# Case Study: Southern New Hampshire University
## Exceptional Leadership Orchestrates Transformative Change and Innovation

***Summary of Case Study.*** Southern New Hampshire University is our capstone case study for this chapter on Orchestrating Transformative Change.

The case traces the evolution of SNHU from a small regional business college to a global leader in online, competence-based learning, growing to serve hundreds of thousands of learners globally. The case demonstrates how a relatively unknown institution can leverage expeditionary strategies, shrewd capacity building, and cultural change to transform an online operation and take it to scale. It brings the insights gained from its many successes and a few mistakes, new organizational capacity, and talent to bear in reinventing its on-campus operations and aggressively visioning and preparing its graduates for the world of 2030.

Over the nearly 20-year leadership of President Paul LeBlanc, SNHU has reinvented the business models for hybrid, global institutions, focusing on new approaches to achieving enhanced learner outcomes and success throughout learner's careers, at significantly reduced cost. In its most recent strategic plan, SNHU has demonstrated excellent foresight in describing the world of work, learning, and living that its learners will face in 2030 and in shaping its programs, experiences, and tools accordingly.

**Why Read This?** Not every institution can be SNHU, but every aspiring transformative leader should read this case and learn what SNHU has achieved in orchestrating transformative change. Their vision of the emerging ecosystems in 2030's world of work and learning is first class. Their 2018-2030 strategic plan, which explores what they plan to do in preparing their learners for 2030, is a must read.
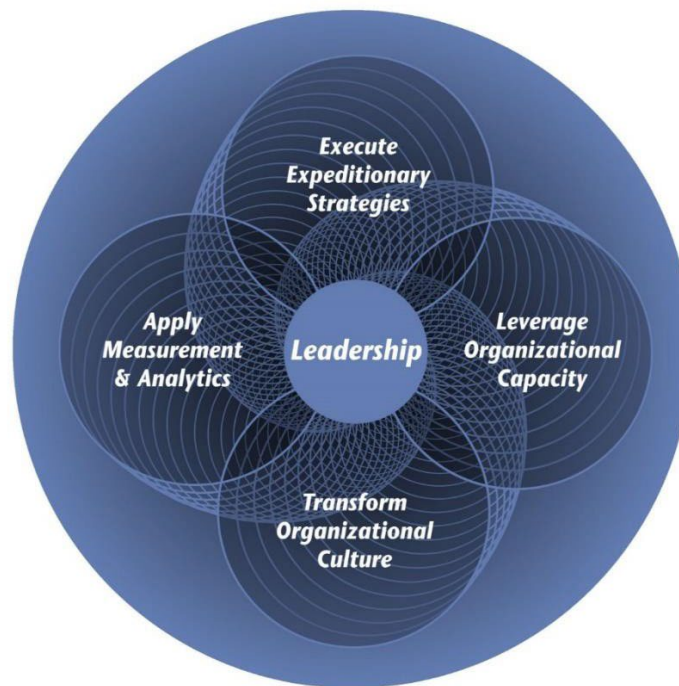
# *The Case Study*
### *(Referenced in Chapter VI)*

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) is the capstone case study for this chapter on Orchestrating Transformative Change. The case demonstrates how a relatively unknown independent institution can orchestrate leadership and action roadmaps, expeditionary strategies, shrewd capacity building, and cultural change to transform, as portrayed in Figure 1. In the process, SNHU has become a global leader in online, competency-based learning, serving hundreds of thousands of learners and has created pathbreaking academic and business models. Looking to the future, it is using the insights gained from these successes to reinvent its on-campus experience and envision the world of 2030 and the steps it must take to play a prominent role in it.

### *Figure 1*

## Orchestrating Transformative Change



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At the time Paul LeBlanc assumed the presidency, SNHU was classified as a small, "at risk," private institution.  And while this case study amply demonstrates LeBlanc's exceptional transformative leadership, it should also offer hope for other institutional leaders in a similar

position today. Many of the basic elements of his strategy can be replicated by presidents at similar institutions who have the strength, vision, and courage to do so. Neither President Paul LeBlanc nor his leadership team had this precise articulation of orchestrating transformative change in mind as they proceeded on the journey of building the SNHU we know today. Nevertheless, applying these concepts to their transformative expedition can help us understand how they achieved such remarkable success.

Southern New Hampshire University[33] enrolls 3,300 on campus and over 135,000 online students and is one of the fastest growing universities in the Nation. Since its founding in 1932 in Manchester, New Hampshire, the University has transformed from a for-profit school of accounting and secretarial science into a non-profit private institution offering over 200 programs, from micro-certificates to doctoral-level degrees in the business, education, liberal arts, social sciences, and STEM areas. SNHU has over 11,000 employees, with over 6,000 adjunct faculty members, and 1,700 faculty and staff focused on running online programs.

Revenues have grown to approach $1 billion, with a surplus of over $100 million in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2019. SNHU operates as a non-profit and all surpluses are plowed back into operations and capital expenditures. The University ensures that students are keeping pace with new technologies and professional requirements. SNHU was named the 2020 Most Innovative University in the North and one of the nation's "Best Regional Universities" by U.S. News & World Report. It was awarded the 21st Century Distance Learning Award for Excellence in Online Technology by The United States Distance Learning Association.

This case study is organized into five sections that explore each of the elements of Orchestrating Transformative Change portrayed in Figure 2, followed by a sixth on Results Achieved to 2021.  It should be noted that President LeBlanc and his staff's assistance with this case study has been exceptional and is deeply appreciated.  In addition, it should also be pointed out that the "mistakes" noted in this case are included at his suggestion.  They add a texture to the case that makes it just that much better.

*Figure 2 – The Six Sections Describing Orchestrating Transformative Change and its Outcomes*



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[33] https://www.snhu.edu/about-us

## Leadership

SNHU is exhibit one for the case that a transformative leader can make a huge difference in the trajectory and promise of an institution. The University has experienced explosive growth since Dr. Paul LeBlanc's arrival in 2003 and there is no reason to believe that this pace will slow in the years ahead. As extraordinary as this growth has been, it has also been achieved with a clarity of purpose and values and an abundance of innovation that is truly stellar. The University's mission and vision statements demonstrate this point.

*Mission: Southern New Hampshire University transforms the lives of learners. Our success is defined by our learners' success. By relentlessly challenging the status quo and providing the best support in higher education, Southern New Hampshire University expands access to education by creating high quality, affordable, and innovative pathways to meet the unique needs of each and every learner.*

*Vision: Make the world a better and more just place through our work, one learner at a time.*



As one reviews the strategic planning documents that have guided the University since Paul LeBlanc's arrival, there is a remarkable eloquence and clarity with regard to SNHU's directions. At the same time, there is a humble recognition that they inevitably will be modified as conditions change. They leave little doubt that LeBlanc wants SNHU to increase access to higher education, become more affordable, graduate a greater percentage of students, improve their career and life prospects, and provide greater flexibility in their learning options. He describes SNHU as being in the "hope" business.

