Rewiring the Academy:
Leading with Hope in an Age of Chaos

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Author Note:

This white paper was born from both personal reflection and professional urgency.
Over the past year, I've been trying to make sense of the increasing chaos in higher education—both personally and nationally. The sector is reeling from overlapping pressures: political interference, legislative attacks on diversity and free speech, eroding trust in the value of a degree, and a growing culture war aimed squarely at our education system. Every week brings a new headline—another funding threat, another no-confidence vote, another public skirmish between faculty and administration. The system feels disoriented, reactive, and often disconnected from its mission. I've contributed to that conversation myself, including my own article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which joined a growing chorus naming the threats facing our institutions.

But naming the chaos wasn't enough.

This paper began as a way to process my own journey through that disruption. After experiencing burnout, toxic workplace culture, and the absence of psychological safety among other challenges in my previous role, I made the difficult decision to leave. What followed was more than a career change—it was a reminder of what higher education can be. In my current role, I've found the trust, autonomy, and support I had been craving: the opportunity not just to manage, but to lead. To grow. To be seen and heard.

That contrast—the emotional whiplash between exhaustion and renewal—is what compelled me to write this.

In recent months, I've immersed myself in books and articles that helped reframe my thinking. *Radical Hope*, *Hope Circuits*, *The Connected College*, *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It*, and *Hacking College* have all, in different ways, reminded me that transformation is still possible—even in crisis. And that hope is not a feeling. It's a practice.

This white paper brings those frameworks together—along with dozens of recent reports, essays, and articles from higher ed publications—to do three things:

- **Map the chaos** we're facing with clarity and care.
- **Name the emotional, cultural, and structural toll** it's taking on our institutions.
- **Offer a path forward** rooted in radical hope, trauma-informed leadership, shared stewardship, and design for the modern learner.

This isn't a traditional research article or policy memo. It's a call to action.

It's for faculty who feel silenced. For staff who feel invisible. For administrators trying to lead with purpose in a system built for compliance. For students wondering what kind of institution, they're inheriting.

It's for anyone who refuses to give up on higher education—because they still believe in its promise
If the paper resonates, I'd love for you to share it. If it challenges or complicates your thinking, even better. And if it helps spark one new idea, one better question, or one act of leadership—you've made it worth writing.

--- Greg Pillar

Rewiring the Academy: Leading with Hope in an Age of Chaos

Leading Higher Education Forward with Radical Hope, Trauma-Informed Practices, and a Commitment to the Modern Learner

"Hope begins in the dark… If you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come."
– Anne Lamott

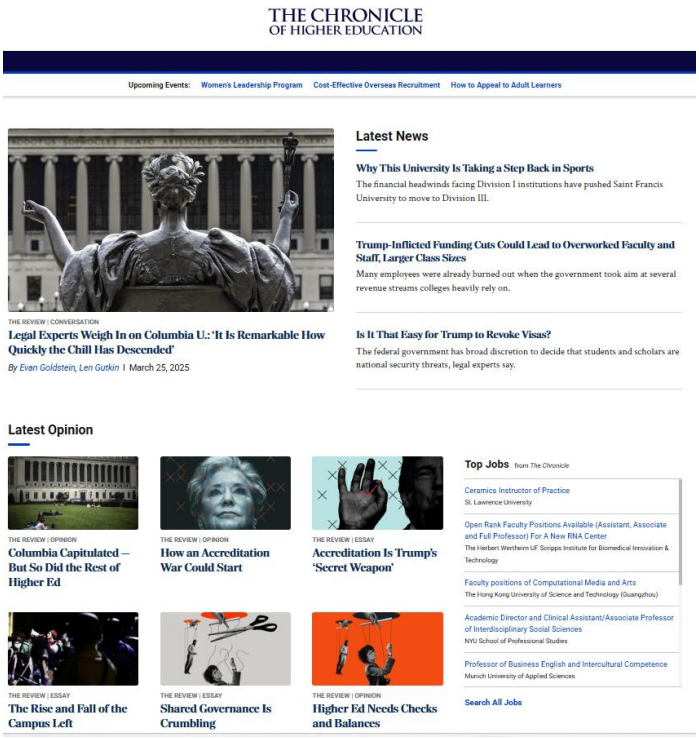

Figure 1. Snapshot of the front page of the Chronicle of Higher Education on March 26, 2025. Ten of the main headlines present a negative picture of the current state of higher education.

It's become a genre unto itself: the chaos narrative in higher education. Whether in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Higher Ed Dive*, *Times Higher Education*, or *The Washington Post*, each headline seems to echo the same refrain: the sky is falling. A snapshot of *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* website (Figure 1) on a single day clearly illustrates the full range of headlines signaling chaos in higher education. The examples are clear, shared governance is eroding—or at best, dysfunctional. Political actors are weaponizing accreditation and Title VI. Enrollment is shrinking, budgets are tightening, and the cultural value of higher education is under constant scrutiny. And too often, we've lost sight of the very reason these institutions exist: the modern learner.

Even a recent article I co-authored and published in the *Chronicle* (shown in Figure 1 on the bottom right, *Accreditation is Trump's 'Secret Weapon',* contributed to this chorus of concern—acknowledging the severity of the challenges while offering some ideas for moving forward. Still, like many others, it carried the weight of "doom and gloom" that currently defines so much of the discourse. But the truth is, this moment isn't just about collapse. It's about possibility.

"The times are urgent. Let us slow down." — Bayo Akomolafe

We are not simply watching the university unravel. We're being asked to imagine it differently.

In *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, Kevin Gannon writes, "Hope without action is merely fantasy." That sentence sits with me—because hope, in this moment, can feel like an empty slogan. And yet, when coupled with intentional, collective effort, it becomes a way forward. As Gannon reminds us, we cannot get stuck in critique alone—we must also commit to building something better (Gannon, 2020). We need unity—authentic, action-oriented, and grounded in shared responsibility. In a post Covid world where burnout, exhaustion and stress is the hitting everyone at some level. This collective unifying effort is even more daunting.

The need is simple as we need to refocus on students. The most painful irony of our internal (and external) conflicts is how often students—or more accurately, modern learners—are left out of the conversation entirely. These battles are too often about institutional preservation, professional protectionism, or long-standing grievances. In calm waters, that alone would be hard enough to untangle. But in this storm, it becomes nearly impossible. Still, the absence of the student voice is a signal we can't afford to ignore. If we aren't building a future for them, who are we building it for?

This post is an attempt to surface that possibility—to move from critique to commitment, from despair to resolve, and from resistance to redesign.

Jessica Riddell's *Hope Circuits* offers a compelling and natural path for that shift. Drawing from neurobiology and the re-mapping of trauma responses, Riddell shows how hope is not a feeling—it's a practice. A ***circuit*** we can intentionally build, together, by rewiring the systems that have long prioritized prestige and performance over people and purpose. As her framework suggests, we can choose wonder and delight over shame and despair—but only if we're willing to design systems that support that shift. That kind of re-routing is difficult—but it's doable. And it matters.

