The Change Leader, Inc
Transforming Higher Education Institutions

00:04
Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton 00:31
Thank you, David. Our guest today is Elissa Sangster, CEO of Forté Foundation, a nonprofit that wants to see more women leading. Through education, role models, professional networks, and leadership training, Forté shows women how to build their credibility, skills, network, and confidence to thrive as leaders and change the status quo. Elissa brings extensive knowledge of issues affecting women's abilities to help them prepare for and attain leadership positions. Elissa's knowledge is drawn from her experience as assistant dean and director of the MBA program at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. She joins us today to discuss how universities can improve their leadership development programs for women and people of color.

Elissa, welcome to the program.

Elissa Sangster 01:23
Nice to be with you, Drumm. Thank you.

Drumm McNaughton 01:25
My pleasure. Glad to have you here. This will be a fascinating topic for our listeners and me since we'll discuss minorities in higher ed leadership positions. Before we get into that, tell us a little about your background. How did you come to work at your own company?

Elissa Sangster 01:48
Sure. I started in higher education probably 28 to 30 years ago. I took my first role at Texas A&M University in admissions for the business school and moved over to the University of Texas at Austin a few years later. I became the assistant dean for the MBA program and was responsible for everything from admissions to student services and alumni relations. It was a great MBA program experience for ten years.

As part of my role at UT Austin, the dean asked me if I would consider being a part of a task force researching how we could build a better pipeline for women into business leadership and improve their enrollment at the business school. That's how I ended up taking this role at Forté. That working group ultimately became the Forté Foundation nonprofit, where I serve as CEO. I've been there for about 18 years.

Drumm McNaughton 02:58
So, after 18 years, have you got it right? I'm just kidding.

Elissa Sangster 03:01
We figured it all out. We're done. So, there's nothing left.

Drumm McNaughton 03:06
So, what are the three takeaways? No, I'm just kidding. Presidents, if you do this, then [you're all set]. Well, that's a fascinating background. It sets you up very well for what you're doing. We've heard for years that there's a case for diversity of leadership and thought, etc. Tell us a little about that, so our listeners can understand where you're coming from.

Elissa Sangster 03:35
There are so many different approaches to why it's essential. One cheeky approach is, why do we even have to discuss and justify a business case for women when they're half the population? It's essential that, in this day and age, we acknowledge that everybody has leadership potential and something to give. How we get and provide all those opportunities to women, minorities, and men should be the same. It should be something that we're all paying attention to. If there are roadblocks and hurdles along the way for any of those people, what can we do to open up those pathways?

The business case is essential, especially if somebody has yet to hear it. In the corporate world, the significant return on investment is the return on equity. When you look at firms with substantial female leadership, you see them performing better. The bottom line is that it's different. You see that those teams and leaders are better at problem-solving. You see that they make better business decisions. Some of that is just a factor of the diversity of thought and decision-making, which research has pointed to for decades. At the leadership level, that's where many of the decisions are made. So, having diversity at the top is critical for making the best decisions.

Drumm McNaughton 05:01
Being able to approach diversity of thought is essential, but don't women make decisions differently? They tend to be more inclusive, which is critical in higher education.

Elissa Sangster 05:17
Yeah, it is. Across higher ed, you need to see women in those decision-making roles so that you can have a different kind of leader. It's not that one is better or that much different. It's bringing them all together and giving them opportunities will make better decisions across the board.

There's risk aversion, and then there's risk tolerance. There's no risk consideration at all. You don't want to apply those liberally to one gender or the other. But I think that, predominantly, women do have more risk

aversion. They're going to slow things down a little bit. Men want to move things a little bit faster. So, together, they provide balance and keep you as an institution out of some of those danger zones.

Drumm McNaughton 06:05
You're right. But we can both provide examples of women who have had to move decisively. For instance, when Nivine Megahed took over National Louis University 10 years ago, they looked at closing the school down, and she said, "We need to make these cuts to save the school even if the faculty aren't happy about it."

Elissa Sangster 06:36
Yes, absolutely. Also, I don't mean that risk tolerance is slow decision-making. There's an assessment of all the good and the bad. That's also an example of someone who moved in and was decisive but knew exactly what needed to be done to put things back to make a promising future for the university.

