ASU University Design Institute
Arizona State University

Design Leadership for Higher Education

Why the Next Generation of Universities Requires Leaders Who Are Designers

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Executive Summary

Universities have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to endure. Across centuries of political upheaval, technological disruption, economic transformation, and social change, they have advanced knowledge, educated generations of learners, and contributed to society's progress. Stewardship has made that continuity possible. We believe the next era of higher education requires something more.

We begin with a simple premise: universities are designed systems. Their structures, incentives, governance models, academic organizations, and cultures are not inevitable. They are the result of choices made over time. Those choices determine what universities can achieve. When institutions struggle to expand opportunity, foster interdisciplinary discovery, respond to technological change, or create greater public value, the question is not simply how to improve performance within existing systems. We must also ask whether those systems remain fit for purpose.

Our work at Arizona State University and through the University Design Institute has led us to view leadership differently. We define Design Leadership for Higher Education as the philosophy and practice of intentionally designing universities to create greater public value. We do not propose a single model for the university. Every institution is shaped by its own history, culture, mission, and society. What we offer instead is a way of thinking that enables leaders to design institutions appropriate to their own context while remaining focused on enduring purpose.

We identify seven responsibilities that characterize Design Leadership: designing for outcomes, stewarding values, experimenting strategically, building ecosystems, crafting institutional narratives, creating new possibilities, and investing in leadership capacity. Together, these responsibilities shift leadership from managing inherited institutions to intentionally shaping systems capable of continual learning, adaptation, and societal contribution.

We also contend that Design Leadership is cultivated through three inseparable dimensions: Knowing, Doing, and Being. The objective is not simply to prepare individual leaders for positions of authority. It is to develop institutions with the collective capacity to continually redesign themselves as the needs of learners and society evolve. In the decades ahead, the universities that create the greatest public value will be those that understand design not as an occasional activity, but as a fundamental responsibility of leadership.

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Introduction

For centuries, universities have preserved knowledge, advanced learning, and sustained their missions through wars, revolutions, pandemics, economic upheaval, and technological change. Their longevity is extraordinary. It reflects generations of capable stewardship and leaders who protected academic values, safeguarded institutional integrity, and ensured continuity across time. Stewardship has served higher education well. But stewardship alone is no longer sufficient.

The conditions in which universities operate are changing at extraordinary speed. Demographic shifts are changing who learns, what learners need, and how learning occurs. Climate change, geopolitical instability, economic transformation, and widening inequality are creating new demands for education, research, and societal engagement. Artificial intelligence is altering how knowledge is produced, accessed, and applied. These are not simply challenges for universities to manage. They are changes in the environment that require universities to rethink how they are organized.

The task of university leadership, therefore, can no longer be simply to manage institutions effectively or preserve them for future generations. It must also be to ask whether the institution itself is designed to meet the needs of the society it exists to serve.

Most theories of leadership were developed to help organizations perform more effectively. They teach leaders to motivate people, execute strategy, build culture, navigate complexity, and manage change. These capabilities remain essential. But they tend to begin with an important assumption: that the organization itself is fundamentally fit for purpose. For universities, that assumption can no longer be taken for granted.

Many of the structures, systems, and organizational models that define higher education were designed for another time, another population, and another set of societal needs. They were designed for a world where knowledge was scarce, student populations were relatively homogeneous, careers followed predictable pathways, and change unfolded gradually. Those assumptions no longer hold. The question for leaders is therefore no longer: "How do we lead this university better?" The more important question is: "How should this university be designed to serve the future?" That is a fundamentally different leadership challenge.

Universities produce the outcomes their systems make possible. Those systems are the accumulated result of choices, about whom to educate, how to organize knowledge, what to value and reward, and how to serve society. Universities are also products of place and purpose. They have evolved in response to different histories, cultures, political systems, economic conditions, and societal ambitions. Those differences are not incidental; they shape what institutions value, whom they serve, how they organize themselves, and what they understand excellence to mean. The diversity of higher education is therefore one of its greatest strengths. There is no single model of the university, nor should there be.

Yet across this diversity, our work through the University Design Institute has made one responsibility increasingly clear: every university must determine how it will create value for learners and for society. Every institution must decide what should endure, what must evolve, and what must be designed anew. University leaders must make these choices amid constrained resources, technological change, shifting expectations, and growing demands for greater access, greater excellence, and greater public value.

The decisions will differ across institutions and contexts. The responsibility will not.

The defining responsibility of university leadership in the twenty-first century is therefore not simply to steward the institution as it exists, nor merely to manage change as it arrives. It is to design institutions capable of achieving the outcomes society increasingly requires.

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Universities Are Designed Systems

To understand why universities need design leaders, we must first recognize something easy to overlook: universities themselves are designed systems. We often talk about universities as if the structures that define them are somehow natural or inevitable: departments, colleges, semesters, credit hours, degrees, admissions requirements, tenure, promotion systems, research funding, governance structures, and rankings. Even the ways knowledge is divided into disciplines is an inherited function. None of these is inevitable. They are all products of design.

Universities did not simply come to be organized as they are. Choices were made about how to organize knowledge, educate students, recognize achievement, allocate resources, reward faculty, govern institutions, and define excellence. Those choices reflected the technologies, assumptions, constraints, and societal needs of their time

Over decades (and in some cases centuries) they became embedded in institutional structures, practices, and cultures. What began as a set of choices gradually came to be understood as simply "the way universities work." But these arrangements are not inevitable. They are the accumulated products of design. And that distinction matters because designs produce outcomes.

