

# Leadership Traits and Success in Higher Education

**A Witt/Kieffer Study**



**How College and University Leaders Compare  
with Corporate Executives**

---

## Contents

Introduction . . . . .	1
About the Assessments . . . . .	2
About the Leaders Who Were Assessed . . . . .	2
Assessment Results . . . . .	3
HPI Assessments: Normal Personality . . . . .	3
HDS Assessments: Dark-Side Personality . . . . .	4
MVPI Assessments: Goals and Drivers . . . . .	5
Key Similarities and Differences . . . . .	6
General Conclusions . . . . .	7
“Commerce” Orientation: The 23-Percentile Difference . . . . .	8
Further Questions and Implications . . . . .	9

## Introduction

Few would argue that there are fundamental differences in the challenges facing leaders within higher education versus those in the corporate world and in the roles that each must perform. College presidents are not private sector CEOs, clearly.

Nevertheless, as resource constraints and funding shortfalls plague many not-for-profit colleges and universities today, the suggestion has been made more than once that higher education presidents and other leaders need to become more “businesslike” or “entrepreneurial.” They should, for example, pay more attention to the bottom line, partner creatively with organizations outside of academia, and/or explore new sources of revenue. For most presidents and academic leaders, in fact, their roles have gravitated significantly in this direction already.

These suggestions and pressures often come from boards of trustees, whose membership is increasingly grounded in the corporate world, or from prominent alums, the media, state legislators, and other parties concerned about the long-term viability of institutions of higher learning.

In short, higher education leaders are being asked to change. While the question of “should they?” is subject to fierce debate, the question “can they?” is also relevant. *Can today's academic leaders successfully adapt to a changing environment or might innate personality and values characteristics preclude them from doing so?*

Meanwhile, many colleges and universities are seeking out “nontraditional” candidates to fill traditional academic roles, from deans to chairs and even presidents. Often they are looking to the private sector, or at least to candidates who have close ties to the corporate world.

While these corporate leaders are expected to bring new blood and fresh ideas to academia, they will also be asked to change and adapt to a new climate. *Can business executives adapt to positions within academia, or will some of their innate personality and values characteristics preclude them from succeeding in higher education?*

To begin to answer these questions, Witt/Kieffer teamed with Hogan Assessment Systems to collect personality assessment data on more than 100 of today's higher education leaders and compare these results to those gathered from leaders within the private sector.

We share results of these comparisons here. While the sample size of higher education leaders is modest, there are fundamental conclusions to be drawn from these comparative assessments:

- Leaders within higher education and the corporate world show very similar personality profiles when assessed characteristics are viewed as a whole.
- Yet there are several characteristics and values measured—among them, “Mischievous,” “Aesthetics,” “Altruistic,” and “Commerce”—in which higher education leaders and corporate executives clearly differ.
- The discrepancy in the “Commerce” scale is particularly striking and deserving of further discussion and study.
- These differences deserve particular consideration and attention when higher education leaders are asked to adapt to new market conditions or strategic directions, or conversely, when executives from the private sector are asked to step into academic leadership roles.

## About the Assessments

Leaders involved in the study were given three separate proven personality assessments:

**Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI):** a measure of normal personality; used to predict “bright-side” personality, or what is seen when people are at their best.

**Hogan Development Survey (HDS):** identifies “dark-side” personality-based performance risks and derailers of interpersonal behavior—what is exhibited when people are stressed or when their guard is down.

**Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI):** reveals a person’s core values, goals and interests—what a person desires and strives to attain.

Hogan’s assessments are among the most widely researched and commonly used personality and values assessments in the world. Hogan maintains a research archive demonstrating links between Hogan assessment results and performance in over 300 different types of jobs. Furthermore, the HPI, HDS, and MVPI have been translated into more than 40 languages.