As James Clear puts it in *Atomic Habits*:

> "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

And our systems—many of them—are in free fall.

This is why hope itself—its word, its concept, its presence—is not a luxury in this moment. It is a necessity. We need Radical Hope. We need Hope Circuits. And we need trauma-informed leadership that recognizes the emotional and psychological toll higher education is taking on those who work and learn inside it. ***Hope is not the opposite of crisis. It's how we find our way through it.***

The answer is not to retreat. Nor is it to resist change out of fear or fatigue. The answer lies in radical hope, in trauma-informed leadership, and in a deep recommitment to human flourishing in higher education. We can—and must—(re)design new systems that honor

emotional labor, mentorship, collaboration, and courage. We can create institutions worthy of our students and sustainable for those who serve them.

This is not a manifesto of denial. The chaos is real. But so is the opportunity.

And if we're brave enough to walk through the portal, rather than retreat from the precipice, we might just build something better on the other side.

You cannot solve a problem until you acknowledge
that you have one and accept responsibility for solving it.
– Zig Ziglar

Mapping the Chaos

Higher education today isn't facing a single crisis—it's caught in the crosshairs of several. What we're seeing isn't just instability, but a buildup of years of tension across governance, politics, economics, culture, and institutional identity. The usual collapse narrative doesn't capture the full picture. These disruptions overlap and amplify one another, requiring deeper reflection and clearer responses. What follows is a mapping of five deeply entangled domains where the chaos is most visible—and where the work of rebuilding must begin. If we are to rebuild – we have to understand the landscape we are trying to navigate and flourish.

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1. Shared Governance in Decline

Shared governance is weakening, pulled apart by deepening mistrust—sometimes well-founded, sometimes misplaced—and perceptions of administrative overreach, even when leaders may be acting under pressure and in complete good faith. What was once a collaborative exchange between faculty and administration now too often looks like a standoff, with both sides retreating into suspicion. Across many campuses, governance is starting to feel more symbolic than substantive—meetings held to fulfill a requirement rather than to solve real problems.

No-confidence votes are growing more common. Faculty senates feel ignored. Decisions are made in haste, often without honest dialogue or meaningful inclusion. The tension isn't simply academic; it's emotional, personal, and in some cases, existential. When faculty feel shut out and administrators feel vilified, the entire institution turns inward—protecting itself instead of focusing on students (Gardner, 2025; Pillar, 2024; Seltzer, 2025).

This isn't just a policy failure. It's an emotional and psychological one. When trust erodes in systems, like higher education, that require shared responsibility, they begin to fray from the inside. Colleges and Universities across the country (and in other countries such as the UK) are pulling apart at the seams. Leaders who don't acknowledge this risk missing the

deeper impact of broken governance: disengagement, burnout, and a culture that mistakes formality for real contribution. This can make change, any change, near impossible.

Rosenberg (2023) captures this tension vividly in his account of Macalester College's failed attempt to reassign tenure lines—a process informed by years of committee work, data gathering, and faculty input, only to be rejected in a single 90-minute meeting. As he writes, "the final vote was one hundred to forty-seven against the motion…a recommendation that was the product of months of careful work was rejected at the conclusion of a ninety-minute meeting" (p. 94). The clash between long-term planning and momentary resistance doesn't just delay decisions—it grinds progress to a halt.

Governance, in many places, has turned into a form of performance. As Rosenberg notes, it's often better at resisting change than making space for it (p. 100). Not because the current system serves students well, but because it feels like the safer option in uncertain times.

He also complicates the idea that shared governance is failing because of top-down overreach. In reality, many faculty no longer have time—or support—to participate in the way the system was designed. Junior scholars are told to prioritize research. Committee work is undervalued. And service rarely factors into promotion decisions (pp. 104–105). The erosion isn't always an attack; sometimes, it's neglect.

Add to this the growing disconnect between faculty and staff, the sidelining of adjuncts and non-tenure-track voices, and the shifting of decision-making to specialized units once co-led with faculty—and what's left is less shared governance and more fragmented governance, with each group working in isolation (Rosenberg, 2023).

Rosenberg offers one alternative: drawing from the concept of the "ambidextrous organization," he describes how innovation might be better served by granting certain units the freedom to pilot change without needing consensus at every step. Rather than try to please everyone, this model allows for experimentation within guardrails—solutions tested in smaller spaces before being scaled up (p. 103).

But Rosenberg's deeper message is more sobering: no governance model works unless those participating are ***honest*** about its limits and willing to work across roles, not just within them. "Basing one's hope for improvement on people simply behaving better," he writes, "is rarely a realistic idea, especially when so many are under so much stress" (p. 110). And yet, hope—radical, collective hope—still depends on new structures and incentives that encourage people to do exactly that.

2. Political Interference and Compliance Culture

As internal systems grow weaker, external political actors are stepping in—not just to influence higher education, but to reshape it entirely. Colleges and universities now

operate in the shadow of increasingly aggressive mandates that use budget threats, regulations, and investigations to push ideological agendas.

Recent actions by the federal government—particularly investigations tied to Title VI and scrutiny of DEI programs—have put institutional autonomy at risk. Whether it's the freezing of research funding, proposed changes to tax policy, or direct attacks on diversity efforts, the message is clear: institutions that don't align with dominant political narratives could lose critical resources. Columbia, Penn, and other major universities have already made swift concessions to avoid hundreds of millions of dollars in potential losses (Douglas-Gabriel, 2025; Pillar & Shanderson, 2025; Smith, 2025).

Accreditation, once a guardrail for quality and consistency, has become part of this political battlefield. Proposals that would allow states to override accreditor decisions are raising red flags across the sector, not just for their legal implications, but for what they represent: a shift toward political litmus tests as a measure of institutional legitimacy. Pillar and Shanderson (2025) argue that Trump's labeling of accreditation as his "secret weapon" wasn't rhetorical flourish—it was a tactic to force ideological alignment from the top down. Their article points to the rise of partisan accrediting agencies and new state-level rules in Florida and North Carolina that require institutions to rotate accreditors, thereby weakening oversight and increasing political leverage (Douglas-Gabriel, 2025; Pillar & Shanderson, 2025).

The fallout is tangible. In an environment where taking risks can cost funding—or jobs—many institutions are quietly retreating from innovation. Faculty, staff, and students find themselves navigating unwritten rules about what can be discussed, taught, or explored. These limits aren't always spelled out, but they are deeply felt.

This atmosphere isn't random. As Naber (2025) explains, it's part of a broader campaign of disruption—a way to disorient institutions, fracture alliances, and neutralize dissent before it can organize. She calls it "engineered chaos"—a strategy that weaponizes confusion and fear. Under that pressure, institutions often choose silence or self-censorship to avoid becoming targets. But in doing so, they risk doing the work of repression for those in power (Naber, 2025; Pillar & Shanderson, 2025).

What emerges is a culture where compliance replaces courage. When universities act out of fear rather than purpose, they trade resilience for risk avoidance. And when they fail to protect the people and principles they were built to uphold, they become complicit in their own unraveling.