An admissions system designed primarily around selectivity will produce different outcomes from one designed around access and student success. A faculty reward system that privileges individual disciplinary achievement will produce different behaviors from one that also rewards collaboration and societal impact. A budget model that protects existing organizational units will generate different institutional behavior from one that directs resources toward shared outcomes. A curriculum organized almost entirely around disciplines will create different learning experiences from one that enables students and faculty to work across fields on complex problems. What we sometimes describe as institutional culture, resistance, bureaucracy, or inertia is therefore often the predictable consequence of design.

When students struggle to progress, a management mindset might ask: *"How can we help these students succeed within the existing system?"* A design mindset also asks: *"What is it about the system that makes success unnecessarily difficult?"*

When interdisciplinary research struggles to flourish, we can exhort faculty to collaborate more. Or we can examine whether our organizational structures, funding mechanisms, workload models, promotion criteria, and disciplinary boundaries make collaboration unusually difficult. When universities struggle to respond quickly to changing workforce needs, we can blame slow decision-making. Or we can ask whether approval processes designed for another era are capable of producing the speed and adaptability now required.

This understanding of the relationship between systems, design, and outcomes has an important intellectual lineage. In the nineteenth century, the German thinker Lorenz von Stein argued that institutions should be understood not simply as structures to be maintained, but by their capacity to advance the development of individuals and society. Administration, in this sense, was more than the execution of established rules. It was the means through which institutions translated purpose into action—organizing resources, reconciling competing interests, and creating the conditions in which individuals and society could advance.

Von Stein's insight points toward a central premise of Design Leadership: institutions produce outcomes through their design. Structures, incentives, policies, and administrative systems are not neutral. They reflect choices about whom an institution serves, what it values, what it enables, and ultimately what it is capable of achieving.

This changes the responsibility of leadership. The task is not simply to manage an inherited institution well. It is to continually assess whether the institution is organized to achieve the purposes it exists to serve—and, when it is not, to redesign it.

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For higher education, this represents a consequential shift. When outcomes fall short of our aspirations, we cannot assume that each failure is an isolated problem requiring an isolated solution. We must examine the systems producing those outcomes. If students are excluded, if learning is constrained, if discovery is disconnected from societal need, or if institutional performance fails to advance public value, the question is not only what went wrong? It is also what in the design of the institution made this outcome possible?

This does not require abandoning tradition or disrupting institutions for the sake of disruption. Quite the opposite. Universities embody purposes and values that have endured precisely because they remain essential: the advancement of knowledge, the cultivation of human potential, the pursuit of discovery, and service to society. Design Leadership requires distinguishing these enduring purposes from the particular structures and practices that have grown up around them.

Purpose and design are not the same thing.

A purpose may endure even when the mechanism created to advance it no longer works. Yet universities too often confuse preserving an inherited structure with preserving the value that structure was intended to serve. Design leaders make the distinction. They protect what is fundamental while remaining willing to redesign the systems through which those purposes are achieved. The question, then, is not whether universities should preserve or change. It is more demanding: what must endure, what must evolve, and what must be designed anew for the university to fulfill its purpose?

Design is not synonymous with innovation.

Innovation often focuses attention on what is new: a new technology, a new program, a new partnership, a new pedagogical approach. Design asks a more fundamental question: How should the whole system work to produce the outcomes we seek? Sometimes the answer will involve something new. Sometimes it will involve redesigning what already exists. Sometimes it will require removing policies, structures, and practices that have accumulated over time. And sometimes good design will mean deliberately preserving something because it remains essential to the institution's purpose.

Through UDI's work with universities and higher education systems around the world, we repeatedly encounter institutions with very different histories, resources, regulatory environments, and societal mandates. Yet beneath those differences lies a remarkably consistent challenge. Leaders inherit institutions whose structures were created through countless decisions made over many years. They are then asked to produce outcomes those structures were never necessarily designed to achieve.

Universities may be asked to dramatically expand access while operating systems built around scarcity and selection. They may be asked to produce interdisciplinary solutions to societal problems while organizing knowledge, budgets, and careers primarily through disciplines. They may be expected to respond rapidly to technological and workforce transformation while relying on decision-making structures designed for stability and deliberation. They may aspire to greater societal impact while rewarding people primarily for achievements recognized within the academy.

These are not simply execution gaps. They are design tensions. Design leadership is not about moving an institution from one strategic plan to another. It treats transformation as a continuous capacity because universities operate in environments that will keep changing. There will never be a moment when the institution is finally "finished." The task is therefore not to design the university of the future once. It is to build a university capable of continually redesigning itself.

That requires leaders who can see beyond organizational charts and individual initiatives to the relationships among purpose, structures, incentives, people, resources, culture, and outcomes. They must be able to recognize when a system is producing precisely what it was designed to produce—even when those outcomes are no longer what the institution or society needs. Once leaders see universities this way, leadership itself begins to look different. The university is no longer simply an institution to be administered. It becomes an institution that can be intentionally shaped. And the leader's role expands from stewarding the institution that exists to designing the institution it needs to become.

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Universities Are Designed Systems

If universities are designed systems, then leadership must be understood, at least in part, as the work of design.

Design Leadership for Higher Education is the philosophy and practice of intentionally designing universities to create greater public value.

