedback, the likes of which they had never seen in alumni surveys for other institutions.
9. **Successful Hiring:** Another key measure of our success is that we continue to make very impressive new hires, in spite of the fact we live with frozen salaries and are financially non-competitive with other Canadian universities.
10. **Engagement:** Finally every two years we undertake a Cultural Values Survey, and each time, the results improve.