



INTRODUCTION

Why This Book?

The environment in higher education these days can feel overwhelming. We hear calls for college and university presidents to cut costs while expanding resources, broaden access while increasing success, reform and innovate yet stay true to tradition, and even justify their institution's value. Leaders may feel overwhelmed by the challenges of competing for student enrollment and donor dollars, as well as navigating changing political obstacles and public skepticism about higher education's mission and value. For some, this anxiety has caused them to pull inward—close ranks and isolate themselves—in order to maintain a sense of control in a seemingly chaotic situation.

College and university leaders need successful new models and methods of operating, and the path forward presented in the pages ahead is exactly that. It relies not on our individual desires to compete for the same resources but on our ability to work and learn together. This book shows how The Community Solution Education System was able to go from a single organization to a system of nonprofit institutions that retain their core missions and ability to serve students

while sharing a larger brain trust and the increasingly complex and costly infrastructure needed to operate a modern university.

While this book is not necessarily a road map, I aim to show how leaders in higher education can come together to help each other innovate and grow, as well as confront challenges on the academic, administrative, and financial fronts. This must happen within individual institutions but can also take place powerfully across institutions whose leaders embrace what I call “radical cooperation,” a philosophy of intentional collaboration in which diverse entities and individuals align their strengths, share accountability, and prioritize collective success over individual gains.

The incentive to change the way we’ve done things is no longer just about innovation. Many institutions are facing existential threats. The Community Solution has been able to stabilize colleges that were on the brink of going under, as well as create a new university for health sciences and new structures for existing colleges, all the while reorganizing and launching many programs that serve important societal needs. The System has been able to lift its community of universities into an “abundance and invest framework” rather than the sadly common “cut to survive” scenarios we see across much of higher education today.

This book unfolds in three distinct parts, each building on the foundation laid by the previous sections. First, I explore the systemic challenges facing colleges and universities today. In chapter 1, I examine the crossroads at which higher education stands—caught between tradition and transformation, with mounting fiscal pressures, changing student demographics, and eroding public trust. The chapter highlights how siloed operations and outdated governance structures perpetuate inefficiencies that ultimately hurt student outcomes.

Next, in chapter 2, I show how The Community Solution Education System provides a deliberate response to those challenges. I share our founding vision of radical cooperation among institutions and explain how our innovative governance model allows colleges and universities to retain their distinct identities while benefiting from shared infrastructure and strategic alignment.

In chapter 3, using the model of radical cooperation, I show how we've reimagined governance, shared infrastructure, and institutional collaboration. The chapter outlines our approach to board empowerment, operational accountability, and the comprehensive institutional support that allows member colleges to focus on their educational missions.

The next section, part II, takes readers behind the scenes of building and implementing our collaborative model, including, in chapter 4, how I have drawn from my experiences in both for-profit and nonprofit education to illustrate the delicate balance between mission-driven education and sound business principles. Through the story of The Chicago School's transformation from financial crisis to sustainable growth, I demonstrate how business acumen can enhance rather than diminish educational quality.

In chapter 5, I recount the formation of The Community Solution Education System, from early presidential networking efforts to our first institutional expansion with Pacific Oaks College. The chapter reveals the strategic considerations, challenges, and successes we encountered while developing a new model for higher education cooperation.

Finally, part III outlines in detail the key elements of radical cooperation and provides a practical framework that shows how we implement collaborative approaches in an institutional context.

In chapters 6 through 12, I break down the essential elements that make radical cooperation possible: leveraging institutional “Niche Superpowers,” fostering “Two-Way Learning,” embracing “Productive Humility,” taking “Healthy Risk,” maintaining “A Global Perspective,” cultivating “Continuous Urgency,” and uniting around “An Inspired Vision.” Each chapter offers concrete examples and actionable strategies that leaders can adapt to their own institutions.

The book concludes with a call for a paradigm shift in how we think about higher education leadership—moving from isolation to interconnection, from competition to collaboration, and from short-term survival to sustainable impact.

Throughout these pages, I share not only theoretical frameworks but also personal experiences, institutional case studies, and practical wisdom gained from four decades in higher education. My hope is that this book will serve as both an inspiration and a road map for leaders ready to embrace radical cooperation as the path forward in an increasingly complex higher education landscape.

The goal is to inspire college and university chancellors, presidents, academic leaders, staff, trustees, donors, funders, and students aspiring to lead. I write from experience—as a faculty member and academic leader, as president of The Chicago School from 2000 to 2010, and now as chancellor of The Community Solution Education System, the national integrated nonprofit higher education system I founded. In the pages ahead, you’ll discover how we’ve defied conventional wisdom, reshaping expectations in ways few people would imagine possible in higher education—and how you can too.



