

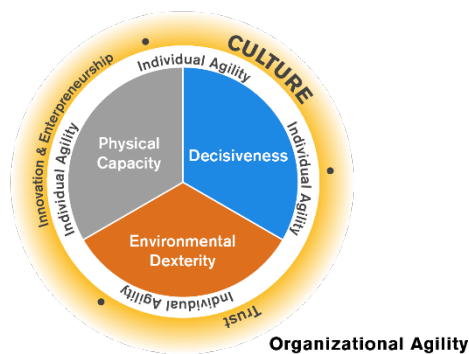
This case study is being featured by the University Design Institute (UDI) to provoke thought and stimulate action around comprehensive and **adaptive planning and decision-making**. The target audience includes **higher education senior administrators, policy advocates, investors/funders** and other **university thought-leaders**.

Design Opportunity:

How can higher education leaders and institutions best detect, decide, and communicate in response to change? What is the relationship between strategy and agility?

About this Paper:

Drawing on a series of American military and sports analogies, higher education strategist and professor Ryan Shaw deconstructs the often-misunderstood concept of agility and how its various components translate in a higher education context at both the individual leader and organizational levels. U.S.-based Arizona State University (ASU), where Shaw currently advises the President, is his main point of institutional reference. After defining and deconstructing agility, he examines how ASU has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether and how strategic agility was demonstrated.



About ASU:

In 2021, ASU was ranked the #1 most innovative university by U.S. News and World Report, a distinction it earned for the seventh consecutive year.

Click [here](#) for more about the ASU Charter.

About the University Design Institute

The University Design Institute (UDI) is a catalyst for transformation in higher education. Our guiding belief is that universities must become engines of social and economic impact. We work at the individual leader, institutional, and systems level around 6 key imperatives: University Mission, Leaders and Cultures, Teaching and Learning, Resource Diversification, Knowledge Generation and Discovery, and Digital Solutions.

For other UDI learning products, contact udi@asu.edu

Key Takeaways for University Designers:

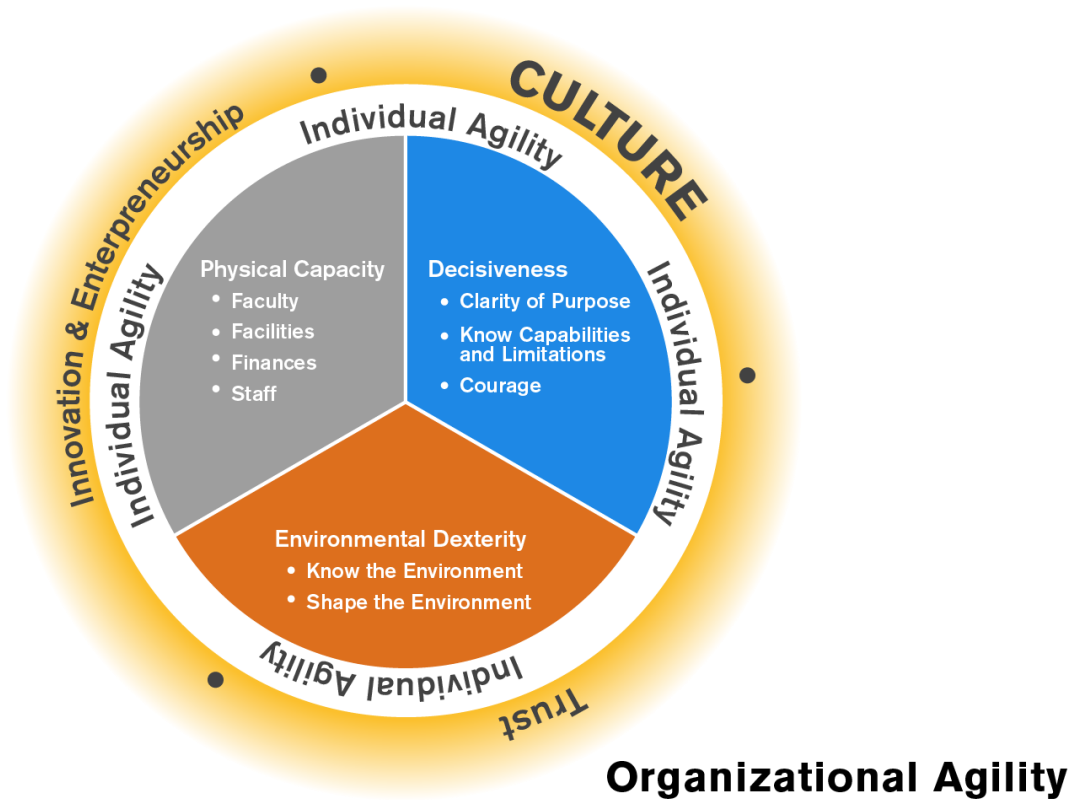
- Strategic agility is the enterprise-level capacity to rapidly detect and analyze unforeseen challenges and opportunities, and quickly respond in the manner that best promotes a more complete realization of the institutional vision.
- Far from constraining agility, properly conceived and executed strategy is the best way to attain it.
- The three components of individual agility - physical capacity, environmental dexterity, and decisiveness - together with a culture that prizes innovation and cultivates trust, supports institutional transformation and organizational agility.
- Three principles should guide the development of any strategy for an organization that prizes agility:
 - The more complex and dynamic the operational environment, the simpler a strategy should be, but the more important it is to have one.
 - A strategy is not a plan – it is a top-level framework that provides the context necessary to allow subordinates to make their own plans.
 - Strategy should not prevent action in response to unforeseen challenges and opportunities; it should enable action by providing a framework for rapid decision-making.
- As an example, ASU demonstrated an agile response to COVID-19 by:
 - financial stability bolstered by long-standing resource diversification efforts (physical capacity)
 - commitment to social embeddedness (environmental dexterity)
 - decentralized decision-making and increased communication of central vision and mission (decisiveness)
- Challenges associated with COVID-era agility include:
 - staff and faculty burnout
 - necessary trial and error in many areas
 - concerns about broken or unclear communication channels