Drumm McNaughton 06:56
When talking about ROI for higher ed, we're talking about graduation rates, student performance, and graduates being workforce ready. Have you seen any research? Or have you noticed any difference between men and women leaders?

Elissa Sangster 07:18
I believe *Research in Higher Education* published an article saying that female instructors have a significant positive effect on female student grade performance but do not have a statistically significant effect on male student performance. So, having women in the classroom positively impacted young women but did not negatively affect the young men in those classrooms.

Seeing is believing. Having women faculty members in front of that classroom is suitable for young women, and we know that there are a lot of young women on college and university campuses today. It's essential to have that reflected in the faculty.

Drumm McNaughton 07:59
I think you're right. And it's interesting that women leaders positively impact women students, but it makes no difference with their male counterparts. Meanwhile, men don't have the same positive effect on women, and there's no change in men identifying with men. That's interesting.

Elissa Sangster 08:23
Yes. For women, it's exciting to have someone who thinks like you, sees the world the way you see it, and is that role model. Also, maybe women faculty connect well with those students in the classroom.

My story is that I've had many men who have significantly impacted me, especially in my high school English class, which is why I became an English major. That continued into the university world. But when I started connecting with women in those college classrooms who were thinking about the world from a gender perspective, they brought up points that some of my male faculty members had never considered bringing up because it wasn't in their own experience. It made the whole learning so much richer and different than when it was a man in the classroom. So, of course, I'm all for everybody being there. But we need to bring special

attention to what's going on with gender in the classroom. However, we are seeing many women in the faculty ranks.

What you're trying to get out with this podcast is how we see that change move up the pipeline. They may be reflected in the day-to-day classroom experience but not those tenured faculty positions. They may need to be in administration or at the top as presidents or deans. How can we make sure that that pathway is still open to women?

Drumm McNaughton 09:54
You make an excellent point there, and that is one of the challenges. A lot of my work has to do with boards of directors and trustees, etc. And I remember working with a board where the school was lamenting why they weren't attracting more minorities or students of color. But then you look at their board; it was all white men. The majority of them were 50 to 60-plus years old. There was one Hispanic man on the board. So it's like, folks, all you have to do is look in the mirror. This is why you don't have many minorities or students of color. There were no women faculty members. They were all in support roles. But you enroll students of color or any student if they can identify with the people they see.

Elissa Sangster 10:58
Right. You see that playing out in so many different ways. It's hard to even think outside of that box if you don't have that voice at the table. If you're not seeing that [diversity in the boardroom,](#) how do we find more students of color when the question is asked? How do we find more women? It's difficult for that group to come up with the answers because it's not their life experience. It's just not how they see the world. This doesn't mean they won't come up with any good ideas because they might come up with a couple. But having a diverse reflection in that boardroom is so essential.

If you don't and you're just trying to make a change or do something in line with the vision or mission of your university, the first step is figuring out where you will find those people you can bring onto the board. I know that you need a board to be comfortable. But you also need some differences in opinions and a group that's comfortable pushing back.

If you're in that situation, don't just find someone who will answer your questions by recruiting one Hispanic, one Black, or one woman. You need to give them the power so they feel like they can push back and that they're not just there as a token but that they are there because you genuinely want to see change happen. That might mean giving up a little of your power and privilege, which is sometimes uncomfortable. I'll stop there. But there's a whole pathway for going out and finding the right students and understanding which places to seek those student prospects. It sometimes is hard to figure out where those places are if you've never had people tell you about them.

Drumm McNaughton 12:53
That makes perfect sense. Let's dig a little more deeply into [women's leadership in universities.](#) When we spoke last week, we chatted about differences between men and women applying for a position and making job descriptions more open. I don't want to call them gender-neutral but along those lines. What are some of the steps that universities can take to start building a supportive atmosphere for women in leadership positions?

Elissa Sangster 13:31
As I said, universities are doing a pretty good job in some of the data I saw from the American Association of University Professors. A 2020 study found that women comprise about 43% of full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. There are about 54% of full-time nontenure track professors. So that's all represented. But women account for only about 33% of full professors. As we know, the tenured group is what gets a lot of the benefits and extra support. They have reduced classroom time, for example. That's the microcosm of what we're looking at. What can we do to recruit the best and ensure you retain them and see them become full-tenured professors?