Design Leadership did not begin for us as a theory. It emerged from two complementary bodies of experience: more than two decades of institutional transformation at Arizona State University and the University Design Institute's work alongside university leaders and higher education systems around the world. ASU is the longitudinal experiment: an institution continuously designed, tested, and adapted over time. UDI is the comparative global laboratory: a window into how institutions operating across different cultures, systems, and circumstances confront the challenge of transformation. Together, they allow us to examine not only how universities change, but how leaders design institutions capable of changing with purpose. At ASU, we have had the opportunity to observe what happens when a university attempts sustained transformation over more than two decades—not through a single initiative or strategic plan, but by continually redesigning the institution around a set of enduring aspirations. That experience has allowed us to see institutional change over time: how ideas become embedded in structures, how incentives shape behavior, how culture evolves, how experiments become institutional capabilities, and how one generation of design decisions creates the conditions for the next. ASU taught us that universities are not fixed institutions. They can be intentionally redesigned, and their capacity to adapt can itself become part of their design.

UDI has given us a different vantage point. Working with universities and higher education systems across countries, cultures, histories, regulatory environments, and stages of development has allowed us to test the assumptions formed through the ASU experience against radically different contexts. Some ideas travel. Others must be adapted. Still others prove to be artifacts of a particular institution or environment. The comparative experience has reinforced a fundamental lesson: there is no universal design for the university.

Together, these experiences have shaped our understanding of Design Leadership. ASU has allowed us to study transformation deeply over time; UDI has allowed us to examine it broadly across contexts. One reveals the dynamics of sustained institutional redesign while the other tests which principles endure when the context changes. What emerges is therefore neither the ASU model nor a formula derived from a collection of universities. It is a way of understanding the work of leadership itself: the responsibility to discern what must endure, recognize what is no longer fit for purpose, imagine what could be different, and build the institutional capacity to continually redesign in pursuit of greater public value.

The words in this definition matter. **Intentionally**, because universities are always being shaped—through policies, incentives, structures, investments, and thousands of decisions that may or may not remain aligned with their purpose. **Designing**, because leadership requires more than operating the institution that has been inherited; it requires questioning assumptions, understanding the systems producing current outcomes, and reshaping them when necessary. **Universities**, because these are distinctive institutions: communities of scholars and learners, research enterprises, economic and cultural actors, and contributors to the public good, with distributed authority and deeply embedded traditions. Approaches to leadership developed for corporations, governments, or other organizations can offer useful insights, but they cannot simply be transplanted into universities. And **public value**, because the ultimate measure of a university is not the advancement of the institution alone, but the value it creates through the learners it educates, the knowledge it generates, and the societies it helps to shape.

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This orientation changes the starting point for leadership. Instead of asking first, *"How do we make our institution more successful?"*, the Design Leader asks, *"What outcomes do our learners and society need from us, and how must we design the institution to produce them?"* Institutional success, financial sustainability, reputation, and research performance all matter — but not as ends in themselves. They are capacities that enable the university to fulfill its larger purpose.

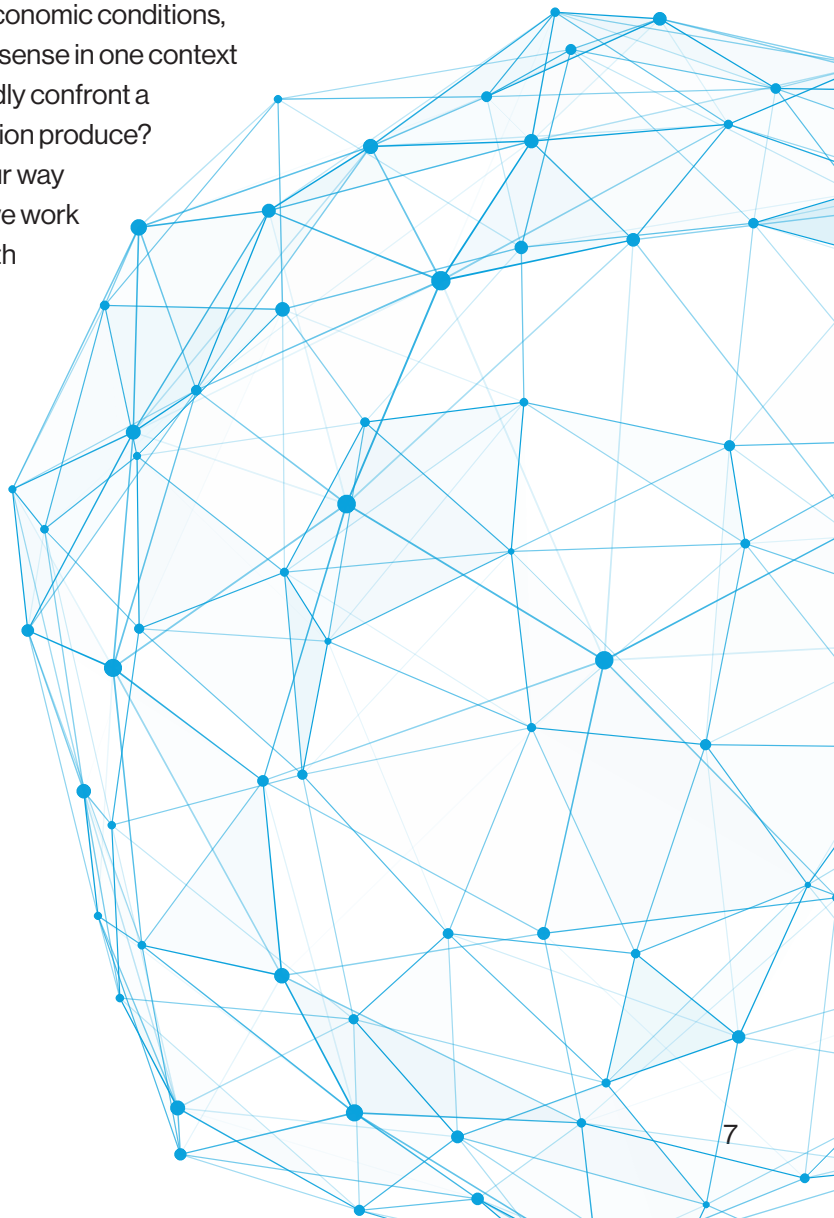
Design Leadership Is More Than Design Thinking.

