
LEAD FROM WHERE YOU ARE:

THE ASCEND SHIFT IN HIGHER EDUCATION



**GROW
YOURSELF.**



**BUILD
COMMUNITY.**



**CREATE
LASTING IMPACT.**



Dr. Kimberly Lowry



THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

You **care**.

You **believe**.

You want to **make a difference**.



STUDENTS.



COMMUNITIES.



FUTURE.

WHAT'S CHANGING?

The landscape surrounding higher education is shifting faster than most institutions were designed to adapt.



DEMOGRAPHICS

Fewer traditional-age students.
More adult learners.
More stop-outs.



WORKFORCE

Jobs are changing faster than credentials.
Skills and adaptability are increasingly valued.



AI

Artificial intelligence is changing how students learn, work, and prepare for careers.



AFFORDABILITY

Students and families are asking harder questions about cost, value, and ROI.



PUBLIC TRUST

Higher education faces growing scrutiny regarding outcomes, relevance, and impact.



STUDENT SUCCESS

Persistence, completion, transfer, and economic mobility remain uneven across populations.



These are not separate challenges.
They are interconnected realities.

THE NATIONAL REALITY

The need for higher education has not decreased.
The urgency has increased.



**36
MILLION+**

Americans have
some college credit
but no credential.

Source: National Student
Clearinghouse Research Center



54.3%

National
postsecondary
attainment rate.

Source: Lumina Foundation



72%

Of jobs are projected
to require education or
training beyond
high school.

Source: Georgetown Center on
Education and the Workforce



ENROLLMENT

National enrollment
remains below
pre-pandemic levels.

Source: National Student
Clearinghouse Research Center



MILLIONS

Of potential students
remain on the
sidelines of
opportunity.

“

The challenge is not whether higher education matters.
The challenge is whether we are reaching everyone who could benefit from it.

THE MICHIGAN REALITY

Michigan faces the same pressures—
and the stakes are just as high.



1.7M

Michiganders have
some college credit
but no credential.

Source: MI Student
Data Dashboard



51.6%

Michigan's
postsecondary
attainment rate.

Source: Lumina Foundation,
2024



68%

Of Michigan jobs are
projected to require
education or training
beyond high school.

Source: Georgetown CEW,
2023



-6.4%

Decline in public
college enrollment
since Fall 2019.

Source: MI Student
Data Dashboard



230K+

Additional credentials
needed each year to
meet workforce
demand.

Source: Mitudent Department
of Labor & Economic Opportunity



OUR STATE'S
FUTURE DEPENDS ON
OUR ABILITY TO
**PREPARE MORE PEOPLE
FOR MORE OPPORTUNITIES
IN MORE PLACES.**

“

Talent is everywhere.
Opportunity is not.
We must close the gap—together.

Sources: Michigan Student Data Dashboard (2024),
Lumina Foundation (2024), Georgetown Center on
Education and the Workforce (2023), Michigan
Department of Labor & Economic Opportunity (2024)

THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

MEET JASMINE

22 years old.

First-generation student.

Started at a four-year university.

It didn't go as planned.

Returned home.

Became a parent.

Works while attending school.

Still believes education can change her future.



Her challenge
isn't motivation.
It's navigation.

Jasmine is not unusual.

She represents thousands of students navigating:

- Transfer complexity
- Financial uncertainty
- Family responsibilities
- Work obligations
- Questions about belonging
- Questions about value



The future of higher education
depends on how well we serve students like Jasmine.

LEADERSHIP CREATES POSSIBILITY

Leadership creates the conditions that allow possibility to become reality.

LEADERSHIP DECISIONS



Advising



Financial Aid



Transfer



Scheduling



Belonging



Career Connections



LEADERSHIP
SHAPES
PATHWAYS



STUDENT OUTCOMES



Persistence



Confidence



Completion



Transfer



Employment



Mobility



Jasmine's success is not determined by motivation alone.
It is shaped by the systems leaders create.

WE DON'T HAVE A LEADERSHIP SHORTAGE. WE HAVE A LEADERSHIP ACTIVATION CHALLENGE.

Across higher education,
talent exists at every level.