Paul LeBlanc likens the presidency to playing a high-stakes poker game. You have to play the cards you have, not the ones you wish you had. When he arrived at SNHU, it was clear that demand for its programs was declining. But it did have one card to play that he thought held significant promise—an online continuing education program offered to personnel at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. He was aware of the tremendous success of the University of Phoenix, but that it, along with other for-profit providers, at the time was under fire for its low graduation rates and student loan malfeasance. He believed that these circumstances opened a window for SNHU—a campus-based non-profit—to move in and compete successfully.

LeBlanc spent several years reengineering the SNHU's online education office so that it was truly student-centric, cost effective, and ready for the national marketplace.  What he did next is the stuff of organizational legend. Recognizing that the program could not develop a national footprint without a significant investment in marketing, he persuaded his Board to make a $4m loan from the University's endowment to fund a national campaign. This marketing campaign, coupled with the program's reengineered learner-centric approach, was an overnight success, exceeding everyone's expectations.  LeBlanc described the experience as a "rocket ride." Neither SNHU or LeBlanc ever looked back. The section on expeditionary strategies discusses how he parlayed this program into a huge win for SNHU and the start of an extraordinary expedition, aimed at disrupting higher education as we know it.

**Action Roadmaps Through Strategic Plans.** Through his years, President LeBlanc has produced, with input from SNHU's stakeholders, a series of exceptional five-year strategic plans. They leave no doubt as to the mission and directions for the University and articulate in great detail the initiatives that must be executed to achieve those aims. The plans are also striking in their candor about what went right and wrong regarding the previous five-year plan.

The 2013-2018 plan laid out an aggressive vision for expansion, which resulted in explosive growth in the depth and diversity of SNHU's academic programs, enrollment, and financial health. The 2018-23 plan traced the University's history since its founding, presenting in one infographic the hockey stick shape of its growth since 2007. (A version of this chart, extended to include actual results through 2021 and the 2030 vision, appears as Figure 7 in the concluding section on Results.)

The ***Planning Horizon*** for the 2018-23 Strategic Plan was five years, reaching out to 2023. This is
typical for institutional strategic plans. However, SNHU is exceptional in how it utilized a ***Vision Horizon*** that reached out to 2030, the year by which SNHU expects systemic transformation to have occurred in the ecosystem for work, learning, and living. SNHU stated its clear ***Strategic Intent*** to begin to prepare learners for the world they would inherit in 2030, starting immediately. These approaches are analogous to the "Planning from the Future Backward" methodology in our Action Roadmap tools described in Chapter IV.

Figure 3 on the next page demonstrates how SNHU articulated and wove together three key trends
pertaining to 2030.

- Revolutionizing the Learner's Place in the 2030 Workforce,

- SNHU's Strategic Goals from its 2018-23 Strategic Plan, and

- By 2030 VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) will Require New Approaches to Strategy, Talent, and Disruption

*Figure 3 - SNHU Sets Sights on Preparing Learners for the World of 2030*

| Revolutionizing the Learner's Place in the 2030 Workforce | SNHU's Strategic Goals from its 2018-2023 Strategic Plan | By 2030 VUCA Will Require New Kinds of Strategy, Talent, and Disruption |
|---|---|---|
| **Human/Machine Collaboration** **How might artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning challenge us to develop the skills and ethics to work in human-machine teams?** | **Commitment #1: Deliver a broad portfolio of high-demand credentials leading to meaningful work and purposeful lives.** SNHU will increase the number of programs, array of credentials, and pathways to completion. It will target outreach to learners who have few, if any, pathways. Workforce aligned programs will be part of a lifelong learning ecosystem. | **Future-Focused Planning Methods** Strategic planning at SNHU will be informed by trends, signals, and forces that inspire creativity. SNHU will make integral use of a wide range of scenarios: 1) Growth), 2) Constraint, 3) Utter Collapse, and 4) Transformation, modeling futures in these scenarios. |
| **Internet of Things** **How might the Internet of Things (IOT) enable us to simulate everything and challenge us to integrate simulation literacy into daily practice?** | **Commitment #2: Provide the best and personalized learner support in higher education**. Learners will have a curated learning pathway and support. SNHU will understand our learners and what they need. Passionately dedicated staff. Drive down costs and prices, reach new learner groups. | **Deploy Digital Talent** By 2030 SNHU will deploy AI talent, providing market intelligence to our leadership team. All forms of strategy will be shaped by AI tools and talent. This will transform nature of jobs in our organization. Digital talent will enable SNHU to create a new, hyper-personalized culture. |
| **Personal  Economies** **How might the rise of digital platforms challenge people to fashion their own economic opportunities?** | **Commitment #3: Attract, develop, empower, and retain world-class talent to deliver on our mission.** SNHU will be an employer of choice for a diverse, national, and global workforce. Employees will be passionate about our mission and reinforce our culture of welcoming and belonging in an inclusive, learner-focused SNHU. | **Willfully Disrupt** SNSU will build R&D capacity to model complex systems that have previously evaded our understanding. This R&D will enable new capacities for large-scale transformation, carried out through design sprints, prototyping, and simulation. SNHU will confront disruptions and threats head on. |
| **Spectrum Demographics** **Could "Spectrum Identities" replace traditional demographics, enable highly personalized services, and change how people manage their reputations?** | **Commitment #4: Deploy transformational technology to support next-gen learning on a global scale.** Technology infuses everything we do. SNHU is building an industry-leading technology platform, creating strategic advantage. Digital processes will provide powerful data analytics, consumer-grade experiences for learners, and the ability to serve a global learner population – while closing the equity gap. | |
| **Shape-Shifting  Organizations** **How might distributed computing enable organizations to redesign themselves to maximize human value in a world undergoing rapid change?** | **Commitment #5: Create the capacity and foundation on which to build the 2030 learning ecosystem.** SNHU will continue to challenge the higher education status quo and systemic inequities as we work to serve the learner of 2030. Rethink our approach to learner success. Reduce cost and expand accessibility. | |
| | **Four Types of Initiatives:** To support the execution of each of these Commitments/Strategic Goals, SNHU developed four types of initiatives: 1)Game Changing, 2) Foundation Building, 3) Scouting, and 4) Strengthening. | |

### *Revolutionizing the Learner's Place in the 2030 Workforce*

Early in the 2018-23 Strategic Plan, SNHU described five trends that would transform the workforce by 2030: 1) Human/ Machine Interaction, 2) Masterminds of Reality, 3) Personalized Economies, 4) Spectrum Demographics, and 5) Shape-Shifting Organizations. These trends described a world in which learning, work, and the workforce will all transform. The plan committed SNHU to preparing its learners to thrive in this disrupted, transforming workforce. This promise then helped shape the five Commitments/Strategic Goals and the three fresh approaches to Strategy, Talent, and Disruption discussed later in the 2018-23 Strategic Plan.