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Strategic Agility

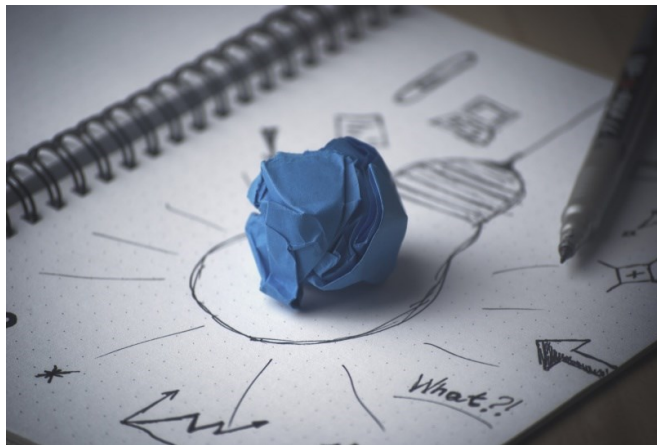
April 2022

By Professor Ryan L. Shaw



About the Author

Professor Ryan Shaw serves as Senior Advisor to ASU President Michael Crow and Managing Director of Strategic Initiatives. Prior to joining ASU, he was an officer in the U.S. Army. He commanded a cavalry troop in Iraq, taught history at West Point, and provided strategic advice and led planning efforts at the highest levels of U.S. and multi-national military command. Professor Shaw did his graduate studies at Yale University and has published widely in the fields of national security strategy, strategic theory, and history.



About Blueprints for University Design (BUDs)

Launched with an initial prototype in April 2021, **Blueprints for University Design**, or **BUDs**, is a product series published by the **University Design Institute (UDI)** that highlights university design problems, solutions, and designers from around the world. Higher education leaders, policy-makers, and funders are invited to submit design innovations, concepts, and stories of interest to be featured as part of the series.

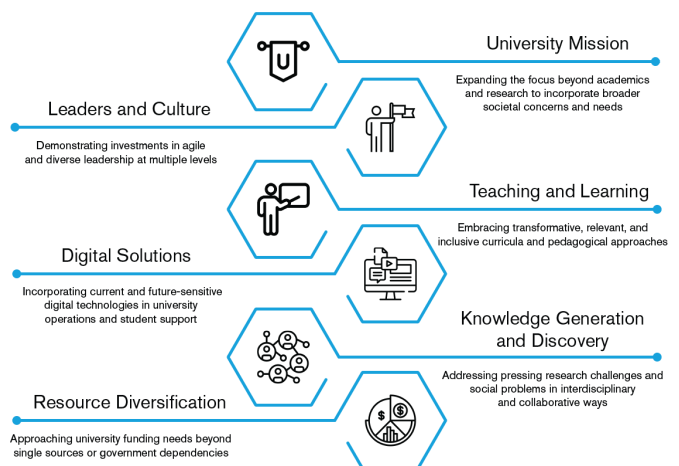
BUDs Series Editor-in-Chief: Tamara Webb

About the University Design Institute (UDI)

The University Design Institute (UDI) is a catalyst for transformation in higher education. Our guiding belief is that universities must become engines of social transformation and economic success. The work we do is centered around 6 university design imperatives: University Mission, Leaders and Cultures, Teaching and Learning, Resource Diversification, Knowledge Generation and Discovery, and Digital Solutions. Building on over 20 years of innovation experience at Arizona State University, UDI approaches change at three levels—leader, university, and system—and nurtures working relationships with design experts and innovators around the world to advance the mission. Over the first three years of global outreach, UDI partnered with 77 institutions across 21 countries, impacting nearly a million students, faculty, administrators, and community leaders.

UDI Managing Director & Vice Chair: Minu Ipe

The Whys and Hows of University Transformation



STRATEGIC AGILITY

In the popular conception—which is grounded in historical truth—universities are neither strategic nor agile. Since the late twentieth century, however, many research universities have tried to adopt strategic planning practices from the business world to help drive growth. As often as not, those attempts have served only to prove that corporate-style strategy is a poor fit with the form and public value function of a university, and they have generated frustration and a generalized cynicism toward strategy and strategic planning (Hosemann & Zinkan, 2021). Meanwhile, the pace of societal change has many convinced that agility will increasingly be required for some institutions even to survive, much less to adapt and excel at meeting the needs of our globalized society in the 21st century. And some universities—especially those that comprise what Michael Crow and William Dabars refer to as an emerging “Fifth Wave” in higher education, with Arizona State University (ASU) on the leading edge—are demonstrating that perhaps agility is possible in higher education (Crow & Dabars, 2020).

But these institutions are the exceptions that prove the rule. How can agility be institutionalized in a sector whose most pronounced characteristics are **filiofetism** and **isomorphism**, a sector whose resistance to change might be exceeded only by some religious institutions?

Strategy suffers assault from both directions. **Traditionalists** want to resist change, so they have no use for a disciplined and deliberate approach to driving it. **Reformers** recognize and embrace the need for change, but based on prior experience with misapplied concepts and methods of strategy, they see it as rigid and restrictive—admitting of change, but not at the speed of relevance. They want the change, but not the discipline or deliberation. Agility seems to be what is at stake for these reformers, and the fear that strategy is an impediment to it. According to this prevailing (mis)conception, “strategic agility” would be an oxymoron.



