

COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

The Power of Brave Hearts & Bold Action
to Spark Change in Higher Education

A collection of personal essays from
today's most courageous leaders

CAMPUSWORKS



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Impact Innovation

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As the executive director of the Alliance for Innovation & Transformation (AFIT), I have the privilege of working with some of the most courageous leaders in higher education today. If you're not yet familiar with our small but mighty organization, AFIT is a collaborative community of innovators leading the radical renewal of higher education. Our mission is fueled by a shared belief in the transformative power of education and the necessity of innovation to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Our membership comprises visionary leaders from community and technical colleges, polytechnic universities, nonprofits, and corporations that support higher education. Many of these CEOs began their careers in the classroom, driven by a passion for teaching and a deep commitment to their students. Their journeys to the C-suite were often not motivated by a quest for prestige but by a desire to influence policy, improve accessibility, and help both individuals and their communities thrive. As a result, our members are uniquely positioned to drive what I call “impact innovation.”

Impact innovation focuses on creating and applying new ideas and solutions to improve student success, strengthen institutions, and benefit society in measurable ways. At AFIT, we catalyze this process by exposing our members and their teams to world-class thought leaders and innovative organizations across different sectors. Over the years, our members have gained transformative insights and practical strategies to elevate their institutions. They've reinvented the art of delivering exceptional customer experiences with inspiration from the award-winning Ritz-Carlton. They've explored how to cultivate a culture of innovation alongside the visionaries at

Apple. They've enhanced their foresight skills and embraced the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in collaboration with the futurists at the Institute for the Future. Through dynamic team-based and community learning experiences, we empower our members to lead organizational transformations that are actively shaping the future of higher education.

Meeting the Challenges of a Changing World

At AFIT, our members understand the world is changing—they see it in the shifting demographics of their student bodies, feel it in the strain of economic and funding challenges, and witness it in the rapid technological advancements that are reshaping what it means to teach and learn. They also recognize that the practices of the past will not sustain the future. Instead of retreating in the face of uncertainty, our members roll up their sleeves to reimagine what comes next.

People often ask what the future of higher education looks like. At AFIT, I see our members creating it every day. Some are leveraging extended reality (XR) technologies to create immersive learning experiences that connect learners with people, places, and content beyond their physical reach. Others are integrating artificial intelligence to personalize education and streamline operations. Many are redesigning curricula to align with local workforce needs, helping students secure high-demand jobs while driving regional economic growth.

Still others are transforming campuses into innovation hubs with makerspaces and business incubators that foster creativity and entrepreneurship. Some are developing mobile education labs to bring learning directly to underserved communities. Many have transitioned to shorter academic terms to help students achieve their goals more efficiently, while others have embraced new models, such as becoming Community College Bachelor's Institutions (CCBI)—to offer affordable, accelerated pathways to in-demand degrees.

Of course, innovation is not without its challenges. It is often tangled in bureaucracy, constrained by limited funding, and complicated by political pressures and labor dynamics. Beneath these obstacles lies an even deeper struggle: the students they serve often face significant barriers in meeting their basic needs. Yet, despite these hurdles, our members persist. They go beyond delivering quality education, creating academic institutions that care for the *whole learner*—offering food pantries, affordable housing, mental health services, and childcare support. Each initiative is an act of courageous compassion, a lifeline extended to those striving to build a better future.

The Courage to Innovate

Through my close work with AFIT's members, I've come to understand that impact innovation demands more than creativity and vision—it requires extraordinary courage. True innovation challenges the status quo, embraces uncertainty, and navigates complexity with resilience and determination. At AFIT, our members embody this courage as champions of equity and opportunity, transforming education to create a better world.

From them, I've learned that courageous leadership starts with a clear purpose—a compelling “why” that inspires action and unites teams. It thrives on trust, transparency, and a commitment to fostering belonging, where everyone feels empowered to contribute authentically and succeed.

Courageous leaders embrace experimentation, viewing failures as opportunities to learn and grow. They make difficult decisions thoughtfully and inclusively, ensuring alignment with their mission and their students' needs. They possess a rare combination of strength and compassion, boldness and integrity, vision and humility. Remarkably, they are often unaware of the profound courage they display—a quiet yet powerful force that inspires and empowers those around them.

When I think about the courageous leaders in our AFIT community, I feel hopeful about the future. They are living proof of the goodness in the world and the extraordinary power of collective action. Through their courageous commitment to innovation, they are reimagining what is possible in higher education—tearing down barriers, opening doors of opportunity, and transforming lives. This is not only the essence of impact innovation, but also a blueprint for the future. §