The Hogan approach presents results as they might relate to a person’s professional behavior and reputation, not necessarily how he or she views him or herself. For example, highly ambitious individuals see themselves as goal-oriented, driven, and highly motivated. Although others might also describe “ambitious” people using the same terms, some might also see them as restless, pushy, and hyper competitive. For this reason, we present assessment information using both “bright-side” (HPI) and “dark-side” (HDS) personality characteristics, as well as provide insight into individuals’ goals and values (MVPI).

It is important to note that the assessment data collected represents general trends within sample study groups and is in no way tied to actual on-the-job performance. Also, with larger sample sizes, there tends to be a regression to the mean. Thus, it would be very unusual for a group as a whole to exhibit scores in the 80th or 90th percentile, for example.

For these studies, the mean suggests an “average.” It does not convey the variability or diversity of the scores within these samples. Also, it is important to interpret scores above/below the mean in regards to the context of role that assessment participants play. For example, if an individual’s or group’s “Prudence” score—which measures conscientiousness and self-control—is above the average, this could be interpreted as negative or positive depending on whether their particular leadership position requires, for example, flexibility or conformity.

## About the Leaders Who Were Assessed

Over 100 U.S.-based higher education leaders consisting of presidents, VPs, deans, and other academic administrators completed the HPI, HDS, and MVPI to create a benchmark for the Witt/Kieffer Higher Education Competency model—this model is now used, upon client request, to assess leadership candidates in executive searches Witt/Kieffer conducts within higher education. [HPI (N=111), HDS (N=107), and MVPI (N=100)]. Their assessment data were used to define a five-level scoring range for each competency. Each leader received a report of their individual strengths and shortcomings for participating in the study. Average age for the Higher Education group was 55, with roughly three-quarters male. Sample job titles included: president, chancellor, VP, provost, associate provost, dean, and CIO.

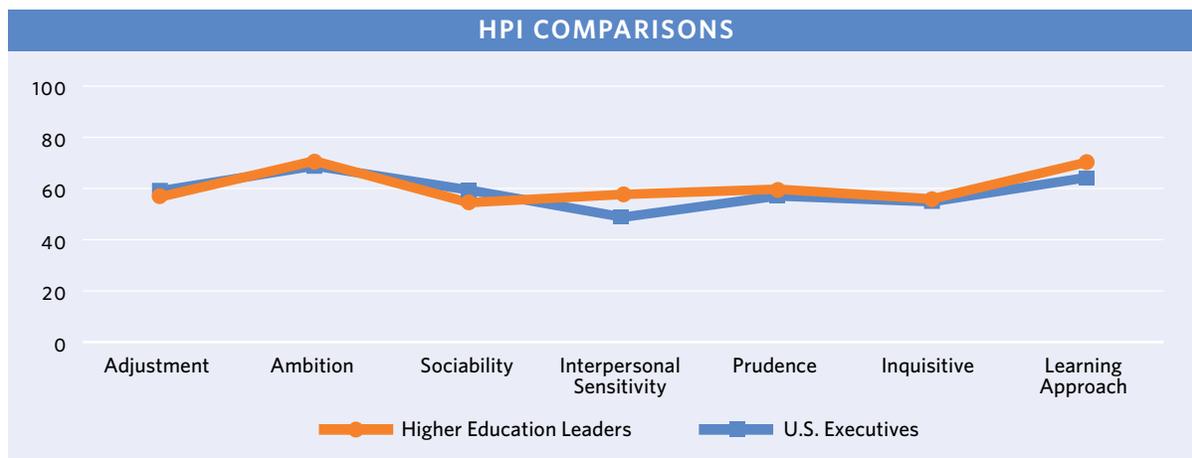
In an exploratory effort, we compared the higher education leaders to a general population of more than 1,000 U.S. executives across HPI, HDS, and MVPI scales to gain insight regarding education leaders' performance strengths, barriers, and drivers. [HPI (N=1,104), HDS (N=1,530), and MVPI (N=1,082)]. Average age for this group was 43; roughly three-quarters were male. Sample job titles included: CEO, VP, senior executive, and senior manager.

