

By Carole A. Barone

# LEADERSHIP, GOALS, & TRANSFORMATION

## An Interview with John C. Hitt

**John C. Hitt** became the fourth president of the University of Central Florida (UCF) on March 1, 1992, after nineteen years of administrative experience and a distinguished academic career. He received his M.S. and his Ph.D. at Tulane University. Dr. Hitt serves on the boards of EDUCAUSE, the National Center for Educational Accountability, the Greater Orlando Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Commission of Mid-Florida, SunTrust N.A., the Winter Park Health Foundation, and United Arts, among others. He is also a member of the Florida Council of 100 and the Florida High-Tech Corridor Council. Dr. Hitt is past president of the Florida Association of Colleges and Universities and served on the Presidents Commission of the NCAA until its restructuring in 1997.

In June 2004 **Carole A. Barone**, Senior Fellow with EDUCAUSE, talked with Dr. Hitt about leadership style, about institutional goals, about changes in students today, and about the resulting transformation of higher education.

**Barone:** John, you've been president of the University of Central Florida (UCF) since 1992. In that time, the institution has grown exponentially, from approximately 20,000 students to 43,000 students. How

has that explosive growth affected your leadership role and that of your executive team?

**Hitt:** It has certainly dictated an agile decision-making process. With change, there must also be transformation. From time to time, a number of us at UCF remind ourselves, and others, that the processes that worked really well when we had 20,000 students didn't work when we got to 30,000 students. And those that worked pretty well at 30,000 had to be transformed when we reached 40,000. You need to have a leadership style that puts a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of an executive team and that asks those executive leaders to work together. You have to trust people to do the right things, in the right way, at a number of levels in the organization. And you have to let people know that it's fine to talk about the way things were years ago but that we're not the same institution we were years ago. Things that worked wonderfully well on one scale are inadequate on another scale.

**Barone:** When you came to UCF, you articulated a set of goals. Have these goals changed? How do you use the goals to do what you just talked about?



**Hitt:** From a stack of strategic planning documents that had been completed before I arrived, I distilled five goals for the university. In my opinion, a lot of strategic plans don't have much impact because they generate a list of thirty or so goals. My original training is as a psychologist, and I think of a goal as something that consciously directs my behavior. And if I can't remember it, the goal is not going to consciously direct my behavior. So, a list of thirty goals is not very useful to me. Five to seven is about the number accommodated in human immediate memory, so five is a reasonable number.



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I wanted to have a set of goals that we could work on as a community. Early on, I did some talking around the campus with various groups, and we did a little editing and development and came up with the five goals: (1) to offer the best undergraduate education in Florida; (2) to achieve international prominence in key programs of graduate study and research; (3) to create an international perspective in our programs of teaching and research; (4) to become more inclusive and diverse; and (5) to be America's leading partnership university.

Today we have these same five goals from twelve years ago. Some people have said to me: “You've had the same goals for years. Aren't they getting stale?” I don't think so. The goals are directions of travel. We've changed, and the ways we pursue the goals have changed. A friend gave me some very good advice: “John, when you are sick of hearing yourself talk about those goals, you are just getting started.” So we have used them repeatedly over the twelve years. They have been the non-negotiable starting points of two strategic plans. They are incorporated into numerous publications and into countless commentaries, speeches, and talks that I've given. When you are growing as fast as we are, you have to remind yourself that more than one hundred faculty members are added every year. So if I stopped talking about the goals for two or three years, there would be hundreds of faculty members who wouldn't have heard much about them.

And of course, you are dealing with really smart people in any university. Not too long after we established the goals, people started to write or call me with ideas about how we might wisely invest some funds or resources, and they would point out how doing so would advance one or more of the five goals. That starts to have a formative influence. Plus, as we produce our annual reports in the institution, I always ask all the folks who report to me to tell me how the activities of their units have advanced the five goals during the last year. The goals thus affect what we do, sometimes in a more formal and sometimes in a less formal way, and I think it is

very helpful for any organization to have a short list of goals that are easy to understand and easy to remember.