3. Financial Instability and Resource Scarcity

Beyond the battles over ideology and governance lies a quieter—but equally destabilizing—pressure: money. Or more accurately, the lack of it. Financial strain has been building for

decades and is now reaching a breaking point, intensified by political interference, shifting student behavior, and eroding public confidence in higher education.

This isn't a sudden storm. It's the result of years of reduced public investment, rising operational costs, unpredictable donor support, and an overdependence on tuition. Demographic shifts are compounding the crisis—not just because fewer students are graduating high school, but because of deeper trends shaping who attends college and why. Fewer men are enrolling. Alternatives like apprenticeships, micro-credentials, and employer-sponsored learning are gaining momentum. And skepticism around the cost and payoff of a degree is spreading in ways that were once unthinkable. All of this means institutions are ***not just competing for students—they're competing to stay relevant***.

Hiring freezes are no longer a temporary measure—they're becoming standard practice. Class sizes are expanding. Faculty and staff are being asked to carry heavier loads with fewer resources. And while these challenges once felt distant for elite universities, they're now hitting flagship campuses too. Institutions like Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and Brown are slashing budgets in anticipation of funding cuts tied to federal research support and changes to overhead reimbursements (Lu, 2025; Smith, 2025; Bauman, 2025a).

But the fallout goes beyond balance sheets. When resources dwindle, morale follows. Staff are stretched across multiple roles without the support they need. Faculty are struggling to find time for mentoring, innovation, or research. Graduate programs are contracting. And the idea of investing in people—through professional development or fair compensation—starts to feel like a luxury, not a baseline expectation. Maintenance backlogs don't stop at buildings—they now include frozen salaries, stalled benefits, and missed opportunities to support the long-term vitality of the academic workforce. What once felt like a mission-driven community begins to feel like a workforce stuck in triage.

Students—especially those who are first-generation, low-income, working adults, or from historically excluded backgrounds—bear the weight of these decisions most heavily. Fewer advisors. Fewer course sections. Delays in financial aid processing. Fewer available counselors, tutors, or disability services staff. And as institutional supports shrink, student needs continue to grow. The burden isn't shared equally—it's concentrated on those already navigating the steepest paths.

All of this is unfolding in an atmosphere of uncertainty that makes long-term planning nearly impossible. Institutions are caught in reaction mode—making decisions under pressure, with limited data and little time. Under those conditions, hope can feel like a risk. But without hope—and a plan to stabilize and rebuild—this cycle only deepens.

4. Cultural Cynicism and Mistrust

Amid all the external pressures and structural breakdowns, something quieter—and harder to measure—is happening inside many institutions: a growing sense of disillusionment.

Cynicism, once a coping strategy for those burned by bureaucracy, now feels like the default setting on many campuses. And it doesn't start from malice. It often begins with exhaustion, grief, or unmet expectations.

Faculty are voicing more doubts about administrative motives. Staff describe feeling invisible and overwhelmed. And students are speaking out—not just to criticize, but to question the very foundations of how institutions are run and whom they truly serve. One striking example of this discontent came from the Bloat@Brown campaign, a satirical website that mocked a fictional administrator using AI-generated quotes and vague job duties. It was clever, yes—but also cutting. The message was blunt: "What do you actually do all day?" and "Explain how Brown students would be impacted if your position was eliminated."(Bauman, 2025b). Humor was the vehicle, but the frustration behind it was real. When more straightforward channels of feedback feel ignored, satire, often becomes the next best option.

This mistrust cuts across roles. Faculty and staff alike are feeling increasingly overworked, undervalued, and left out of key decisions. Administrators are feeling judged and vilified when faced with outrage from faculty and staff especially when it comes from not having the full picture or context of the situation and decision. Whether it's a wave of resignations, new union organizing, or just quiet withdrawal from once-loved work, the message is the same: people don't feel seen. On campuses that claim to be built on inquiry and connection, too many feel like they no longer belong in the conversation (Pillar, 2024; Bauman, 2025b; Seltzer, 2025). And when people no longer feel safe enough to speak freely or take creative risks, hope starts to slip away. Riddell warns us that this kind of emotional safety isn't a bonus—it's foundational.

So, this cynicism isn't just about attitudes or personalities. It's a response to systems that leave people feeling powerless. Research backs this up: long-term exposure to stress and a lack of voice in decision-making creates detachment, lower morale, and reduced professional commitment (Wiens & Eckel, 2024). Over time, that detachment becomes normalized. It's not just burnout—it's a slow drift toward disconnection. And once that becomes the norm, the culture of a place starts to unravel. I've experienced this first hand.

Even senior leaders are acknowledging this shift. In *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education*, Rosenberg writes about how institutions fall into the trap of performative communication—not because leaders are acting in bad faith, but because the systems for authentic dialogue have broken down. "Basing one's hope for improvement on people simply behaving better," he observes, "is rarely a realistic idea, especially when so many are under so much stress" (Rosenberg, 2023, p. 110). In that vacuum, people retreat from shared vision and start focusing on individual survival.

Students notice this unraveling, too. It shapes their experience even when it isn't directed at them. When faculty-administrator disputes play out publicly and students are never mentioned, it sends a message: this isn't really about you. And that perception—that

higher education is more about institutional maintenance than student success—can cut deep (Gardner, 2025). Yet, Gen Z isn't checking out. They're organizing. They're building mutual aid networks. They're using social critique to challenge outdated models. "They are realistic without being fatalistic," one professor noted. "And they're not afraid to ask hard questions" (Seltzer, 2025d).

Still, even student energy can't fully make up for a campus culture that feels hollow. When institutions prioritize spin over substance, when mission statements are empty and meetings lack meaning or purpose, the community spirit fades. And when cynicism (or sarcasam) becomes the main language people speak, rebuilding trust takes more than a rebrand—it takes a cultural reset.

Higher education cannot afford to ignore this erosion. When campuses lose their emotional core, strategies don't matter. Budget cuts and program reviews might balance the spreadsheet, but they can't rebuild trust. And when cynicism becomes the default mode of communication, no amount of marketing or rebranding will restore what's already been hollowed out.

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5. Loss of Mission and Student Focus

Perhaps the most painful irony in all of this is how absent students have become from the very conversations that are supposed to shape their futures. Strategic decisions are increasingly made to manage political fallout, respond to public pressure, or protect the institution's image—not to center the people these institutions were built to serve. And that disconnect is clearest when we look at how most colleges are (still) treating the modern learner.

According to Education Dynamics in a recent report on the modern learner, today's students prioritize speed, flexibility, and relevance over tradition—yet many institutions continue to operate as if the average student is a full-time, 18- to 22-year-old living on campus (Education Dynamics, 2025). That model doesn't match the reality for millions of learners who are working, caregiving, juggling multiple commitments, or returning to education after years away.

Modern learners aren't a uniform group, but they do have needs that are often overlooked: clear pathways to credentials, transparent value for their time and money, course formats that work with their lives, and environments where they feel seen—not just enrolled (Sallustio & Colbert, 2024). When institutions don't meet those needs—not because they can't, but because they're prioritizing rankings, optics, or inertia—they drift from their missions.