## Assessment Results

### HPI Assessments: Normal Personality

The HPI is the industry standard for measuring normal personality based on the Five-Factor Model (FFM). This tool is designed to predict occupational success by measuring day-to-day personality characteristics that drive behavior. The deeply-ingrained characteristics measured by the HPI impact how individuals approach work and their interactions with others. The HPI includes seven primary scales:

- **Adjustment:** confidence, self-esteem, and composure under pressure
- **Ambition:** initiative, competitiveness, and desire for leadership roles
- **Sociability:** extraversion, gregarious, and need for social interaction
- **Interpersonal Sensitivity:** tact, perceptiveness, and ability to maintain relationships
- **Prudence:** self-discipline, responsibility, and thoroughness
- **Inquisitive:** imagination, curiosity, and creative potential
- **Learning Approach:** approach for acquiring knowledge, valuing education



### HPI Results Summary

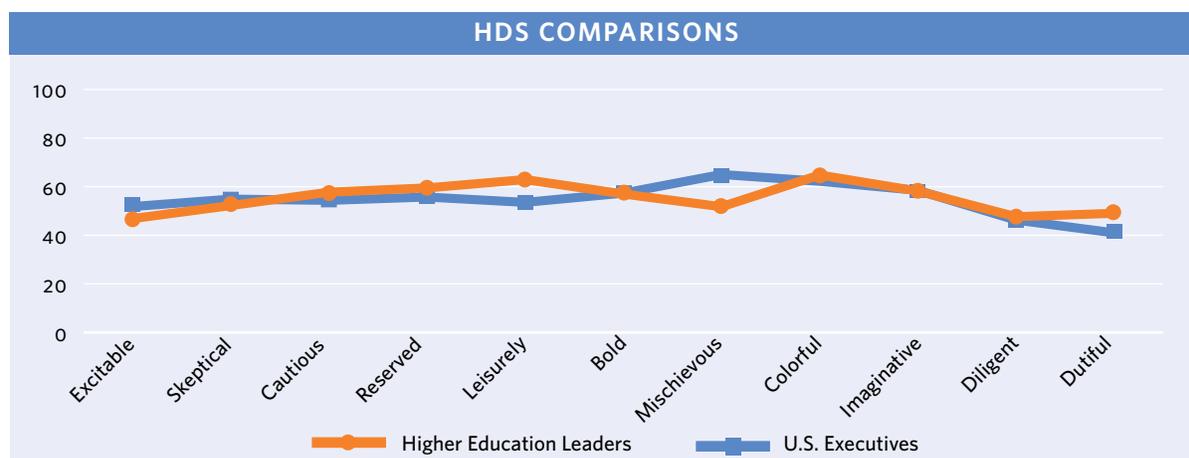
Higher education leaders and corporate leaders fared similarly in most categories, with higher education leaders scoring slightly higher in terms of Interpersonal Sensitivity and Learning Approach, and executives scoring higher in terms of Sociability.

Both groups exhibited elevated scores for Ambition and Learning Approach. Higher education leaders scored at the 71st percentile for Ambition and 70th for Learning Approach. The U.S. Executives collectively rose to the 69th percentile for Ambition and the 64th percentile for Learning Approach.

### HDS Assessments: Dark-Side Personality

The HDS identifies performance risks and counterproductive behaviors that can negatively impact an individual's leadership style, ability to build relationships, and overall career performance. These derailers may be overused strengths that one exercises inappropriately or they may represent dramatic shifts of behavior incited by stress, pressure, boredom, fatigue, or a lack of social vigilance. The HDS includes 11 scales:

- **Excitable:** moody, hard to please, and emotionally volatile
- **Skeptical:** suspicious, sensitive to criticism, and expecting betrayal
- **Cautious:** risk averse, resistant to change, and slow to make decisions
- **Reserved:** aloof, uncommunicative, and indifferent to the feelings of others
- **Leisurely:** overtly cooperative, but privately irritable, stubborn, and uncooperative
- **Bold:** overly self-confident, arrogant, and entitled
- **Mischievous:** charming, risk-taking, and excitement-seeking
- **Colorful:** dramatic, attention-seeking, and interruptive
- **Imaginative:** creative, but thinking and acting in unusual or eccentric ways
- **Diligent:** meticulous, precise, hard to please, and micromanaging
- **Dutiful:** eager to please and reluctant to act independently or against popular opinion