**What we need is the
conditions that unleash it.**

THIS IS NOT THE PROBLEM



We don't lack passionate people.



We don't lack potential.



We don't lack ideas.

VS.

THIS IS THE CHALLENGE



Barriers that limit impact.



Systems that are complex, not connected.



Opportunities that are unevenly distributed.



Leadership isn't the issue.
Activation is.



Our work is to remove barriers,
connect systems, and create
the conditions for leaders to lead.

THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

WHAT LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE CONCERNS YOU MOST RIGHT NOW?

Take 60 seconds.

Write it down.

Be specific.

*What challenge, opportunity, or responsibility
keeps showing up for you?*

We'll come back to this later.

I'LL LEAD WHEN...

- > When I have more experience.

- > When I feel more confident.

- > When I know more.

- > When I get the title.

- > When someone asks me.



The problem is that **“when”** has a way of moving.

LEADERSHIP RARELY BEGINS WHEN CERTAINTY ARRIVES.

— It begins when **responsibility** arrives. —

MY JOURNEY

I DISCOVERED I WAS A FIRST-GENERATION LEADER.

I DID NOT KNOW:



How to supervise



How to navigate politics



How to influence



How to make difficult decisions



How to lead through uncertainty

THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

I WANTED TO BECOME THE LEADER JASMINE DESERVED.

“

Leadership isn't
about titles.
It's about *impact*.

”



Every project.



Every degree.



Every mentor.



Every opportunity.



Every lesson.

Was
preparing me
to better serve
*students like
Jasmine.*



The goal was
never the position.

*The goal was
the people.*

When we invest in leadership for students,
we don't just change individual lives—
we strengthen our entire future.

STOP ARGUING WITH THE EVIDENCE.

“”

“ Quit doubting yourself.
You’re as ready as anybody. ”

COMMUNITY
COLLEGE
GRADUATE

MASTER’S
DEGREE

DOCTORAL
WORK

DIRECTOR

DEAN

ASSOCIATE
VICE
PRESIDENT

VICE
PRESIDENT

STUDENT
IMPACT

The evidence said *I was ready.*

Fear said *I wasn’t.*

**ASCENDING
ISN'T ABOUT
POSITION.**



**IT'S ABOUT
BECOMING.**



GROW YOURSELF

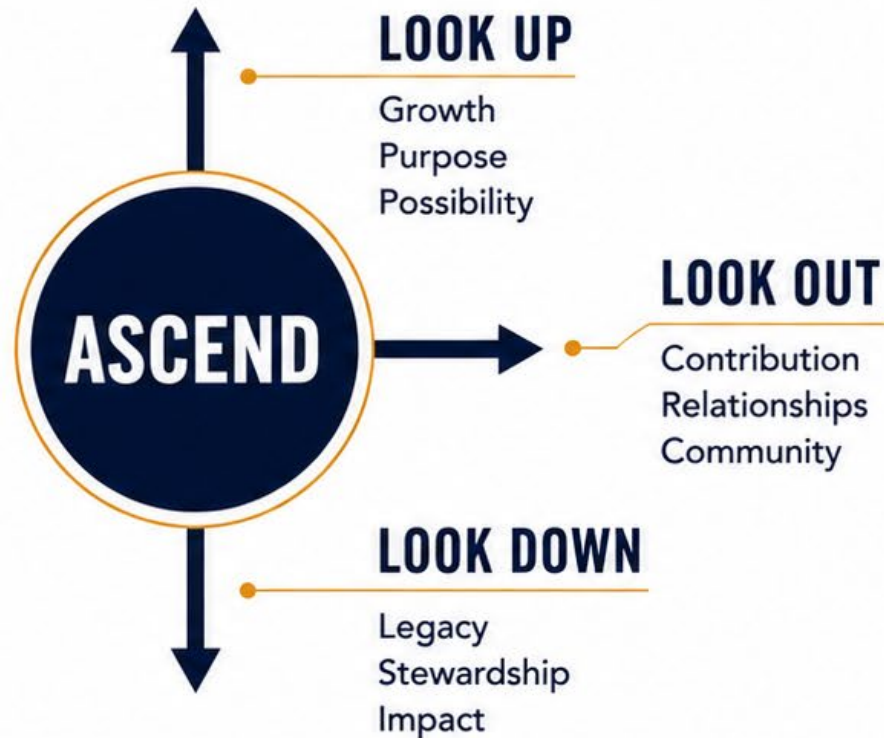
BUILD COMMUNITY

CREATE LASTING IMPACT

*The most meaningful growth rarely happens *on* an organizational chart.*

A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP

THE THREE DIRECTIONS OF ASCENDING



————— The strongest leaders grow in all three directions. —————

LOOK UP

GROWTH • PURPOSE • POSSIBILITY

“

The most important promotion
in leadership is not a new title.