### *SNHU's Strategic Goals in the 2018-2023 Strategic Plan*

Figure 2 contains a short paragraph describing each of the Five Commitments. They all contain elements necessary to build an enterprise capable of serving the 2030 vision - programs, learner support, links to employability, technology, and talent – especially talent. Commitment #5 makes a specific commitment to "challenge the higher education *status quo* and systemic inequities as we work to serve the learner of 2030."

### *By 2030 VUCA will Require New Approaches to Strategy, Talent, and Disruption*

SNHU frequently uses the notion of a VUCA World (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity). VUCA demands that leaders avoid traditional, outdated approaches to their management, leadership, and day-to-day work. In this spirit, President LeBlanc plans to: 1) leverage AI, ML, simulation, and other technologies to dramatically upgrade SNHU's approach to foresight and strategy; 2) develop "digital talent" – staff, collaborators, and gig employees – capable of embedding these new practices in SNHU's operations; and 3) deploy technologies and digital talent to confront disruptions and threats head on.

Taken together, the elements in Figure 2 illustrate how SNHU effectively used Vision 2030 to extend its ***Vision and Transformation Horizons*** well beyond the five-year Planning Horizon. This articulated, in a stellar fashion, both its vision and the imperative to transform to address changes in the work and learning environment. The efforts defined in Figure 2 have yielded a new, revolutionary blueprint for SNHU and higher education for the Fourth Industrial Age.  We are unaware of a strategic plan in higher education that adopts the foresight principles that we outlined in Chapters I – III so capably. In addition, SNHU also developed a ***Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness*** in 2018 which reiterated its commitment to racial and social justice and educational opportunity.  This document reinforced the commitments made in the 2018-23 Strategic Plan.

## Measurement and Analytics

Each of the five commitments in 2018-23 Strategic Plan contains a series of initiatives with measurable goals. Their completion and impact are tracked on a regular schedule. With each review, course corrections are made and progress celebrated. This measurement process is a key lever for the orchestration of SNHU's efforts to transform.

SNHU is data-driven institution. Customer and employee satisfaction are regularly measured, reviewed and acted upon. Process performance is constantly under review and improved based on these reviews. In addition, the commitment to use AI, ML, simulation and other technologies; the recognition of the need for digital talent; and the will to deploy them will significantly upgrade SNHU's capacity to disrupt and anticipate in the future.
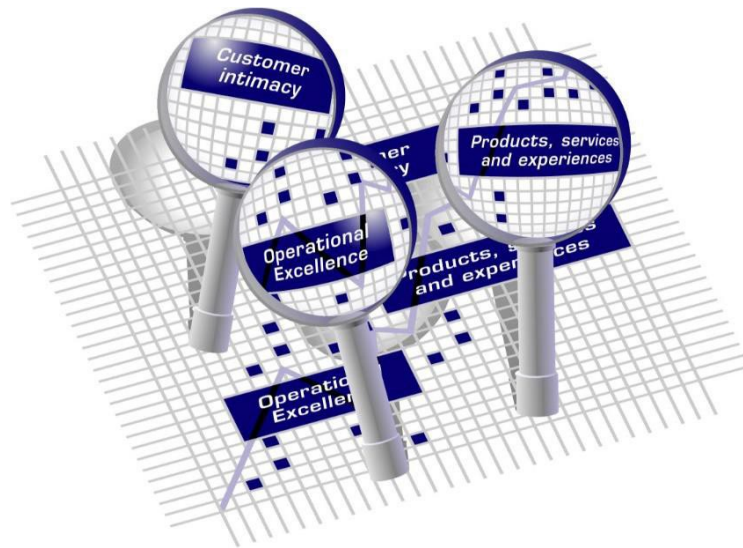


SNHU has made significant progress over the past decade in its use of embedded analytics to optimize student success. Real-time analytics are used to enable interventions geared to the personalized needs of individual learners.

## Strategic Expeditions

This discussion focuses on the strategic expeditions undertaken during the LeBlanc years from 2003 to present. Since his arrival, SNHU has been on an extraordinary journey toward greatness. As enumerated in Figure 3, this expedition has included an online learning revolution, the development of a large array of innovative programs, the transformation of the on-campus experience, and the breakthrough vision for 2030 just discussed.

Until recently, SNHU has used a variation of the Track A and B approach for organizational development described by Clark Gilbert, Matthew Eyring, and Richard N. Foster (Harvard Business Review, 2012). Gilbert et al argue that a two-track model allows an institution to focus effectively on two major, but different types of change efforts at a time. The two tracks are led and operate separately, allowing each the focus and leeway necessary to carry out the goals they have been assigned. Gilbert et al maintain that the challenges and skills needed for the evolution of core programs (legacy businesses) are different from those required for the development of new, disruptive models.  At SNHU, this two-track approach was enabled by what Paul LeBlanc refers to as a "civil alliance" with the faculty, which we will discuss further in the section on the development of the organizational capacity for transformation.

It is doubtful that Paul LeBlanc foresaw the full outlines of the expedition chronicled in Figure 4 as he undertook this long transformational campaign.  What is clear, however, is that he learned from each program initiative and steadily built a transformed array of offerings that, combined, form the broad outlines of a radical new higher learning ecosystem. This ecosystem provides SNHU with capability to serve its learners with most of the higher education opportunities they will need throughout their lives.

In addition to being an economic engine, the ***Global Campus*** allowed the development of a revolutionary academic program model with the following characteristics:

- Dedicated faculty and instructional technology staff design all of the courses, resulting in a better product that is built from the outset to be scalable.

- The courses are delivered by adjunct faculty and staff, who receive more support from the institution than is the case at most other colleges and universities.

- Support services for students are intentionally designed to be world class, e.g., a prospective learner receives an answer within five minutes of any inquiry.

- SNHU's  approach to course development and delivery, has allowed it to bend the cost curve, and offer a high-quality student experience at lower cost than its competition.