**Barone:** Have you also integrated the goals into your budgeting process?

**Hitt:** Yes. I think not doing so is a mistake that a lot of institutions made in the past. If you have a set of goals and plans and they are somehow divorced from the budget process, the goals are not going to have much long-term impact. You need to inform your budgeting with your goals. You have to put your money on things you say are important; if you don't, people will stop paying attention to what you say is important.

**Barone:** What do you think are the most effective tools and techniques that presidents have for engaging the community in fostering the kinds of transformation we are talking about?

**Hitt:** I think the more successful presidents are those who are capable of capturing a bold vision that casts their institution into a protagonist role and those who help campus community members understand how pursuing a set of goals will move the institution and its members forward. You must have some kind of vision for the institution, you must translate that vision into a set of goals or directions for the institution, and you must then communicate that vision and those goals to your campus community members in ways that they can subscribe to and understand and incorporate into their own day-to-day goals and operations.

**Barone:** How do you reconcile that leadership style with the hands-off leadership style, which seems to be the expectation?

**Hitt:** The president is setting goals and expectations and is challenging a community to be something more than it is today. The president is not telling people, “By the way, this is how you are going to do this.” That is left to the creativity and commitment of colleagues. Think about those five goals that I articulated earlier. It is

hard to argue with any of them: offering the best undergraduate education, picking key programs and trying to make them internationally prominent, having an international focus, being more inclusive and diverse, and focusing on partnership. But I don't expect everybody to work on all five of those goals at once. I've been blessed over the years by being able to find outstanding folks to work with me. I think one of the reasons that I've been able to do so is because everyone knows that I have a clear vision of where I want the institution and its operations to go. But I also understand that if I'm going to be successful as the leader of the institution, I've got to let the talented, energetic, and experienced people I work with be the leaders of their parts of the institution, and I've got to give them the latitude to do good work. I hold them accountable for doing the work, but I let them do it their way. I do try to help them get the resources they need to be successful.

It is simple to understand what I want: I want things done right, and then I want them done a little better next time. Over a period of three to five years, you'll see some real progress if you know where you're going and you have some future directions in mind for the institution, if you have great people working deliberately and successfully with that kind of goal structure and that kind of professionalism, and if you have an ethos of “We are pretty good right now, but we aren't as good as we are going to be in a while.”

**Barone:** What about institutional leaders' relationships with each other?

**Hitt:** You must have people who understand that they are a team. All good teams develop a sense of trust. Can that break down, can the trust get frayed? Sure. But I think it is very important for the president or chancellor to make clear that people are expected to work as a team and that people who don't work as a team won't be rewarded. You can talk about teamwork, but if a self-seeker who goes his or her own way always ends up prospering by doing so, at the expense of the others, you

shouldn't be surprised if you start to see a lot of freelancing. Part of leadership success is having really good people who work with you, but another part is using reward systems that encourage the right behavior.

**Barone:** Behavior such as trust and consistency?

**Hitt:** Yes. There is a lot to be said for constancy of purpose. The average tenure of college and university presidents today is about six years. The literature is full of references to the ideal tenure for a president—anywhere from five to eight or nine years. Since I'm in my thirteenth year, it is obvious that I don't really agree with the "ideal" or that if I do agree, I don't have the courage of my conviction. But I don't agree. Some presidencies are done in less than a year. Some people should never be president in the first place. There are people who find, within one or two years, that although they thought they wanted to be president, they really don't like it. There are others who like being president, but

nobody *else* likes that they are president.

If you have the capacity to reinvent yourself and your presidency, you can be an effective president for a long time. If I were trying today to do the same job that I stepped into as president on March 1, 1992, I would have failed some years back. We talked about the institution being transformed: the president has to change with it. With constancy of purpose, however, people know that if they invest their creativity, their energy, and their intellectual capital in a certain program or a certain direction, they will see their efforts bear fruit. They know that the institution will stay with them and that their investment will be worthwhile because they will get to see the results of their ideas in programs that help transform the lives of students and they will be able to fulfill their professional and personal ambitions in meaningful ways.

**Barone:** When you talk about reinventing yourself, does that mean changing your leadership style? Has that changed over the years?