It's a new level of thinking.

”

LOOK OUT

RELATIONSHIPS • COMMUNITY • CONNECTION

“

Leadership was
never meant to be
a solo journey.

”

LOOK DOWN

LEGACY • IMPACT • GENERATIONS

“

The measure of leadership
is not what you achieve—
it's what endures,
long after you're gone.

”

HOW ARE YOU ASCENDING?

“

GROW YOURSELF. • BUILD COMMUNITY. • CREATE LASTING IMPACT.

”

**ASCENDING
ISN'T A
DESTINATION.**

**“
IT'S A
PRACTICE.**

-
- Every day presents a choice. •

EVERY DAY YOU CHOOSE TO:

“



LOOK UP

GROW YOURSELF.

Keep learning. Stay curious.
Keep ascending.



LOOK OUT

BUILD COMMUNITY.

Recognize your people.
Lean on them. Lift with them.
We rise together.



LOOK DOWN

CREATE LASTING IMPACT.

Develop others. Strengthen systems.
Leave things better
than you found them.

”

Three directions. One mission: **ASCEND.**

**THE FUTURE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION
WILL NOT BE
DETERMINED
BY POLICY ALONE.**

“

It will be shaped by leaders who choose to **ascend**.

**EVERY DECISION
WE MAKE
SHAPES A FUTURE
WE MAY NEVER SEE.**

“

FOR A STUDENT.

FOR A COLLEAGUE.

FOR A FUTURE LEADER.

”

REMEMBER JASMINE?

SHE ACCOMPLISHED HER GOAL.

“

Jasmine had the **drive**.

Jasmine had the **determination**.

Jasmine had the **talent**.

But potential needs **opportunity**.

Opportunity needs **systems**.

Systems are shaped by **leaders**.



LEADERS DESIGN SYSTEMS

Policies, processes, and structures that open doors.