### HDS Results Summary

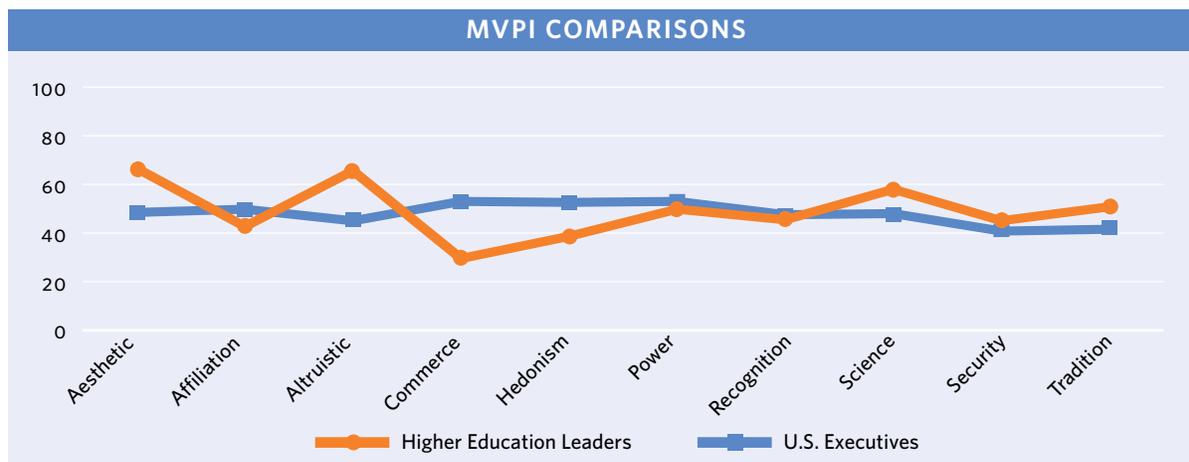
Higher education leaders and corporate leaders again fared similarly. Corporate leaders showed elevated scores on the Mischievous scale (65th percentile, versus 52nd percentile for the higher education leaders), while higher education leaders scored slightly higher on Leisurely and Dutiful.

Both groups exhibited strong Colorful and Imaginative scores. Higher education leaders fell within the 65th percentile on Colorful and the 58th percentile on Imaginative, with executives in the 62nd and 58th percentiles, respectively.

### MVPI Assessments: Goals and Drivers

The MVPI is a measure of an individual’s core values, interests, and performance drivers as they relate to occupational preferences and job-related satisfaction. The MVPI evaluates the fit between an individual and the organizational culture and provides insight into the type of value-driven culture an individual is likely to create as a leader. The MVPI includes ten primary scales:

- **Recognition:** responsive to attention, approval, and praise
- **Power:** desiring success, accomplishment, status, and control
- **Hedonism:** orientated for fun, pleasure, and enjoyment
- **Altruistic:** wanting to help others and contribute to society
- **Affiliation:** enjoying and seeking out social interaction
- **Tradition:** dedicated to strong personal beliefs
- **Security:** needing predictability, structure, and order
- **Commerce:** interested in money, profits, investment, and business opportunities
- **Aesthetic:** needing self-expression, concerned over look, feel, and design of work products
- **Science:** wanting knowledge, research, technology, and data



### MVPI Results Summary

MVPI Comparisons exhibited greater disparity between academic and executive leader results. Higher education leaders scored much higher in terms of Aesthetic (67th percentile) and Altruistic (66th percentile) drivers and motivators, while slightly higher on the Science and Tradition scales. Corporate leaders scored higher on Commerce (53rd percentile) and Hedonism (53rd percentile) values, and slightly higher on Affiliation.

