As students delay or reconsider attending college, academic departments must reinvent themselves. Universities have no other option but to explore immediate remedies. In 2021, the future of higher education looks bleak, with mounting student debt and lower enrollments exacerbated by economic shortfalls due to COVID-19. That dreary outlook will prevail for years to come if institutions insist on business as usual. What, precisely, is that business?

**Conventional Practices**

- **Ballooning administrative costs.** Federal financial data show universities spending less on student instruction—down by 0.7 percent between 2016 and 2018—and more on administration, up by 1.4 percent. Presidential salary remains problematic, rising on average 6 percent, year after year. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the Institute for Effective Governance (2017) warn that the rising costs of administration signals “misplaced priorities” undermining academic missions. A report in *The New Republic* notes how status quo fixes will fail, especially dependence on tuition—in the wake of “massive liabilities, as vacant dormitories, stadiums, and surgery wards collect not income but dust” (Taylor 2020).

- **Term rather than tenure-track hires.** In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that higher education added more than half a million administrators between 1987 and 2012, doubling the numbers relative to academic faculty, and noted that the bloat resulted from federally subsidized tuition, with administrators siphoning funds dedicated to the primary functions of colleges and universities (Hamburger 2019). As a result, those institutions hired fewer full-time professors, replacing them with nontenured adjuncts earning “paltry wages.” The American Association of University Professors (2018) states that 73 percent of faculties across academic institutions are contingent, “known as adjuncts, postdocs, TAs, non-tenure-track faculty, clinical faculty, part-timers, lecturers, instructors, or non-senate faculty.” Because adjuncts lack tenure protection, shared governance has eroded, tilting the balance of power to administrators who habitually safeguard the status quo.

- **Curricular glut.** The professoriate also plays a role in increasing numbers of adjuncts. Although academic senates, councils, and unions often bemoan low pay for term faculty, continuing professors grow the curricula without regard to cost, proposing marginal subjects for courses associated with arcane, duplicative subjects. Any new social or pop-cultural concern is a candidate for a new course, especially if tangentially related to a professor’s research. Worse, tenure and promotion guidelines typically reward course creation. With fewer numbers of tenured faculty, adjuncts teach as many as six classes per semester. Curricular creep is at the heart of tuition increases, budget shortfalls, and legislative distrust. It also is a factor in student debt, as students struggle to comprehend the maze of required courses leading to commencement.

- **Excessive student amenities.** In 2015, Senator Elizabeth Warren bemoaned luxury amenities, from climbing walls to lazy rivers, all of which undermine her goal of debt-free
college attendance. Warren had a point. Often residential living and associated fees, not tuition, are responsible for student debt. Moreover, according to *The Atlantic*, the United States ranks number one in the world for spending on housing, meals, health care, and transportation, otherwise known as “ancillary services,” averaging about $3,370 per student—“more than three times the average for the developed world” (Ripley 2018). A decade ago, these amenities were added to recruit students who relied on the availability of loans without thinking about the ensuing debt. In 2013, the Brookings Institution was among the first to warn that luxurious perks may enhance well-being but do little to increase earning potential after graduation.

Failed budget models. In the past, provosts administered the budget as titular heads of the professoriate. Then they got the dual title of executive vice president and delegated more fiscal decisions to deans according to the tenets of responsibility-centered management. Here’s how the decentralized model typically works. Budgets are pegged to tuition, with revenue generated by student credit hours. That puts departments in competition with one another, duplicating efforts and courses and thus creating a battle for credit hours. As a result, duplication abounds, with course catalogs expanding each year. With this model, you can balance budgets as long as you keep them in the institution, the longer you keep them in the institution, the better for the budget, explaining why so few students graduate in four years.

Abysmal four-year graduation rates. Many families are hurting financially due to the pandemic. Others experienced job loss while caring for loved ones who contracted the virus or are disabled with special needs. That has an additional effect on declining enrollments. In sum, many families cannot squirrel away funds for their children’s postsecondary education. A 2020 study of 10,839 college students found that 56 percent of those attending 255 colleges and universities say they no longer can afford tuition (OneClass 2020). Consider their viewpoint in light of lagging graduation rates. Data show that four-year institutions on average have a 60.4 percent rate and that two-year institutions have a 31.6 percent rate. A mere 41 percent of students earning bachelor’s degrees graduate within four years. Students who miss that benchmark are liable to drop out of college with massive debt and no degree to show for it.

Misguided alumni/donor relations. Foundation officers and support staff at department, college, and university levels typically focus on two goals: large gifts worth the time investment and new pledges from first-time donors. They often overlook or minimize the third goal of donor relations: retention. Studies show that modest attention to retention brings extraordinary results. This oversight is indicative of status quo thinking in as much as it takes existing givers for granted. As students delay or reconsider attending college, academic departments must reinvent themselves.

Reflect, Reorganize, Reinvent

We can’t take anyone for granted anymore, particularly students. Their absence on residential campuses during the pandemic is a stark reminder of our mission. Every remedy must consider their welfare and future. Here are some recommendations.

