

Leader Profile



Leader Profile:

Mark Heckler

President

Valparaiso University

“Anyone who comes into a job like this really needs to want to do this work. You have to know that there’s nothing else on this planet that you want to do.”

— Mark Heckler

Creative collaboration eases navigation through change

What do a theatre director, a ship’s captain and a university president have in common? Ask Valparaiso University president Mark Heckler, whose use of imagery and metaphor paint a colorful portrait of his view of leadership.

Communicating through visual imagery is second nature for this leader, who began his career as a theatre artist and director. Mark uses directorial skills to help guide people toward a common vision. “There’s the kind of director who says, ‘go there, do this, do that’ and often ends up with a performance that looks great, but has no soul,” he explains. “Then there’s the kind who asks the actors how they view their roles, listens to what they say, challenges them to commit fully and articulates a vision for the outcome. That director is far more likely to end up with a soul-satisfying result.”

When Valparaiso University’s board began searching for a new leader in the summer of 2007, its members were keenly aware they needed to fill big shoes. The school’s retiring president had served for 20 years, quintupled the endowment, and successfully built student success, a distinguished faculty, a talented senior administrative staff, and a dedicated board while maintaining a balanced budget and a well-defined mission.

The new president would need prodigious energy, an expansive vision and a deep dedication to the institution’s Lutheran mission. The board’s ideal candidate possessed unquestioned integrity, exquisite judgment, substantial creativity and a sense of humor. A year later, the board found a perfect fit in Mark Heckler.

When Mark describes dealing with trends in American higher education, he uses the analogy of navigating a ship through arctic waters. He compares the current economy, the changing demographics of college students and new technologies to ice floes with the potential to batter the ship of the university. In his role as president of Valparaiso University, he stays alert to the shifting environment of academia while charting a course that keeps the hull uncompromised.

The parallels between the theatrical director, the ship’s captain and the university president become even clearer when Mark describes a leader. He says, “A leader is a listener, an observer and a communicator. A leader has the ability to discern the next step and create the circumstances that allow people to move in that direction.”

Mark’s talent for collaboration and communication may have been born in the theatre, but his confidence in the power they deliver was honed during his five-year tenure as Provost of the University of Colorado at Denver. “I held that role during a period of intense pressure,” he said. “We experienced a precipitous drop in financial support from the state and weathered several significant scandals. In my five years as provost, I worked with six chancellors. I emerged from that experience feeling as if I’d been tempered in a fire; like I’d gained a lifetime of career experience.”

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His time in Colorado also included leading the merger of the university with the academic health services center to create a new, three-campus institution. Working with the deans of 12 schools and colleges, Mark played a leading role in the strategic planning, implementation and execution for the consolidation.

He credits his parents for his commitment to higher education. He grew up in a coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania and was the first person in his immediate family to attend college. “Like many in our community, my folks were keenly aware that the better future they imagined for their children came through education,” he says.

His own college experiences make him particularly sensitive to the needs of today’s first-generation college students. He knows, for example, that these students need mentors and advisors to help them figure out how the system works: the best courses to take, how to finance a college education, how to reduce the cost of text books. Mark believes that with mentoring, highly intelligent students who may enter the university academically disadvantaged will blossom over the course of their college years.

Valparaiso University, or Valpo, as it’s affectionately nicknamed, already had a well-oiled strategic planning process in place when Mark accepted the call to the presidency in 2008. What was needed was a refreshed vision for the future of the university: What would Valpo look like in 30 years?

Mark spent the better part of his first year involving faculty, staff, alumni and community leaders in articulating this vision. The process included multiple opportunities to share ideas and collect feedback. By offering a university summit, open discussion forums, electronic forums, and surveys, the visioning task force invited constituents to contribute in the ways that were most comfortable for them. The process maximized transparency and resulted in significant buy-in by the university community.

With a collective vision in place, Mark has engaged others in defining strategic options that will effectively guide the university’s course. His leadership relies on students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members dreaming, imagining and sharing a commitment to Valpo’s future.

In other words, Mark Heckler is not navigating this ship alone.

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with Valparaiso University on this important executive search assignment.

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