Too many decisions today are driven by survival instincts: cutting programs to balance budgets, rushing to comply with political pressure, or fueling internal turf wars. But what's often missing is the most basic question: "What's best for our students?" And when

students are mentioned, they're often invoked symbolically—not included meaningfully in decisions that impact them (Pillar, 2024; Hubler, 2025).

Rosenberg (2023) warns of what happens when a mission becomes branding rather than a guiding principle. He describes institutions that say one thing about who they serve, and then act in ways that contradict it. "We say one thing about who we serve," he writes, "and do another." It's not just mixed messaging—it's a form of institutional betrayal. And that disconnect takes an emotional toll. As Riddell (2024) reminds us, when systems prioritize risk management over relationship-building, curiosity—at the core of learning—often fades first.

But there's still reason to be hopeful. Generation Z is not disengaged. They are attentive, organized, and often far more clear-eyed about the contradictions in higher education than we give them credit for. Many faculty and staff remain deeply inspired by their students' values, creativity, and willingness to challenge outdated norms (Hubler, 2025). Gannon (2020) reminds us that education is never neutral—it either reinforces injustice or makes space for liberation. And right now, we need to be building with students, not just talking about them.

Elliot Felix (2022) offers one roadmap: institutions that are built not just for function, but for student coherence. That means designing systems that actually work for students—integrated advising, streamlined support services, simple and practical bureaucratic processes, real-world connections, and clear communication from entry to graduation. These are not just logistical improvements. They are moral choices.

Without a reset—without a real return to mission—we risk becoming institutions with taglines but no purpose. And when that happens, even the most polished strategy won't matter.

Mapping the chaos is not an exercise in despair—it's a step toward action. These themes are interwoven and mutually reinforcing, but they are not immutable. With radical hope, trauma-informed leadership, and a willingness to rewire our systems, we can move from crisis management to transformation.

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."
– Martin Luther King Jr.

Beyond the Chaos – Building With Care, Leading with Hope and Conviction

Naming the chaos is essential—but we can't live there. At some point, critique must give way to commitment. This is where Kevin Gannon's concept of radical hope becomes not just helpful, but essential. In *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, Gannon (2020) writes, *"Hope without action is merely fantasy."* This is not naïve optimism or a refusal to confront

reality—it's a practice rooted in agency and aspiration. It's the belief that even in a system in crisis, transformation is both possible and necessary.

Naming injustice without committing to transformation doesn't just maintain the status quo—it exhausts people. It trains faculty, staff, and students to expect disappointment, eroding their ability to imagine anything different. Hope, in this sense, isn't a luxury—it's a moral obligation.

Gannon reminds us that cynicism is not strategy, and *"fighting for the sake of fighting"* is not leadership. We must critique broken systems—but we can't remain stuck there. Without a clear and active vision for what comes next, resistance becomes performative. Radical hope offers a different model: not passive endurance, but an intentional stance grounded in moral imagination.

This kind of hope demands we reimagine our relationships, too. For far too long, faculty and administrators have seen each other as adversaries—one side gatekeeping the past, the other chasing bureaucratic efficiency. But the real threat is not across the conference table—it's in the external pressures that threaten the mission of higher education altogether. Radical hope calls on us to stop fighting each other and start facing those threats together.

The stakes of this unity are captured in Gannon's powerful metaphor of the "classroom of death" versus the "school of life." A classroom of death is one where cynicism flourishes, curiosity is suppressed, and students feel unseen or disposable. A school of life, by contrast, is built on trust, care, inquiry, and the belief that learning is a shared act of liberation. This isn't just poetic—it's pedagogical. And it's political. If a classroom of death suppresses curiosity, an institution of death suppresses innovation, integrity, and care. Rebuilding a school of life requires us to extend radical hope beyond our syllabi and classrooms and into our governance, leadership, and design structures.

But what does hope in action actually look like?

Scholar-activists Nadine Naber and Jigna Desai have answered this question directly. In response to the growing repression of higher education, they curated a powerful framework: *20 Actions to Defend Higher Education*. These actions resist despair not with slogans, but with strategies—organized across levels of power and responsibility. They are reminders that no matter your role—faculty, administrator, staff, or student—there are tangible ways to protect the future of higher education. And, as Naber notes, they invite adaptation and expansion to reflect institutional diversity and emerging threats (Naber, 2025; Desai, 2025). So I've done just that.

What follows is not just a list—it's a map of hope in motion.

What Administrators Can Do:

Radical hope and trauma-informed leadership at the administrative level means protecting the institution's mission and it's people —not merely preserving its image. It means leading with care, clarity, and conviction in the face of uncertainty and pressure. That includes:

Institutional Protection & Advocacy

- Refusing preemptive compliance with unjust or unconstitutional mandates.
- Using institutional endowments and legal resources to support at-risk students, programs, and scholars.
- Establishing clear channels for reporting political pressure, suppression, or retaliation.
- Creating structural resistance to compliance culture by requiring academic freedom and student impact reviews before major policy rollbacks.
- Auditing policies and practices for equity, inclusion, and disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities.

Trauma-Informed Culture

- Creating trauma-informed policies that recognize the burnout, grief, and fear shaping campus life.
- Publicly acknowledging the emotional toll of ongoing crisis—naming burnout, trauma, and loss as part of institutional storytelling.
- Supporting professional development in trauma-informed leadership for department chairs, deans, and VPs.

Transparency & Communication

- Leading with transparency, explaining decisions in mission-driven, values-based terms.
- Publicly narrating major decisions—the "why" as well as the "what"—through open letters, videos, or community forums.
- Modeling moral imagination and humility in public communication, especially during high-stakes change.

Strategic Design & Innovation

- Co-creating a "mission check" process to ensure strategic decisions are regularly tested against institutional values and public purpose.
- Protecting and investing in roles that build human connection—academic advisors, mentors, DEI coordinators, bridge programs (Felix, 2022).
- Designing programs, pathways, and supports around the needs of modern learners: flexibility, relevance, identity, and ROI (Sallustio & Colbert, 2024).
- Supporting ambidextrous leadership—creating internal spaces for innovation that don't require full consensus to begin (Rosenberg, 2023).

Collaboration & Relationship-Building

- Facilitating structured dialogue between faculty, staff, and student leaders to rebuild trust and break down silos.
- Demonstrating authentic partnership with shared governance—not just consultation after decisions have been made.
- Auditing leadership pipelines to ensure inclusive, mission-aligned promotion and hiring practices.

What Faculty and Staff Can Do:

Faculty and staff are the connective tissue of higher education—and they hold tremendous power to embody radical hope in classrooms, offices, labs, committees, and conversations. This work is not just resistance; it's a practice of reimagining and rebuilding, every day.

Educate, Resist, and Reimagine

- Educate students and colleagues about the threats facing higher education—and the histories of struggle, resistance, and reinvention within it.
- Say no to complicity—refusing to carry out unjust, performative, or discriminatory policies.
- Reimagine the classroom as a "school of life," not a compliance zone—centering purpose, possibility, and shared agency (Gannon, 2020).

