

ROCKY TOP'S SURE-FOOTED LEADER

Veteran management scholar brings her expertise to bear in addressing novel challenges

Jeffrey G. Harris, MBA & Richard A. Skinner, PhD

If, during her many years as a management professor, Donde Plowman, PhD, had presented her class with a business simulation featuring the challenges she's faced in her brief tenure as a CEO, the students might have rejected the scenario as too farfetched.

It's one thing, they might have argued, to concoct a scenario in which the chief executive has to regain the trust of customers, employees, and investors rattled by the highly visible departure of her predecessor. But, come on — how realistic is it to throw in an adverse business climate, a senior leadership team riddled with openings, and an unprecedented global crisis that upends the marketplace, interrupts supply chains, and forces the closure of brick-and-mortar locations?

The students might have questioned whether they were enrolled in a business course — or a creative-writing workshop led by an overwrought instructor with an affinity for the absurd.

The foregoing scenario, however, is precisely what

Plowman has experienced in her 15 months as chancellor of the University of Tennessee's flagship campus in Knoxville, a 225-year-old institution with 11 colleges, nearly 1,600 full-time faculty members, and more than 30,000 students.

Plowman's predecessor was in office for just 14 months, owing to a high-profile clash with the now-former president of the University of Tennessee (UT) system. The latter had complained publicly about "numerous areas of unsatisfactory performance" that the chancellor was, in his estimation, "unwilling or unable to improve." Some of the chancellor's backers, including the UT Faculty Senate and the university's employee union, had a different take. They maintained that the administrator fell out of favor because of her opposition to privatization efforts backed by the state's then-governor. Others attributed the discord to her removal of the university's athletic director, who, at the time, was in the middle of a protracted search for a new football coach.



LISTEN IN



Donde Plowman, PhD, chancellor of the University of Tennessee's flagship Knoxville campus, discusses her institution's COVID-19 response in the latest installment of *Innovators*. The podcast, presented by Harris Search Associates, is available on the web at [HarrisSearch.com](https://www.HarrisSearch.com) and on leading podcast platforms, including Libsyn, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Overcast, Stitcher, Spotify, and PlayerFM.

Regardless of the factors that triggered it, the departure of UT's top administrator unnerved several of the institution's core constituencies. The upheaval in the athletic department compounded the problem. The upshot: Plowman said she arrived knowing that she needed to assess — and, if possible, repair — the damage.

Plowman commenced her chancellorship with a “listening tour” designed to gauge the sentiments of faculty, staff, and students. Although she was familiar with UT, courtesy of an earlier stint at the institution, Plowman knew full well that campuses are constantly evolving. In hopes of gaining a nuanced understanding of current conditions and concerns, the newly arrived administrator also scheduled weekly open office hours, during which anyone could drop by to talk about any topic.

Plowman said the exercise enabled her to glean insights and establish lines of communication that otherwise might have taken years to acquire.

“Here at Tennessee, they'd had some high-visibility turnover at higher levels,” she said in a just-released installment of *Innovators*, a podcast produced by the global higher education search firm Harris Search Associates. “The chancellor had stepped down under bad circumstances, and it was very visible; the AD and the football coach — same thing. So there was a feeling on the campus, among faculty and staff, that I'd describe as woundedness — a hesitancy to trust someone again. It almost felt like a personal loss of trust that faculty and even students had about the administration.

“So, it felt different to me than any other administrative job I had taken.”

Open door, open mind

It turned out that many of UT's external constituencies — e.g., alumni, business leaders, and legislators — harbored similar misgivings. “They want to feel good about Tennessee,” Plowman said, “and it doesn't feel good when the leadership is changing.”

By the time her official investiture took place on November 6, 1999, Plowman had attended more than a dozen alumni events and met one on one with hundreds of individuals, including close to two-thirds of the state's 132 legislators

“I guess I was surprised at how much energy I was going to have to put into helping people feel like things have stabilized,” then administrator told *Innovators* host Richard Skinner, PhD, himself a former university president. “There was a lot of time I spent in the early days — and I'm still doing it —

trying to build the trust of faculty and students, and getting to know them. I think I've made a lot of progress.”

The knowledge afforded by the chancellor's fact-finding, fence-mending blitz helped shape a series of well-received personnel moves, including Plowman's appointment of UT's first vice chancellor for diversity and engagement.