CHAPTER 6

Niche Superpowers

When I came to The Chicago School as president, I understood intuitively that our administration was beleaguered and our people were on the verge of giving up because things had gotten so dire. The vision I established was to be the best school of professional psychology in the world and the best of the best at engaging with our communities. An inspired vision is crucial for the success of any organization and something leaders of institutions in higher education really must focus on. We must paint a big picture of the future that will galvanize our community and inspire our team to work toward that ideal.

People want to feel like they're creating something important and positive. It gives meaning to their work. A unifying vision inspires and motivates teams to execute. The concept is familiar to anyone who has studied leadership, but it often gets neglected when we feel overwhelmed by day-to-day challenges or an ongoing crisis.

After nine years of leading The Chicago School, it was time for a broader vision because our programs were edging us into other professions beyond psychology, such as business. We posed the question of whether we should keep growing and, if so, in what direction. We

didn't want to sit on our laurels, but some trustees of The Chicago School and I were concerned that we were going to put at risk what we had achieved. Despite significant skepticism, the bold vision that resulted from these deliberations was that we could create a nonprofit system of colleges with a high focus on student success and community impact. To do so, we would have to find other unique nonprofit colleges, whether they were teaching law, education, business, health-care, or other disciplines, that would help inspire and innovate with us to better serve our students, who were mostly working adults. It took years of hard work, making contacts, and convincing wary accreditors and regulators, but the excitement of doing something new and groundbreaking carried us through the challenges.

As my role expanded into leading a system of colleges, I set out to study how to continue developing and communicating an inspired vision, a concept I intuitively knew was essential. My path to the visioning process we utilize today was anything but conventional.

One of my favorite restaurants in Chicago is known for its very authentic Mexican food. You may have heard of the chef, Rick Bayless, from his cookbooks, awards, and television appearances. Bayless has several restaurants, and I asked him if he would be offering a fusion of Latin American cuisines. "No. We're just Mexican. This is my passion. This is what we do." That's his niche superpower—staying true to himself. But that doesn't mean he didn't branch out to better serve his community. His company, Frontera, partners with a nonprofit that offers a twelve-week, no-cost culinary training program for young adults on Chicago's West Side. Another nonprofit, the Frontera Farmer Foundation, supports organic farming. The Bayless Family Foundation assists Chicago's theater companies. I see that even though Bayless is a chef, his company is sharing the same ideals of our System: student success and community impact.

Bayless and I somehow ended up talking about consultants, and he told me about one called ZingTrain, which started off mostly serving the food industry because it grew out of an Ann Arbor, Michigan, delicatessen called Zingerman's. Ari Weinzweig and Paul Saginaw founded the small deli in 1982, and now it is a multimillion-dollar group of businesses. Zingerman's has a system office supporting its community of food businesses—the deli, bakery, coffee house, and online ordering company. So, the bakery can do its best at creating great baked goods without worrying about marketing, IT, and legal issues. Sound familiar? I don't know if they are The Community Solution of food or if we're the Zingerman's of higher education.

Zingerman's very successful business model relies on visioning, which it teaches through its training and development arm, ZingTrain. It believes in helping a business or organization create a vision for its future rather than focusing solely on its problems and how to fix them. It avoids the typical corporate MBA lingo and presents a philosophy of treating employees, customers, and clients well. The approach aligns with our philosophy, so I first had ZingTrain speak to our leadership at The Chicago School in the mid-2000s.

One of the ZingTrain premises is that your employees will never provide better service than they experience as employees. Human interaction and organizational culture are immensely important in higher education. If we can't keep students excited about learning and faculty excited about teaching, we won't succeed. With the help of ZingTrain consultants, we have developed a series of five-year vision documents and accompanying strategic action plans that keep our organization humming, motivated, and focused on actionable goals.

Higher education too often looks inside instead of outside. Innovative ideas and solutions to problems may be found within the confines of creativity in the food, cooking, and service worlds and not

only within the academy. My travels through these two evolving food ecosystems have contributed much to my higher education leadership. Both Bayless and Weinzwieg preach a focus on your core, excellent service and hospitality, taking time to build greatness, and a high sense of internal community. And, of course, a worldview that is broad and outward facing.

