

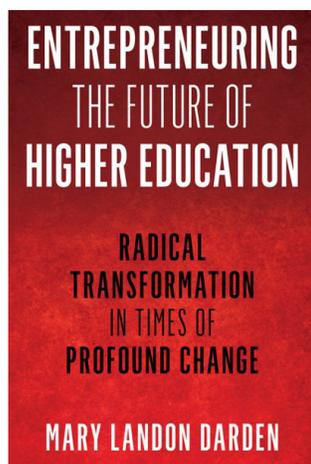
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BOOK REVIEW

Entrepreneurial the Future of Higher Education

Radical Transformation in Times of Profound Change



by Mary Landon Darden
Rowman & Littlefield:
Lanham, MD: 2021
202 Pages
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Reviewed by Lynn Priddy, PhD

“What will it take to change the course of more than 2,000 struggling colleges and universities in America?” In *Entrepreneurial the Future of Higher Education*, Mary Landon Darden adds her voice to the myriad books, articles, and conference speakers sounding the customary alarm on higher education’s relevance, viability, cost, and struggle to innovate.

What sets her book apart is not the opening question, nor its tenets and arguments. Rather, it’s the unapologetic dive into doable strategies fit-to-purpose for more traditional colleges and universities. Previously resistant to alarms on higher education, these institutions are now seeing 20-20 post-COVID-19, pre-climate freefall, and mid-social and political outrage. For them, Darden offers *Entrepreneurial* as a means for reasonable, reachable change designed to move an institution from surviving to thriving.

She defines *entrepreneurial* as “... a combination of mission-based creative, wholistic, systematic, strategic, and continuing process-oriented brainstorming and the resulting entrepreneurial initiatives—frequently involving high levels of innovation, change, and risk—in order to achieve greatly improved institutional economic, operational, social, and cultural environments through the often



bold actions of individuals and/or groups of individuals with the institution, and which can ultimately result in the overall radical transformation necessary for future success.”

Readers should pause at this definition, as it hints at both the merits and drawbacks of the book.

At times Darden’s writing becomes complex and dense. However, a reader determined to unravel the meaning will discover robust frameworks and practical strategies tested by the multiple presidents interviewed. In Chapter 7, a crisp interpretation of entrepreneuring emerges: “The main points of this book are that it is essential for colleges and universities to develop new revenue streams, make innovation and entrepreneurship part of the culture, and partner with business, industry, government, and more to better meet the needs of society, students, and the workforce.” This succinct definition summarizes Darden’s guidance and makes clear which colleges are and are not the best audience.

For public and private institutions that are already edge-pushing innovators, large and intractably established, or full-scale online with admissions, learning, and retention systems honed, the book may seem a read from some years past. It isn’t for readers seeking in-depth guidance for merger, acquisition, ethical closure, or financial scenarios that upend the solo college business model.

Nonetheless, *Entrepreneuring* is refreshing because of its focus on the majority versus those institutions pioneering the future, those in financial exigency, or those that won’t be touched by it. Just as an excellent

faculty member begins with learning outcomes fit-to-purpose for the students, Darden provides an action guide suited to campus-based colleges, predominantly traditional in function and delivery, that are determined to remain independent enterprises and to continue serving the breadth of the country with face-to-face education buttressed with some online or hybrid offerings.

Darden quickly establishes her premise. Chapter 1 offers a tight, clear call to change, 16 characteristics of sustainability, and an overview of critical processes and topics detailed in the rest of the book. These seven opening pages and a handful more in Chapter 11 summarize the steps to become entrepreneuring and are alone worth the price. As the testimonies claim, Darden furnishes a cover-to-cover realistic roadmap and all tools necessary to execute change.

This roadmap becomes clear in Chapter 5 as Darden cites the fatal flaw of clinging to tuition and donors as primary revenue streams and convinces the reader that colleges must shift from managing to survive on those two financial legs to entrepreneuring to thrive. She packs the chapter with a toolkit for creative entrepreneurship and explicates the process in detail, complete with forms, instructions, examples, and a full who and how-to for transformation. Good and bad case explications extend through implementation, supported by testimony from multiple presidents, and a realistic, doable planning and action guidebook.

For many C-suite leaders, the question isn’t what changes the college needs, but where and how to start. Darden doesn’t disappoint. Several chapters



dive deeply into key topics that improve financial viability, broaden revenue streams, or mitigate risks and crises that could undermine both. She enters arena academics that student service personnel too often avoid, dismantling the painfully slow enrollment and advising processes and their traditional roles. Darden uses clear, pointed forensics on the immediately responsive admissions conversion and the advisor “stitch-in” engagement strategies known in the consumer profiling, targeted marketing, and skilled for-profit, student-first systems. Depictions of “hunters” and “farmers” and their approaches to leads, assessments, and scripts bluntly make the competitive point. Readers acquire a recipe for revamping the entry pipeline and for integrating it with ongoing student engagement and retention that meets new expectations for personalized experiences.

In other sections, Darden overhauls typical tuition, grants, fundraising, development, and even investment systems. In a nod to astute community college practices, she pushes new modes of partnering and outsourcing that position business and industry inside the educational enterprise. Chapters 8 and 9 are jewels that address major gaps in policies and proactive schema for risk mitigation, crisis simulation, and scenario planning processes that avert costly lawsuits, liabilities, or reputational loss.

The balance of *Entrepreneurship* focuses on effective senior leadership and organizational culture. In her argument for a visionary, experienced leader, Darden makes important points. However, it’s hard to reconcile that most of the substance ties back to research from 2006, albeit rich and insightful, and doesn’t integrate

more recent data. Nonetheless, her changeable attributes model provokes necessary thinking, and Chapter 7 on organizational culture and change does offer emerging leadership skills necessary to navigate current and future crises. Arguing that change equals stability, Darden employs the voices of several leaders, who urge cultural transformation that tackles the “whiteness” of current senior teams and traditional instructional models. In her pragmatic, straightforward style, Darden respects the complexity of culture but raises the necessity of institutions becoming diverse, equitable, and inclusive. She offers fewer tools and strategies in this chapter, perhaps honestly reflecting that most still grapple with what and how.

All told, *Entrepreneurship the Future of Higher Education* offers a guide for taking stock of outdated functions and limited financial legs of an institution. Darden raises critical questions and perspectives and provides robust sets of tools and practical methodologies for transformation. For some, the sequence of chapters may seem confusing and the shifting among several voices distracting. Nonetheless, Darden achieves an authenticity through the case studies of current presidents who have changed the course of their colleges and universities, thankfully, putting 2020 in the hindsight.



Reviewer Biography



LYNN PRIDDY, PHD, is president and CEO of Claremont Lincoln University. From 1999–2013, Priddy performed multiple roles at the Higher Learning Commission, capping her tenure as vice president of accreditation services, and from 2013–2020 she served as provost and chief academic officer at National American University. In addition, Priddy is a board member for the University of Saint Augustine for Health Sciences, the American University of Bahrain, and the Society for College and University Planning (effective July 2021). She has consulted extensively with multiple start-up and turnaround institutions on accreditation, merger and acquisition, and academics. She edited “Employing Accreditation to Strengthen Planning and Drive Improvement,” a SCUP collection of resources focused on accreditation.

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