LEADERS REMOVE BARRIERS

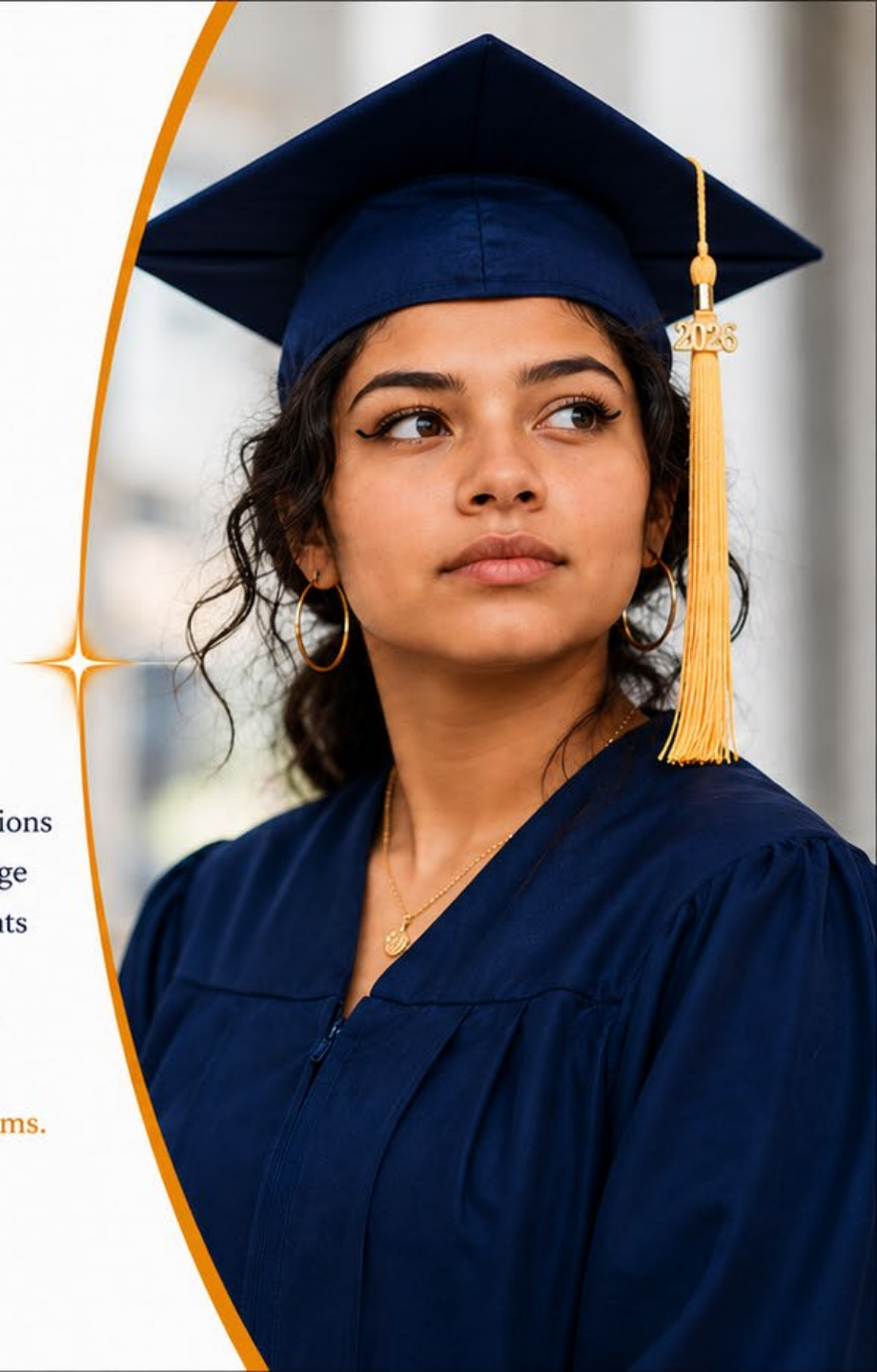
Access, mentorship, and belonging that empower.



LEADERS SET EXPECTATIONS

High standards and accountability that fuel achievement.

Through the decisions leaders make—large and small—students like Jasmine are able to reach their full potential and **achieve their dreams**.



TAKE OUT YOUR CHALLENGE.

The *one* you wrote down earlier.

You identified it for a reason. Now it's time to *activate* it.

HOW WILL YOU ASCEND?

LOOK UP

GROW YOURSELF

- What do you need to learn?

- What mindset needs to shift?

- What are you waiting to feel ready for?

LOOK OUT

BUILD COMMUNITY

- Who can help?

- Who should you call?

- What support already exists around you?

LOOK DOWN

CREATE LASTING IMPACT

- Who benefits if you solve this?

- What future becomes possible?

- What happens if you don't?

The challenge hasn't changed. *Your perspective has.*

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DON'T?

A student waits.

An opportunity is missed.

A colleague goes unsupported.

A future leader remains unseen.

Leadership is not measured by what we intend to do.
It's measured by what we *choose* to do.

WHAT WILL YOU ACTIVATE?

**ONE
CHALLENGE.**

**ONE
DECISION.**

**ONE
ACTION.**

Before you leave today,
identify *one* thing you will activate
in the next *30* days.

Leadership doesn't begin when you're ready.
It begins when you *decide*.

THIS IS YOUR MOMENT.

The future will not be built by someone else.
It will be built by **leaders like you.**

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY *LOOKING FOR YOU.*

Your students need
your leadership.

Your campus needs
your voice.

Your community needs
your vision.

The question isn't if you'll lead.
The question is HOW.

HOW WILL YOU LEAD FORWARD?



TELL
A FRIEND.



WRITE IT
DOWN.



SHARE IT.



ACTIVATE IT.
LEAD FORWARD.

LeadingForward

THE ASCEND SHIFT

THANK YOU.

Let's Keep Ascending.

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