Build Relationships and Solidarity

- Refuse isolation by creating mutual aid networks, faculty learning circles, and cross-unit solidarity groups.
- Build alliances across disciplines, institutions, and professional roles—staff and faculty and administrators — to share resources and organize collectively.
- Mentor with intention: create spaces for vulnerability, questioning, and hope with students and junior colleagues (Riddell, 2024).

Preserve Knowledge and Culture

- Document and archive research, syllabi, and course materials—especially from threatened disciplines and marginalized voices.
- Preserve public data and institutional memory, ensuring access even if systems are dismantled or erased.
- Challenge knowledge erasure by incorporating historically excluded scholars, texts, and frameworks into teaching and research.

Participate With Purpose

- Join and activate professional organizations as spaces for advocacy, protection, and moral community.
- Speak up in department and committee meetings—not just about operations, but about ethics, equity, and student impact.

- Push for trauma-informed policies in faculty governance, advising, and student support structures.

Teach and Lead With Care

- Practice trauma-informed pedagogy—use restorative feedback, accessible design, and relational trust-building.
- Invite students as co-designers of their learning experiences, classroom norms, and even departmental initiatives.
- Normalize flexibility, care, and boundaries—for students and for yourself.

What Students Can Do:

Students are not only at the heart of higher education—they are among its most courageous truth-tellers and builders. In a time of institutional crisis, students have consistently stepped into leadership, organizing, and mutual care. Radical hope for students doesn't require perfection—it just asks you to stay present, stay informed, and stay connected.

It might include:

- Getting informed and plugged into student senates, advocacy groups, mutual aid networks, and campus orgs.
- Challenging institutional narratives that use "both-sides" framing to legitimize harm or silence dissent.
- Supporting targeted faculty and staff—especially contingent workers and scholars from marginalized backgrounds—through visibility, advocacy, and care.
- Sharing testimony through public comment, storytelling, zines, digital campaigns, or student media—to rehumanize policy debates.
- Showing up: to rallies, teach-ins, governance meetings, forums, and community spaces where accountability and imagination are possible.
- Practicing peer support: checking on classmates, sharing resources, offering rides, or creating study and wellness spaces together.
- Asking hard questions and offering better ideas—reclaiming your voice as a co-designer of the campus you want to belong to.

What We Can All Do Together:

Collective action is the most radical form of hope. No single group can defend, reimagine, or transform higher education alone—but together, we can resist despair, rewire systems, and rebuild trust. Across our roles, we must:

- Reimagine shared governance not just as a technical process, but as an ethic of mutual care, inclusion, and accountability.
- Build coalitions across silos, titles, and functions—ensuring staff, contingent faculty, and students are not afterthoughts, but co-leaders.
- Amplify, resource, and protect community-engaged scholarship and teaching that connect the academy to movements for justice and liberation.

- Develop collective response protocols to protect those targeted by censorship, surveillance, or repression—so no one faces retaliation alone.
- Co-design institutional change—not just react to crisis—with participatory structures that make equity and purpose non-negotiable.
- Normalize reflection, healing, and celebration as part of institutional culture—not distractions from it.

Gannon reminds us that hope is not passive—it's deeply pedagogical and undeniably political. If we take that seriously, then hope must also be a collective act—not just a private belief, but a shared commitment to transformation. It asks us to resist engineered chaos not only with critique, but with care. Not only with outrage, but with organized action.

But radical hope must also move beyond intention. It becomes real when it is practiced in community—**and when it's built into the very structures that shape how we live, work, and learn together.** To meet this moment, we need institutions that aren't just responsive—but rewired. Ones where hope is not episodic or fragile, but sustained through design, relationships, and shared power.

That's where Jessica Riddell's framework of *Hope Circuits* offers a path forward.

"The system isn't broken; it was built this way.
That means we can build something else."
— Mariame Kaba

Hope Circuits and Institutional Rewiring — Building Systems That Can Hold Us

If radical hope calls us to believe in transformation, *Hope Circuits* shows us how to build institutions capable of it. Jessica Riddell's framework invites us to see that hope isn't just a feeling—it's a practice. And not just a personal practice, but a relational and institutional one. Like the neural pathways in our brains, colleges and universities are built on circuits—systems of response, regulation, and memory. Many of them are currently wired by fear.

In her lectures and forthcoming book, Riddell (2024) draws from neuroscience, narrative, and higher education leadership to propose a powerful metaphor: just as trauma affects the brain's ability to regulate emotion, trauma within institutions short-circuits trust, connection, and creativity. Our campuses, like our nervous systems, often default to reactivity. We see it in panicked budget cuts, performative governance, and policy decisions made through the lens of legal risk rather than mission. Fear-based systems cannot nurture flourishing. When systems are wired by fear, their primary outputs are control, silence, and self-preservation. When wired by care, their outputs are connection, innovation, and trust.

But here's the good news: circuits can change. Riddell reminds us that curiosity is the first casualty of trauma—but it is also the first step toward recovery. To activate hope circuits in higher education, we must stop treating dysfunction as destiny. What Riddell calls the "fallacy of necessity"—the belief that things have to be the way they are—is one of the most dangerous myths we perpetuate in higher ed (Riddell, 2024). It shows up in phrases like "we've always done it this way," or "we can't afford to change that now." It stifles imagination, punishes care, and preserves broken or disfunctional structures.

Hope circuits are not about sentiment. They are about design—how policies, protocols, and daily practices shape what's possible. Rewiring begins with the systems we touch every day. When we archive public data under threat of erasure, we are building memory. When we center trauma-informed policies in our syllabi, student support offices, or HR protocols, we are creating psychological safety. When we organize mutual aid for colleagues under pressure, or protect contingent workers from being scapegoated, we are creating microcircuits of care. These are not side projects. These are systems in repair.

In *The Connected College*, Elliot Felix (2025) helps translate this metaphor into institutional design. He shows how even well-intentioned campuses often suffer from misaligned wiring—silos, duplicated efforts, and disconnected student experiences. In one case, a university had both a "writing lab" and a "writing center" operating independently, each unaware of the other. The result wasn't failure—it was confusion. The signals existed, but the connections were missing.

Hope circuits, in this light, are more than emotional responses—they are architectures of alignment. Felix outlines four guiding principles for designing connected colleges:

1. **Focus on people**
2. **Make connections**
3. **Co-create solutions**
4. **Test and adapt continuously**

These principles mirror Riddell's framework in meaningful ways. Both call for a reorientation toward relational systems—where care, curiosity, and courage are not just tolerated but expected. They remind us that hope doesn't happen in spreadsheets or slogans—it happens in spaces, in structures, and in the everyday experiences of students, faculty, and staff.

Mentorship, Riddell argues, is one of the most potent hope circuits we have—but it must be redefined. It is not just guidance or career advice. True mentorship is "emotional scaffolding"—a relationship that creates space for uncertainty, risk, and co-regulation. Felix echoes this, emphasizing that student success depends on faculty and staff success, which in turn relies on cultures of care, feedback, and trust (Felix, 2022, p. 19). Institutions must stop depending on individual heroics and start designing for sustainability.