**Hitt:** Yes, I think it has, but some of that change is just maturation. I was a chief academic officer for fourteen years before becoming an interim president for a while and then president. There is no question that I have changed. But some things that one can easily do as president of an institution of 20,000 are a little harder to do as president of an institution of 40,000—or to do with any meaningfulness or effectiveness. In my early years, I used to go talk to kids in the dining hall. Frankly, today, there are a lot of other activities vying for my time. When you are president, there are a lot of folks who want your institution represented at this or that event, and they won't settle for anybody but you. The larger the institution, the more this is true. So you are pulled in many directions. And if you want to get your institution fully understood and appreciated in a larger setting, you have to be in a lot of different places, doing a lot of different things off the campus.

**Barone:** Your university is celebrating its fortieth anniversary with the motto "From

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Promise to Prominence.” Do people understand that the institution has moved along this continuum?

**Hitt:** People on the campus do, and people in the community do, though to differing degrees. Eight to ten years ago, if the chairman of Orange County or the mayor of Orlando had given a talk on economic development, there would have been a less than fifty-fifty chance that UCF would be mentioned. Today, it is almost a certainty that UCF would be mentioned as an engine for economic growth. We are the sixth-largest employer in Orange County. If you look at the jobs we directly and indirectly create and those created by the Central Florida Research Park (which is part of Orange County but was created from the efforts of UCF people), the number is about 36,000 jobs. The combined economic benefit is \$2.6 billion a year. People now better understand UCF’s role, though not everybody to the same degree. Our local newspaper probably understands it a lot less than the business and political leadership of the city and counties.

**Barone:** You’ve talked about being opportunistic. How can you be opportunistic as you move toward prominence?

**Hitt:** Yes, I talk about being opportunistic, and I also talk and write about being strategic. Some people would say, “Which side of your mouth are you talking out of, John?” But I think that people who are successful opportunists choose their opportunities in light of their strategy. There was a terrible economic downturn when I was at the University of Maine. You would wake up in the morning and hope to find an opportunity. Here in Orlando, today, you are more likely to wake up in the morning and wonder *which* opportunity you should respond to. It is that kind of opportunistic behavior that I’m talking about. When you see something good and it fits with your strategic profile, you have to be ready to jump on the opportunity even if it wasn’t specifically mentioned in your strategic plan. You must have a good-enough sense of what your real strategy is that your tactics can be modified on the fly.

That is part of the agile leadership-team concept, starting with the president and extending along the lines.

**Barone:** How does technology play a role in such strategy and in the opportunities that are available? How do presidents and their leadership teams become and remain informed about and comfortable with technology?

**Hitt:** EDUCAUSE, of course, has many great resources, like regional meetings and the annual conference. The EDUCAUSE Web site has a page for presidents and senior executives (<http://www.educause.edu/presidents/>). The association offers a lot of helpful reading: *EDUCAUSE Review* and other good sources as well.

In addition, presidents have CIOs to help us understand what we really need to know about technology. Understanding technology takes some effort, but like any other university aspect that commands a reasonable slice of our resources, technology demands that we make that effort. Even though I make a pretty good investment in staying current on technology, if I think about the amount of time that I spend on athletics, I blush a little. We do many things, and many of them are a heck of a lot less important to the educational enterprise than understanding technology and what it can offer. This is something that presidents need to work on, but we have good colleagues in and out of the institution, and we have a lot of resources we can draw on.

**Barone:** A while back, I sat next to you for five or six hours in a meeting, and you were using a PDA. You’re a president who multitasks and who understands the technologies, so to some extent, you are into the heads of today’s students. What is your reaction to how students today use technology, how they learn?

**Hitt:** I find it fascinating. Part of me is old-fashioned, so when I first heard a bright young man say about the *Wikipedia*, “You are getting the information right from a nuclear physicist, as opposed to an *Encyclopedia Britannica* editor who may not

know anything about physics,” I thought that he didn’t understand much about who can claim to be a nuclear physicist and he didn’t know much about how encyclopedias are written. But his view of knowledge and of how knowledge is validated is simply different from mine.

**Barone:** What actions do you feel leaders need to take in order to deal with these new kinds of students and to be opportunistic?