Drumm McNaughton 14:24
Is retaining these senior women an issue?

Elissa Sangster 14:29
I still need to get a number on retention, so it might not be retention. Some of them are going into the non-tenure track versus the tenure track. There may be a reason for that. Retention is important. You invest a lot as a university into a faculty member. If they're on that tenure track, they receive a lot of research dollars and support. Ideally, you want to see them move into a tenure-track faculty position because you've invested that money in them. The question then becomes, how do you make sure that happens? That's the whole retention process.

In the business world, if you see a large group coming in at the manager level, the ratio of men-women dwindles from 50/50 to 70/30 to 80/20 by the time you get to the senior VP level and the C-suite. Something's happening to that other population that has to be addressed or looked at if your endgame is an equal representation at the top.

Drumm McNaughton 15:36
This is what I want to focus on. What are the things that institutions need to do to get that 50/50? Right now, there are more women students than men in higher ed. But, we're not representative of that in faculty, administrator, or senior administrator ranks.

Elissa Sangster 16:01
Right. There's a lot of debate about what to do in the university space for the student population because that switch happened in the '90s. For the last 20-25 years, it's been the case where women outnumber men in those undergraduate ranks. But you do not see those numbers at the faculty, senior faculty, and administration levels.

A few tips include ensuring that the language in your job descriptions for faculty reflects both words and meanings that appeal to both men and women. Tamper down on some of the language that is traditionally interesting to men versus women in terms of what they're looking for in their careers. For example, what we see is more aggressive or competitive language. It's not that you don't want women to be competitive, but they immediately see that and think this may not be the environment for her. If it's cutthroat, they may think, "Well, that may not be right for me. Maybe I'll go over here and try this." It's not a drastic shift. Many websites provide

tips on how to make a gender-neutral job description. It's very much the rage these days. Various organizations can provide advice or consulting on this.

Also, look for people where they are. For example, suppose you want to hire more black or Latino Ph.D. candidates but only look in the same places where you've always looked. In that case, you may need to find a different pipeline of talent that you can then evaluate and determine whom you will bring to your university. Broaden that scope. Ensure you've included other sources for that talent then you've done in the past.

Look at how you support those candidates when they come to your university. Think about what outcome you want for them. This generation—the Gen Z population—is interested in transparency and knowing their career path. How are you going to support them? Where do you want them to be in 10 years? Being very clear with them about your expectations is something to consider. That may mean giving them extra support once they start writing or doing their research to be approved. For women tenure-track faculty, use language like "We know this is a time when many things are going on in your life. Therefore, we will give you access to additional teaching assistants or graduate assistants while you're writing your research."

Consider their sponsorship and mentorship. The difference there is when you're a mentor, you're advising that person face to face. But when you're a sponsor, you advocate for them behind closed doors. So, if you're the department chair or part of the leadership team that sponsors the faculty, go into that room and be that representative and voice for them. When they're not there to defend themselves, defend their research and the extra work they do as a faculty member. Make sure that you've created very formal sponsor relationships for candidates.

Drumm McNaughton 19:46
I want to revisit the research you mentioned. I know one R1 institution where every full-time faculty member who comes in as part of their research tenure track is expected to have a research portfolio. They have a class on [how to write a research grant](#) that all faculty go through. We met with several of the research faculty, who said this was incredibly helpful for them. It was their first time out as a PI, the primary investigator, and they had somebody walking them through the application, including NIH grants, etc. It was beneficial for them.

Elissa Sangster 20:42
Yeah. This could cause someone to think, "I didn't have that course," or "Nobody held my hand while I walked through this process. So why should we do something like that for these new faculty members?" But that's a beautiful example of leveling the playing field by providing everybody with access to the information and taking the best of what your current faculty has to offer—the tips, tricks, and insights—to make this process successful. Formatting it in a way that every new faculty member can take advantage of is a perfect example of making this retention piece work within your faculty ranks and giving them the support they need. It's ultimately good for the university and colleges to see all their faculty members succeed. I know it's a competitive environment where you always try to get the best and better opportunities. But leveling the playing field helps everyone.