Plowman also earned high marks for her oversight of the reunification of UT's Institute of Agriculture into UT and for her role in the creation of the Oak Ridge Institute, which provided a single administrative umbrella for five joint programs operated by the university and the U.S. Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the nation's largest multiprogram science and technology hub.

Plowman's first few months at UT, however, weren't entirely free of controversy.

Early on September 11, 2019, just 10 weeks into her tenure as chancellor, someone painted an anti-Semitic message on The Rock, a 98-ton boulder that has served as something of a public canvas since the mid-1960s. It was the third time in a year that the campus landmark — usually associated with humorous doodles, athletic cheers, and love notes — had been defaced with racist graffiti.

Plowman immediately denounced “the hate aimed toward members of our Jewish community” but acknowledged that “words (of condemnation) are not enough.” Within a week, she announced her decision to install live-streaming cameras that now allow anyone with an internet connection to view The Rock — from two distinct angles — 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We are committed to being a campus where everyone matters and everyone belongs, a campus where love will never be replaced by words or actions of hate,” Plowman said in an email to the UT students, faculty and staff. “Hate aimed at one Vol is aimed at all Vols, and we are committed to responding decisively and peacefully as a Volunteer community.”

Plowman's actions drew widespread praise.

“Donde responded immediately and directly,” Gary Skolits, EdD, then president of UT's Faculty Senate, told the *Knoxville News Sentinel* in November 2019. “She was focused on the community that was hurt by those expressions and focused on what we need to do in the future.”

In the same interview, pegged to Plowman's investiture, Skolits lauded the chancellor's overall performance, making particular note of her transparency.



University of Tennessee

The Rock, a landmark on the UT campus for more than 50 years, bore a warm welcome for Donde Plowman on July 1, 2019. Ten weeks later, a racist message appeared on the boulder, presenting Plowman with an unwelcome leadership test.

“She says what’s on her mind, she seeks to understand what’s on your mind, and then she comes to a solution from there,” Skolits said. “In this day and age, that’s very refreshing.”

Energized by a spate of early accomplishments and no doubt buoyed by the affirmation of key stakeholders such as Skolits, Plowman was upbeat as her first semester as UT’s chief executive came to a close.

The administrator was looking forward to continuing her trust-building campaign; to “doubling down” on Vol is a Verb, a diversity and inclusion initiative; and to helping roll out UT Promise which guarantees free tuition and mandatory fees for qualifying Tennessee residents attending all four of the UT System’s campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Martin and Memphis. (<https://tennessee.edu/ut-promise>)

“This campus has been through a lot,” Plowman told the *News Sentinel* last December. “It feels like the momentum is going in the right direction.”

So much for the agenda

Less than three months later, Plowman was hit with a challenge that dwarfed the public-relations and personnel concerns that had been her initial focus: Like virtually every other higher education leader on the planet, the chancellor had to turn her attention to COVID-19.

On March 11, the same day the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic, UT announced a temporary transition to online instruction, a suspension of study-abroad programs, and the cancellation of most university events.

“I understand the hardship that this presents to all of you, and these are not decisions we made lightly,” Plowman wrote in an email to students, faculty, and staff. “Our campus response to COVID-19 has been based on ongoing CDC updates and regular communication with public health officials and our own infectious disease specialists at the UT Health Science Center.”

Unwilling to abandon the mantra that had marked her chancellorship, Plowman concluded her email with a plea for compassion and cohesiveness: “As we navigate these challenging times as an inclusive campus community, please do not make assumptions about others based on perceived symptoms or identities. We want to foster a campus environment in which everyone matters and belongs. This means showing empathy and respect to ALL Vols, particularly those for whom this may be an especially stressful situation. Let’s do our best to be kind, caring, and considerate of one another, especially during difficult times such as these.”

The prophylactic measures taken by UT were initially set to run through early April. Few in the administration could have imagined that the pandemic would still be claiming lives — never mind disrupting plans and policies — months later.

When it became apparent that COVID-19 would be a long-term problem, Plowman convened a brainstorming session with members of her cabinet and other campus leaders. The question she put to the group: What can UT do to mitigate the virus's impact and stand out from other universities? One participant suggested reaching out to every UT student, including all incoming freshmen.

In the days that followed, UT faculty and staff did just that, making some 41,000 phone calls.

"We didn't want students to leave and not come back," Plowman said in a June interview with the *News Sentinel*. "We were very concerned. You leave for seven weeks, (and) you get disconnected. We just called and said, 'How are you? What do you need?'"