Critique your strategic plan. It failed. Assess why it did. COVID-19 was unanticipated, but that is an excuse to maintain the status quo. There will always be unforeseen crises, including Title IX judgments, class action lawsuits, fiscal malfeasance, racial unrest, campus crime, compliance violations, weather-related disasters, and operational risks (especially ransomware attacks). How will each of these affect constituents? For instance, did your existing plan adequately foresee IT and technology needs during the pandemic, especially for faculty and students? Is your plan ready to confront any unforeseen realities? Tens of thousands of students are expected to delay graduation or drop out of college altogether because of pandemic-related issues, a fiscal impact anticipated to last as many as six years. What preventive measures are in place to navigate that future or now may need updating in hindsight? How will public information communicate risk and manage reputation before, during, and after a crisis? The best strategic plan is based on adaptability, not aspiration.

Conduct a fiscal audit. Review your budget model and determine how it performed during the pandemic. Is a decentralized model, designed to spur competition in pursuit of credit hours, really the best option in a fiscally challenged climate with declining enrollments? Or is there a more flexible alternative that adjusts to changing circumstances? That used to be the standard decades ago when provosts worked with faculty leaders rather than with deans to cover costs. Put a cap on student amenities and determine whether any existing ones require defunding. Assess administrative allocations and freeze or cut leadership salaries, including athletic directors. Department chairs, deans, and foundation officers must focus on donor relations, with more effort on retaining and developing existing accounts. Create department or college advisory councils, using alumni in assessment efforts, which is important in unit and institution accreditation. Call on donors to provide internships to retain students and prepare them for life after commencement.

Promote advising and retention efforts. Instructors will have more time with fewer students and classes. That also means less grading. Administrators will be tempted to eliminate positions. Professors will be tempted to propose more courses advancing special interests. Instead, use that time to advise and retain students. This is important in community colleges because of the low graduation rates. Advising also is
indispensable for incoming and graduating students because of the transition into and out of the institution. One-on-one advising, even via Zoom or WebEx, keeps students on track toward graduation. Advising methods can be enhanced to retain and recruit a more diverse student body.

**Increase service for term faculty.** Adjuncts are not only poorly paid but also frequently lack a voice in academic departments. They are expected to teach, and too often their institutional value ends there. Rather than eliminate term positions due to lower enrollment, tap this resource for committee assignments typically given to continuing professors. Junior faculty usually complain that service detracts from research needed for promotion and tenure. Associate professors in particular are overburdened with service, which is also an impediment to advancement. Adjuncts can help alleviate that burden and be empowered by the process.

**Prioritize research for continuing faculty.** Allow reduced course loads for tenure-eligible and tenured faculty. Again, the budgetary temptation will be to cut adjuncts and redistribute their classes to continuing professors. Instead, set new scholarship benchmarks, including grant acquisition at research extensive institutions. Research is a core component of reputation and recruitment. Graduate students in particular vie to work with distinguished professors. National awards, grants, and academy membership are key indicators for inclusion in the Association of American Universities.

**Streamline curricula.** Administrators should work with faculty senates and councils to review requirements in existing majors, eliminating sequences, tracks, and emphases that never appear on the degree. Often these are silos created by professors, some long since retired, that still remain on the books. Remove as many prerequisites as possible that necessitate that students take one course to qualify for another when no new particular skill is gained. This impedes degree progress and delays graduation. Assess each course to see if it advances innovation or prepares students for advanced study. If not, revise or delete it. Streamlining curricula also simplifies advising, increases retention, and improves graduation rates. Require every first-year student to work with academic advisers to devise a four-year plan of study with specific courses.

**Align Your Priorities**

These recommendations buck the status quo—firing or furloughing adjuncts, redistributing workload to professors, creating aspirational rather than nimble strategic plans, maintaining failed budget models, ignoring administrative bloat and curricular creep, raising tuition and fees, supporting luxury amenities, undervaluing academic advising, and neglecting existing donors and alumni. The prototype for the reinvented institution values everyone, with a primary focus on student learning and affordability.

As demonstrated here, business as usual practices have a domino effect, with one indirectly aggravating another. The aforementioned alternative strategies are aligned for the opposite effect, with each one empowering the next. Institutions that adopt them will emerge from the pandemic with the wherewithal to meet any future challenge or crisis. Students will be the direct beneficiaries.

**Developing Women Chairs: Challenges and Recommendations**

**Camille Johnson**

Women scholars face unique obstacles in their pursuit of the department chair position, and once in the role, they may encounter challenges to their success. These challenges lead to disparities in women’s leadership of departments, which is an important pipeline to other leadership roles in higher education. Some of these obstacles and challenges are described next, accompanied by suggestions for individual and institutional remedies.

**Benefits of Becoming a Chair**

Although many women report that they became chairs out of a sense of duty, being a department chair provides benefits to individuals and their departments.

First, chair positions may come with twelve-month appointments or stipends that increase salary and provide other financial benefits (e.g., vacation days, increased limits on retirement contributions). Second, experience as a chair is often a prerequisite to other leadership roles in academia. Chairs work with tenure–line faculty, lecturers, staff, and students and are involved in curricular, human resources, and financial decision-making. They gain unique knowledge about university functioning, and a successful term as chair allows women to demonstrate and prove their leadership skills, opening up future opportunities.

Beyond individual advantages, departments benefit from women’s leadership. For example, women chairs are more likely to have departments with parity in gender...