Traditionalist



Strategy

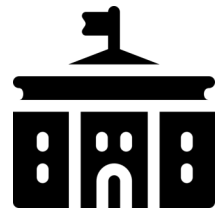


Reformers

Proceeding from the premise that agility is, in fact, a supremely important quality that should be cultivated to the maximum possible extent throughout the higher education sector, **this paper argues that, far from constraining agility, properly conceived and executed strategy is the best way to attain it.**

“Agility is not a strategy. It is a capability, a very valuable one which has immediate operational benefits, but that cannot permanently affect a firm’s competitive position unless there is a strategist taking the right decisions about where to direct that capability.”

—Stephen Bungay, HBR, 2019



CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Filiofetism:

Excessive veneration of tradition

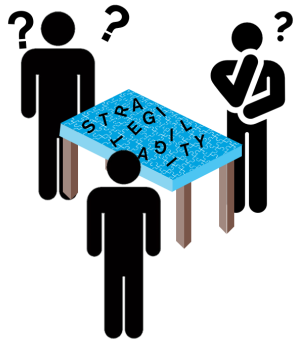
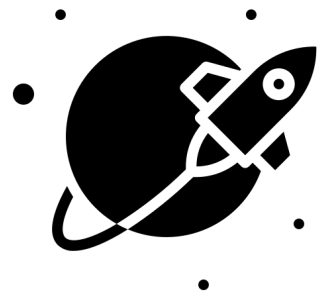
Isomorphism:

The tendency to emulate one another and become increasingly homogenous

Toward that end, it begins by sketching a theory of agility—first defining the term, then deconstructing it—before considering ASU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study in agility. That case study demonstrates the relevance and utility of this theoretical model while concluding that ASU's pandemic response was indeed agile, but perhaps not to the extent that it could have been. The paper concludes with some concrete thoughts on how to use strategy to promote agility in universities.

TOWARD A THEORY OF AGILITY

In May of 2014, I was working as Strategic Advisor to General Chuck Jacoby, US Army, Commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and United States Northern Command, when he was ordered to Washington for a Senior Leader Seminar (SLS). Two or three times a year, the Secretary of Defense would convene all the service chiefs and combatant commanders for an SLS to discuss a matter of some urgency or import, usually involving some question of force development priorities or a specific problem of geopolitics. This time, the stated topic was, simply, “strategic agility.” Traditionally, the Secretary's staff provided some type of homework, or at least a read-ahead, that would allow us to prep the boss for his contribution. This time, we got nothing. Briefed on his lack of prep material, General Jacoby leaned back in his chair, folded his hands behind his head, and said, “They gave us nothing because there’s nothing to give... we keep using this term, and I don’t think anybody even knows what it means.”



I was new to the General's staff, having been recently called up from the Strategy, Plans, and Policies directorate, where I'd done some work trying to stand up a Future Concepts Branch. That effort gave me enough background to say, “Well, Sir, I can tell you what it doesn't mean, what it can't mean...” We spent the next ninety minutes huddled over his conference table, sketching ideas on a legal pad. When he returned from Washington, he said we had an informal but well-understood mandate from the Secretary to further develop those initial ideas. The result was an article published in the flagship professional journal *Joint Force Quarterly*¹. In his retirement, General Jacoby partnered with Leo Tilman² to co-author a book on organizational agility based on the ideas in that original article.

The call for agility in the U.S. defense enterprise was palpable in 2014, and understandably so. By most analyses, our threats and challenges were less predictable, more diffuse, more globally interrelated, and less attributable than ever before. Our strategic landscape included levels of military investment and militant activity from rival states not seen since the Cold War, including unprecedented forms of tech-enabled hybrid warfare; deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan and the rise of ISIS following our drawdown in Iraq; transnational criminal organizations exploiting migrants on our borders; an increasing reliance on cyber and space capabilities that made us more vulnerable even as they made us more

¹ Rather than finding new words to express old concepts, sections of this paper borrow liberally from the original article. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-81/Article/702009/strategic-agility-theory-and-practice/>

² Leo M. Tilman is a financier, author, and a leading authority on strategy, risk intelligence, and finance. He currently serves as President and CEO of Tilman & Company, a global strategic advisory firm. Tilman was formerly an executive at BlackRock, Capitol Peak, and Bear Stearns and adjunct professor of finance at Columbia University. <https://lmtilman.com/leo-m-tilman/>

capable; all while a changing climate was opening new approaches to the homeland and making weather-related disasters more frequent, increasing the demand for Defense Support to Civil Authorities. Meanwhile, the economy continued to struggle in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and defense budgets were hamstrung by congressional “sequestration.”

Our budgets would not let us get bigger and our threats would not let us do less. In the traditional strategy framework of ends, ways, and means, **our means were shrinking but our ends were fixed**. Agility seemed to be the currency with which we hoped to buy better ways in order to do more with less. But despite all the lip service, no one in the Department of Defense had ever bothered to define agility, much less to articulate a theory of agility that would allow us to deliberately cultivate it at the national command level or in our combat formations. Chuck was right—we didn’t even know what the word meant.

DEFINING AGILITY

So, we started by defining agility in the abstract, and we relied heavily on analogy. Academics discuss mental agility and business leaders pursue agile finance and supply chain strategies, but the most common context in which agility is understood is in the physical domain of athletics. Even those of us who are neither athletes nor fans understand agility when we see it displayed on a field or court. Quite simply, the common usage of the word agility is in reference to athletics, so athletic analogies were useful in that first effort. And since that effort translated from the athletic domain to the military domain, we should now have two sets of analogies at our disposal to help refine and describe a theory of agility for the university as an institutional type.