Design Leadership should not be confused with simply applying design thinking to higher education. Design thinking offers valuable methods: understanding the experiences of users, reframing problems, generating possibilities, prototyping solutions, and learning through iteration. These methods can contribute significantly to the work of Design Leaders.

But the ambition of Design Leadership is broader. A university leader is not simply facilitating a design exercise or solving a discrete problem. Leaders shape complex institutions over time. Their choices influence purpose, people, resources, structures, incentives, partnerships, culture, and measures of success. They must protect enduring values while challenging inherited assumptions. They must work through both formal authority and distributed influence. And they must create the capacity for the institution to continue evolving beyond their own tenure. Design Leadership therefore treats design not as a technique leaders occasionally use, but as an orientation toward leadership itself.

Through UDI's work with universities and higher education systems around the world, it has become increasingly clear to us that the design challenges facing universities have the unique flavors of different cultures, regulatory systems, economic conditions, histories, and societal expectations. The solutions that make sense in one context may be entirely inappropriate in another. Yet leaders repeatedly confront a common set of questions. What outcomes should our institution produce? What values must endure as we change? How do we learn our way toward solutions when the answers are uncertain? How do we work beyond institutional boundaries? How do we bring people with us? How do we create possibilities rather than merely imitate established models? And how do we build the leadership capacity to sustain the institution beyond any one individual?

The answers will be different. The responsibility to ask the questions is not. We believe that Design Leadership is an evolving practice. If university leaders are designers, what are they responsible for designing?



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The Seven Responsibilities of a Design Leader

Through our work with universities and higher education systems around the world, we have come to see seven interconnected responsibilities at the heart of Design Leadership. They are relevant across institutional types and national contexts, but their expression will necessarily differ. They are not a list of competencies, nor a prescription for what every university should become. Rather, they describe where Design Leaders direct their attention and agency as they shape institutions capable of creating greater public value.

They design for outcomes.

Design Leaders begin with impact rather than activity. Universities are extraordinarily busy institutions. They teach courses, conduct research, run programs, convene communities, form partnerships, and administer complex organizations. But activity is not the same as impact. Design Leaders continually bring the institution back to a more fundamental question: "*What outcomes are we trying to create and for whom?*"

Those outcomes extend beyond the university itself. They include what happens to learners, communities, economies, and society. They may encompass educational attainment and student success, but also social mobility, knowledge creation, economic opportunity, community resilience, innovation, or other forms of public value appropriate to the institution's mission and context. Starting with outcomes changes leadership decisions. Instead of allowing inherited structures and processes to determine what is possible, leaders work backward from the outcomes they seek. They align resources, policies, incentives, organizational structures, and measures of success accordingly. When an existing system impedes the desired outcome, they are willing to redesign it.

The Design Leader asks:

What outcomes are we designing this institution to produce?

Who benefits from them? How do we know?

And what in our current design is preventing us from achieving more?

They steward values.

Design without values becomes opportunistic. Universities are distinctive because some things should not change simply because the environment around them does: the pursuit of knowledge, intellectual rigor, academic freedom, integrity, the capacity to question accepted wisdom, and a commitment to learners and to the public good. These and other enduring principles give universities their legitimacy and their distinctive role in society. Design Leadership therefore contains an apparent tension: leaders must be willing to question almost every aspect of how the university works while remaining deeply grounded in why it exists. That tension can be productive if values become the compass for design.

The challenge is to distinguish between an enduring value and the institutional arrangement that has historically expressed it. A particular policy, structure, tradition, or practice may have been created to protect an important principle without being the only, or still the best way of protecting it.

The Design Leader asks:

What must remain non-negotiable as we change?

Which inherited practices genuinely protect those values, and which have simply become familiar?

How can redesign strengthen rather than compromise our purpose?

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They experiment strategically.

Universities often attempt to reduce uncertainty through planning. But some of the most consequential questions facing higher education cannot be answered through analysis alone. The future cannot be planned with certainty. Much of it must be discovered. Design Leaders therefore treat experimentation as a legitimate and necessary form of institutional learning. Rather than waiting until every question has been answered, they create opportunities to test assumptions, prototype new approaches, gather evidence, and adapt. They make thoughtful bets where learning is possible and risk can be managed. They scale what demonstrates value and stop or redesign what does not.

This requires a different relationship with failure. Design Leaders create environments in which people can acknowledge what is not working, learn from evidence, and change direction without every setback becoming an institutional indictment. Over time, experimentation becomes less an occasional innovation initiative and more a cultural capability. This matters because an adaptive university cannot depend on its leaders always knowing the right answer. It must become good at learning its way toward better answers.

