

Yawson, Robert M.

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From business school dean to university president: leadership lessons from Dr Judy Olian

Robert M. Yawson

School of Business, Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Connecticut, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore Dr Judy Olian’s leadership journey from business school dean to university president, aiming to distill key lessons for aspiring higher education leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employs a multimethod qualitative approach, including a personal interview with Dr Olian, an analysis of a podcast featuring her insights, a review of her official university profile and the author’s lived experience as a faculty member under Dr Olian’s leadership. This semiethnographic approach is supplemented by a review of relevant literature on higher education leadership.

Findings – The study reveals critical competencies for transitioning to university leadership, including strategic vision, change management skills, team-building abilities and external relationship management. It highlights the importance of seeking broadening experiences, developing financial acumen and cultivating resilience in leadership roles. The research also underscores the significance of shared governance and the ability to navigate diverse stakeholder relationships.

Practical implications – The research provides valuable insights for business school deans and other academic leaders aspiring to university presidencies, offering strategies for professional development and leadership transition.

Originality/value – This study offers a unique perspective on the transition from business school leadership to university presidency. It combines insider observations with Dr Olian’s reflections to provide a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities in higher education leadership.

Keywords Higher education leadership, University presidency, Business school deans, Leadership transition, Strategic management, Shared governance

Paper type Viewpoint

Leadership lessons from Dr Judy Olian

Leadership has become increasingly complex and demanding in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education. As institutions face unprecedented challenges and opportunities, the need for visionary, adaptable, and strategic leaders has never been more critical. This research essay explores the journey and insights of Dr Judy Olian, a prominent figure in higher education leadership, as she transitioned from her role as a business school dean to the presidency of Quinnipiac University.

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Dr Judy Olian's career trajectory offers a unique perspective on the skills, experiences, and mindset required for effective leadership in higher education. Before assuming her current role as the 9th President of Quinnipiac University in 2018, Dr Olian served as dean of UCLA Anderson School of Management for 12.5 years and previously held the position of dean at Pennsylvania State University's Smeal College of Business Administration. Her extensive academic leadership experience, strategic vision and innovative approach provide valuable lessons for current and aspiring higher education leaders, particularly those considering the transition from business school deanship to university presidency.

This essay will delve into the key aspects of Dr Olian's leadership journey, examining the competencies, challenges and strategies that have shaped her success. By analyzing her experiences and insights, I aim to distill essential leadership lessons that can guide and inspire future higher education leaders, especially those contemplating the leap from business school administration to broader institutional leadership roles.

Study approach

This research essay employs a multi-faceted approach to explore Dr Judy Olian's leadership journey and strategies, combining primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study methodology includes:

- **Personal Interview:** Dr Judy Olian was interviewed in-depth, providing firsthand insights into her experiences, leadership philosophy and strategies. This primary source offered valuable perspectives on her transition from business school deanships to university presidency.
- **Podcast Analysis:** The Dean's Counsel podcast episode featuring Dr Olian was analyzed to gather additional insights into her leadership approach and experiences (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). This audio resource provided a different medium for understanding Dr Olian's thoughts on transitioning from deanship to presidency.
- **Official Website Review:** Dr Olian's official profile on the Quinnipiac University website (www.qu.edu/about-quinnipiac/leadership/president/) was examined to understand her formal roles, responsibilities and accomplishments as presented by the institution.
- **Lived Experience:** As a faculty member, department chair and participant in Faculty Senate leadership throughout Dr Olian's tenure as President, I incorporated my own observations and experiences to provide context and validation to the findings from other sources.
- **Literature Review:** Relevant academic literature on higher education leadership was consulted to provide a theoretical framework and context for Dr Olian's experiences and strategies.

This multimethod approach allows for data triangulation, enhancing the findings' reliability and validity. By combining direct interview data, public statements, institutional information, personal observations and academic literature, the study aims to present a well-rounded and nuanced understanding of Dr Olian's leadership journey and its implications for aspiring higher education leaders. The semiethnographic nature of this study, incorporating both insider perspectives and external data sources, provides a unique lens through which to examine leadership in higher education. This approach allows for a rich, contextual understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in transitioning from business school leadership to university presidency.