*Figure 4 - SNHU's Strategic Expeditions toward Greatness*

| Year | Track | Program | Description |
|------|-------|---------|-------------|
| 2008 | B | Global Campus | The Global Campus (GC) is the basis of SNHU's national footprint and its economic engine. It provides the resources to invest in the Strategic Plan and serve a growing and diverse community of learners, allowing the University to lean into the future of higher education and the global workforce. SNHU's goal is to become one of America's three dominant nonprofit providers of online degrees in terms of size and the best in terms of quality. |
| 2012 | B | Workforce Partnerships | Workforce Partnerships and the competency-based education program allow SNHU to reach new and historically underserved learner populations, build innovative partnerships, align with workforce needs, and place it at the forefront of the national dialogue on the policy, innovation, and future of higher education.<br>The goal is to be the leading and best provider of competency-based degree programs with a measurable impact on the workforce development needs of the country. |
| 2016 | B | Global Education Movement | Global Education Movement (GEM) is the world's most ambitious effort to bring full university degrees to refugees, the most marginalized learners imaginable. After three years of honing the delivery model in Rwanda, GEM has expanded to serve refugee populations in Malawi, Kenya, South Africa, and Lebanon. In the works since 2016, GEM had its timeline shifted forward with the receipt of the largest grant in SNHU's history as an institution, from a group of anonymous donors in 2017. |
| 2017 | A | College of Engineering, Technology and Aeronautics Established | The College of Engineering, Technology, and Aeronautics (CETA) is a recent addition to the University, part of the acquisition of Daniel Webster College in 2017. Recently given full ABET accreditation for aeronautical and mechanical engineering, CETA moves SNHU more fully into high-demand STEM fields. |
| 2018 | B | Merger with LRNG | Merger enables SNHU to provide online, just-in-time learning for underserved learners that includes a badging component as part of the life-long learning ecosystem it is building. |
| 2019 | A | Transformation of the On-Campus University College | University College (UC) provides an established, residential campus and offers the University's "coming-of-age" experience to younger learners. The goal is to offer the best coming-of-age, residential undergraduate education possible for traditional-age students for whom college success is not a guarantee. |
| 2020 | A | Southwest Ops Center in Tucson, AZ | SNHU hired 100 staff for its Southwest Operations Center which will better serve its online students in Western time zones. It is located in downtown Tucson and is close to major corporate neighbors. |
| 2021 | B | Micro-Credential Partnerships and Acquisition of Kenzie Academy | In January 2021, SNU and EdX launched a Micro-Bachelors ® Program in Business Analytics and Data Management. In March 2021, SNHU acquired the Kenzie Academy which offers high-quality programs leading to alternative credentials in software engineering and UX Design at an affordable price. The goal is to create a new, diverse pipeline of talent and close the opportunity gap for underserved students. |

The ***Workforce Partnerships*** began with the College for America Program, which was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Lumina Foundations. The Program is designed to provide baccalaureate-level instruction in the workplace. Major employers were recruited to partner in offering the Program, using job tasks as projects and management staff as vocational mentors. The outcomes for the program are competency based, and it is the first such program to be approved by the US Department of Education. As time passed, company partners asked SNHU to expand access to its other programs, leading to a change in the name of program to Workforce Partnerships.

The ***Global Education Movement*** is a logical extension of SNHU's vision to "Make the world a better and more just place through our work, one learner at a time." It is also an excellent way for it to explore the opportunities and challenges for SNHU in the Global marketplace, particularly in the Third World. It is funded from a large start-up gift from a group of University donors.

The ***College of Engineering, Technology an Aeronautics (CETA)*** provides SNHU with an avenue to enhance its STEM capacity and programming, especially for the University College. This addition preceded but is related to the current effort to transform the University College.

In 2018, ***SNHU and LRNG merged*** to build a highly innovative learning and workforce solution for cities and employers across the U.S. LRNG fulfills this mission by creating personalized pathways that give learners the right learning, at the right time, and at the right place in their lives. The program is offered through an online platform that enables students to discover vocational knowledge/skills areas they want to pursue, to access learning playlists that provide them with that learning, and to achieve badges that provide evidence that this learning has occurred. This partnership provides SNHU with just-in-time learning and badging capabilities and one more critical component for the lifelong learning ecosystem it is building.

The ***Transformation of the On-Campus University College*** marks the first time that Paul LeBlanc has sought to transform the historic core of the University. It should be noted that while there was no effort to transform it until recently, the College has grown from 2,000 to 3,300 students since 2003, been enhanced by the addition of CETA and received a substantial array of new facilities and renovations.

With this effort, begun in 2019, SNHU is using for the first time the heart of its innovative learning ecosystem concept. As shown in Figure 5, "The Idea" defines a new concept of the University as a truly learner-centric institution. It operationalizes this role by serving as a curator of learning for each student based on a deep data-based knowledge of that person and their goals. It translates these needs into tailored learning experiences and assesses and credentials what the student can do, based on their learning from these experiences. But it does not stop there: it seeks to become a lifelong learning partner, staying with that learner for their entire life, using different pricing mechanisms to encourage that kind of long-term relationship.

*Figure 5 – SNHU's View of the Learner-Centric Institution*
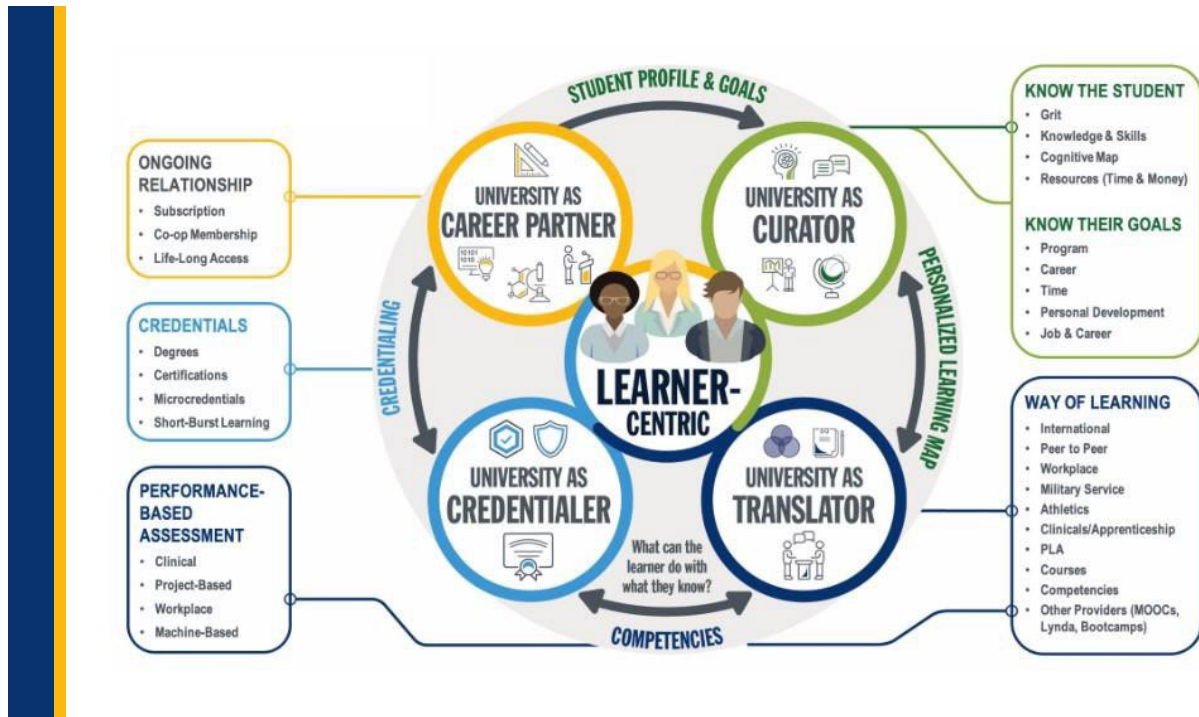