Plowman told the newspaper that three values were guiding the administration's emergency planning: creativity, compassion, and flexibility.

"We just kept repeating that," she said.

In preparation for 2020-2021 academic year, UT reconfigured classrooms to promote social distancing, established a testing regimen to identify exposed individuals as quickly as possible, and mandated that everyone on campus wear a mask to curb the virus's spread.

Despite such precautions, as soon as students returned to campus in August, COVID-19 cases spiked. By the first week of September, UT was reporting 600 active cases, the overwhelming majority involving students. Plowman shuffled resources to step up contact tracing, procured additional off-campus housing to accommodate the isolation of infected students, and made an emotional appeal to the campus.

"Students, I am asking you to change your behavior," the chancellor said in a video message. "Just be with a handful of your best friends. Stay out of places that are crammed with people, like bars. If people are crammed in there you become a close contact of someone. Help us, please, get control of these numbers."

Plowman called out a handful of fraternities for allegedly flouting safety protocols and warned that continued "recklessness" would force the administration to resort to more drastic measures, including a wholesale shift to remote instruction.

"Let me be clear," she said. "Everything is on the table at this point."

Live and learn (or vice versa)

Obviously, in navigating the COVID-19 crisis, Plowman, like her counterparts across the country, hasn't had the benefit of a pandemic-response instruction manual. Similarly, at no point in her ascent to the top rung of academia's leadership ladder did she attend a seminar dedicated to leading a complex educational institution during a global health crisis.

As a result, Plowman has had to rely on the wisdom of scientists and public-health experts — and, perhaps more importantly, on her own three-plus decades of experience in higher education.

"In a lot of ways," she told *Innovators*, "every job I've had in my life has prepared me for this moment — every single one of them."

Plowman, who holds a bachelor's degree in English from Southern Methodist University, a master's degree in higher education administration from the University of North Texas, and a doctorate in strategic management from the University of Texas at Austin, began her academic career in 1988 as an assistant professor of management at the University Texas at San Antonio (UTSA).

Twelve years into her tenure at UTSA, Plowman got the opportunity to put her management know-how to use in an administrative role: associate dean of graduate studies and research. While serving in that position, she launched a PhD in Business program and developed the institution's first-ever criteria for evaluating research.

In 2007, after 19 years at UTSA, Plowman joined the faculty at UT as the Ralph & Janet Heath Professor of Management in the Haslam College of Business. The following year, she was appointed head of the college's newly created Department of Management. In that role, she brought together three formerly disparate faculty groups that had been combined to form the department; she revived a dormant doctoral program in strategy; and she helped establish the university's Anderson Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

Plowman's success caught the attention of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), which, in 2010, recruited her to be dean of its College of Business Administration — a program she now describes as an "underperforming and underrecognized" school "yearning to be more and better but not sure how to do it."

In six years as the college's James R. & Susan Stuart Endowed Dean, Plowman raised \$150 million for curriculum, faculty, and student support. She led fundraising and planning for a new home for the program — an \$84 million, 240,00-square-foot building that opened in 2017. She presided over a 26 percent increase in overall enrollment, a 57 percent increase in first-time freshman, and a 41 percent increase in minority students. She also added degree programs, introduced outreach tools, and hired 70 faculty members, boosting female representation from 28 percent in 2010 to 35 percent in 2016.

During that same period, the college jumped from No. 72 to No. 45 in *U.S. News & World Report's* raking of undergraduate business programs.

In late 2016, UNL announced that Plowman would become executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer, the institution's second-highest-ranking official. She assumed the post on January 1, 2017, and held it until her return to UT.

"I came to this position with some recent experience in, and successes with, leading change — and leading what at the time seemed like monumental change," Plowman told *Innovators*. "I'm hoping that my preparation (for the pandemic) was in having already had the experience of making hard decisions. Not all of them went great, but I learned from them. I hope that it has provided me with that I need to be able to make *these* tough decisions.

"Another thing I bring to this is that I'm not just a business professor. My whole background was in management and organizational behavior — in reading, writing, and researching about change and leadership. I hope that I bring — I think I do — an appreciation for leadership. You have to be intentional to be good. I don't think that being smart and having a lot of good credentials makes you a good leader. It requires thinking and reading and learning and working at the job of 'How do I inspire people? How am I going to keep people hopeful right now?'"

Pick up the phone

That aspect of academic leadership — or leadership, period — has never been more critical, Plowman said.