Preparation for university leadership

Broadening experiences beyond the business school

One of the critical factors in Dr Olian's successful transition to university presidency was her deliberate effort to broaden her experiences beyond the confines of business school administration (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). Expanding her professional horizons prepared her for the multifaceted responsibilities of leading a comprehensive university.

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business volunteer roles. Dr Olian's involvement with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) provided her with invaluable exposure to diverse models of higher education institutions globally (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). As she progressed through various volunteer roles within AACSB, ultimately becoming the chair, she gained a unique perspective on the accreditation process for international business schools. This experience allowed her to witness firsthand the different approaches to business education across cultures and systems, broadening her understanding of higher education on a global scale. The exposure to alternative university models through AACSB accreditation visits to institutions in countries like France and New Zealand expanded Dr Olian's vision of higher education beyond the American context. This global perspective would later prove instrumental in her ability to lead a diverse and complex institution like Quinnipiac University.

Council of professional deans at UCLA. Another crucial experience that prepared Dr Olian for university leadership was her participation in the Council of Professional Deans at UCLA. This council, which included representatives from 14 professional schools out of the 19 schools at UCLA at the time, provided Dr Olian with insights into the operations and challenges of various academic disciplines beyond business (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024).

As chair of this council, Dr Olian had the opportunity to sit on the President's executive committee, exposing her to high-level decision-making processes and strategic discussions that encompassed the entire university. This experience was particularly valuable in preparing her for the presidency, as it allowed her to develop a holistic understanding of the diverse needs and priorities of different academic units within a large institution.

Importance of external focus

Dr Olian's experiences as a business school dean highlighted the importance of maintaining a strong external focus, a skill that would prove crucial in her role as university president.

Corporate and donor relationships. Business school deans are often well-equipped to handle external relationships, particularly with corporate partners and donors (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). Dr Olian's experience cultivating and maintaining these relationships as a dean provided her with a solid foundation for the extensive external engagement required by a university president. The ability to build and nurture relationships with key stakeholders is crucial for fundraising, developing strategic partnerships and enhancing the institution's reputation and influence (Alves, Mainardes, & Raposo, 2010).

Community engagement. While business school deans may excel in corporate relationships, Dr Olian noted that community engagement presents a unique challenge for those transitioning to university leadership (Olian, 2024). As a university president, she needed to navigate complex relationships with local government officials, community leaders, and various stakeholders beyond the corporate world. This broader community engagement involves understanding and managing issues such as planning and zoning for new buildings, potential taxation of nonprofit institutions, and managing university-owned real estate within the community. Dr Olian's experience underscores the importance of aspiring university leaders developing skills in community relations and public affairs, areas that may not be as prominent in the role of a business school dean.

Key leadership competencies

Strategic vision and change management

One of the most critical competencies for higher education leaders, exemplified by Dr Olian's career, is developing and implementing a strategic vision while effectively managing change. This skill becomes particularly crucial when transitioning from a business school deanship to a university presidency, where the scope and complexity of the institution increase significantly (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). Dr Olian's experience transforming Penn State's Smeal College of Business and UCLA's Anderson School of Management demonstrates her capacity for strategic thinking and execution.

At Quinnipiac, she faced the challenge of following a president who had been in office for 31 years, necessitating a delicate balance between respecting institutional traditions and driving necessary changes. Her approach to change management emphasizes the importance of galvanizing people around a shared purpose and strategy. Dr Olian notes that change is not just about altering policies or structures but also about transforming underlying systems and practices that have been ingrained over time (Olian, 2024). This comprehensive approach to change requires patience, persistence, and the ability to communicate a compelling vision that inspires buy-in from various stakeholders across the institution (Doten-Snitker, Margherio, Litzler, Ingram, & Williams, 2021).

Team building and talent development

Dr Olian's success in her leadership roles, particularly as university president, can be largely attributed to her skill in building and developing high-performing teams (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). She emphasizes the critical importance of "getting the right people on the bus" – a reference to Collins and others (2001) concept of "Good to Great" – as a fundamental responsibility of leadership (Olian, 2024). In her transition to Quinnipiac, Dr Olian recognized the need to assemble a team that could execute the new strategic vision while respecting the institution's culture. This process involved retaining valuable staff and bringing in new talent to drive change. Her approach to team building focuses on finding individuals who not only possess the necessary skills and experience but also align with the institution's strategic direction and cultural values. Dr Olian's philosophy on hiring emphasizes the importance of both strategic fit and interpersonal chemistry. She looks for candidates who embrace change, demonstrate nimbleness, and are open to new ideas – qualities that align with her forward-looking, change-oriented strategy. Dr Olian values the ability to work collaboratively and the potential for positive interpersonal dynamics, recognizing that leadership roles in higher education require extensive interaction and teamwork (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024).