The 20+ actions outlined in the previous section are not just forms of resistance—they're hope circuits in motion. Refusing preemptive compliance, building peer support networks, redesigning governance to reflect collective care—these aren't small acts. They are institutional neuroplasticity. We're not just reacting. We're teaching our systems to respond differently, to recover from trauma, to replace fear with care, and to remember what they're here for.

So what does rewiring actually require?

Below are five practical steps institutions can take to begin building hope circuits into their everyday operations:

Five Practical Steps Toward Rewiring

1. **Rebuild Systems Around Psychological Safety**
   Create policies, practices, and spaces where faculty, staff, and students can bring vulnerability, curiosity, and dissent without fear. That includes trauma-informed HR, care-centered classroom norms, and leadership decisions that prioritize people over performance.

2. **Re-center Mentorship as Infrastructure, Not Extra**
   Mentorship must be resourced, visible, and structurally supported—not left to informal networks or personal sacrifice. Build it into workload models, advancement pathways, and institutional priorities so it becomes part of the architecture, not the exception.

3. **Audit for Connection, Not Just Compliance**
   Move beyond the question "Are we meeting our KPIs?" to ask: "Are our systems aligned?" Identify silos, duplicated services, and workflow gaps that disconnect students and staff from meaning and support. Metrics matter—but they can't replace purpose.

4. **Design Governance for Shared Agency and Feedback Loops**
   Reimagine shared governance as co-creation, not control. Build systems where input flows across functions, not just ranks, and where decisions are shaped by the people most affected by them. Trust grows when everyone has a role in shaping the system.

5. **Make Curiosity Operational**
   Treat curiosity not as a distraction from rigor, but as a design principle. Embed inquiry into meetings, encourage experimentation across departments, and create protected spaces for risk-taking. Curiosity fuels relevance—and it's a sign of institutional health.

Rewiring our institutions won't happen overnight—but it can begin today. Every policy we redesign, every relationship we re-center, every question we ask with curiosity instead of fear helps rebuild a system that can actually hold the people inside it. What Riddell and Felix offer us is not a step-by-step manual, but a mindset—a commitment to designing for care, connection, and coherence. Hope circuits can't remain isolated sparks—they must become institutional pathways. And while rewiring often begins in the margins—with contingent faculty, staff advocates, and student organizers—it cannot stay there. It must be embraced at the highest levels of leadership. Because the future of higher education depends not only on what we preserve or resist—but on what we dare to design.

That's the focus of the next section: how courageous, strategic leadership can align hope with action and move institutions from survival to transformation.

"The role of the leader is not to have all the answers
but to ask the right questions."
— Nancy Kline

From Hope to Strategy — Leading Toward What Comes Next

Hope is not a mood—it's a strategy. And for higher education to move from survival to transformation, leadership must catch up to that reality. As Gannon (2020) reminds us, *hope without action is merely fantasy*—and as Riddell (2024) argues, institutional culture must be rewired to sustain care, not just endure crisis. Yet too often, colleges and universities respond to pressure by doubling down on survival strategies that reproduce mistrust, fear, and inertia (Wiens & Eckel, 2024; Rosenberg, 2023).

The frameworks of *Radical Hope*, *Hope Circuits*, and *The Connected College* offer blueprints for care, courage, and coherence. But these ideas only come to life when institutions are willing to lead—not just manage—the future. That means resisting reactionary fixes and instead embracing strategic clarity, programmatic courage, and collective stewardship.

In what follows, I explore what bold, ethical leadership might look like: not just in resisting chaos, but in realigning programs with purpose, restoring shared governance, and redesigning institutions for relevance and care.

1. The Limits of Short-Term Thinking
Too many institutions are responding to chaos with the higher ed equivalent of duct tape: trendy new programs not grounded in workforce or mission alignment, cosmetic messaging campaigns, reactive governance models, or hasty DEI statements that evaporate under pressure. Others are adding crushing new responsibilities to already maxed-out faculty and staff—shifting workloads in ways that offer no measurable return on investment but exact a deep emotional toll. These short-term pivots often miss the mark. As *Education Dynamics*

(2025) highlights, modern learners aren't simply looking for trendy program titles—they want rapid support, clear pathways, and confidence that their investment will pay off.

Effective leadership in this climate requires more than operational skill—it calls for intentional team building and strategic clarity. A recent national study of presidential competencies found that presidents, and by extension cabinet level administrators, who prioritize building strong leadership teams and distributing decision-making are better positioned to navigate uncertainty (Burmicky, McClure, & Ryu, 2024). These competencies—like collaborative cabinet building and a readiness to adapt—are what distinguish reactive management from purposeful leadership.

As I argued in my piece on trauma-informed leadership, resilient leadership requires more than procedural agility—it requires emotional intelligence, attunement to collective trauma, and the ability to recognize when institutional "efficiency" is eroding human capacity (Pillar, 2024). Rosenberg (2023) warns that leadership often defaults to performative decision-making because it's easier to manage perception than to confront broken systems. And as Mintz (2022) notes, when cynicism replaces trust, even sincere reform efforts are met with disengagement.

These short-term "solutions" may buy time, but they don't build trust. They reinforce what Riddell (2024) calls a "fear-based circuitry" in higher education—a system that reacts to threats rather than designs for flourishing. Leaders who operate from panic rather than purpose may maintain the institution's shell but lose its soul.

Many institutions confuse visibility with vision. They launch new majors, rebrand with updated logos, and issue tuition resets—tactical moves that give the appearance of change without addressing the systems underneath. As Dr. Meliké Peter Khoury (2024) puts it:

"These changes, while visible, rarely address the fundamental challenges facing our institutions today."

True transformation, he argues, means reimagining operational models, designing sustainable financial frameworks, and enabling nimble governance—not just tweaking surface features. Without this level of commitment, institutions risk mistaking motion for progress.

The result is a dangerous cultural divide—what Gardner (2025) terms a "Campus Cold War"—where faculty and administrators caricature one another, build silos of suspicion, and compete for control rather than collaboration. In such climates, innovation dies before it begins. No one feels safe enough to dream.

2. Strategic Prioritization as an Act of Courage and Care

Higher education is entering a period of necessary and painful prioritization. The temptation is to treat this as a spreadsheet problem: rank departments, slash low-

enrollment programs, repeat. But prioritization, done well, is not about scarcity—it's about clarity. It's not about cutting the most vulnerable to save the most powerful. It is a leadership act rooted in equity, courage, and hope.

When institutions approach prioritization as a zero-sum efficiency game, they risk eroding trust, alienating faculty, and abandoning the students they claim to serve. As Rosenberg (2023) warns, too often strategic planning becomes performative—language without alignment, change without courage. But institutions that choose values over optics, and mission over market mirroring, can transform this moment into something generative.