"People don't feel hopeful right now. I mean, this is *hard*. It's unsustainable, what we're doing. No one has had a day off in months, and there's nothing you can look at and say, 'Well, this is all going to be over here,'" she said, gesturing as if marking an endpoint.

To be clear, Plowman doesn't claim to have all the answers. Far from it. In fact, she readily acknowledges turning to others for advice.

MEET DONDE PLOWMAN

Background

Donde (pronounced don-DEE) Ashmos Plowman, a self-styled "preacher's kid," is the daughter of a Methodist minister. Her given name, Donde, is the amalgam of the first names of two of her father's ministerial colleagues, Don and Dee. Because of her father's job, Plowman lived in six small towns in Oklahoma before graduating from high school.

Personal

Plowman is married to Dennis Duchon, an adjunct instructor in the Department of Management and Entrepreneurship in UT's Haslam College of Business and professor emeritus and former chair of the Department Management at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The couple has two grown sons.



University of Tennessee

UT Chancellor Donde Plowman, left, took an active role in promoting — and enforcing — the school's mask mandate as students returned to campus for the start the 2020-2021 academic year.

“I’m going to say something that’s probably politically incorrect, but I think women have a willingness to reach out and ask for help more than men do,” she said. “I’ve always done that my whole career — in everything that I was doing. I was on the phone with two different universities just today.

“Every time I’ve picked up the phone and called someone and said, ‘How are you handling, say, an outbreak in Greek housing?’ people have shared (useful suggestions). It’s using the connections you’ve built in your life up to this point and just calling on those same people — and they call on me.”

Plowman said such exchanges are especially valuable now.

“We’re not going to conferences. We’re not seeing people like we used to. It’s incredibly isolating,” she said. “For me at least, being able to get on the phone now and again with other chancellors and other vice chancellors is very helpful — if nothing else, to share misery.”

Notwithstanding the occasional miserable moment, Plowman is choosing to remain positive — or at least keep things in perspective. (Of course,

what other option does she have? This *isn’t* a business simulation; it’s real life.)

Plowman points out that most, if not all, of the challenges that were confronting higher education before COVID-19 surfaced will still be there after the virus succumbs to medical advances. Maybe, just maybe, she said, the pandemic will end up nudging the academy closer to solutions.

“How are we going to maintain our viability with a shrinking demographic? How do we, as public universities, lower tuition and make college more accessible? And how do we prepare people for careers and jobs that don’t really exist now? I think *those* are the existential questions in a lot of ways,” the chancellor said.

“I think the opportunity for us — if I can put on my I’m-going-to-make-lemonade-out-of-these-lemons hat — is that COVID offers us the opportunity to rethink ourselves: Who are we, and what is our role? And I don’t mean we, Tennessee; I mean we, academia. It already has forced us — without saying that’s what we’re doing — to rethink a lot of things.” ■

About Harris Search Associates

Harris Search Associates is a leading, global higher education executive search firm. Established in 1997 by Jeffrey G. Harris, the firm focuses on the recruitment of senior leaders to support the growth of universities, research parks, institutes, national laboratories, hospitals, and academic healthcare enterprises. Based in Dublin, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus, Harris Search Associates maintains regional offices in Dallas and San Francisco. The firm is a shareholder member of IIC Partners, one of the world’s largest executive search organizations, with 44 offices in 33 countries.

About the *Innovators* podcast

The *Innovators* podcast features timely conversations with global thought leaders in higher education, research, engineering, technology, and the health sciences. The audio segments, which allow listeners to learn from those at the forefront of change, innovation, and discovery, are available on the web at [HarrisSearch.com](https://www.harrissearch.com) and on leading podcast platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Libsyn, Google Podcasts, Overcast, Stitcher, Spotify, and PlayerFM.



About Jeffrey G. Harris, MBA

Jeffrey G. Harris is founder and managing partner of Harris Search Associates. He is an active member of CUPA-HR, the American Council on Education (ACE), the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), and the Executive Search Roundtable, a group dedicated to the development of best practices in higher education talent recruitment. Mr. Harris holds a bachelor’s degree from Ithaca College and an MBA from the University of Dayton.



About Richard A. Skinner, PhD

Richard A. Skinner is a senior consultant at Harris Search Associates. He formerly served as president of Clayton State University in Atlanta and as president and vice chancellor of Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia. Dr. Skinner also was senior vice president for programs at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. He holds a PhD and a master’s degree in government and international studies, both from the University of South Carolina.