The Design Leader asks:

What assumptions are we making?

Which could we test?

Where can we make a small bet before making a large one?

What are we learning, and how quickly are we turning that learning into better design?

They build ecosystems.

The boundaries of the university are becoming increasingly permeable. The most important outcomes universities seek to create rarely sit entirely within their control. Economic development, workforce transformation, public health, climate resilience, technological innovation, educational access, and community prosperity cannot be delivered by universities acting alone. Design Leaders therefore see relationships beyond the institution not as peripheral partnerships, but as part of the institution's design. They intentionally build ecosystems connecting universities with governments, industry, schools, communities, philanthropy, civil society, alumni, entrepreneurs, and other universities.

This requires more than signing agreements or accumulating partnerships. Leaders ask what the university can contribute, what others contribute, what can be accomplished together that none could achieve independently, and what structures are needed to make collaboration durable. The Design Leader therefore sees the university not as a self-contained institution but as part of a larger system for creating public value.

The question shifts from *What can our university do?* to:

What becomes possible when we design with others?

What must we redesign within our own institution to make genuine collaboration possible?

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They create new possibilities.

Higher education is unusually susceptible to imitation. Institutions benchmark themselves against peers, pursue common measures of prestige, replicate programs that have succeeded elsewhere, and frequently look toward established universities for models of what excellence should resemble. There is value in learning from others. But imitation is not design. Design Leaders begin with the institution's own purpose and context. They ask what their society needs, what distinctive assets the university possesses, what assumptions can be challenged, and what might become possible if the institution were not constrained by existing models. They bring together ideas from different disciplines, sectors, technologies, and cultures. They look beyond higher education for inspiration. And they create combinations that did not previously exist. This is where imagination becomes a leadership capability. The objective is not novelty for its own sake but to create institutional possibilities better suited to the outcomes the university seeks.

This is particularly important globally. Design Leadership should not produce universities that increasingly resemble one another. It should enable institutions to become even more distinctive, more deeply connected to their missions, contexts, learners, and communities.

The Design Leader asks:

If we stopped trying to become more like other universities, what might we become?

What assumptions are limiting our imagination?

What could we create that does not yet exist?

They craft institutional narratives.

Transformation succeeds only when people can make sense of it. Universities are communities of independent thinkers. Faculty, students, staff, alumni, governing bodies, governments, partners, and communities experience the institution from different vantage points and may hold very different interpretations of its purpose and direction. Change therefore cannot be accomplished through directives alone. Design Leaders craft institutional narratives that connect purpose with action, history with possibility, and strategy with meaning. A powerful institutional narrative explains where the university has come from, what it stands for, what is changing around it, what it aspires to become, and why that journey matters. It allows people to locate themselves within a larger story.

This is more than communication. Narrative creates meaning. Design Leaders understand that people need to hear the institution's direction repeatedly, see it reflected in decisions, and understand how their own work contributes to it. In this sense, leaders are not merely telling the institution's story. They are helping its community author the next chapter together.

The Design Leader asks:

What story are we telling about who we are, why we exist, and where we are going?

Is that story clear enough to guide decisions?

Is it credible enough to inspire belief?

Can people see themselves within it?

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They invest in leadership capacity.

Perhaps one of the most consequential investments a Design Leader makes is in the capacity of other people to lead. The complexity of contemporary universities makes the mythology of the heroic individual leader increasingly untenable. No president, rector, vice-chancellor, provost, or dean can possess all the expertise, relationships, perspectives, and capabilities required to navigate the challenges facing an institution.

Great universities are not built by great leaders alone. They are built by leadership teams and communities whose collective capabilities exceed those of any individual. Design Leaders therefore treat leadership capacity as an institutional asset that must be deliberately cultivated. They build teams whose strengths complement rather than replicate their own. They develop leadership throughout the organization, not only at the executive level. They create the trust and psychological safety that allow people to question assumptions, experiment, contribute ideas, and make decisions close to the work. They create opportunities for emerging leaders to grow. This requires humility. Leaders must be willing to share authority, invite perspectives that challenge their own, and measure their success partly by what others become capable of doing.

Investing in leadership capacity also changes how we think about leadership development. It cannot be reserved for those who already hold senior titles. If universities need to continually redesign themselves, they need people throughout the institution who can see systems, challenge assumptions, work across boundaries, experiment, and mobilize others around shared purpose. The goal is not simply to develop more leaders. It is to develop greater collective capacity to lead.

The Design Leader asks:

What leadership capacity will this institution need for the future?

Where are we too dependent on particular individuals?

Whose perspectives and capabilities are missing?

Who are we developing now to lead what comes next?

And am I leaving this institution more capable of leading itself than I found it?

These responsibilities are not a checklist, nor do we expect every leader to possess them in equal measure. The complexity of universities exceeds the capacity of any individual. The responsibility of the Design Leader is therefore not to master all seven, but to ensure that the leadership of the institution collectively exercises them. Design Leadership ultimately shifts the question from whether we have an extraordinary leader to whether we have created extraordinary capacity for leadership. That raises another question: how do we develop leaders capable of this work?