Drumm McNaughton 21:44
What are companies outside higher ed doing that can carry over into higher ed to support women and minorities coming through the ranks?

Elissa Sangster 21:55
Develop a promotion plan that includes their professional development that considers these critical times along this journey as they move toward full professorship. Research how your previous faculty members have performed. Across the board, are you seeing an underrepresented faculty member as a winning faculty member? Are they performing at the same rate? If they're not, what's the roadblock or problem in their way? Listen to those faculty and build these development plans that help support them through this process.

That's what companies are trying to do. I'm not saying they're all successful. But they're thinking about this hurdle. McKinsey data from their study on women in the workplace compares the experiences of men, women, and underrepresented employees during the first four to five years of employment. It shows how as you move toward those more senior ranks, the men increase, and the women decrease. The first-time women employees going into a managerial role do not get promoted at the same rate – this is called the broken rung theory – and it results in men being on a higher trajectory toward leadership almost immediately. Women are stalling out in that first managerial role. What companies and universities can learn from this is to pay attention to that very early stage because, almost immediately, there are challenges for women to continue their progress along that research path.

Drumm McNaughton 23:50
Yeah, higher ed is notorious for not training its leaders. They need to do a better job. What you mentioned about having leadership development plans for faculty and other folks coming up the ranks is something you typically see at the higher levels in corporations. You usually see them only if someone is identified as a HIPO, a high performer. So having that is an excellent idea.

The other piece is that women's career trajectories are slightly different. What about doing leadership courses where you're teaching people leadership? I know of a few institutions that do it, but not many.

Elissa Sangster 24:37
It's interesting because, almost always, professional development and executive education courses are being taught across campus at every university. Yet their very own leaders aren't invested in enrolling them. There's much to be learned and gained from those interactions with other people in the industry or at other universities. So it's an excellent suggestion when considering what's available on their campus to give these professionals that training.

We have a couple of different iterations of groups called male allies on gender equity, where men and women come together to have frank conversations about what it looks and feels like and how it plays out in their personal and professional lives. This could be helpful in terms of focusing on the issues that exist in that pipeline. Universities have so many opportunities to give that kind of training.

Drumm McNaughton 25:51
And, of course, it all starts with the student. If you don't have visible women or minority leaders, you won't attract students who look like that. We are all attracted to things that are similar to us. The purpose of the university is a higher purpose and preparing students for a career and life. But you can only do that with a diverse workforce. If you don't have diverse students or faculty, how do you prepare them for diversity?

Elissa Sangster 26:26
I'll give examples of how we've dealt with some of this in the business school for other colleges to consider. We've done a lot of work with our university partners to create a class profile for MBA programs that look more equitable. We've gone from 25% women to 42% women.

As those women appear in the business school classroom, you must ask yourself if the faculty is diverse. Are we bringing a diverse student population into a classroom where the faculty teaching them needs to be more diverse? The downside to a lack of diversity is more than just needing more women for women to see. It's that there aren't more women for men to see.

Your business school is a place where they're being trained as a leader to run a business. So you want them to have this experience where they see both men and women leading. We want to see how women answer the hard questions and think about the future just as much as we want to hear from men.

We've been seeing some faculty members work with students to look at the inclusivity of their classrooms. So, how are they talking in the classroom when they bring in 50/50 men and women? How are they representing the speakers who come forward and talk about their experiences in the business world? How are they expressing their stories to those students? Is it a gender balance? Are the faculty thinking about whom they call on in the classroom? Is their default always to go to someone who looks and thinks like them? Are they purposefully considering bringing in different opinions and maybe even contrary ones? Are they asking for opinions from someone who has yet to ask a question for the entire class? Perhaps they do have something to say? Are you making sure that you call on them? Are they trying to diversify that conversation? So much can be done if faculty are actively thinking about that experience. Whom am I missing? Whom am I leaving out of this conversation? That would go a long way if faculty were willing to do that in their classroom.

Drumm McNaughton 28:43
That comes to implicit bias, having case studies where there are men, women, and people of color as the protagonists or saviors of the company.