In the abstract, **agility is the capacity to respond quickly, effectively, and efficiently to a wide variety of unpredictable demands**. More than mere strength, speed, power, or endurance, agility implies a capacity to employ any of those qualities individually or in combination and to switch between employment patterns to accomplish a goal with a minimum waste of time or energy.³ In the athletic realm, while sprinters are fast, **running backs** are agile; marathons demonstrate endurance, but **parkour** demonstrates agility; weightlifting tests strength and power, but **wrestling** demands agility. In the context of military strategy, agility is the ability to identify and capture relevant opportunities faster than our rivals, to rapidly adjust priorities and shift resources to the main effort. For the military domain, we defined strategic agility as our capacity at the global and theater level to rapidly assess complex and unpredictable security challenges and opportunities and to decide and respond quickly, effectively, and efficiently.

³ In Agility (n.d.), Jacoby and Tilman further contrast agility with adaptability, resilience, flexibility, dynamism, and antifragility. These words are often used interchangeably with agility, but the authors describe agility as “an overarching quality that encompasses these other, more specialized traits and competencies, but goes much further.” (p. 47).

AGILITY IN ATHLETICS



Running backs:

In American and Canadian football, a running back is responsible for carrying the ball, moving quickly, and getting to critical places to catch the ball when it is thrown.



parkour:

parkour is ‘the practice of traversing obstacles in a man-made or natural environment through the use of running, vaulting, jumping, climbing, rolling, and other movements in order to travel from one point to another in the quickest and most efficient way possible without the use of equipment. (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.)



wrestling:

Is a one-on-one sport with the objective of holding your opponent down in a designated manner for a prescribed period of time or by avoiding penalties and outscoring your opponents.

A sprinter, runner, or lifter may, in fact, be agile, but one could not know it by watching them compete within the predictable parameters of their respective disciplines. Similarly, a military force does not demonstrate agility by throwing overwhelming resources against a predictable threat. But there is precious little predictability in international affairs, and true agility should enable successful defense of the nation's interests in a complex and dynamic international security environment even with limited and uncertain fiscal resourcing.

Drawing directly on that military definition, for universities,

Strategic agility is the enterprise-level capacity to rapidly detect and analyze unforeseen challenges and opportunities and quickly respond in the manner that best promotes a more complete realization of the institutional vision.

At ASU, that vision is captured in the charter.

ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves.

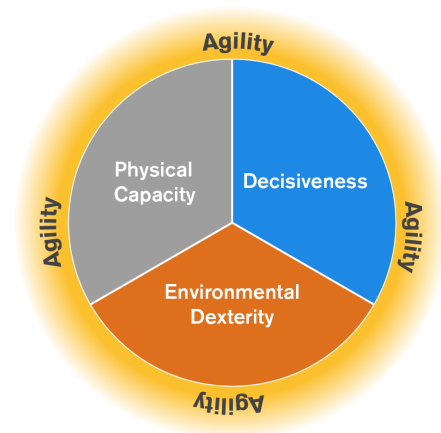
DECONSTRUCTING AGILITY

In any context, agility depends on the three components of **physical capacity**, **environmental dexterity**, and **decisiveness**.

Physical Capacity. While agility is not merely strength, speed, power, or endurance, those are all prerequisites, or enablers, of agility. The laws of physics still matter. To win through agility, one does not have to be the fastest or the strongest, but one does have to be fast *enough* and strong *enough*. The athletic application is obvious. For military power, this has to do with budgets, programming, acquisitions, and research and development, along with recruiting and training personnel. **For a university, physical capacity involves the breadth and depth of faculty and staff, the capacity of labs and classrooms (on campus or online) and, as always, the hard realities of dollars and cents.**

Importantly, in all cases, agility demands a careful management and preservation of physical capacity. You can't accelerate if you're running at full speed. You can't reinforce when your troops are all decisively engaged. The closer you are to redline, the less agile you are.

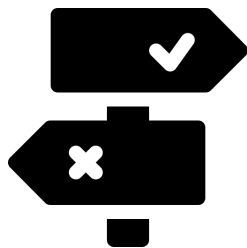
Environmental Dexterity. Agility is never exercised in a vacuum; it happens in an environmental context. Indeed, as discussed, the absence of obstacles or opponents nullifies agility as a relevant factor. Athletes apply agility on a course, court, or field, usually with teammates and against opponents. The military defends the nation across the hard geographic realities of land, sea, and air, in the developing domains of



space and cyber, among varied human cultures, and against thinking and adaptive enemies. And universities pursue their goals in dynamic and highly competitive national and global fields, serving a diverse and growing population in a rapidly changing economy, with levels of public interest and government investment that can sometimes seem capricious.

Environmental dexterity requires both knowledge of the environment and the ability to shape and use it. A running back reads the defense, uses his blockers, and quickly changes direction based on an intuitive sense of the interface of his cleats with the turf. In parkour, a traceur turns obstacles into opportunities by vaulting, jumping, or swinging in ways that increase rather than decrease momentum. For military purposes, knowing the environment requires sustained strategic intelligence and cultural acuity. U.S. forces shape and use the environment through theater security cooperation and building partner capacity, through access and overflight agreements, prepositioned stocks, and the discriminating use of overseas basing and force rotations, which provide what Antoine Henri de Jomini (1838) called “pivots of operations” across the globe.

For Arizona State University, as a national-scale, comprehensive public research university, knowing the environment requires rigorous, sustained analysis of economic and demographic trends and educational needs at the local, state, national, and global levels. It demands continual assessment of who our competitors are and what strategies they are pursuing. We shape the environment through policy advocacy at all levels, through remote physical footprints in key locations, and through corporate, philanthropic, municipal, and global partnerships that expand our reach, magnify our resources, and provide us with our own pivots of operations.