External relationship management

A key competency Dr Olian brought from her business school experience to the university presidency is managing external relationships effectively. This skill encompasses a wide range of stakeholders, including corporate partners, donors, alumni, community leaders and government officials (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). Dr Olian's experience in dealing with powerful advisory boards as a business school dean prepared her well for interactions with the university's board of trustees. She notes that business school deans are typically accustomed to working with influential boards, which provides valuable experience for the fiduciary responsibilities of a university president (Olian, 2024).

This familiarity with board dynamics allows for more effective governance and strategic alignment between the board and the institution's leadership. Dr Olian's involvement in corporate boards and other nonprofit organizations that operate similarly to corporate boards

has enhanced her ability to navigate complex stakeholder relationships. This experience, as she acknowledges, has helped her understand the delicate balance of “noses in, fingers out” – allowing the board to provide strategic guidance without overstepping into day-to-day management (Olian, 2024).

Financial acumen

Financial management is a critical competency for university leaders, and business school deans often have a natural advantage in this area (Olian, 2024). Dr Olian’s experience in managing the finances of large business schools, particularly her role in transforming UCLA Anderson into a self-supporting school within the UC system, provided her with valuable financial expertise (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024). This financial acumen is crucial for university presidents, who must navigate complex budgeting processes, manage diverse revenue streams, and make strategic financial decisions that impact the entire institution. Dr Olian’s background allows her to approach financial challenges with a business-oriented mindset, which is increasingly valuable in the current higher education landscape, where financial sustainability is a growing concern.

Shared governance and stakeholder management

A critical competency for university leadership, Dr Olian emphasizes, is the ability to effectively manage shared governance and navigate relationships with diverse stakeholders. In her transition from business school leadership to university presidency, Dr Olian found that the multiplicity of stakeholders increased significantly, requiring a more comprehensive approach to decision-making and communication.

Dr Olian stresses the importance of honesty and transparency in shared governance. She notes, “I think honesty and transparency is the key. I do not think you can share every item of information because there are some things that, either for legal reasons or just strategic reasons, you have to make decisions on before you can share them. But I found that people don’t like to be surprised” (Olian, 2024). This approach helps build trust and fosters a sense of shared responsibility among various university constituencies.

She advocates for a “no surprise management rule” for her team and her interactions with the Board of Trustees. This open communication practice helps build allyship around decisions, especially those that may be challenging or unpopular. Dr Olian emphasizes the importance of listening to and acknowledging different perspectives, even when final decisions may not align with everyone’s preferences.

Dr Olian’s experience highlights the need for university leaders to develop a “360-degree vision” to account for the diverse array of stakeholders in higher education (Altmann & Ebersberger, 2012). She notes:

You have to be paying attention to a variety of constituencies that might not be in your natural gaze. You might be just looking within the pathway that’s ahead of you as opposed to behind your head (Olian, 2024).

This expanded awareness includes being attentive to community relations, alumni engagement, donor relationships, and even local planning and zoning issues that can impact university operations.

The complexity of stakeholder management in a university setting led Dr Olian to create a specific role for a Vice President of Community Relations at Quinnipiac, underscoring the critical nature of this aspect of leadership in higher education. This strategic decision reflects the need for dedicated attention to external relationships and community engagement, even for private institutions (Chan, 2021).

Challenges in transitioning to university presidency

Managing diverse academic units

One of the primary challenges Dr Olian faced in transitioning to the university presidency was overseeing and integrating a diverse array of academic units. At Quinnipiac University, this includes eight professional schools and one arts and sciences college, covering the schools of medicine, law, business, education, engineering, nursing, health sciences and communications. This diversity requires a president to understand and appreciate the unique needs, cultures, and priorities of each academic unit while maintaining a cohesive institutional vision. Dr Olian's experience on the council of professional deans at UCLA provided her with valuable insights into the complexities of managing multiple disciplines, but the challenge of integrating these diverse units into a unified strategy remains significant (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024).