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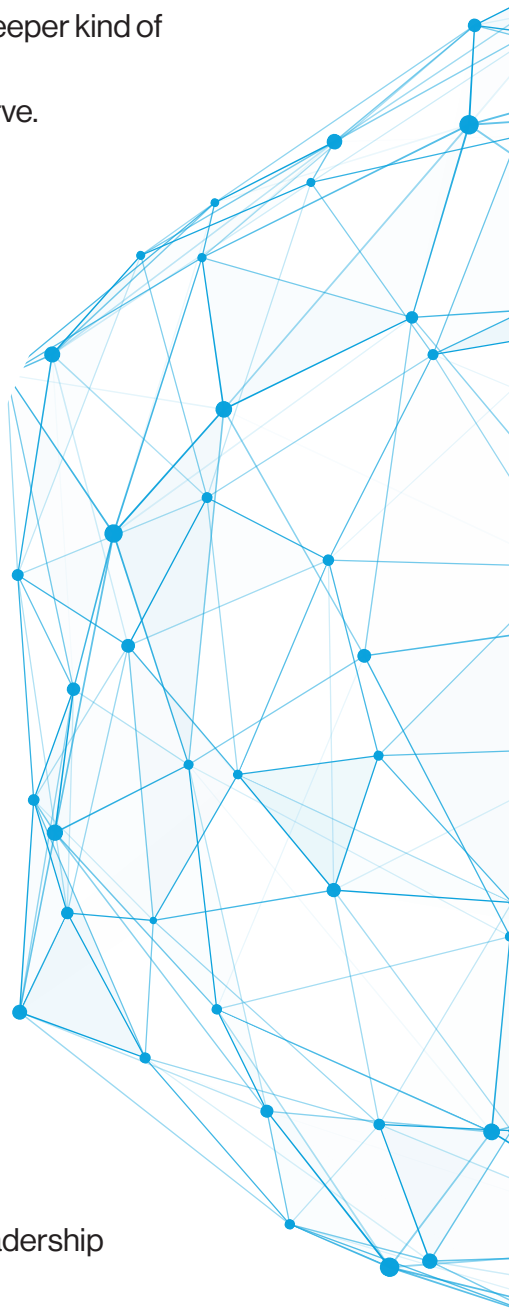
Developing Design Leaders

Knowing the responsibilities of a Design Leader is not the same as becoming one. No leader arrives fully prepared for this work. Design Leadership must be cultivated through a deeper kind of learning —
one that changes how leaders see, act, and show up in the institutions they serve.



Traditional leadership development often focuses on helping leaders manage organizations more effectively. Those capabilities remain important, but designing institutions requires something more. Our experience working alongside leaders engaged in significant transformation has taught us that knowledge and experience alone rarely determines whether change succeeds. Leaders may understand what needs to change and still struggle to make it happen. The difference often lies in their ability to translate insight into action—and in who they are when the work becomes difficult, uncertain, or contested.

We therefore think about the development of Design Leaders through three inseparable dimensions: **Knowing, Doing, and Being**.

Knowing

Design Leaders learn to see differently. They understand the university as a system in which structures, incentives, policies, cultures, relationships, and measures of success interact to produce outcomes. Their knowing is diagnostic: they learn to recognize underlying assumptions, see connections others may miss, and distinguish symptoms from the systems producing them.

Knowing also requires looking outward and inward. Design Leaders understand enough about the larger social, political, economic, technological, and cultural environment to design within context rather than import solutions from elsewhere. And they develop self-awareness—the capacity to examine their own assumptions, habits, and blind spots. Design Leadership begins with learning to see the institution, its context, and oneself more clearly.

Doing

Seeing differently matters only if it changes how leaders act. Doing is the capacity to translate insight into institutional choices: to experiment when answers are uncertain, make trade-offs, redirect resources and attention, reshape systems that no longer serve their purpose, and mobilize others around what needs to change.

This requires judgment as much as action. Design Leaders must decide what should be preserved, what should be redesigned, what should be created, and what should be stopped. They act without waiting for perfect certainty, but they do so deliberately, learning and adapting as they go. And they recognize that their role is not simply to accomplish change themselves, but to create the conditions in which others can contribute to it.