**Hitt:** First, today’s leaders need to understand that the world is not what it was when we went off to college. There is a great temptation for all of us to retreat back to the college or university that we went to—or that we *think* we went to. When I was at the University of Maine, a handful of alumni—some of them in the state legislature—would talk at great length about the university and how it was getting away from what it had been. Well, it had probably never been what they were describing. Even though we know better, we still try to impose on today’s students our model of college as we remember it.

So, institutional leaders need to step back and take a cold look at reality. Who are the students today? What are they like? Not “What do I want them to be like?” but “What are they really like?” When you do that, one of the things you are going to learn is that in most cases, we don’t have one student body. We have student *bodies*, plural—people in their fifties and forties as well as people in their thirties, twenties, and teens. They are all going to be a little different in the way they approach their college experience.

I don’t believe that colleges and universities can become a fully consumer-oriented business. Registration, or the bookstore, or the wellness center, or the gym—well, OK, we can be consumer-oriented in those areas. But if we did a survey of students and 90 percent said, “I don’t need to know how to write,” or “Don’t ask me to read any literature or philosophy,” I wouldn’t say: “OK, that’s fine. If 90 percent of you don’t want or need that, we’ll just stop doing it.” On the other hand, I do think it is worth asking, “Why do I

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want students to do *x, y, or z*?” We need to focus on what it is they need to know and need to know how to do, which may go beyond the immediate requirements of their job, go beyond what they see as being important to them and their futures.

In a consumer-oriented world, it is tempting to think of the university as a store, where students come and buy something, some product or service. But as a colleague president once pointed out, it is a lot better to think of the university as a gym or fitness center. When you join a gym, you are not buying fitness. You buy the right to go to the gym and work really hard to become fit. You buy access to set of activities that, if pursued with energy and diligence, will give you a desired result: strength, fitness, wellness. The university is similar. By paying your tuition, you buy access to a set of mental and intellectual activities that—if pursued with vigor, persistence, and diligence—will give you a very beneficial result. It

falls on us, the university leaders, to help define those activities in ways that provide students with something that is truly beneficial to them—something other than a first job.

**Barone:** So, a faculty member could be viewed as a personal trainer?

**Hitt:** Yes, in some ways. If the personal trainer is someone who just likes to be with people and doesn’t know much about exercise physiology, he or she may not do anything worthwhile, but if the personal trainer knows the content and knows the method of applying that content, he or she can get marvelous results. Faculty members are always, I think, going to be valued most for their mastery of content. But we can hope to get faculty who not only are masters of content but also care about students and are good at helping students develop some overarching skills that go across disciplines.

**Barone:** What is the role of technology in all of this?

**Hitt:** Think of technology as the answer to a question. If you are not sure you know what the question is, then technology is probably not the right answer. But if your question is “How do I come up with instructional settings that are individualized, that are strongly interactive, and that can foster and support group learning?” then technology is the answer. If your question is, “How do I give 24/7 service?” then technology is the answer. Technology is a great enabler.

We’ve been very lucky at UCF. Joel Hartman and Frank Juge have had tremendous success with the application of technology in faculty development. But it is not the technology per se that is responsible for their success. Their ability to engage—with great enthusiasm—a dedicated, talented faculty in professional development has produced outstanding results for our distributed learning activities. There is an old joke: “How do you ensure health, happiness, longevity, and wealth for yourself? Choose your parents carefully.” Well, we chose our faculty carefully. Twenty or thirty years ago, UCF carefully chose many of these faculty members. Without faculty who are entrepreneurial, who care about teaching as well as research, and who are willing to grow and change, we’d be dead in the water. And if Joel and Frank and others had not worked with those faculty members in a very respectful way, we could still have fouled it up. But because of the folks we inherited, the ones we hired, and the team we put together, some amazing things have happened here.

It comes down to what I said earlier: if you can formulate a plan, a set of activities, a list of goals that people who are involved in the institution can remember, can understand, and can trust will take them in the direction that they want to go and that the institution needs to go, then you have a powerful vehicle for building something that is going to serve the needs of students, faculty, and staff—and the larger society—in ways that will make all participants proud. *e*