Decisiveness. No amount of physical capacity or environmental dexterity can compensate for an inability to make decisions. **Agility demands the capability and the willingness to assess, decide, and execute in stride.** That requires knowing what you’re here for and what you’re capable of, which translates to **clarity of purpose** (the running back knows that no matter how many times he changes direction, his aim is forward yardage) and an **appreciation of your own capabilities and limitations** (how far can I jump? how fast can I run?). It also requires **courage** (execute with conviction or fail).

In national defense, these requirements translate to a widespread agreement on the national interest and a shared strategic vision or “theory of victory,” which allow for rapid consensus on relevant, emerging opportunities. Capturing those opportunities requires clear and appropriate authorities at all levels and strategic leaders with backbone enough to say “yes” or “no.” In recent years, the U.S. military has sought to promote agility through an emphasis on “mission command,” which is both a command and control philosophy and an operational doctrine that emphasizes trust-empowered command structures, decentralized execution, and rapid, problem-based task organization.⁴

For ASU, clarity of purpose entails universal commitment to the charter and a thorough, shared

⁴ Note that for present purposes, this paper is not commenting on the success of these initiatives or of U.S. national security strategy generally, only on the identification and prioritization of these requirements for agility. The inglorious conclusion of the United States’ twenty-year effort in Afghanistan—which dominated headlines while this paper was in final draft stages—might be interpreted as discounting or discrediting the relevance of these military approaches. On the contrary, while the situation is enormously complex and its lessons will be debated for generations to come, I would argue that most of the failure is attributable to the military’s inability to apply its own best doctrine and to integrate these approaches with existing structures, cultures, and practices at the national command level.

understanding of **public enterprise** as the operational logic and strategic approach. It is every bit as important in a university as in the military that the scope of discretion and decision authority is clear at every level and that authorities are commensurate with responsibilities.

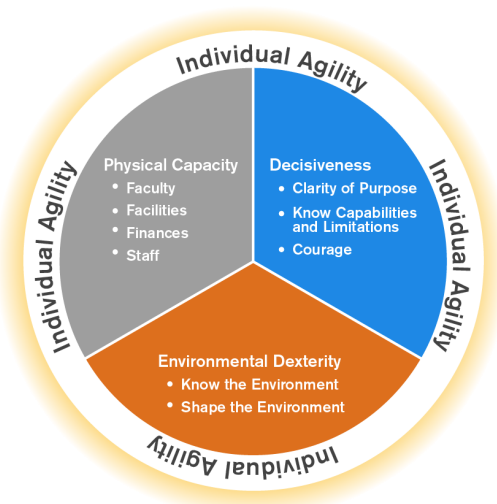
Does ASU have that clarity of purpose and discretion? Is the institution decisive? I would not presume to answer definitively. And, in any case, the answer would not be a binary yes or no; these are matters of degree. For present purposes, let us at least agree that there is likely room for improvement, and if we can improve, we should.

The charter is engraved in stone on each of ASU's campuses. The logic of public enterprise is articulated in two books and countless articles; it's repeated in presentations to the Board of Regents and expounded in university leadership meetings. A small army of staff at the enterprise level and at every college and school keep careful tabs on balance sheets and the capacities of faculty and facilities. While there is always room for improvement, the first two requirements for decisiveness—clarity of purpose and a clear picture of our capabilities and limitations—are fairly straightforward propositions. The third component—courage—is a less tangible question, a moral one. As such, it cannot be programmed so directly.

Those first two elements apply equally to individuals and organizations. Courage, too, can be remarkably pronounced in individuals, and it is universally admired when we see it. But this is a collective effort we are engaged in—a team sport. And in team efforts, while individual feats of courage might make the highlight reel or earn a soldier a medal, they are rarely independently decisive in the overall effort. Championships—and wars—are won by collective courage, by a whole team executing boldly, selflessly, and in concert. That is only possible in an environment of trust.

Public Enterprise is an operational logic distinct from that of government bureaucracy, traditional academia, and for-profit market models. It differs in its conception of animating purpose, path to public value, assumptions of faculty and management, funding and accountability mechanisms, and scale of impact.

(Crow & Anderson, 2020)

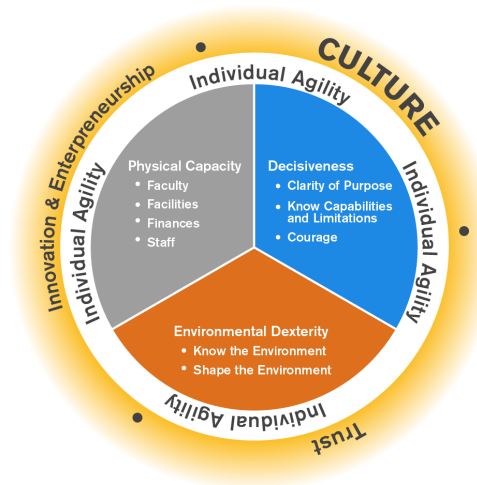


Individual Agility comprises Physical Capacity, Environmental Dexterity and Decisiveness

Napoleon famously said that in war, moral power is to physical as three is to one. We are not at war here, but we are daring greatly and the stakes are high. All across the globe, there are well-resourced universities filled with brilliant minds that are failing to transform their societies at the pace demanded by our present challenges—we must push the bounds of what is possible. And if the underlying causes of most mass violence can be traced back to either some form of resource scarcity or to toxic and uninformed worldviews, the ends of our research and teaching enterprise are every bit as noble and critical to human flourishing as the military's, even if our pursuit of them is less dangerous. The stakes are high, the consequences are real, and we will not succeed where others have failed without being exceptional in both our methods and our culture.

