

Findings of the 2009 Thought Leaders Symposium

By E. Lander Medlin

Clearly the economic storm clouds that gathered in 2008 all but burst wide open in 2009, and are now considered the largest recession since the Great Depression. The Wall Street financial meltdown, plummeting real estate values, decreasing consumer, and increasing unemployment are some of the most critical factors that have created structural deficits in federal, state, and local budgets.

Although education is a critical driver of success for our economy, we cannot escape the stark reality that reduced state appropriations and corresponding state budget reductions are cascading across higher education. In some cases higher education institutions are receiving a disproportionate share of the fiscal burden. Diminishing resources and tight fiscal times will be with us for some years to come. Nonetheless, we must endeavor to maintain a stable, safe, and stimulating environment so students can learn, teachers can teach, and researchers can innovate.

To help solve our most vexing problems, education needs your best efforts, your best thinking, and your entrepreneurial spirit! This is where the work stemming from APPA's Thought Leaders series is critical.

A HISTORY OF THE SYMPOSIUMS

In the spring of 2006, APPA established the annual Thought Leaders Symposium to spark the progressive discussion and distillation of major issues impacting colleges and universities' facilities and create a forum to disseminate information on alternative ways to approach these pressing problems and concerns. The Symposium seeks to engage

both the higher education community of leaders and facilities professionals in a dialogue about the future of higher education, the trends, issues, and concerns.

These types of discussions are critical to our industry because the challenges of change remain, and the myriad pressures of accessibility, affordability, and accountability are ever-present. However, to effectively manage the entire campus' physical assets in an environment of scarce resources, the educational facilities professional must understand all aspects of their facility as well

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as their impact on the complex mission of the institution. They must connect the goals of their operation with the educational outcomes of the institution.

The work of the 2006 Thought Leaders Symposium resulted in the distribution of the white paper titled *University Facilities Respond to the Changing Landscape of Higher Education*, which focused on the trends affecting higher education's future, and related these trends to the top 10 issues affecting facilities professionals. The 2007 Thought Leaders Symposium considered, in greater depth, three major challenges confronting higher education as a whole: evolving technology; changing stakeholder expectations; and the impact of competition on both these drivers of change.

They also developed a list of the top 10 critical facilities issues. They found that broad collaboration is the neon sign for success and that technology is an integral tool to create and develop community, thereby creating connections and enhancing the channels of communication.

The 2008 Thought Leaders Symposium explored the challenges of changing demographics, accountability, and the impact of institutional resistance to change on both these drivers. Given the need for flexibility, work must continue with institutional human resource professionals to ensure outdated hiring practices and salary scales are changed to enhance staff recruitment and retention efforts. Our collective response to accountability is effective strategic planning, setting institutional priorities, and establishing corresponding performance measures to demonstrate a culture of evidence and fact-based decision-making.

2009 THOUGHT LEADERS SYMPOSIUM

The 2009 Thought Leaders Symposium took a different turn by delving into the two major subject matter areas of environmental sustainability and energy, and the impact of the economic downturn on both these issues. Although both issues are closely related, participants believed the criticality of each topic required separate treatment in the report. Specific challenges were identified, some strategies to prepare for the future were discussed, the reality of a diminishing resource base was explored, and the critical leadership role of higher education with respect to these two areas was highlighted. Indeed, environmental sustainability has become a cause célèbre for higher education and must remain a priority even during this time of economic hardship.

The challenges for sustainability will be the increasing disconnect between short-term decisions and long-term goals, making an effective business case, chang-

ing the campus organizational culture, and thinking short-term, which hampers long-term investment. Strategically, leaders need to drive change, communicate with all stakeholders, and demonstrate/celebrate all successes. The role of higher education is critical since we shape the next generation of environmental leaders and our intellectual capital remains an unmatched, somewhat untapped resource.

As for energy issues on college and university campuses, the challenges for energy action are numerous, none the least of which is energy uncertainty and volatility and their associated risks. The impact of the recession is increasing the pressure to reduce energy costs more dramatically. Institutional processes and operations campus-wide are undergoing a similar culture shift as noted for sustainability.

Facilities professionals must engage the entire community in their energy conservation efforts. Some strategies include taking short-term actions with a long-term vision, further developing incentives for increased conservation efforts, engaging in risk assessment modeling, and diversifying or leveraging alternative funding sources. In fact, energy research at higher education institutions could play a valuable role for society. Offering beta sites to experiment with different energy strategies and conservation programs could also be explored. New and different partnerships should be further leveraged to enhance more creative energy solutions.

On the second day, our facilities experts considered these two subject matter areas and their economic implications, yet expanded their focus to encompass the following critical facilities issues for 2009-2010:


- Adjusting to the new “sustainability” reality
- Developing an institutional vision of sustainability
- Creating a leadership role for sustainability by facilities professionals
- Confronting economic challenges
- Fixing broken budget models
- Managing rising energy costs and energy volatility
- Engaging the campus to address

energy challenges

- Managing space
- Prioritizing renewal needs
- Meeting the challenges of workforce development

Each issue is discussed further, strategies are identified, and specific questions are formulated for facilities professionals to help their organization understand how to best position itself for the future, and further develop strategies for continued progress and improvement.

2009 SUMMARY REPORT

The summary report provides the detailed background and explanation for each of these subject matter areas and critical facilities issues along with a series of discussion questions you should use to begin a meaningful dialogue and search for solutions, and to do so collaboratively at the highest levels in the institution. 

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