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**Quality University Decision-Making in Times of Crisis:  
Advice to Continuing Educators**

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Introduction

When I first began to sketch out this article in October 2008, the contours of our nation's budgetary meltdown were just beginning to emerge. Now, in February 2009, there are few people who remain unperturbed. The rest of us, fearing the worst, continue to hope for the best.

The subject of decision-making within a context of financial catastrophe is now of singular importance as public colleges and universities are confronting budget deficits of previously unimaginable scale. Because of the historic magnitude of budgetary shortfalls, campus leaders are without comparable prior experience which would help them to confidently address the crisis. They are operating within climates of great uncertainty and cannot accurately foresee outcomes.

There are important variables that have traditionally been out of bounds limiting available cost reduction options. These include defined faculty work-loads and priority campus missions. The imagined and not inaccurate, anticipated difficulty of achieving broad consensus, restricts decisions to a small group sharing the same values. This narrow clique rarely incorporates any sensitivity to the needs of part-time students and the bureaus that serve them.

In the following pages I describe how continuing education leaders can act to both protect and advance the interests of their clients and divisions. I draw upon my own thirty plus years of experience in continuing higher education, some of which is encapsulated in Drawing on Experience in Adult and Continuing Education (Krieger, 2006).

Quality Decision-Making

Quality decision-making must accomplish, at the very least, the following three objectives:

1. Satisfactorily addressing the identified problem.
2. Not causing, as a consequence, a problem of comparable or greater magnitude than the one identified for solution, and
3. The decision is regarded as "correct" by opinion leaders w/in the organization.

By these criteria campus decision-making often falls dismally short. To begin, the problem identified is usually one of not having enough resources. Analysis rarely penetrates to anything resembling a more

Careful understanding of basic premises with respect to operations, values, objectives, and educational mission. This is not surprising since when funding is adequate, there is little motivation to conduct a fine grain analysis. Campus self-studies and reaccreditation exercises are detailed, yet shallow, portraits of institutional life, largely incapable of futuring beyond linear projections of existing occurrences.

Moreover, while the crisis persists, decision-makers are unable to stay ahead of rapidly unfolding events, with coping emerging as the default strategy of choice. Understandably, real-time decision-making is likely to effect outcomes that are, at present, dimly perceived. For example, the reduction of adjunct faculty can result in fewer courses, lower enrollment, and in still lower levels of income generation and funding.

Operating within a small circle of like-minded colleagues, though roundly and justifiably criticized as inward looking groupthink, is still embraced as good practice due to the highly fractured nature of campus governance, where almost any imaginable point of view will nevertheless have its adherents. The fear of interminable campus debates push senior decision-makers in the opposite direction of top down, small group planning.

For these reasons it is not surprising that during a period of crisis, there is no such thing as a good decision, only an acceptable one. Once the crisis is resolved, owing to external forces and not as a consequence of any actions taken in mitigation, the need to move on imposes collective amnesia, and with respect to outcomes, there are few lessons learned, except a widely held view that the crisis was poorly handled. The periodic turnover of senior administrators, deans, and chairs, results in a shallow pool of experienced decision-makers available to provide some useful perspective for the next emergency.

Unfortunately, for continuing educators, decision-makers will reflexively protect what they perceive as the core institutional mission. Priority campus missions will trump those of perceived lesser importance. And marginal players, lacking in political power, pay the price for their weakness, shouldering a greater percentage of the financial pain.

#### How Continuing Educators Can Most Effectively Address the Coming Fiscal Crisis

I propose these basic understandings as a prelude to action:

1. Imagine the worst case scenario: decision-makers will act without adequate knowledge and without concern for the consequences.
2. Continuing education, as an outlier, is poorly understood, and is always suspected of fostering weak pedagogy.
3. Although a profit center, continuing education will be viewed as a cost center because of the reluctance to accept that something so minor can be vital to institutional well-being.

4. The uniqueness of continuing education, especially its alacrity and its ability to quickly respond to new circumstances, is its fundamental strength.

Action, predicated on the above assumptions can incorporate any or all of the following:

1. Never wait until the die is cast. Anticipate and begin crafting a leadership strategy as soon as it is fairly obvious that a tornado is heading your way.
2. Begin planning with your senior colleagues, and extend outward to enlist the creativity of all your staff.
3. Energize, don't panic. A prime leadership skill is to create a framework for purposeful action.
4. Inspire confidence by presenting best case scenarios. There will be plenty of worst case scenarios out there, so be positive.
5. Activate existing campus continuing education advisory councils, or form one.
6. Capitalize on campus resources- faculty, administrators and staff- with whom you have developed relationships, in order to get a better handle on what other people are thinking.
7. Attend all town hall forums, or send representatives, in order to have up-to-date information. This also includes union meetings. The latter are likely to be unscripted and spontaneous.
8. You should have already assembled data to show your unit's value- income, FTE, outreach, special programs, incredible efficiency and high return on investment (ROI).
9. Start making a list of everyone you have done favors for and begin thinking of how they might be able to help you if it looks like you will be heading to the chopping block.
10. Immediately begin sending to senior administrators your own continuing education action plans detailing how your unit can beneficially contribute to mitigating the campus crisis.
11. In addition to sending to your immediate supervisor, also send these plans one level above. If you report to an assistant provost, then to the provost; if to a provost to the president. This will reduce the likelihood of your ideas being suppressed before they can be carefully considered.
12. Your goal is to come across as an untapped, valuable resource, with special skills.
13. Write clearly and succinctly.
14. Minimize the use of excel, at least initially, and do basic "back of the envelope" calculations: "If we add 500 students paying \$1,000 each, then we can generate...."
15. Don't worry too much about being too high or low on projections...as long as you truly believe that you are within the ballpark.
16. Remember, although we are not a business, other people think we are. And at the very least, we have a businesslike approach to what we do.

17. This should translate into other campus business officers (especially senior budget people) having respect for your track record and an understanding of your bureau, especially as it pertains to revenue.
18. Although these behind the scenes bean-counters will not be pre-eminently visible in the decision-making process, you can bet that all important decisions with budgetary implications will be passed by them for review. Include them in the distribution of your projections and reports.
19. By the very nature of staff (as opposed to line) positions, those providing support to senior decision-makers cannot directly challenge their supervisor's plans. But they can point out flaws and counter-intuitive developments, eg. "If you cut their budget, you will actually be disproportionately reducing your revenue." At least that is what we hope the message will be. Find a way to get information to these people informally so they can support you.
20. Time can sometimes be an ally, but not when there is so much in flux. For all you know, major decisions have already been made, just not announced. Act now while there is still room to maneuver. Once plans are publicized there is great reluctance to modify them.

#### The Cards you Hold

It's not your deck, so you can't deal yourself another ace. But you can still put together a winning hand because you hold the following cards:

1. Your reputation as a productive, creative, reliable leader of your unit who is almost always accurate in her promises and projections.
2. Having a close knit team who will understand and act in concert with you.
3. A natural optimism that good outcomes result from hard work.
4. Enough cynicism to avoid overly relying on the altruism of others.
5. Being able to state your case so clearly and powerfully that reason will overcome bias against continuing education. And, not to be underestimated,
6. A stubborn resistance to folding your cards and leaving the table.

Is there a point at which you must yield to a decision you are convinced is wrong? This is a personal choice each of us must make, balancing tolerance for risk with enough realism to sense when you might be going off the table. Here, you are on your own. I've always believed in the need to anticipate and act rather than react. Perhaps the best strategy in these circumstances would be one of cautious risk-taking. In other words, it's business as usual for all of us in continuing higher education.

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