The Colleges of Law

The Colleges of Law, which joined The Community Solution in 2010, had been improving access to legal education for four decades. The college's founding attorneys had a vision of providing affordable legal education to people from all walks of life. Focusing on that niche, it allowed its students to pursue a law degree through night classes. The students were older than the typical law students and had work or family commitments that made it difficult to come to campus several nights a week.

By all accounts, The Colleges of Law was fulfilling its mission well. But soaring unemployment during the 2008 recession, rising tuition fees, and increasing worries about student debt together began to diminish interest in pursuing a law degree. By 2016, The Colleges of Law's leaders felt a need to once again innovate and improve access to legal education through modernizing and reimagining the JD program.

The concern involved making sure students learned the practical skills and ethical values necessary to *apply* the legal fundamentals, theory, and analysis that have long dominated law school curricula to actually practicing law from day one of their careers. So, our leaders borrowed a concept from Silicon Valley—the hackathon. The idea was to create rapid progress on an experimental program by bringing

together the college leaders, outside legal experts, and some of us from the System to work in teams for thirty-six hours. In this “Hack the JD” event in January 2017, participants challenged conventional wisdom and reimagined the core tenets of legal education, deciding which aspects to abandon, preserve, and introduce. The result of this burst of collaboration was the creation of the hybrid JD program, which became California’s first accredited hybrid JD—a point of pride and significant milestone for the institution.

Notably, the hybrid JD allowed students to come to the campus one weekend a month for an intensive residency component in which they synthesized the material that they learned in online coursework. Remote online courses were becoming more common in higher education but had not been embraced by traditional law schools.

Our System’s shared infrastructure allowed the college’s administration and faculty to remain focused on rethinking and updating their long-standing methods of teaching law to working adults without being distracted by learning how to choose and implement a digital platform. Our System’s experts in online learning technology came in to partner with the academics and make it happen. The program launched in August 2018 and quickly became the most popular at The Colleges of Law.

The innovation makes the program available to students from throughout California, not just those relatively near the Santa Barbara and Ventura campuses, who might find this JD program less expensive, more convenient, and more practice-focused than what is offered at major universities. Typically, it would take people in higher education two years and a lot of committee meetings to even begin to create such a transformative program, which has opened doors to students who might otherwise have been unable to pursue their

dreams. We developed the road map for—and identified the key signature elements of—this program over a long weekend.

During a time when interest in traditional JD programs was declining, The Colleges of Law experienced significant enrollment growth with an influx of new students who brought unique perspectives and experiences to the profession. Additionally, the development of the hybrid JD increased the diversity of its student body, supporting the college's desire to build a more inclusive and diverse legal profession. This success exemplifies our System's philosophy of encouraging our member institutions to grow by going deeper into their niche.

Specialized Versus Generic

It may seem a bit contrived to describe a college's niche as a superpower, but it is an enormously strong advantage compared with the alternative of trying to be good at too many things. Even the wealthiest powerhouse universities can't be good at everything, and that's doubly true in my focus area of small to midsize nonprofit colleges. Those that ignore their calling or expand their missions beyond their means all start to look the same.

To be clear, focusing on a niche superpower doesn't preclude change. New ideas or societal demands can result in major changes happening around a core strength. Not only did The Colleges of Law create a hybrid JD program, but it also developed a master's degree in business, law, and technology for those with a professional need for legal training but no intention of becoming a practicing attorney. Those changes are deepening the niche versus saying, "Hey, we need more students. Why don't we start a program in English literature or computer science?"

It is tempting for small colleges to want to grow by broadening their offerings. They stray from their valuable core strengths and waste resources in areas where they cannot compete. Pacific Oaks College & Children's School, for example, has its niche superpower with early childhood education and preparing preschool and K–12 teachers. Once upon a time, the college considered adding IT because of the demand for that degree but decided against branching out into a field in which it lacked expertise. Instead, the college widened its focus with more compatible programs focused on children and families, such as social work and marriage and family therapy. By focusing on its niche, the college was able to develop successful programs that enjoy healthy enrollment.

Encouraging our institutions to lean into their niche superpowers does not mean we discourage them from launching programs that may already exist at another System institution. Each institution has an independent identity that shines through in the academic experience and community culture it offers to students. Because our institutions view one another as partners and not competitors, there is widespread support for strategic programmatic expansion.

Programmatic Collaboration

Starting a new program is a leap of faith for a small college with limited resources. Ramping up while applying to become fully accredited involves a lot of crucial decisions in budgeting, human resources, marketing, and technology—all areas where The Community Solution utilizes shared infrastructure. Outsourcing services is hardly a new idea in the business world but remains somewhat novel in higher education. For our universities, we provide something even better—insourcing to our own collective expertise.

