

Academic Health Center Transformation: Future Shock or Future Success?

Author Commentary

CHAPTER ABSTRACT: Academic health centers are vital institutions that are central to health and well-being. A combination of societal, scientific, and economic forces are disrupting the traditional approaches to educating the next generation of health professionals, conducting biomedical and clinical research, and providing comprehensive and advanced patient care. This chapter reviews the impact of these forces in three specific areas: interprofessional health professions education; the lab-based research investigator; and the impact of a changing health system. It then focuses on the challenges of successful leadership in this new era for academic health centers and concludes with some overarching guidelines for the path forward.

**Steven A. Wartman,
MD, PhD, MACP**
President/CEO
*Association of Academic
Health Centers*

Editing this book and reflecting on my own thoughts in developing this final chapter served to underscore the full complexity of the organizations that we call academic health centers. I have gained an even deeper appreciation of the dedication and thoughtfulness of their leadership teams. While every academic health center has its unique culture, the challenges and opportunities being faced are quite similar. As this book abundantly points out, academic health centers have a tradition of thriving—even in challenging times—and I expect they will continue to do so.

As I discuss in my chapter, I believe that the central challenges for academic health centers pivot around leadership and alignment. That is, skilled leadership is vital for the success of every academic health center. Equally fundamental is the importance of aligning the institution internally so that the missions of education, research, and patient care truly support each other.

In this era of healthcare reform, scientific and technological advances, patient empowerment, and economic challenges, every academic health center needs to examine itself closely to determine its strengths and weaknesses and, more importantly, clarify those areas where it can truly make a difference. We in academe have an unfortunate tendency to try to emulate and perhaps surpass institutions that are above us in the so-called conventional rankings. I do not believe this is a meaningful strategy in the coming environment. (Indeed, I am not sure it was the best plan to begin with.) I believe institutions can do better than merely planning on moving up in the rankings. Rather, they should identify those particular areas where they can truly make a difference and excel. The focus then becomes the alignment of their strategic vision and budgetary planning in ways that will best advance progress toward specifically identified goals.

Apart from their essential role in upholding and advancing society's health and well-being, academic health centers are also critical engines for economic growth and development. They anchor their communities, whether we think about that in local or state contexts or even country-wide. In education, and especially in their research missions, they house and harness the tremendous force of the knowledge economy—perhaps the dominant force of the 21st century. Reading the insightful chapters in this volume as a whole reinforces for me the inestimable value that academic health centers add to society and its citizenry.