The capacity to provide this individually advised, curated, instructed, assessed ecosystem will be made possible through the extensive use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). While the basic phases of the undergraduate experience will continue, it will not be offered in the traditional peer cohort fashion and serve the student more organically as their personal (coming of age) and intellectual development proceed. At each juncture in the program, learners will be coached and mentored, much of it through AI, on what the best next steps should be. It should be noted that there is every expectation that this new approach will significantly increase student learning and, because it is scalable, will succeed in bending the cost curve. One final note, in an excellent example of courageous leadership and institutional generosity, Paul LeBlanc launched the program in Fall 2020 tuition free to enable students who were adversely impacted by COVID-19 to go to college. The only charge was for room and board.

SNHU *Launched a Southwest Operations Center in Downtown Tucson, Arizona* in February 2020, just before COVID hit. Its purpose is to provide service for online learners in the Western time zones. It also creates a physical presence in the Tucson business community, with corporate neighbors like Caterpillar, Hexagon Mining, Madden Media, Tucson Electric Power, and Ernst & Young.

One can see how the lifelong learning ecosystem envisioned by Paul LeBlanc could work with the current array of programs that SNHU offers. But the addition of the *Kenzie Academy in 2021* suggests that the plan is for an even richer ecosystem in which a wide range of academic

and vocational training programs is contemplated. The Kenzie Academy offers a new array of non-degree credentials that learners are sure to demand in greater measure in the near future. They also have the virtue of providing affordable access to valuable credentials for the disadvantaged. Earlier in 2021, SNHU partnered with EdX to launch Micro-Bachelors® Programs in Business analytics and Data Management.

### *A Mistake: An Effort to Bring Online Higher Education to China*

In 2011, SNHU was one of first American institutions to get approval to offer online degrees in China. Many other institutions were rushing in and building campuses. The plan for SNHU was to target a tier of Chinese students who couldn't afford to come to America but coveted a US degree and would be willing to engage online. An office was opened in China and staffed. About $1M was invested in the program, MOUs were signed, and some good relationships were formed. But then the official approvals to open the program did not come.  Finally, the president of a Chinese partner institution pulled Paul LeBlanc aside and said, "This isn't going to happen anytime soon.  We will get there eventually…. maybe in 10 years."

What SNHU learned from this venture was that the market has to be ready – and at that point they didn't understand that reality sufficiently, nor did they understand the Chinese Culture well enough. It is now more evidence and data driven and assesses potential opportunities much more thoroughly. It pulls the plug when it needs to and doesn't let things drag on. Paul LeBlanc took the decision to pull out of China to his board, which supported the recommendation. Unfortunately, not a lot of higher education understands that there is no education in the second kick of the mule. You need to learn from the first kick and act quickly to avoid the second.

The next strategies on SNHU's expedition have yet to be defined, but they will certainly ensure that it continues its learner-centric expedition and continues to disrupt the higher education marketplace.

## Building and Leveraging Organizational Capacity

As one examines the successful pursuit of these ambitious expeditionary strategies, it is clear that substantial efforts have been required to build SNHU's capacity to execute them. Figure 6 lists those capacities and describes them.

Once SNHU faculty and staff are on board, they are provided a steady regimen of onboarding and leadership development programs that encourage them to develop as leaders and steadily progress in the SNHU organization.

President LeBlanc is very clear that a key to SNHU's success has been ***Attracting and Retaining World Class Talent***. He believes that leaders have to be hardnosed about personnel and insist that only the right people are on the bus. They also need to require sound, hard-hitting assessments of people. Too often, higher education puts up with mediocre people and only rarely removing non-performers. Leaders also need to recognize that most people can be right for a position at one point in time and not in others. This is even true of presidents.

Paul Le Blanc recognized early on that some of the talent he needed would have to come from the for-profit sector, where capacities in several strategic functional areas —marketing, human resources, and IT—far exceed those of folks who have spent their careers in higher education. That said, SNHU has a lot of excellent employees who have come up through higher education.

In his search for talent, he casts a wide net. SNHU brings in 40 people every week and until recently they had no talent development team. They brought in an HR person from the financial services industry who got them on track to hire strategically. They now have teams that procure talent and then onboard them. It takes such a load off managers and results in stronger talent that is fitted better to the new organization. In the cases of HR, IT, and financial aid, they looked outside and had those hired come in and "break" those functions and rebuild them in line with best practices.  In the early days of SNHU suffered from inadequate talent and lack of training for SNHU employees—they were like ducks paddling like crazy below water, but looking OK on the top. Now they actually hire in anticipation of growth so the people required are in place and ready to go when the new demand hits. They hired 636 persons in anticipation of increased demand from COVID.

Starting with a major reengineering of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard online program he inherited, Paul LeBlanc instituted a **student-centric process improvement** approach. In all process improvement work done at the University, the first question is how well the process being improved serves students. Best practice process design and improvement tools are used to achieve transformation and significant performance gains.