For nearly two decades, ASU has deliberately developed a culture that is exceptional in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship. This has been a critical factor in what has so far been a successful transformation. But the transformation is yet incomplete, and it is trust that separates truly great cultures from merely good ones. It is trust that fosters the collective courage that enables organizational decisiveness and makes next-level agility attainable.

There is, of course, an entire literature on building trust in organizations, and adding to it is beyond the



Organizational Agility comprises the three components of Individual Agility—Physical Capacity, Environmental Dexterity and Decisiveness—together with a culture that prizes innovation and cultivates trust.

scope of this paper. But the relevance of trust to our question of agility is perhaps best expressed by the title of Stephen M.R. Covey's bestseller, *The Speed of Trust*. Nothing hampers agility like what Covey (2008) calls "the time-killing, bureaucratic check-and-balance processes that are so often deployed in lieu of actual trust." And other than explicitly unethical behavior, nothing erodes trust in an organization like a lack of transparency and communication in strategic decision-making.

Physical capacity, environmental dexterity, and decisiveness, together with a culture that prizes innovation and cultivates trust, comprise a model of agility that applies to athletics and to any other meaningful application of the word, including the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war, and to the task of pioneering a New American University and a Fifth Wave of evolution in higher education.

Agility in Action: ASU's COVID-19 Response

An internal review

ASU is justly proud of its response to the dynamic and challenging COVID-19 crisis. At a time when other institutions simply shut down, we managed to keep classes in session—even when it required a rapid shift to 100% online learning—keep staff and faculty safely employed, set new records in research expenditures, increase enrollment and graduation numbers, and advance several critical expansion projects. Not only did we continue the traditional core missions of the university, but we demonstrated like never before our commitment, expressed in our charter, to assume fundamental responsibility for the health of the communities we serve. We provided free digital learning tools for everyone from stuck-at-home kindergartners and their parents to out-of-work or career transitioning adults through the innovative “[ASU for You](#)” website. We utilized our engineering capabilities to fill critical shortfalls in personal protective equipment (PPE) for local clinics, hospitals, and first-responders; we developed COVID testing protocols and administered hundreds of thousands of tests at dozens of sites throughout the state; and we facilitated vaccinations for our on-campus populations and beyond.

A comprehensive review of ASU's COVID response activities and decision-making processes is underway, but it is not too soon to offer preliminary observations of how the model of agility developed above manifested itself here over the last 24 months.

Physical Capacity. Much of what we achieved was only possible because of the scale at which we operate. We have a deep pool of engineering, biomedical, and epidemiological talent, immense capacity in well-equipped research labs, and a fleet of 3D printers; without these, we simply would not have been able to produce the PPE or the test kits we did. Without going into the very complicated specifics, we had the financial capacity to fund these projects “at risk” until state and federal funds became available. We had the flexibility to make large IT purchases ahead of supply chain backups, which enabled us to shift to fully online learning. Most critically, we had lots of people who were willing to work very, very hard.

These are all a testament to the important role of physical capacity as an enabler of agility, but they also prove the point about the risks of running near red-line. Had our finances already been over-leveraged, we could not have afforded to be as proactive as we were or take some of the risks we did. While our people proved motivated, resilient, and more capable than they knew, it is not as if they were underworked before the pandemic—a survey of university leadership indicates that while most are emerging from this crisis with enhanced pride and cohesion, many are also exhausted, with real concerns about the toll on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Environmental Dexterity. Our agility in responding to the COVID crisis was directly proportional to our ability to know and shape the environment. Starting with the earliest reports of an emergent novel coronavirus overseas, through the identification of an ASU student as the first confirmed COVID case in Arizona (just the fifth in the United States), and up through the highest rates of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, ASU leaders made deliberate efforts—including, eventually, the dedication of great human and financial resources—to stay abreast of

trends related to the pandemic. This up-to-the-minute “common operating picture,” combined with a deep working knowledge of supply chains, allowed us to stay ahead of disruptions and ensure sufficient access to everything from hand sanitizer to lab sample tubes to webcams and Wi-Fi hotspots. Based on our longstanding commitment to social embeddedness, we had pre-existing relationships with state and local governments, corporations, school districts, and health providers. As just one among countless examples of how these were expanded and leveraged, ASU eventually hosted a three-times-weekly virtual update with area hospital logistics teams to ensure optimal distribution of PPE and other critical supplies.

There is much here to be proud of, but lest we congratulate ourselves too much, we should remember that many of these capabilities and relationships were built on-the-fly after initial periods of ad hoc trial and error. How much more effective (or, at the very least, efficient) could we have been if they were in place prior to the pandemic? And what can we do now to ensure we are optimally positioned to respond to the next crisis, whatever it might be?

Decisiveness. The pandemic escalated from a distant and hypothetical threat to a full-fledged global crisis with startling speed; responding effectively required rapid consensus on countless decisions. Many were small, but plenty of them were of almost incalculable consequence. This was true at all levels: some decisions—like the decision to suspend in-person instruction—could only be made at the top; others—such as the procurement decisions mentioned above—had to be delegated if they were to matter at all. This is a tremendous example of decentralized execution toward a central vision and intent. Is that our standard, and can it be sustained beyond this crisis? Or will we revert to “garrison ops,” as they say in the military, where leaders start micromanaging their subordinates for lack of anything more compelling to do?

That central vision and intent was sustained the only way it can be—by an increased pace and intensity of communication. For much of 2020, the university’s Executive Committee met twice every day to ensure a common operating picture and clarity of purpose. ASU President Michael Crow kept up a steady drumbeat of communication through subordinate leaders and directly with staff and faculty, as well as with students, parents, and the larger community. This was achieved through a variety of media: emails, voice and video updates, press releases, web pages, and more.

