

Chronicle Festival

→ Building Trust During Change

Building a Network of Commitments: The Real Cultural Divide

By Howard Teibel

Higher education is not facing an ordinary moment. Enrollment pressures, political scrutiny, and cultural polarization have converged into a moment that tests not only strategy, but the character of leaders. We are being asked to hold competing truths simultaneously: protect academic integrity while ensuring financial durability; move decisively while honoring shared governance; and inspire confidence while absorbing institutional anxiety. In this environment, the greatest risk is not disagreement. It is the erosion of trust that silently undermines execution.

The most visible symptoms of strain show up in structure — governance models, reporting lines, decision rights. But beneath these visible debates lies something more consequential: weak communication practices around shared commitments. Commitments fracture when they remain ambiguous, when promises are assumed rather than negotiated, and when mistrust quietly shapes how we treat each other. To lead effectively

in this era, we must look beyond structure to the culture of commitment that holds a college or university together.

Imagine the following. The annual April budget meeting begins with a familiar ritual. The cabinet and academic leadership gather to review the institution's financial outlook. Remarks about transparency and alignment give way to discussions of enrollment, revenue and external financial pressures. Before long, the conversation turns to the budget itself. Professors raise concerns that the provost and deans rarely voice explicitly: the primacy of academic priorities over financial constraints, the effects on teaching and research, and the student experience that risks being overlooked.

Sound familiar? Many would consider this business as usual and even a sign of healthy governance. Look more closely, the divide in thinking and behavior is apparent.

The Divide

Too often, the tension between administrators and academics is framed around rules and reporting lines. Who has authority over curriculum versus budget? What do bylaws or accreditation standards require? What do shared governance practices say on paper? While faculty members see their responsibility as guarding the academic mission, administrators carry the charge of safeguarding financial sustainability and organizational survival. Both perspectives are rooted in commitment yet operate with different definitions of what it means to live that commitment.

Faculty commitment is expressed not only in defending academic standards and advancing research, but in mentoring students, stewarding disciplines, and contributing to the long-term intellectual reputation of the institution. Administrators' commitment lives in ensuring institutional viability: balancing budgets, aligning resources, and making difficult trade-offs around mission and long-term financial viability.

Both groups act in service of the institution yet measure success differently: one through rigorous pursuit of ideas and disciplines, the other through stewardship of systems and people. What should be complementary often feels like competing loyalty, with each side committed to its own set of shared principles. The divide is not between mission and margin. It is between different interpretations of stewardship and different habits of managing commitments.

Trust is not just a feeling. It is built through the disciplined management of commitments — clear requests, negotiated promises, and responsible renegotiation. Without those conversations, commitment becomes wishful thinking.

What is required are new habits of interaction that bridge the divide. The work is not ideological. It is linguistic. When a senior leader requests reductions without clarifying conditions of satisfaction (timelines, trade-offs, or consequences) mistrust begins before resistance ever surfaces.

When a dean agrees publicly but renegotiates privately, coordination is diminished.

Bridging this divide requires a shift in how we listen, coordinate, and lead. It begins by naming the breakdowns in our coordinated actions. When collaboration is transformed, governance becomes a lived expression of the mission. But mistrust is part of the historical fabric of higher education.

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The Origins of Mistrust

For much of the 20th century, expansion masked coordination weaknesses. Growth created alignment without requiring disciplined commitment management.

As financial pressures intensified from the 1970s forward (and especially after 2008) management language expanded while faculty authority and influence was diminished.

In the 2020s, these trends solidified into explicit cultural rifts. Faculty members perceived administrators as too quick to trade core values for expediency, while administrators saw the faculty as resistant or as an obstacle to necessary changes. Both sides acted out of commitment to the institution, yet their efforts were filtered through growing mistrust.

If this mistrust has been reinforced by decades of defensive postures, then rebuilding requires new cultural practices: ways of listening, coordinating, and leading that strengthen our capacity to manage commitments. Below are four antidotes that can transform how we coordinate and build trust.

1. Name the Divide as Cultural and Not Structural

Governance provides clarity in rules and structures but also masks the deeper issue. Faculty sees stewardship as preserving the academic mission, while administrators view it as sustaining financial health and institutional viability. Both perspectives operate around different but complementary concerns. When we reframe the divide as cultural and not structural, we shift the focus from power and authority to listening and managing commitments across organizational lines. Structures matter, but culture determines whether those structures are lived as rigid defenses or as frameworks for collaboration.

2. Practice Managing Commitments

Trust is the currency of effective governance, yet it is too often assumed rather than cultivated. When commitments are broken (which are inevitable as human beings), we justify mistrust. The shift needs to move from a guarantee we will do what we say we'll do, to a more flexible framework around the orchestration of promises. This freedom includes follow-through, making counter offers, and renegotiating promises when the circumstances change. The transformation lies in moving away from seeing promises as sacred to managing commitments well through changing circumstances. This learned set of skills allows for the flexibility that is inherent in coordination, and elevates trust across parties.

3. High-Velocity Decisions

Consensus feels safe yet is also a trap. Teams that rely on complete agreement reinforce differences and don't move tough decisions forward. Presidents and their leaders must model the discipline of "disagree and commit," distinguishing between the desire for unanimous agreement and the need for coordinated commitment. This principle is not about silencing differing opinions but distinguishing between the chronic need for "convincing." When teams look for opportunities to practice this principle, decisions become high-velocity as well as high-quality.

4. Adopt a First-Team Mindset

A favorite mantra in university settings is to find ways to operate as "One University" or one set of principles. The principle asks us to consider what's good for the whole, not just for a school, department, or college. A first-team mindset asks those at the top to put their shared needs as a top priority, versus putting our team's needs first. First team can be a principle practiced by the cabinet, collective deans or any team overseeing the collective work of some group. For example, when deans treat the academic leadership team as their primary allegiance, rather than competing for departmental advantage, they model stewardship as shared responsibility. The unintended consequence of focusing on your direct reports over your peer leadership group is direct reports suffer when their leaders are not on the same page.

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From Structures to Commitments

If higher education is to thrive in the years ahead, the work of governance cannot stop at structures, policies, or procedures. These provide clarity and scaffolding, but do not create the trust needed to sustain institutions through volatility. The divide we feel in our distinct roles live in how we interpret stewardship, how we make and keep commitments, and how we strengthen trust across the organization.

By naming the divide as cultural and recognizing that an organization is fundamentally a network of commitments and promises, we shift our focus to strengthening and embodying the daily practice

in the power of exceptional coordination. In an era of political scrutiny and public skepticism, internal mistrust weakens not only coordination but institutional legitimacy. When leadership teams cannot reliably manage commitments internally, it becomes far harder to defend the institution externally.

The survival of higher education will not be secured by more precise charts or procedures. It will depend on cultivating a culture where commitments are reliable, trust is built, and leadership is understood as a shared responsibility. The true measure of stewardship is not who holds authority, but how we hold one another accountable for the future we are entrusted to create. The future of our colleges and universities will be written not in declarations, but in the promises we choose to keep together.



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