In my *Future of Majors* series (Pillar, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), I've argued that some programs simply need to end—not because they lack intrinsic value, but because they no longer serve the needs of today's learners or the future of work. Others must be radically reinvented: through interdisciplinary design, high-impact practice integration, and a focus on convergent competencies that bridge liberal learning and market relevance. And still others should be prioritized not because they are profitable, but because they serve a deeper public mission—advancing equity, sustainability, or democratic participation.

The need for prioritization is not just about resource allocation—it's about redesigning institutional architecture around relevance and retention. As *Hacking College* authors Laff and Carlson (2025) argue, institutions often expect students to conform to pre-built program structures, rather than building around how students actually navigate choice, change, and complexity. Their recommendation to collapse major and advising silos through "field of study" pathways underscores that prioritization must also consider how curricular design either empowers or alienates learners. Redesign is not just an academic task—it's an equity imperative.

Leadership during strategic prioritization must also be relational and team-based. In the previously referenced national study of presidential competencies, 85% of college presidents emphasized the importance of building a collaborative cabinet and empowering it to lead progress (Burmicky, McClure, & Ryu, 2024). Especially in moments of institutional reinvention, leaders must resist the urge to centralize authority. Instead, they should foster cultures of co-leadership—where trust is not just encouraged, but operationalized through distributed governance and shared accountability.

Sallustio and Freytes (2024) call on institutions to "build the university that doesn't exist yet"—one aligned with today's learners and tomorrow's realities. But that kind of design requires the courage to stop propping up programs out of habit, and the compassion to create new offerings that serve a broader social purpose. Done with care, transparency, and collaboration—including meaningful engagement with faculty and students—prioritization becomes a hopeful act: a kind of pruning that creates space for new growth.

This kind of strategic courage also requires trust. Faculty, staff, and even administrators need the psychological safety to say, "This isn't working anymore." Letting go of long-held

practices or programs can feel like loss—or like personal failure—especially when careers and identities are tied to them. But transformation cannot happen if we treat change as betrayal. Leadership must create cultures where honesty is not punished, and where mission alignment is a shared responsibility, not a top-down edict. Without trust, pruning becomes a threat. With trust, it becomes a beginning.

Riddell (2024) reminds us that institutional transformation is neurobiological: rewiring requires both letting go and imagining new pathways. Letting go is not a betrayal of the past—it's an investment in the future.

3. Shared Stewardship, Not Siloed Survival

Radical change cannot be driven by leadership alone—nor can it survive if leadership and faculty remain locked in conflict. We must abandon the false binary that pits "academic purity" against "administrative pragmatism." Higher education doesn't need saviors. It needs co-stewards—leaders and faculty who are willing to do the slow, sometimes uncomfortable work of building shared governance rooted in trust, transparency, and common cause.

But that kind of trust doesn't emerge from meeting minutes or task force rosters. It requires emotional scaffolding—what Riddell (2024) describes as the conditions that allow people to take risks, express uncertainty, and imagine different futures. That scaffolding is missing on many campuses today. After years of institutional strain, many faculty feel unheard, overruled, or simply tired. Administrators feel villainized. Cynicism becomes easier than collaboration (Wiens & Eckel, 2024). And as Rosenberg (2023) argues, governance often becomes a performance: decisions made behind closed doors, followed by scripted consultations that leave participants more jaded than empowered.

Shared stewardship means building real feedback loops—not just symbolic consultation. It means involving faculty in budget models, enrollment strategies, and student success planning in ways that aren't retroactive or reactive. And it also means expecting faculty to see beyond departmental turf and step into a broader institutional role—one grounded not in nostalgia, but in mission.

Felix (2022) reminds us that design matters. Institutions that reward siloed excellence and discourage interdisciplinary or cross-functional collaboration are effectively wiring mistrust into their operating systems. Hope circuits, by contrast, are relational. They depend on communication, mutual respect, and the willingness to share power.

This work is emotional. As I've argued elsewhere, trauma-informed leadership is essential not just in classrooms, but in boardrooms. When trust is low, transparency alone isn't enough—***leaders must also model vulnerability, invite dissent, and create space for repair*** (Pillar, 2024).

As Gannon (2020) argues, fighting without purpose or direction is not strategy—it's exhaustion and performance. That truth is as relevant in faculty meetings as it is in presidential suites.

Most critically, this co-leadership must re-center the one group most often left out of these debates: students. *Education Dynamics* (2025) makes it clear: modern learners expect to be seen, heard, and served at every stage of their journey—from application and advising to course delivery and career outcomes. When internal power struggles eclipse student needs, we reveal that our battles are more about self-preservation than service. That's not just dysfunctional—it's morally bankrupt. True co-stewardship invites students into the governance of the institutions they fund, inhabit, and shape. It means giving students seats at decision-making tables—not just surveys and town halls. It means co-designing academic programs, support services, and even governance frameworks with the learners they're meant to serve. This has worked as a pedagogical practice in classrooms and learning environments, so why not at the institution level?

We cannot build a better institution if we exclude the people it's meant to serve.

4. Designing Around the Modern Learner

At the heart of this work is a fundamental question: **Who are we designing for?**
If institutional decisions don't reflect the realities of the *modern learner*, then they aren't just incomplete—they're irrelevant. As Sallustio and Colbert (2024) describe, today's learners "expect rapid service and need innovative program development. They are juggling work, families, school, bills, debt, and other areas of life." The modern learner is not an edge case—they are the new center.

Sallustio and Freytes (2024) argue that the transformation needed in higher education must go beyond surface-level change. Drawing on interviews with presidents from across the higher ed landscape, they highlight that truly modern institutions must be designed around outcomes, not legacy structures, and must center the real lives of students rather than abstract models of tradition. As one president put it, "We must build the university that doesn't exist yet"—a call not for incremental improvement but for bold reinvention.

According to the 2025 *Education Dynamics* report, modern learners are no longer neatly divided by age or format. They are "architects of their own educational journeys," and they prioritize flexibility, accessibility, value, and authenticity over tradition. They expect timely communication, outcomes they can understand, and institutions that respect their lived complexity. And they have little patience for slow or siloed systems that fail to meet them where they are (EducationDynamics, 2025).

These students don't fit the outdated mold of 18- to 22-year-olds living on campus.
Instead, they span every age and modality—and they want options. They need stackable credentials and interdisciplinary pathways that build over time. They want schools that communicate career outcomes clearly and offer pathways aligned to their lives and goals.

They crave relevance, responsiveness, and respect. As the *Education Dynamics* report notes, they are highly career-focused, often making enrollment decisions based on the clarity of career outcomes and the cost-to-value ratio of tuition and time (Education Dynamics, 2025).

Elliot Felix (2022) calls this a mandate to "design for people"—an invitation to dismantle institutional silos and build coherence around the student journey. That includes rethinking how we frame majors, electives, and advising. And *Hacking College* offers another powerful alignment: Laff and Carlson (2025) argue that most students are not "undecided"—they're simply undeclared because they haven't yet discovered where their goals intersect with institutional pathways. Their "field of study" model encourages schools to treat undeclared time not as a problem to solve but as a design opportunity: one where students articulate a purpose, build intellectual identity, and customize the blank spaces of their curriculum with intentionality.