Overseeing athletics programs

A particularly novel challenge for Dr Olian in her transition to university presidency was the oversight of Division I athletics programs. Coming from a business school background, the intricacies of managing a high-profile athletics department, including its impact on institutional branding, alumni relations, and financial considerations, presented a steep learning curve. Dr Olian's experience with Quinnipiac's national championship in men's ice hockey highlighted the significant impact that athletic success can have on an institution's brand and community relations. This underscores the need for university presidents to develop a nuanced understanding of athletics' role within the broader institutional context, balancing the potential benefits with the associated risks and resource allocation challenges (Lion, Burch, & Bolinger, 2024).

Navigating community relations

While business school deans are often adept at managing corporate and donor relationships, Dr Olian found that the breadth and depth of community relations required in a university presidency presented new challenges (Olian, 2024). As president, she needed to engage with a wide range of community stakeholders, from local government officials to neighborhood associations. These relationships encompass issues such as urban planning, real estate management, and the university's impact on the local community. Dr Olian's experience highlights the importance for university leaders to develop skills in public affairs and community engagement, areas that may not have been as prominent in their previous roles as deans.

Leadership philosophy and approach

Embracing opportunities for growth

A key aspect of Dr Olian's leadership philosophy is her willingness to embrace new opportunities and challenges, even when they lie outside her immediate comfort zone. She advocates for saying "yes" to broadening experiences, emphasizing that these opportunities not only enhance one's skills but also expand professional networks (Olian, 2024). This approach is exemplified by her early career decisions to take on roles that extended beyond her primary academic responsibilities, such as serving as an ACE fellow in the University of Maryland President's office. Dr Olian's willingness to engage in boundary-spanning activities laid the foundation for her future leadership roles and provided her with a broader perspective on higher education administration (Kring & Ikenberry, 2024).

Balancing internal and external responsibilities

Dr Olian's leadership approach emphasizes the importance of balancing internal institutional management with external engagement. As a university president, she recognizes the need to be deeply involved in the institution's internal operations while also maintaining a strong external presence. This balance involves delegating effectively to a capable leadership team while remaining engaged in key strategic decisions. Dr Olian stresses the importance of creating a shared understanding of the institution's direction among the leadership team, allowing for coordinated execution of the strategic vision across various departments and units (Olian, 2024).

Importance of resilience and "thick skin"

Dr Olian underscores the importance of resilience and maintaining perspective when facing challenges. She notes that leadership roles, particularly at the presidential level, "are not popularity contests" and often require making difficult decisions that may not be universally popular (Olian, 2024). Her experience in navigating complex change processes, such as the transformation of UCLA Anderson into a self-supporting school, demonstrates the need for persistence and the ability to overcome setbacks. Dr Olian elaborated on this point, stating, "You are not going to get yes to every decision you want or every move you make. And you have to be like an athlete who gets up after they have been blocked or a goalie who lets a puck pass by them and get into the goal net. You have to pick yourself up" (Olian, 2024). This analogy vividly illustrates the resilience required in leadership roles, especially when facing opposition or setbacks.

Dr Olian advises aspiring leaders to develop a "thick skin" and to focus on long-term strategic objectives rather than short-term popularity. She emphasizes the importance of being able to articulate the rationale behind decisions, even when they may be unpopular:

If you vetted the decision and slept on it multiple times and tried to really weigh the pros and cons, as long as you can get up there and say "I hear you and I know that there are opposing responsible viewpoints that say this, this and this. But here is what I think, and you may disagree with me. But here is the rationale. Here is the why for this decision" (Olian, 2024).

This approach to leadership underscores the need for higher education leaders to be prepared for criticism and opposition while maintaining their commitment to strategic goals and institutional well-being. It also highlights the importance of clear communication and transparency in decision-making processes, even when facing disagreement (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). New leaders often encounter resistance and ambiguity, necessitating clear vision communication and transparent collaboration (Gearin, Dunican, & Castles, 2020).