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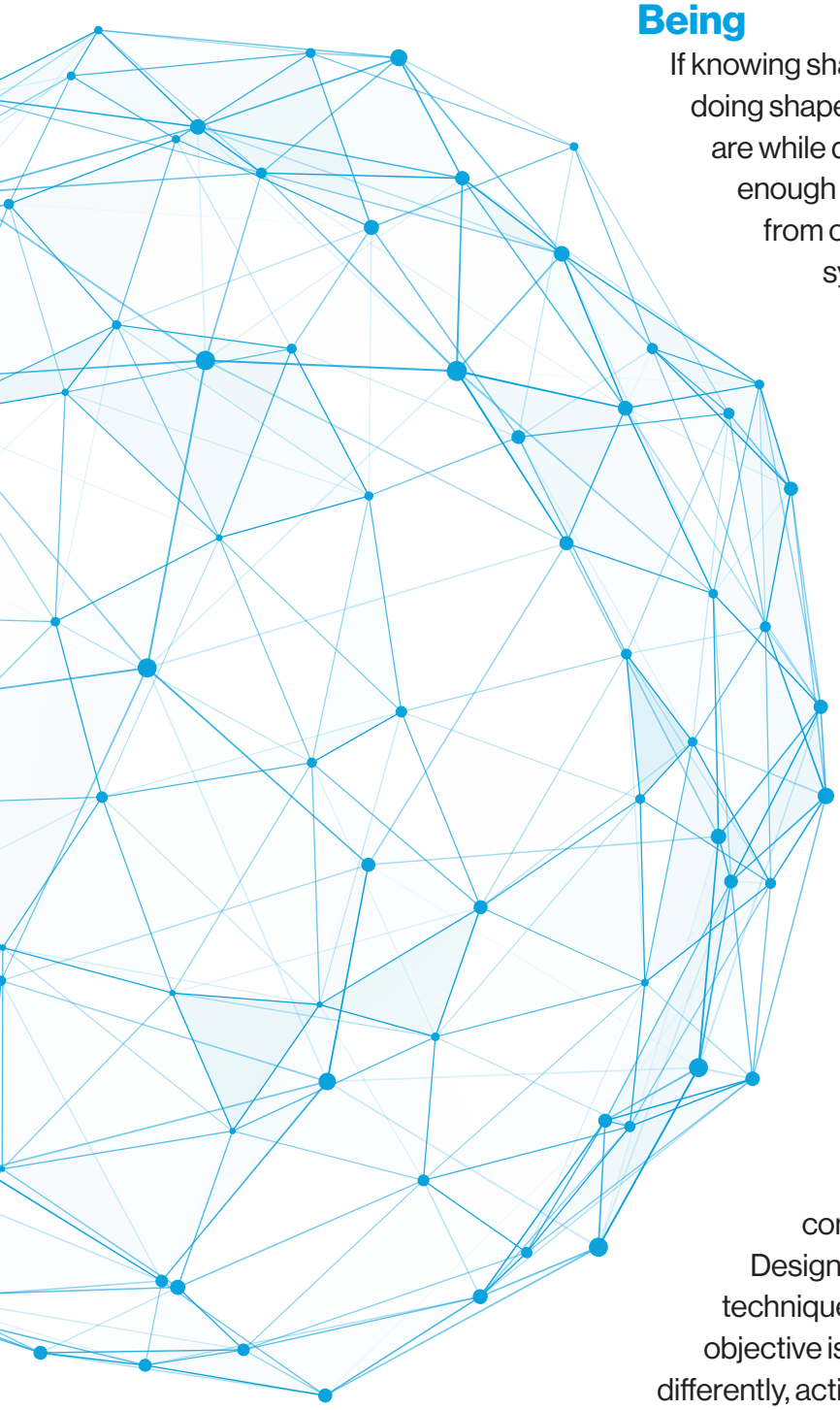

Being

If knowing shapes how leaders understand the world and doing shapes how they act within it, being shapes who they are while doing the work. Design Leaders must be curious enough to question assumptions, humble enough to learn from others, courageous enough to challenge inherited systems, and confident enough to act amid uncertainty. They must remain open without becoming indecisive, and principled without becoming rigid.

Being also requires the inner discipline to lead when transformation becomes difficult: to stay steady when others want quick answers, hold the long view, invite perspectives that challenge their own, and remain grounded in the values that give the institution its purpose. Universities shape lives, opportunities, knowledge, and public trust. The character and judgment of those who redesign them therefore matter as much as their technical competence.

Knowing, Doing, and Being are inseparable. Knowing without doing produces insight without change. Doing without knowing risks action without understanding. And neither is sufficient without the judgment, courage, humility, and integrity required to lead consequential change. For this reason, developing Design Leaders cannot be reduced to teaching techniques or building individual competencies. The deeper objective is to develop people capable of seeing institutions differently, acting with intention, and leading with the judgment that design requires. Nor can that capacity reside only in a president, rector, strategy function, or innovation unit. If universities must continually redesign themselves, the capacity for design must ultimately become institutional.

Universities need people throughout the organization who can recognize when systems are no longer serving their purpose, imagine alternatives, and mobilize others to create something better. Developing Design Leaders is therefore not separate from redesigning universities. It is how universities become capable of redesigning themselves.

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A Global Community of Design Leaders

The purpose of the **University Design Institute** is to develop the capacity of universities and their leaders to intentionally design institutions that are responsive to their context, adaptive to change, and capable of creating greater public value. We pursue this purpose by cultivating a global community of leaders who learn with and from one another while developing the capacity to design universities appropriate to their own societies.

Our work across countries has made us more convinced of Design Leadership over time. We have seen institutions confronting mass expansion and others confronting demographic contraction; universities being created almost from the ground up and centuries-old institutions seeking renewal; systems operating under strong government direction and institutions with substantial autonomy. These experiences have taught us that Design Leadership is not about transferring an institutional model from one context to another. It is about developing the capacity to design.

This distinction is fundamental. Higher education does not need greater institutional conformity. It needs greater institutional imagination. The challenges facing a university are shaped by its history, culture, resources, regulatory environment, learners, and the aspirations of the society it serves. What works at Arizona State University cannot simply be transplanted to another institution, just as a model developed in Singapore, Mexico, Kenya, or Ireland cannot be assumed to work elsewhere. Design begins with context. The goal is not to identify a universal model of the university, but to develop a way of thinking that enables leaders to design more intentionally within their own environments.

Yet context should not become an argument for isolation. Through UDI's work across higher education systems, we have seen that leaders separated by geography often confront remarkably similar questions. How do we expand access while maintaining quality? How should learning change in response to technology and artificial intelligence? How do we connect research more directly to societal needs? How do we build institutions that are financially sustainable and publicly valuable? How do we preserve essential academic values while changing systems that no longer serve us? And how do we develop the leadership capacity to continue adapting as the world changes?