### *Figure 6 - Initiatives to Build SNHU's Organizational Capacity*

| Capacity | Description |
|---|---|
| Attract, Develop, Empower and Retain **World Class Talent** to Deliver on the SNHU Mission | At SNHU these is a strong emphasis on becoming an employer of choice for a diverse global workforce. Employees are to be passionate about the SNHU mission and reinforce its culture of welcome and belonging. They are to see themselves as interdependent and boundary spanning, working together to serve each student. SNHU, in turn, will provide with the training they need and reward their efforts.<br><br>There is also a strong commitment to the idea of getting the right people on the bus and in the right seat. To build and launch the Global Campus, Paul LeBlanc retained a search firm to go outside of higher education to identify an experienced technology leader from a for-profit company. The individual turned out to be just the leader needed in the early phases of the Global Campus operation, but he was replaced recently with an internal hire.<br><br>SNHU has built a multi-faceted employee development Learning Ecosystem that provides for employee onboarding, team leader development, a director/dean/manager six-month cohort leadership program, and an executive leadership program. |
| Student-Centric Process Design, Delivery and Improvement Capacity | In mounting the Global Campus, they broke lots of the naval base online processes and remade them, all with the objective of offering simple, responsive services that were student-centric and that could be scaled. Required considerable new hires—half from the for-profit sector and half from higher education. All 15 of the original online staff had to move on.<br><br>This initial focus on a student-centric process approach has carried over into all that SNHU does. Its processes are to be as simple and interoperable as possible and best in class. The results these processes produce in many cases significantly outstrip performance in the higher education sector; for example, every student contact with the University is responded to within five minutes. |
| Deploy **Transformational Technology** to Support Next Generation Learning Globally | SNHU is building an industry-leading technology platform, taking IT from utility to strategic advantage. Its enterprise solutions will increase access and create end-to-end digital processes that provide powerful data analytics, a consumer grade experience for learners, and the ability to serve a global population of learners. These services will close equity gaps by lowering costs and expanding access. |
| **Innovation Center** | The Center was established to centralize efforts toward preparing for a world of learning for which technologies and processes have yet to be created. |
| **One University Initiative** | In the earlier years of the LeBlanc administration, the University operated in a highly decentralized fashion. In 2015, the One University Initiative was undertaken to recalibrate this level of decentralization through the identification of areas where it made the University less effective in serving learners, particularly as the University looked forward.<br><br>The organization approach adopted to facilitate this recalibration was the matrix organization, allowing the University to become more fluid, agile and shape-shifting to address the vicissitudes of the VUCA World. SNHU's way of implementing the matrix is to create cross-functional communities of practice that are assigned critical University challenges and given significant leeway to address the challenge. |

SNHU throughout Paul LeBlanc's term has been an early adopter of ***transformational technology*** to better serve its students, to scale its operations and to bend the cost curve. It is clear in the 2018-2023 plan—particularly the section looking forward to 2030—that technology is seen as a key enabler of the delivery of educational experiences that are tailored to the needs of each learner and that provide the preparation they need to function effectively in the world. It is also essential to build talent and give them the tools to operate at the levels of productivity and future-focus mandated to succeed in the 2030 competitive environment. The ***Innovation Center*** provides a skunkworks for the imagination and development of these innovations.

Finally, the ***One University initiative*** was developed to recalibrate the organizational structure, processes and services of the University and to develop new matrix organizational models that can operate more flexibly in an increasingly VUCA World.

***Two Mistakes in Technology:*** In 2014, the College for America needed an LMS that could service the needs of its students better than any of the options available at the time. So SNHU built tits own software solution on top of Salesforce. The solution was quite successful and they spun it off as a separate for-profit corporation with 60 staff, calling it Motivis Learning. Motivis attracted a substantial number of clients.

But the SNHU leadership quickly learned that they didn't know how to do a technology startup. They also learned not to lose focus...with this initiative they found they had overcommitted themselves from the standpoint of leadership time. They were also overly enthusiastic and gave Motivis too much cash. After the episode was over, one of his Board members involved in venture capital said that "Creativity craves restraint." The ongoing and large cash flow had allowed the Motivis leadership to become unfocused. If Paul LeBlanc were to do it over, he would select a board for Motivis whose members had a track record with start-ups. With those experienced hands advising him, he could have seen the issues sooner.

The second mistake in leveraging organizational capacity occurred when SNHU was smaller and growing fast. Their Student Information System (Elucian Colleague) was not adequate for their needs, but they didn't want to take the time to procure and install a new one. But what they found is that the pain of making changing such systems only gets worse with passing time. Now it is costing SNHU millions of dollars to transition to the Banner system. They should have bitten the bullet and moved to convert five years earlier.

## Transform Organizational Culture

SNHU may be unexcelled in the vitality and clarity of its culture, which Paul LeBlanc has purposefully developed and fostered throughout his tenure. The characteristics of this culture are described in Figure 7 below. There are no surprises in its values—all are intended to reinforce SNHU's passionate commitment to a student-centric approach. Even its leadership philosophy—addressed explicitly in 2018-2023 plan—is aimed at fostering leaders whose main purpose is working effectively with others to make things work for SNHU learners. A signal achievement regarding culture was Paul LeBlanc's forming of a "civil alliance" with the traditional on-campus faculty at the outset of his term. In the alliance, he gained their understanding and support for the development of transformative offerings to compensate for projected declines in enrollment, invited them to participate in the development of these programs on his terms and promised improved support for the on-campus program in terms of operating funds and enhanced facilities.  Faculty support has not waned.

### *Figure 7 - Elements of the SNHU Organizational Culture*

| Culture Characteristic | Description |
|---|---|
| Understanding and Respect for the Traditional Academic Culture | At the outset of his presidency, Paul LeBlanc formed a "Civil Alliance" with the SNHU traditional faculty. It centered on a common understanding of SNHU's need to develop new offerings to survive and a commitment to support the development of the traditional campus. The alliance continues today. |
| Learner First | No matter how large SNHU grows, each learner will feel that the faculty and staff are dedicated to their success. The first question in starting a new project will always be: "How will this help learners?"<br><br>In its effort to serve its learners better, the University has taken the position that the barriers they face are the institution's as well. They include economic barriers, declining trust in higher education, impact of automation, work/life balance, uncontrolled variables (e.g., government policy), and future forces and challenges. |
| Talent and Culture | SNHU will hire and cultivate people who are committed to its mission and vision, and who understand and reflect its learners. The University provide training and professional development opportunities and promote leadership literacies. It prioritizes culture-building among its employees. |
| Data-Informed | The University uses data to better understand its learners and itself. It uses these data and associated metrics to guide the efforts of student-facing teams and develop a deeper understanding of the learner experience. |
| Core Values | SNHU's core values that guide the University's actions and serve as cultural touchstones are: Exude Passion, Challenge the Status Quo, Do the Right Thing Every Time, Exhibit Grit, and Embrace Diversity.  In addition, the University is dedicated to being affordable, accessible and affordable, committed to student completion, and quality academics. |
| Leadership Philosophy | SNHU's leadership strategy is based on the ideas of interoperability and interdependence as the foundation for driving scalable, innovative growth in alignment with the University Mission and Vision. |

. As was noted earlier, Paul LeBlanc adopted a variation on the Track A (Legacy Programs) and B (Disruptive Programs) approach for the pursuit of transformative change. As he executed his One University Initiative in 2015 and more recently the transformation of the University College, he was, in effect, bringing the two tracks back together to use some of the insights gained from Track B to transform Track A at SNHU. With this development, SNHU is now well on the road to transformation and free to focus greater energy on the disruption of the higher education marketplace—in alignment with the accelerating changes in the larger world. We know of no other institution better situated.

The Chronicle of Higher Education's Great Colleges to Work For Survey provides a clear demonstration of the power of strong culture and an unswerving commitment to recruiting and retaining the best talent. Each year SNHU's results have qualified it for a "Great College to Work For" designation.