Leaders should focus on participative decision-making, empowering followers, and fostering cohesive work environments. Dr Olian has demonstrated trans-collegial leadership involving informal collaboration across institutional boundaries. This leadership approach may be particularly suited to higher education's unique organizational structure (Burns & Mooney, 2018). Effective presidential communication requires being informed, utilizing multiple channels, knowing when to speak, employing a communication team, and maintaining an authentic voice (McNaughtan, DePue, & McNaughtan, 2019). These strategies can help leaders navigate the complexities of higher education and drive institutional success.

Advice for aspiring higher education leaders

Seek broadening experiences

Dr Olian strongly advises aspiring higher education leaders to actively seek out experiences that broaden their perspectives beyond their immediate area of expertise (Olian, 2024). This

includes volunteering for roles in professional organizations, participating in university-wide committees, and engaging in activities that provide exposure to different aspects of higher education administration.

Dr Olian emphasized the importance of saying “yes” to opportunities that can expand one’s skill set and network. She shared personal examples of how this approach benefited her career, including her experience as an ACE fellow, volunteering for AACSB commissions, and accepting invitations to serve on various boards. She notes:

People get to know you who would not have known you and get to see you in a light that is usually different than your mainstream job, and that comes back full circle in all kinds of unpredicted ways (Olian, 2024).

These broadening experiences enhance one’s skill set, provide valuable networking opportunities, and increase visibility within the higher education community. Dr Olian’s own career trajectory demonstrates how seemingly unrelated experiences can ultimately contribute to leadership readiness and open up unexpected opportunities.

Develop a strategic vision

The ability to develop and articulate a compelling strategic vision is crucial for higher education leaders (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Taylor & Machado-Taylor, 2010). Dr Olian emphasizes the importance of understanding an institution’s culture and history while also being able to envision and communicate a path for future growth and development (Olian, 2024). Aspiring leaders should cultivate their strategic thinking skills, stay informed about trends and challenges in higher education, and practice articulating their vision for institutional success. This includes the ability to align various stakeholders around a shared set of goals and priorities (Alves et al., 2010).

Build strong teams

Dr Olian’s experiences highlight the critical importance of building and nurturing strong leadership teams. She advises aspiring leaders to focus on developing their skills in talent identification, recruitment, and development (Olian, 2024). This includes learning to assess candidates not only for their technical skills and experience but also for their alignment with the institution’s culture and strategic direction. Aspiring leaders should work on their ability to create a collaborative environment that fosters teamwork and shared accountability.

Cultivate external relationships

Given the increasing importance of external engagement in higher education leadership, Dr Olian advises aspiring leaders to actively cultivate relationships with a wide range of stakeholders (Olian, 2024). This includes developing skills in fundraising, community relations and corporate partnerships. Aspiring leaders should seek opportunities to engage with external stakeholders, participate in community initiatives and develop their public speaking and relationship-building skills. These experiences will prove invaluable in the broader leadership roles they may assume in the future.

Conclusion

Dr Judy Olian’s journey from business school dean to university president offers valuable insights into the competencies, challenges, and strategies essential for effective leadership in higher education. Her experiences underscore the importance of broadening one’s perspective, developing a strategic vision, building strong teams and effectively managing both internal and external relationships.

The transition from a business school deanship to a university presidency requires a significant expansion of skills and knowledge. Leaders must be prepared to navigate the complexities of managing diverse academic units, overseeing athletics programs and engaging with a wide range of community stakeholders. Dr Olian's success in this transition demonstrates the value of a proactive approach to professional development and a willingness to embrace new challenges.

For aspiring higher education leaders, particularly those considering the path from business school administration to broader institutional leadership roles, Dr Olian's advice serves as a roadmap for personal and professional growth. By seeking out broadening experiences, developing a strategic mindset, focusing on team building, and cultivating external relationships, future leaders can better prepare themselves for the multifaceted demands of university leadership.

As higher education continues to evolve in response to technological, economic, and societal changes, the need for adaptable, visionary leaders will only grow. Dr Olian's experiences and insights provide a valuable template for developing the leadership competencies necessary to navigate these challenges and guide institutions toward a successful future.

As exemplified by Dr Judy Olian, the journey from business school dean to university president is one of continuous learning, strategic thinking and relationship building. By embracing these principles and actively seeking opportunities for growth and development, aspiring leaders can position themselves to make meaningful contributions to the future of higher education.

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Corresponding author

Robert M. Yawson can be contacted at: omj@qu.edu