Nevertheless, the number one problem listed by university leaders in a survey was a lack of communication from the top. Interviews suggest that many felt decision making was insufficiently transparent and leaders were sometimes not being forthright. How can this be? The problem requires further study. Mid-level leaders may not be the dedicated communicators that the president is. In any case, it confirms all the standard aphorisms: There is no such thing as overcommunication; if you’re not tired of your own message, you’re not trying hard enough; when you think you’re communicating enough, double it.

ASU’s COVID response efforts were a great demonstration of agility by an institutional type—a university—known for its rigidity and resistance to change. Our pride in what we accomplished is justified. But we could have done better. And we can—we should—do better next time.

A STRATEGY FOR AGILITY

Having articulated what agility is and what it is made of, how can universities use strategy to promote agility rather than hinder it?

First and most simply, **have a strategy**. The consequence of not having a top-level statement of purpose and priorities will always be misguided efforts and missed opportunities. Physical capacity will be wasted on non-contributing activities. Intelligence collection will be aimless and leaders will default to shaping the environment where it is most pliable rather than where it is most needed.

Most importantly, without the clarity of purpose that good strategy provides, leaders cannot empower subordinate decision-making. This forces decision-making to the top, slowing reaction times. Further, it sows distrust at the bottom, as the rationale for key decisions are not explained because leaders have neither the time nor the shared framework within which to explain them. The result is a self-reinforcing spiral of distrust, cynicism, and eventual burnout—the surest impediments to agility.

As for the content of the strategy, three principles should guide the development of any strategy for any organization, but especially for one that prizes agility:

- **The more complex and dynamic the environment in which you operate, the simpler a strategy should be, but the more important it is to have one.**
- **A strategy is not a plan—it is a top-level framework that provides the context necessary to allow subordinates to make their own plans.**
- **Strategy should not prevent action in response to unforeseen challenges and opportunities; it should enable action by providing a framework for rapid decision-making.**

Some seek to sidestep the hard work strategy demands by propounding a concept of “emergent strategy,” as distinct from the more traditional but (ostensibly) overly rigid “deliberate strategy,” the idea being, apparently, to just see what happens—what emerges—and *ex post facto* call that the strategy. But this is, in fact, just a semantic sidestep—harmless, perhaps, in some cases, but at worst and all too often a sophistic excuse for lazy leadership. There is only strategy, and the only meaningful distinctions are good or bad, thoughtful or haphazard, appropriate or inappropriate, successful or not. When the environment demands agility, good strategy is agile.

Good strategy can be thought of as an Aristotelian mean “between two vices, the one of excess and the other of deficiency” (Crisp, 2000). The extreme form of deliberate strategy would not be strategy, it would be some exercise in long-term micromanagement, which would certainly be doomed to fail. But the extreme form of emergent strategy is chaos or anarchy, and that is not strategy, either, but rather its very antithesis. Perhaps this is reducing the idea of emergent strategy *ad absurdum*, but no more so than the characterization of all strategy as overly rigid; at least I’m using an appropriate qualifier.



Proponents of emergent strategy will admit that individual and organizational initiative must be bound and guided by a set of leading questions, or pre-identified “streams of innovation,” along with some indication of resourcing priorities.⁵ Those bounding elements, thoughtfully developed and carefully communicated, **are** the simple but essential strategy for which this paper argues. And of course, in the execution, an agile strategy—any strategy with a chance at success—will respond to changes in the environment: new initiatives will be launched to seize unforeseen opportunities; successes will be reinforced; failures, when necessary, abandoned. No reasonable strategist would desire anything less or cultivate contrary expectations in an organization.

There is only strategy, for better or worse. There can never be a one-size-fits-all approach or a universally appropriate position between the extremes on the spectrum between “deliberate” and “emergent.” The “right” position will vary from leader to leader and institution to institution. And because strategy is always an ongoing process, never a static achievement, the right position will vary over time even within a single organization. Let’s not get caught up in semantic games—let’s think and lead and rise to the challenge of the work before us.

Having identified the components of agility, it is possible to make the development and preservation of them a deliberate aim of university strategy. In that original article, General Jacoby and I mapped the components of agility to the major strategic-level elements of the defense establishment, ascribing responsibility and encouraging extreme ownership at the highest levels; it should be possible to do the same for a university. Strategy provides the forum to communicate the primacy of agility as an operational capability and the role that each unit has in developing and exercising it. Strategy is where those critical decision-making authorities can be delegated, bounded, and explained. And it is where safeguards can be established to prevent overreach, remembering that the closer you are to redline, the less agile you will be.

The purpose of strategy is not to promote blind adherence to a prescribed course of action despite changing circumstances—that’s not strategy, it’s stupidity. **Strategy is meant to provide a framework for detecting, deciding, and communicating in response to change.** This is enabled by two elements that are missing from most university strategies:

- **A clear articulation of how leaders see the strategic environment, including a list of critical assumptions, and;**
- **A deliberate assessment program to revisit the strategic environment and the progress of the strategy.**

If at any point, the assessment reveals that:

- a. the strategic environment has significantly changed;
- b. critical assumptions have proven invalid, or;
- c. goals are unreachable (measures of performance) or the achievement of goals doesn’t seem to be leading toward the higher objectives (measures of effectiveness),

then the strategy **must** change.

⁵ For this thought, the author is indebted to conversation with ASU colleagues Sukhwant Jhaj and Ji Mi Choi.

There is nothing wrong with changing a strategy—it should be expected. Adaptation is not a failure; it is a feature. In any case, having a strategy that is subject to change is vastly preferable to having no strategy at all, for all the reasons discussed above.