In particular, the high Altruistic (66th percentile) and low Commerce (30th percentile) scores among higher education leaders stand out as compared with the executive group.

## Key Similarities

First, it is noteworthy to look at similarities between the two comparison groups. As one might expect from leaders, both groups had elevated scores (71st percentile) on the HPI Ambition scale. High scores on Ambition indicate individuals who are driven, achievement-oriented, and willing to take initiative. High Ambition scores are typical of people who seek leadership positions.

Additionally, both groups showed elevated scores along the HDS Colorful scale (65th percentile). Elevated scores on this scale are associated with dramatic, attention-seeking, and self-promoting behaviors. High scores on the HDS Imaginative scale, found in both groups, are indicative of creative, innovative, and curious people. It can be a negative tendency and is often associated with, for example, sharing ideas before considering their practicality.

For the MVPI comparisons, results for the two leader groups did not mirror each other as closely as with the HPI and HDS assessments, though the categories of Power, Recognition, Security, and Tradition showed similar relationships.

As is clear from the charts on the previous pages, leaders within higher education and the private sector have similar aggregate personality scores in most areas assessed.

## Key Differences

On the HPI comparisons, higher education leaders scored higher than U.S. executives on HPI Learning Approach (70th percentile). High scores suggest individuals who tend to value education and demonstrate expertise in their area and may advocate learning and training opportunities for others. This finding is consistent with what we would expect in academia. Higher education leaders showed elevations along HPI Interpersonal Sensitivity (58th percentile), which may indicate that these leaders tend to communicate more diplomatically and seek to form and maintain alliances.

High HDS Leisurely scores (63rd percentile) for higher ed leaders can suggest a tendency to be overtly cooperative and covertly resistant in times of stress or pressure. Private-sector leaders, on the other hand, tended to show elevated scores on the HDS Mischievous scale (65th percentile), indicating they are more likely to react to stress by making daring (even uninformed) decisions and testing boundaries and limits.

Perhaps most notably, MVPI results showed that higher education leaders scored significantly higher on MVPI Altruistic (66th percentile) and lower on MVPI Commerce (30th percentile). People with high Altruistic scores typically focus on helping or providing service to others, considering others' wellbeing, and promoting staff morale. Those who scored high on the Commerce scale likely have a strong interest in money, profits, investment, and business opportunities, while those below the mean do not.

Finally, the fact that private sector executives scored slightly above the mean on Hedonism compared to higher education leaders might suggest differences between the two groups in terms of an orientation toward pleasure and enjoyment.

## General Conclusions

The research presented here sheds light on the personality of and values held by typical leaders within higher education versus a cohort of corporate executives. Although based on a small sample size of higher education leaders, some general conclusions can be drawn:

Higher Education Leaders scored high for . . .	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initiative and a desire for leadership roles</li> </ul>	HPI: "bright-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tact, perceptiveness, and relationships</li> </ul>	HPI: "bright-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education</li> </ul>	HPI: "bright-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drama, attention-seeking</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overt cooperation but private stubbornness</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creativity and eccentricity</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping others, contributing to society</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-expression and "look and feel" concerns</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
Higher Education Leaders scored low for . . .	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Money, profits, and business opportunities</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pleasure and enjoyment</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers

Corporate Executives scored high for . . .	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initiative and a desire for leadership roles</li> </ul>	HPI: "bright-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education</li> </ul>	HPI: "bright-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk-taking and excitement</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drama, attention-seeking</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creativity and eccentricity</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pleasure and enjoyment</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Money, profits, and business opportunities</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
Corporate Executives scored low for . . .	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being eager to please; acting with popular opinion</li> </ul>	HDS: "dark-side"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Predictability</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping others; contributing to society</li> </ul>	MVPI: goals and drivers

## Commerce Orientation: The 23-Percentile Difference

Clearly, the most noteworthy discrepancy in scores between leaders in higher education versus those in the corporate world is on the Commerce scale within the MVPI assessment. There is a 23-percentile difference on the Commerce scale, with higher ed leaders scoring at only the 30th percentile compared to the 53rd percentile for the executives.