A global community of Design Leaders creates the opportunity to learn across these differences without erasing them. The purpose is not to transfer solutions from one institution to another, but to transfer insight. An experiment in one university can challenge assumptions in another. A model developed in one national system can expand the imagination of leaders working in a very different one. Successes provide possibilities and failures provide lessons. The most useful question is rarely, *"How can we copy what they did?"* It is, *"What can we learn from why they did it, how they designed it, and what might that cause us to reconsider in our own context?"*

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The Institutions We Leave Behind

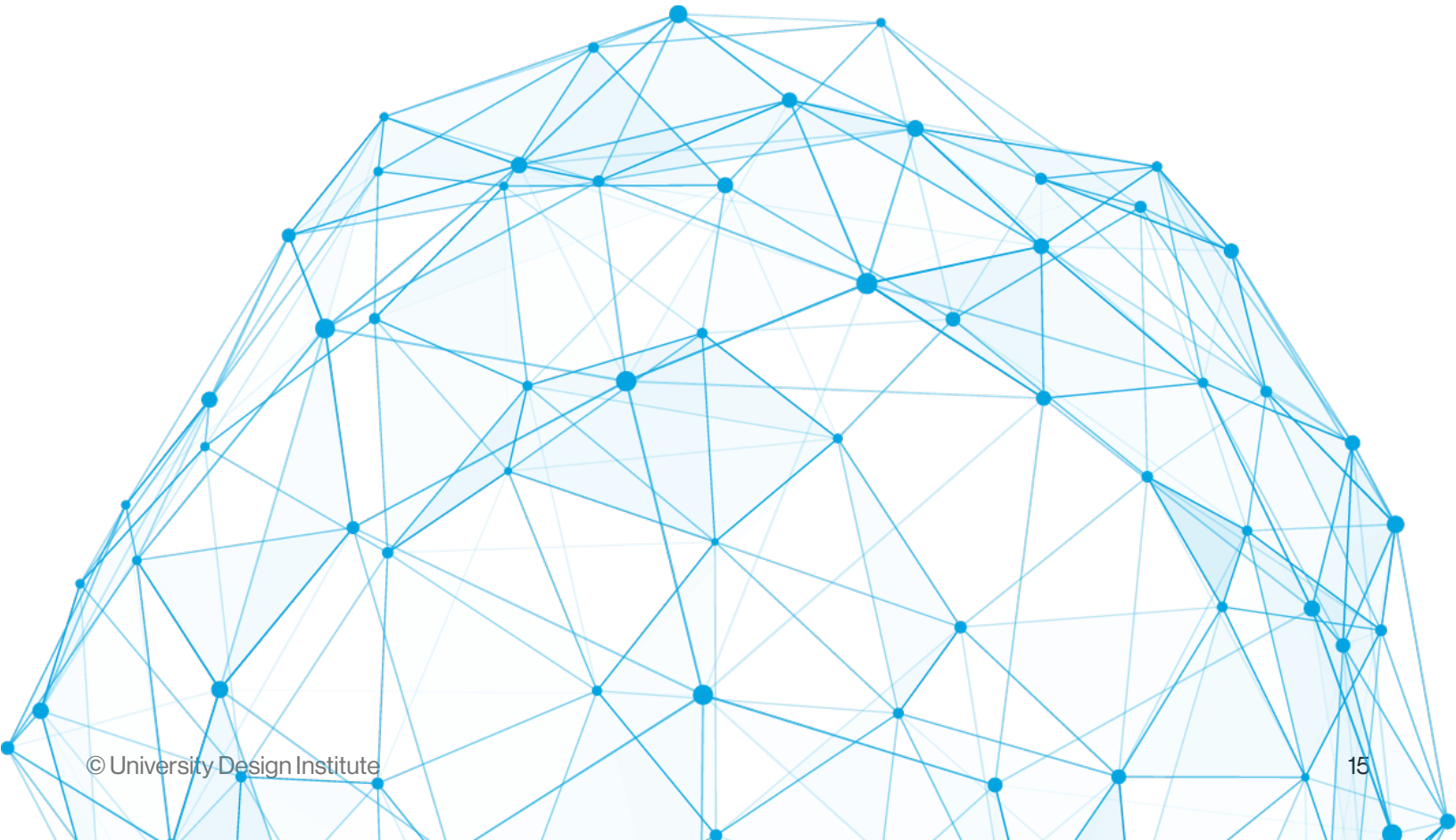
Every university leader inherits an institution designed by others. Its structures embody earlier choices. Its traditions carry forward enduring values as well as assumptions formed in another time. Its systems make some things possible and others unnecessarily difficult.

The question is what leaders choose to do with that inheritance. The work is not to abandon what came before, nor to preserve it unchanged. It is to discern what must endure, what must evolve, and what must now be imagined. That responsibility has become more consequential as the distance grows between the universities we inherited and the societies they must now serve.

We know this because we have lived the work. More than two decades of transformation at Arizona State University taught us that institutions once considered fixed can be redesigned around different aspirations and outcomes. Our work through the University Design Institute has taught us something equally important: there is no design to export. What works in one university, society, or moment cannot simply be transferred to another. The deeper capability is the capacity to design.

That may ultimately be the most important work of university leadership: not to create the perfect institution, but to create an institution capable of continually asking what it should become. Leaders eventually leave. The systems they shape remain. So do the possibilities those systems create—or constrain—for generations of learners, scholars, communities, and societies.

The future university is therefore not primarily a prediction to be made. It is a responsibility to be assumed. *We do not choose everything we inherit. We are responsible for what we leave behind.*



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