Two things become possible when you deliberately develop and explicitly communicate your view of the strategic environment and your chosen approach to changing it. First, you empower everyone in the organization to function as a scout, as an intel collector. When everyone knows the key facts that underpin your strategy, everyone will be attuned to the possibility that they're changing. When everyone knows the assumptions on which you're operating, everyone knows to be on the lookout for information that can confirm or deny their validity. In the military, these are called CCIR—Commander's Critical Intelligence Requirements, defined as "information requirements identified by the commander as being critical to facilitating timely decision making" (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020). In high stakes operations, every soldier will carry a written copy of the CCIR for quick reference. From the executive committee down through every dean and junior faculty member, out to the edges of the organization with partners and investors, everyone should be explicitly empowered and entrusted as a strategic-level scout.

Secondly, when you've made these things explicit, you have an agreed-upon framework for discussing unforeseen obstacles and opportunities and the changes of plans and priorities they require. In the absence of such a framework, subordinates can only guess at your reasons, and they will inevitably feel like their best-laid plans and their highest ambitions are being sacrificed to the whims of noncommunicative senior leaders.

*Strategy enables communication; communication builds trust; trust enables agility.
It really is that simple.*

CONCLUSION

A unique feature of the evolutionary model of American higher education developed by Crow and Dabars in *The Fifth Wave* is that, rather than dying off, many original forms survive and persist into new evolutionary epochs, even while others voluntarily transform and new ones are added. So today, many examples of the small-scale, classical liberal arts colleges typical of the colonial-era First Wave remain and thrive, alongside new ones created as recently as the late twentieth century, even while some of the originals have transformed themselves to newer institutional forms. The same is true of the Second Wave of state-chartered colleges and universities begun in the early republic with a primary focus on teaching; and the Third Wave of pragmatic, largely agriculturally focused land-grant institutions that emerged after the Civil War. The modern public research universities of the Fourth Wave evolved in the twentieth century to assume "global preeminence in knowledge production and innovation," and all four prior institutional forms persist in the landscape today, each with its valid constituency and place in society (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p.14). But it is the premise of both ASU's experiment with the New American University model and the larger Fifth Wave that "our nation has outgrown the existing infrastructure of the research-grade academic platforms and needs to develop new and complementary institutional models..." (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p.9).

The Fourth Wave public research universities might have been the first to explicitly embrace strategy, and

they did so in a manner heavily influenced by the theories and approaches evolving contemporaneously in some of their business schools. This was not all bad; perhaps it accounts for one of the distinctive features of this institutional type, their “success at leveraging burgeoning financial resources and academic infrastructure derived from growth” (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p.15). But strategy is hard to do in any context, and there are costs for doing it poorly.

Universities are not corporations. While they have some features in common, the most fundamental drivers of strategic choice—the aims and incentives, the characterization of customers and competitors—often just do not translate. Based on this poor fit, strategy at universities has frequently devolved into perfunctory “strategic planning” processes, often driven by outside consultants, that fail to engage the soul of public service institutions. The unsurprising result has been collective “scar tissue” which manifests as a general aversion to the idea of strategy among those who have suffered through it.

But it is out of these Fourth Wave institutions that the Fifth Wave must emerge, and to fulfill its promise, agility must be one of its defining features. Driven by a sense of urgency and purpose and cultures of innovation and entrepreneurship (not to mention some outsized leader personalities), a small handful of public research universities are cracking the code on agility. But agility cannot become an institutionalized capacity—certainly not across the entire sector—by force of personality alone. The way to bring Fourth Wave institutions—or First-, Second-, or Third-Wave institutions—into the Fifth Wave is not to abandon strategy, but to find an approach to strategy that fits and works for large-scale public service enterprises.

A recent survey concluded that most publicly available university strategies fail to meet a minimal threshold of being “strategic,” and most are ineffectual. ASU is among the great many universities who have opted out of strategic planning altogether, at least at the enterprise level.

But if strategy is so essential to agility, one might ask, how has ASU managed to be so agile over the last twenty years—effecting fundamental change while surviving and thriving through global economic and public health crises—without a strategy? The answer is, we haven’t. Not that we haven’t been agile; we likely have.⁶ But we haven’t been without a strategy. Like a worldview or a life philosophy for individuals, or a culture in an organization, no one gets to not have a strategy. You can neglect it or even deny it, but some set of principles and assumptions, some vision of a better future and a path toward its attainment are always guiding our decisions. The only question is how thoughtfully it has been developed and how skillfully it has been deployed.

Like most universities, ASU actually has several elements of good strategy firmly in place already. Starting with the charter, of course, as our statement of vision and mission, including our design aspirations as operating principles and public enterprise as a strategic approach, we have also periodically articulated short-, medium-, and long-range goals and priorities.

This is not a call for ASU or any other university to do something that is unprecedented and alien to its nature; it is merely a call to be better at what we already do, to develop strategy more thoughtfully and deploy it more skillfully—not to limit agility, but to promote it.

Strategy is not a panacea; no one has ever developed a perfect strategy and no strategy has ever been

⁶ It is also possible that, in some instances where we think we were agile, we were actually merely big or strong or fast. It is worth considering honestly, in individual cases, whether we were truly agile or whether we merely prevailed through brute force.

perfectly executed. We are in a difficult business, and there will always be friction and failure, inertia and inefficiency. Where humans are involved, there is always the potential for miscommunication and unmet expectations. We should not pretend that those are not also a part of the university experience.

But neither, to the extent we have avoided them, should we pretend we did so by avoiding strategy. That is not helpful. These negative outcomes are failures of strategy; they occur in inverse proportion to the quality of our strategy. Bad strategy might make them worse, but ignoring strategy will not make them better. The only way to overcome them is through better strategy, and you don't get better at strategy by accident. You certainly don't get better by denying it, denigrating it, or ignoring it. You get better at strategy when you invest in it.

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