This carries significant implications. It may suggest, for example, that leaders within higher education would not be predisposed to concern themselves with matters of finance, investment, profitability, and so forth. Given the uncertainty over the changing “business” model of higher education, and the trend towards fewer resources, tighter budgets, and greater need to prove the “return on investment” within higher education, this low Commerce score may be a red flag for current and potential higher education leaders, as well as for those who recruit and select them.

### There are a few important questions to ask in this regard:

- Is having a low Commerce value a negative for higher ed leaders, or is it a virtue? Is it indeed a “red flag” or might it suggest a commitment to education and serving their institutions without compromise or influence by budgets and bottom lines?
- Are higher education leaders low “Commerce” individuals by nature, or are there simply other values that take precedence?
- Can current college and university leaders undergo training and career development to give them more of a commercial mindset if it would be advantageous to their ability to lead? Can they, for example, learn from the “Triple Bottom Line” (i.e., People, Profit, Planet) approach that has gained traction within corporate leadership circles?
- Should candidates for higher education leadership positions—from presidents to deans—be assessed for their interests in profits, financial gain, and business opportunities (and other characteristics), and how much weight should search committees place upon these factors?

Moving forward, as colleges and universities facing significant financial and marketplace challenges seek new leaders and develop their current leaders, they may consider whether candidates’ personalities and, specifically, values can more closely align with those of successful private sector executives without ultimately sacrificing their mission-orientation and commitment to higher learning.

## Further Questions Raised

The personality- and value-based characteristics ascribed to higher education leaders, collectively, raise questions that are central to the future of higher education:

**Are the differences between higher education and corporate leaders significant?** Are the comparative differences suggested here important enough to warrant further research?

**Can/should today's higher education leaders be transformed?** Regardless of how they have arrived at positions of leadership, can they appreciate their weaknesses, see the downside to perceived strengths, and learn to become better leaders to meet their institutions' needs over time? And while academic leaders value learning, is this only within the traditional parameters of higher education or does it also apply to executive coaching and leadership training?

**How can colleges and universities assess current and potential leaders based on competencies and personality assessments?** Should personality assessments be used to identify tendencies or "blind spots" in current leaders, or as part of the hiring process for tomorrow's leaders in higher education?

## Implications for Higher Education Leaders and their Institutions

Within any specific institution, personality assessment results can help match individual values to the most predominant characteristics of the organization's culture, or the responsibilities of a given leadership position. If indeed the role of the future university leader is to be more "businesslike" than in the past, it may be helpful to know this, and to consider precisely which characteristics and competencies correspond with leadership success.

Similarly, this assessment information can help institutions in the future identify new leaders—perhaps even those from the corporate world—who are most likely to fit well in certain colleges and universities and thrive in academic leadership positions.

## Witt/Kieffer Locations

### Nationwide

Oak Brook, IL

Emeryville, CA

Irvine, CA

Denver, CO

Atlanta, GA

Louisville, KY

Burlington, MA

Nantucket, MA

Bethesda, MD

Minneapolis, MN

St. Louis, MO

New York, NY

Toledo, OH

Philadelphia, PA

Pittsburgh, PA

Houston, TX

Seattle, WA

## About Witt/Kieffer

Witt/Kieffer is the preeminent executive search firm that identifies outstanding leadership solutions for organizations committed to improving the quality of life. With 40 years of experience in executive recruiting, Witt/Kieffer helps clients identify leaders with the best mix of skills, experience, vision, and character to fulfill their missions.

Visit [www.wittkieffer.com](http://www.wittkieffer.com) for more information.

## About Hogan

Hogan is a global provider of personality assessments and consulting services. With more than 25 years of experience, Hogan helps businesses dramatically reduce turnover and increase productivity by hiring the right people, developing key talent, and evaluating leadership potential.

Visit [www.hoganassessments.com](http://www.hoganassessments.com) for more information.