Together, these models—Education Dynamics' learner profiles, Felix's institutional design principles, and *Hacking College*'s field of study framework—call on colleges to stop building around institutional tradition and start building around student coherence.

That means institutions must take bold, student-centered action, including:

- Expanding modular, stackable credentials and interdisciplinary pathways.
- Embedding career exploration early and often across curricula.
- Rethinking advising, scheduling, and support to meet adult learners and first-gen students where they are.
- Centering student voice in strategic planning and program design—not as a token gesture but as a structural priority.

This includes rethinking core elements like credential structure, pricing models, and even term schedules. As the report documents, innovative institutions such as Western Governors University and Bellevue University are moving toward stackable credentials, transparent tuition, and flexible start dates—all designed to meet students where they are, not where legacy calendars say they should be (Sallustio & Freytes, 2024). The future of student-centered design depends not just on services, but on reimagining the system itself.

And none of this works unless schools also adapt how they **communicate** with students. The modern learner expects proactive engagement through digital platforms, including AI, chatbot support, and social media that is visually engaging, personalized, and clear. For many students, a slow admissions decision or unclear financial aid portal is not just a frustration—it's a dealbreaker. As the report reveals, **68% of students enroll at the first institution that admits them**, and a majority of them expect decisions within a week (Education Dynamics, 2025).

Felix (2022) challenges institutions to "design for people." That begins with students—not as abstractions in marketing plans, but as real humans navigating complex lives. To truly

design around the modern learner, we need to **stop romanticizing legacy structures** and start meeting this generation of students with humility, data, and design fluency.
This is not just a call for new programs or flashy formats. It's a deeper invitation: to build systems that see students as partners, not problems. To ask hard questions about outdated assumptions. To center care as much as content. And to remember: **if we're not designing for them, we're designing for failure.**

5. Leading with Purpose, Not Panic
If this moment demands anything, it is leadership rooted in clarity, care, and conviction. We need presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs who can resist urgency in favor of intentionality—who can lead not from fear but from mission.

But leadership is not immune to exhaustion. Many institutional leaders are themselves overwhelmed, caught between political pressure, financial instability, and fractured trust. And in fear-based systems, even good leaders can fall into reactive patterns—managing headlines instead of healing culture. As Rosenberg (2023) warns, symbolic leadership may pacify stakeholders in the short term, but it cannot restore meaning.

In fact, presidential expectations are already shifting. The 2024 national study of college leaders found that emotional intelligence, humility, and the ability to inspire trust were among the most frequently cited leadership competencies (Burmicky, McClure, & Ryu, 2024). These are not soft skills—they are survival skills. They enable presidents to lead with vulnerability, repair frayed institutional trust, and model the coherence they ask others to build. As one president in the study put it, "Leadership in this era is about helping people feel seen, heard, and safe."

In a trauma-informed institution, leadership means more than decision-making—it means emotional stewardship. As Riddell (2024) and I both argue, higher education's nervous system is frayed. When that pain is ignored or dismissed, disconnection becomes culture. And as Wiens and Eckel (2024) observe, cynicism is not just an attitude—it's a symptom of institutions that no longer feel safe or honest.

That's why we need leaders who can balance accountability with empathy. Who recognize that burnout is not just an HR issue—it's a leadership failure. And that meaningful reform does not begin with a memo. It begins with presence. With slowing down long enough to listen across power lines. With asking how decisions land not just at the cabinet table, but in the advising office, the classroom, and the residence hall.

This means reimagining leadership as **relational infrastructure**—not individual brilliance, but co-regulation. Not quick wins, but systems repair. Felix (2022) reminds us that when design is fragmented, people fall through the cracks. And Education Dynamics (2025) adds that modern students expect responsiveness and relevance from their institutions—values that can only be modeled if they're practiced at the top.

That means redesigning the institution around mission, not ego. Holding forums that include contingent faculty and staff in budget decisions. Aligning curriculum and policy with the lives of today's learners. Ending the culture of performative consultation and replacing it with shared stewardship.

Carlson and Laff echo this in their interview on the podcast *Work Forces*, noting that one of the most common leadership failures in higher ed is the assumption that transformation must always come from the top. True change, they argue, often bubbles up from the academic margins—from faculty and staff who are closest to students and systems. They call on campus leaders to cultivate "networks of innovation" rather than issuing top-down mandates, reminding us that transformation happens faster when leaders act as connectors, not just decision-makers (Alssid and LeMoine, 2025).

As I've written elsewhere (Pillar, 2024), trauma-informed leadership requires emotional literacy, clarity under pressure, and the courage to admit when a system needs rewiring. It requires knowing when to speak, and when to hold space. It means acknowledging grief, modeling care, and refusing to lead through fear.

Hope, when aligned with courage and clarity, becomes a leadership strategy. And leadership, when rooted in people and purpose, becomes an act of hope.
This isn't the end of higher education. This is the beginning of a new kind of leadership—one worthy of the students, staff, and faculty who continue to show up, even when the system makes it hard to believe.

"We won't all walk the same path. But we can choose to walk forward"
–- Greg Pillar

Final Thoughts: Choosing the Future of Higher Education
The chaos in higher education is real. Political interference has blurred the lines between ideology and policy. Budget shortfalls are accelerating decisions that once took years. Shared governance is frayed. Internal battles are mounting. The modern learner is often misunderstood—or completely invisible. And the emotional toll on faculty, staff, and leaders is no longer quiet.

But despair is not destiny.

If there's one message that has emerged from the frameworks we've explored—*Radical Hope*, *Hope Circuits*, *The Connected College*, and trauma-informed leadership—it is this: we are not powerless in the face of disruption. In fact, we are the architects of what comes next.

This is a defining moment for higher education. We can treat the chaos as collapse, or we can treat it as catalyst. We can double down on outdated systems and power structures—

or we can reimagine institutions rooted in care, curiosity, and coherence. As Riddell (2024) reminds us, trauma rewires the brain—but so can healing. The same is true for our colleges and universities.

And this work is already underway. We've seen it in faculty redesigning classrooms as spaces of care. In mentorship redefined as emotional scaffolding. In cross-role coalitions forming to protect academic freedom and student belonging. In strategic prioritization aligned not just to spreadsheets, but to purpose. Rewiring is not just theoretical. It's happening.

Still, we must go further. And we must go together.

The work ahead cannot rest on one title or office. It requires shared stewardship: faculty who see beyond departments, administrators who lead with humility, staff who hold the student experience together every day, and students who are empowered to help shape the institutions they inherit. It requires trauma-informed policies, equity-minded design, and strategic leadership that aligns hope with action.

Above all, it requires that we stop asking "What do we need to save?" and start asking "What do we want to grow?"

We don't need to agree on everything. But we do need to agree on this: that higher education, if it is to matter, must evolve. It must center people over prestige, purpose over panic, and belonging over bureaucracy.

This isn't just about surviving disruption. It's about designing the future.

And while we won't all walk the same path, we can choose to walk forward—together, with care, courage, and conviction.

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