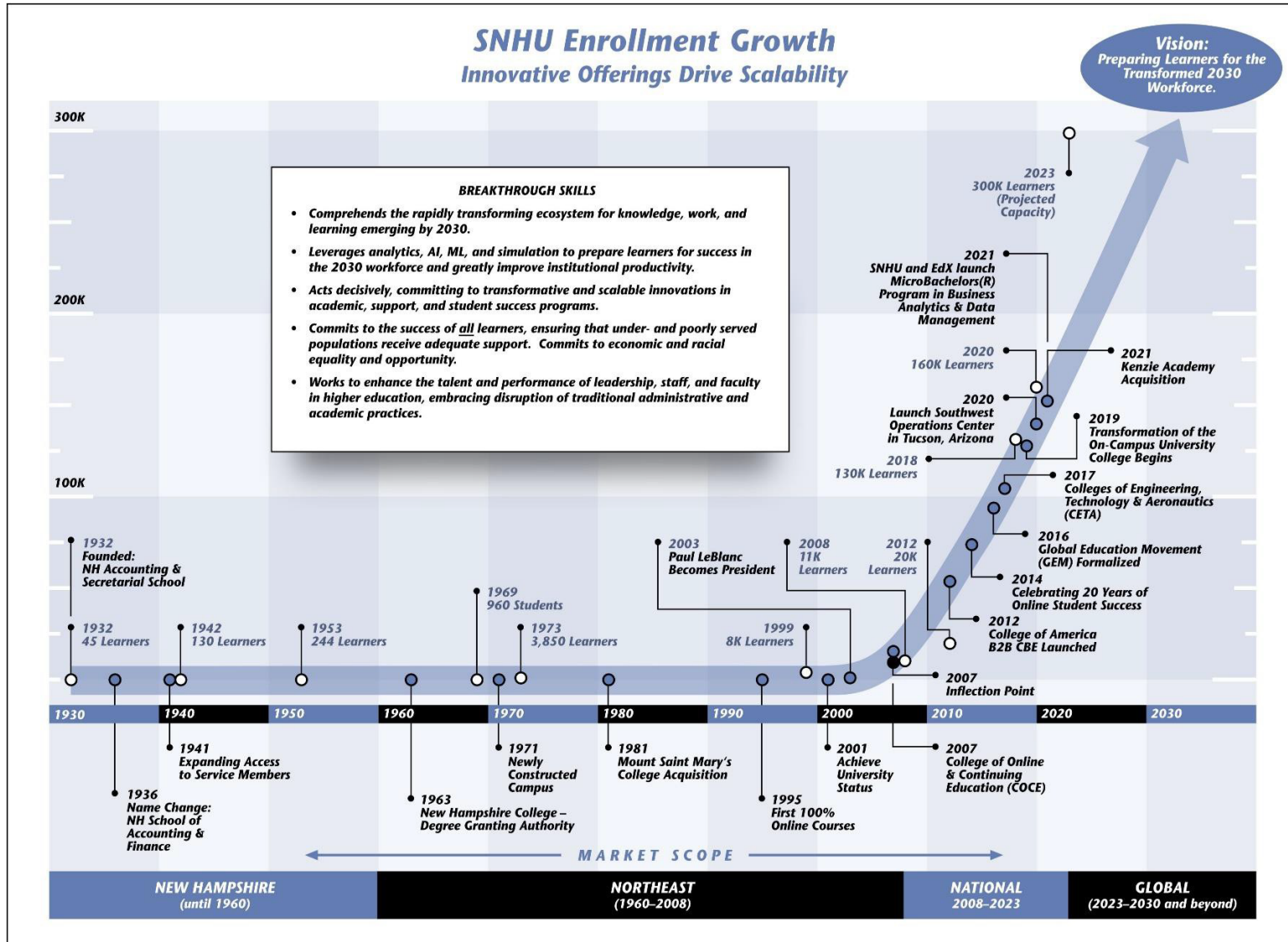## Results Achieved to 2021 – and Vision on to 2030

So, what results has SNHU produced to date in its quest to expand access to education by creating high quality, affordable, and innovative pathways to meet the unique needs of each and every learner? Figure 8 clearly shows the results of one leader's highly successful orchestration of transformative change to dramatically alter the fortunes of an at-risk institution. It depicts, through an enrollment trend line the typical slow growth trajectory of a small private institution through most of its history and then, in 2008, a skyrocketing of enrollments. It also describes an institutional culture transforming programmatically in ways that are, if anything, more dramatic than the enrollment growth.

**Orchestration of Transformative Change.** This level of achievement could not have been accomplished without the careful orchestration of transformative change. The broad outlines of this orchestration are:

- Constantly evolving visionary **leadership** and **action roadmaps** for institutional success that have captured the imagination and commitment of the SNHU community. They provide a vision of serving learners on their terms (learner centric), of reaching them where they live and work at a truly affordable cost, and all the while creating hopeful and ultimately successful learning pathways for a lifetime. Paul LeBlanc has presented this evolving vision compellingly and eloquently in a series of five-year strategic plans since he arrived at SNHU in 2003.

- **Measurement and Analytics** have provided the SNHU leadership team with the information it needs to track and assure progress on key transformation initiatives. They have also allowed it to make essential course corrections and, in some cases, come earlier rather than later to a decision to pull the plug on initiatives that are not working.

- These plans have been clearly and imaginatively mapped out in strategic **expeditions** that have carried SNHU light years from where it started in 2003. Execution of these expeditions has positioned SNHU as a global leader in online, competency-based learning, serving hundreds of thousands of learners and enabled it to create pathbreaking academic and business models. Looking to the future, using the insights gained from these successes, in its 2018-23 plan SNHU is reinventing its on-campus experience and strategically envisioning the world of 2030 and the radical steps it must take to play a prominent role in it.

  Throughout the LeBlanc years, no effort has been spared to build and maintain the **organizational capacity** to take on the challenging transformative tasks that had to be completed to realize the SNHU vision. These efforts included getting the "right people on the bus" and supporting them through exceptional leadership, professional development, and technological and operational support.

*Figure 8*



**SNHU Enrollment Growth**
*Innovative Offerings Drive Scalability*

Vision: Preparing Learners for the Transformed 2030 Workforce.

**BREAKTHROUGH SKILLS**

- Comprehends the rapidly transforming ecosystem for knowledge, work, and learning emerging by 2030.
- Leverages analytics, AI, ML, and simulation to prepare learners for success in the 2030 workforce and greatly improve institutional productivity.
- Acts decisively, committing to transformative and scalable innovations in academic, support, and student success programs.
- Commits to the success of all learners, ensuring that under- and poorly served populations receive adequate support. Commits to economic and racial equality and opportunity.
- Works to enhance the talent and performance of leadership, staff, and faculty in higher education, embracing disruption of traditional administrative and academic practices.