For example, we recently embarked on a project to leverage expertise scattered throughout our institutions to create a new degree program in occupational therapy at the System level, which can be picked up, personalized, and launched at several of our institutions at the same time. As you may well know, developing new degree programs in higher education is a long and painstaking process, but a lot of the work is fundamental. Regardless of the academic field, there are similar challenges, including recruiting subject matter experts, getting regulatory approval, and finding field placements for the eventual students.

The idea is that our System can apply the experience and perspective it gained from helping Pacific Oaks and Saybrook University develop individual programs in social work, for example, to inform our member colleges working to develop their respective occupational therapy programs. Not to mention, our institutions teach clinical psychology, osteopathic medicine, counseling, social work, and early childhood education, among other subjects. We set out to combine the diverse expertise throughout our System to develop a new kind of occupational therapy program. In the process, we may even find new or better potential uses for the degree.

Learning from Each Other

Our work over the years has confirmed that when each member of The Community Solution Education System focuses on fulfilling its own mission, the whole System benefits. In fact, our System is a fascinating think tank in which we can compare how different approaches and experiments are working at each institution, and which of them could be adopted and adapted at another.

The Colleges of Law recently demonstrated the power of thinking outside the box to address another critical challenge: improving graduates' success rates in California's notoriously difficult bar exam. Initially, the college relied on an industry-leading test prep package alone to support students. It was the standard, after all. However, they also recognized that this one-size-fits-all approach wasn't meeting the needs of their unique, nontraditional student population—many of whom juggled careers and family responsibilities alongside their studies.

The college decided to shift and expand its strategy. It hired an associate dean specifically to focus on bar-pass rate success and developed a more tailored approach to test prep. This included creating a stronger internal curriculum, keeping students informed about changing requirements and resources, engaging faculty in adapting coursework to align with test preparation, and working with consultants to customize an additional prep course unique to the college. The vendor's materials were still utilized to focus on specific areas, such as multiple-choice questions, while the college took ownership of the broader preparation process. Students were encouraged to begin studying six months in advance, and those struggling received personalized support—including guidance to delay taking the exam if necessary to ensure they would succeed.

This holistic, student-centered approach has not only improved outcomes but has also underscored an important lesson: Success comes from tailoring solutions to the unique needs of a population. As a System, we can learn from this model and apply its principles to other institutions, as test prep and licensing exams are critical across many fields.

Leaning into Research

Unlike large research-driven universities, where faculty members are often expected to prioritize research over teaching, the institutions within The Community Solution Education System place a higher value on teaching and student engagement. This focus allows our faculty members to dedicate themselves fully to educating the next generation of professionals and leaders. However, we also recognize the importance of faculty research—not only as a means of advancing knowledge but also as a way to enhance teaching practices, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthen the academic environment across our System.

To support this dual focus, The Community Solution has established a cross-institutional faculty research grant program. This program is unique in its purpose and scope. Unlike traditional research grants that prioritize groundbreaking discoveries or publication in prestigious journals, our grants are designed to encourage projects that strengthen the broader System, foster collaboration across disciplines, and directly benefit our students.

The Colleges of Law was actually the first to receive this grant, which led to the Hack the JD event and the subsequent—wildly successful—hybrid JD. Additionally, faculty members from a psychology program at one institution might collaborate with faculty members from a public health program at another to study mental health interventions in underserved communities—an initiative that combines expertise, expands knowledge, and informs curriculum development for both fields. Similarly, a grant might support faculty members from education and business programs to codevelop case studies that address challenges in managing educational organizations, offering practical applications for students across both disciplines.

Ultimately, this program reflects the System's commitment to a balanced approach: prioritizing excellence in teaching while also valuing research in our niche areas of focus, which has meaningful, real-world impact. Faculty members who participate in these projects not only grow as scholars but also enrich the educational experiences of their students, ensuring that our collective mission to transform lives remains at the heart of everything we do.

Conclusion

Focusing on a niche superpower enables each institution to make a greater impact aligned with its mission. This approach requires us to lean into each other's expertise, recognizing that no one has all the answers. By working together within our System, our institutions have refined their strengths, rethought their offerings, and uncovered new opportunities for student success. Staying true to what each does best has proven to be a powerful recipe for growth. Radical cooperation isn't about going it alone—it's about learning from and engaging with one another to achieve more.