

Empowering Relationships Workshop Succession Planning Scenario

Blaze University, a highly sought-after institution, is losing its appeal after 30 years of service to the community under the leadership of three presidents. Blaze University is a private liberal arts institution that was established in 1970 to provide educational programming for the underserved communities located in the western portion of the state. The college was well funded from a private investor, in addition to the tuition received from students who were enrolling in high demand programs for transfer and work. For the majority of its history, Blaze was known as a student-centered institution with excellent student outcomes.

Known as a change agent, Blaze's current president was appointed five years earlier, with a board mandate to elevate the University's standing in higher education. Enrollment has decreased from a high of 6500 students to 1500 students over the past five years. Many of the distinguished faculty has departed and key leadership positions are a roller coaster. A once stable institution, the loss in tuition has placed the institution at risk. In fact, the regional accrediting agency has placed the university on probation (high turnover rate, sporadic student outcomes, declining enrollment). It requested a study to determine the major issues impacting the university's operation. Since the institution is private, the board has begun discussions about selling it. A couple of investors are interested, and have requested a comprehensive research report to get a sense of history of the changes leading to the current state of the life of the university should they make an offer to purchase the college and turn it around. A research team was appointed under a joint agreement drawn up by the Blaze University Board and the investors.

The research team wondered what set of circumstances caused the instability of the college. The fiscal operations were strong. However, the dwindling income had severely impacted the ability to keep the organization afloat. They surveyed a cross-section of students, faculty, alumni and administrators over a four-week period.

Students reported that initially the college was vibrant, with dynamic teachers and supportive staff. Historically, students were empowered to engage, learn, challenge and grow their capabilities. The faculty had high expectations of students and the curriculum was demanding. Students were engaged in learning communities, which they loved.

When asked what changed in the past 5 years, the students reported that faculty appears to be less student centered and overall, less student engaging. Previously, faculty had built relationships with students as part of a learning community. Now, students were encouraged to do it by themselves, which is challenging since they do not know how. A number of student services staff act as if students should be serving them. Poor customer service seems to be the order of the day in some areas.

Alumni, particularly senior alumni, spoke highly of university of matriculation prior to the period which was the focus of the team's research. All alumni engaged in Blaze University alumni life during the five-year period of the team's survey reported experiences as short changed, unpowered, and significantly less engaging with university alumni, staff and the students.

Faculty articulated that the college had a highly talented faculty, rigorous curriculum, and a collaborative approach to academic work and problem solving. Faculty members were

engaged with industry representatives who served on program advisory committees and University committees. They felt supported and appreciated until the last few years. When asked what changed in the past 5 years, the faculty group reported there have been a lot of turnover among the vice president, dean and chairperson roles. They reported that as soon as they built a relationship with the leader (vice president, dean, chairperson), they separated from the college within 12 to 18 months.

Administrators, on the other hand, stressed that they had accepted a leadership position at the college because of the opportunity to make a big difference in the life of the community and its diverse student population. They were excited about building team relationships and improving learning opportunities.

When asked what changed in the past 5 years, the administrators group reported an abrupt dismissal of experienced, competent and committed leadership in their units or colleges. There was constant turnover in the vice president and dean's roles as exemplified by the number of administrative searches conducted on an ongoing basis. When the current president arrived, the board supported his plan to release the vice presidents and deans in order to build his team. After 30 days, on a Friday afternoon, the president notified the four vice presidents that their skills were no longer needed. The second in command would assume their roles immediately. A number of changes in the dean roles followed.

Distilling the information from the research team, the investors identified some concerns, including the lack of a viable succession plan. After meeting with the selected investor group, the investors would meet with the University board.