Elissa Sangster 28:59
Right. We support case writing competitions that look for cases where women are the protagonist, so there will be more of them available. Of course, a case study isn't just about the protagonist. It has to be about the teaching notes and whether the concepts you teach are illustrated well. A faculty member doesn't want to teach a bad case to ensure a female protagonist is in it. It would be best if you, therefore, had more cases written.

We performed audits where we looked at the top MBA programs and what cases they were teaching. When you look at those core classes, there are about 15% to 20% women protagonists in their cases. But there aren't enough cases in the library for all the topics you need. So, again, there's an imbalance among the people who write these cases. Any incentive you can give on the front end to encourage them to write a female protagonist case study helps.

Drumm McNaughton 30:11
So much to do, so little time.

Elissa Sangster 30:14
Yes, I say it's not like a glass ceiling. It's the Glass Onion. We're just peeling those layers back one at a time. There's always another layer, it seems.

Drumm McNaughton 30:23
I like that. Elissa, this has been wonderful. I really enjoyed our conversation. As we wrap up, what are three takeaways for university presidents and boards?

Elissa Sangster 30:32
Sure. What we've covered has been to look at your hiring policies and job descriptions and consider whether you have a comprehensive plan for recruiting diverse talent into your pipeline and how to remove unconscious bias affecting hiring decisions. There are many layers there. As I said, you will not do it right the first time. But any attempt to shore that up will be good for your pipeline.

Also, think about throughput. What is that classroom experience like? Are they inclusive? Are they intentionally designed for a diverse student population? Who's feeling left out? Who's getting 100% for what they're paying? Is every student getting the access, opportunity, inspiration, and role models they need? That's a tall order for a university. But leaders of these academic institutions need to think about every single student. What will 100% look like for them when they walk out those doors? Will they turn back and say, "80% of my faculty was amazing? They thought about me as a student and made me use 100% of my full ability to learn." So, we have to give it our best. I hope every university leader thinks about what's best for their students.

My final point is to think about the sponsorship of female faculty members and their students. Introduce them to those who can advocate for them when they're not in the room. What more do you want than proof of your institution's mark on these faculty, having the most acclaimed faculty who are both men and women, and having the most prominent students who have been successful because your university invested in them 100%?

Drumm McNaughton 32:28
I'm going to add one more to that, if I may. And that is the leadership development plans, having a plan and pipeline for all faculty and everybody you hire: men, women, and minorities. What's the plan? How are you going to ensure their success going forward? If you open the doors and give them the tools, it's up to them to walk through. Nobody's going to hand it to them on a platter. But if you say, "I had to go through this, so why can't you?" That's not productive.

Elissa Sangster 33:05
Yeah. That's a good addition because I mentioned pipeline as number one. But if you do go out and recruit, you don't want them to show up and you say, "You're on your own." So it would be best if you recruited them to intentionally continue that investment as they move into those higher ranks. So absolutely. I agree with you, Drumm.

Drumm McNaughton 33:24
So, what's next for you?

Elissa Sangster 33:28
Oh, Forté. We're so busy. We have lots of projects going on. We are looking at how to build out our representation on college campuses. That's so important to us. We have about 65 university partners. We are trying to connect with students on all campuses to learn more about what college women are looking for regarding their leadership journey and career opportunities. We've done a lot of work in the MBA space and getting more women into an MBA. We're not trying to get more women into a university. But we are trying to think about what opportunities they're setting themselves up for and ensuring that when they graduate, they're gainfully employed, making the proper wage, and seeing a future for themselves in a leadership position. We want to help them get that.

Drumm McNaughton 34:16
Well, this has been great. Elissa, thank you so much for being on the program. I've thoroughly enjoyed our conversation and look forward to it again in the future.

Elissa Sangster 34:25
Thank you so much. I enjoyed it.

Drumm McNaughton 34:29
Thanks for listening today. I want to thank our guest Elissa Sangster for sharing her insights on creating an environment that supports aspiring female and minority leaders at higher education institutions.

Our next guest is Dr. Andrew Koricich, executive director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges and an associate professor of higher education at Appalachian State University. Dr. Koricich's focus is rural-serving institutions (RSI). He'll join us to discuss RSIs, their impact on their communities, and the lessons they can teach other higher education institutions.

34:29
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