2023 300K Learners (Projected Capacity)

2021 SNHU and EdX launch MicroBachelors(R) Program in Business Analytics & Data Management

2020 160K Learners

2021 Kenzie Academy Acquisition

2020 Launch Southwest Operations Center in Tucson, Arizona

2019 Transformation of the On-Campus University College Begins

2018 130K Learners

2017 Colleges of Engineering, Technology & Aeronautics (CETA)

2016 Global Education Movement (GEM) Formalized

1932 Founded: NH Accounting & Secretarial School

2003 Paul LeBlanc Becomes President

2008 11K Learners

2012 20K Learners

2014 Celebrating 20 Years of Online Student Success

1969 960 Students

2012 College of America B2B CBE Launched

1932 45 Learners

1942 130 Learners

1953 244 Learners

1973 3,850 Learners

1999 8K Learners

2007 Inflection Point

1930  1940  1950  1960  1970  1980  1990  2000  2010  2020  2030

1941 Expanding Access to Service Members

1971 Newly Constructed Campus

1981 Mount Saint Mary's College Acquisition

2001 Achieve University Status

2007 College of Online & Continuing Education (COCE)

1936 Name Change: NH School of Accounting & Finance

1963 New Hampshire College – Degree Granting Authority

1995 First 100% Online Courses

**MARKET SCOPE**

**NEW HAMPSHIRE** (until 1960)

**NORTHEAST** (1960–2008)

**NATIONAL** 2008–2023

**GLOBAL** (2023–2030 and beyond)

20

- Finally, and maybe in the end most critical, Paul LeBlanc has worked hard to **transform the organizational culture** he inherited in 2003. Today's SNHU culture is fully integrated into and supportive of its vision, values, strategies, policies, and practices. Of note has been Paul LeBlanc's ability to understand and work effectively to transform the traditional academic culture he inherited into one with great potential for success in the coming decade.

### *Breakthrough Skills for Transformational Leadership*

Although not an organizational result per se, SNHU's extraordinary performance in no small part stems from the breakthrough leadership provided by Paul LeBlanc over his 18 years of service.  What do these breakthrough skills and qualities include?

- Comprehends the rapidly transforming ecosystem for knowledge, work, and learning emerging by 2030.

- Leverages analytics, AI, ML, and simulation to prepare learners for success in the 2030 workforce and greatly improve institutional productivity.

-  Acts decisively, committing to transformative and scalable innovations in academic, support, and student success programs.

- Commits to the success of *all* learners, ensuring that under- and poorly served populations receive adequate support. Commits to economic and racial equality and opportunity.

- Works to enhance the talent and performance of leadership, staff, and faculty in higher education, embracing disruption of traditional administrative and academic practices.

These breakthrough skills have achieved even greater salience during the 2109-2021 period of Coping with COVID. These years have dramatized the inequities in our current society and workforce and the need for concerted, continuing, transformative action.

From our interviews with President LeBlanc and his staff, we have the clear impression that the bold and innovative leadership practiced to this point will continue and take SNHU to global leadership in higher education by 2030—all the while transforming to "Make the world a better and more just place through our work, one learner at a time."

### *Summary of the  Case Study*

 Figure 9 on the next page summarizes how the elements of this case study comport with the key concepts revealed in *Transforming in Turbulent Times.* We have used these same key factors as a template for summarizing all our case studies.

*Figure 9 - Summary of the SNHU Case Study*

| Key Factors | Actions Taken |
|---|---|
| **Sense of Urgency** | When he arrived A SNHU in 2003, Paul LeBlanc persuaded the SNHU community that it needed to identify new markets to ensure survival. Over time this sense of urgency has evolved into an urgent imperative to continuously disrupt higher education to increase access, affordability and learning results through continuous and successful innovation. |
| **Foresight and Vision** | Through a succession of continuously improving five-year strategic plans, LeBlanc has provided the vision and the strategies for SNHU to continuously disrupt higher education. The latest plan for 2018-23 significantly ups the game by looking forward to 2030 and asking what SNHU must do to prepare its learners for a VUCA world in 2030. |
| **Guiding Coalition** | This methodology per se has not been used by SNHU, but the key goals of the methodology—getting the most innovative members of the institution out from under the hierarchy and into teams where they can develop innovative solutions—have been met through well-coordinated capacity building and highly effective efforts to build a culture focused on learner needs. |
| **Strategies and Action Plans** | A succession of five-year strategic plans provides a masterclass on how to set and maintain a course for transformation; mount multiple expeditions in that journey, learning from each; constantly adjusting and transforming; all the while getting better and better as an institution. |
| **Quick Wins, Continuing Wins** | SNHU's continuous development of successful innovative programs that have yielded significant enrollments and net revenue demonstrates how a winning organization can capture the imagination and commitment of its members. Particularly after the rocket-like launch of its online offerings, the institution has produced a string of winning programs that continues to this day. |
| **Action Roadmap: Leading and Navigating Change** | SNHU's strategic plans have provided the action roadmap for SNHU's continuous progress and success. Attention has been paid to cultivating community support for the plans and recently the One University and matrix organization concepts have been initiated to bring the University conceptually and operationally under one institutional umbrella, while continuing to bring as many members of the community as possible into the work of fulfilling SNHU's ambitious goals. |
| **Organizational Capacity to be Built** | Notable has been the commitment of SNHU leadership to build the organizational capacity necessary to achieve the transformational goals set. This included getting the "right people on the bus," an industrial strength IT capacity—including AI in recent years, an excellent professional development approach, and well-planned, high-quality facilities. |
| **4 R's of Transformation – Realign, Redesign, Redefine, Reengineer** | Starting with the reengineering of the Naval Yard online program from 2003-7 and with the initiation of each new program, considerable attention has been given to the 4 R's. In the Naval Yard case, it was with regard to an existing online program. With later initiatives it had to do with the transformation of established higher education approaches. Most recent is the effort to revolutionize the undergraduate coming of age experience through the creation of an affordable, high-quality program that is realigned, redesigned and reengineered to take advantage of AI and prepare its graduates for the VUCA world of 2030. Overall, SNHU is realigning its programs and experiences to prepare learners for the world they will experience in 2030—or even before. |
| **Culture Change** | Throughout his term, Paul LeBlanc has relentlessly focused on defining and building a truly learner focused culture. He has communicated these ideas eloquently in all of his communications and through systematic training throughout the time an employee participates the SNHU culture. |
| **Learning from SNHU** | There is so much to learn about transformation from the SNHU case study that is applicable to any higher education institution. The challenge that Paul LeBlanc did not have is the need to move at warp speed in the face of the accelerating disruption that all of higher education now faces. While this is a herculean challenge, leaders with the will and courage can and must prevail. |