

A Bargaining Unit Member's guide to CREDO, Part I

from the Rider AAUP Executive Board

Who is CREDO? Do they have the qualifications and expertise for us to assign credibility to their assertions?

CREDO is a higher education consulting agency advising small, private colleges. The vast majority of these colleges have strong religious affiliations. Founded in 1995, and based in Whitsett, NC and De Pere, WI, and with a revenue of \$9 -12 million, CREDO's consultancy frequently leads to university-wide restructuring that favors STEM fields, downsizing, and the closing of Liberal Arts programs.

CREDO claims expertise in *“the higher education market [that] allows us to understand the unique challenges independent institutions face when attempting to make positive change. With that insight and your input, we chart courses to affect desired experiences.”* Their literature does not define positive change, or specify to whom the phrase ‘your input’ might apply.

CREDO's core team

Their core team of professionals has fleeting practical experience as faculty or upper-administration in higher education. A number of senior core team members have spent a career only in higher ed consulting, and have little, or no experience as college administration or faculty – or experience only in the past millennium. A number of their newest employees appear to have spent their entire working careers in consultancy.

When cross referencing claims made by ‘core team’ members on CREDO's site with the resumes on LinkedIn and other public sites, inconsistencies appear. In one instance an individual claims serving in “seven interim vice-presidential roles” while also stating that they have been in higher ed consulting since 1997. This is also the year in which the individual completed their undergraduate degree at the age of 22 or 23. Clearly, this leaves no time for a recent graduate to serve in all these roles, even if an academic institution were to hire a recent graduate as a vice-president. Furthermore, no institution lists the individual as having served in this capacity, and the individual's LinkedIn profile mentions no such experience. This is not the only instance of potentially misrepresented qualifications.

Instead of broad expertise and verifiable credentials, CREDO's ‘core team’ offers slick marketing of warmed-over slogans from the corporate world of the 1990s; an empty brand that repackages myopic for-profit/corporate soundbites into a boutique downsizing experience for struggling higher ed administrators.

CREDO's affiliates

CREDO's 'core team' is heavily supplemented by an affiliate network who do possess verifiable experience in the academy. Many are former college administrators CREDO seemingly employs on an ad hoc basis. A number of these retired administrators (primarily vice-presidents) are from former CREDO client institutions. Rider was introduced to one during the August webinar: Jerry Seaman, retired principal of Harlaxton College (University of Evansville). For those administrators in their dotage, their life and income after academia can be supplemented with independent contractor work provided by CREDO.

What are CREDO's core texts and who are their authors?

Central to CREDO's message are two texts, *Surviving to Thriving: A planning framework for leaders of private colleges and universities* (2014); and *PIVOT: A vision for the new university* (2019). CREDO founder Joanne Soliday is one primary author, and in *Pivot* writes alongside Mark Lombardi, president of Maryville University. CREDO's site lists CREDO Press as the publisher, an entity existing only on CREDO's site. Libraries and booksellers list the publisher as Advantage Media Group. AMG's website indicates that they specialize in helping CEOs "Grow your business and become THE authority with a book." CREDO's published texts accomplish exactly what Advantage Media Group promises on their site - drumming up business and establishing pseudo-authority via publication. The scrutiny that academia expects of faculty who publish is not present in CREDO's guiding texts.

Mark Lombardi is co-author of *Pivot*, and currently serves as president of Maryville University. He formerly served at the now-defunct College of Santa Fe. At CSF he presided over scandals alleging wrongful termination, defamation of character, allegations of fraud, and academic misconduct (e.g. changing students' grades and transcript statuses while president). Following his departure from CSF in 2007, the institution defaulted on a \$25 million dollar bond. CSF was taken over and operated by for-profit entities; one a Singapore-based multinational. CSF morphed into the for-profit Santa Fe University of Art and Design, ultimately closing in 2018.

The lawsuits and allegations followed Lombardi to Maryville University where he took over for the previous president (who left in the midst of allegations of sexual assault).

- https://www.stltoday.com/news/maryville-u-president-is-sued-over-previous-job/article_f6083318-593c-55d0-9e59-8e8f7fc064e4.html
- https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/o-brothers-where-art-thou-a-brief-history-of-the/article_ddb887bf-dddb-51dc-b612-03ca89278356.html
- <https://www.sfreporter.com/2006/08/02/executive-decisions/>

While Lombardi's tenure at Maryville appears to have been without major scandal, his leadership at CSF was pockmarked by failures. Faculty from CSF have been vocal in their negative assessment of Lombardi's leadership. At Maryville student success is attributed to the 23 members of the student success department, primarily life coaches. Faculty are required to do a minimum of 70 hours of continuing ed on an annual basis. The Better Business Bureau has registered myriad complaints from prospective students who were mercilessly harassed to enroll.

- <https://www.maryville.edu/studentsuccess/contact-us/>
- <https://www.maryville.edu/academicaffairs/ctl-ale/>
- https://www.stltoday.com/news/maryville-u-president-is-sued-over-previous-job/article_f6083318-593c-55d0-9e59-8e8f7fc064e4.html
- <https://www.bbb.org/us/mo/saint-louis/profile/college-and-university/maryville-university-0734-120004550/complaints>
- https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/tales-from-the-teacher-s-lounge-faculty-tell-the-csf/article_cc6700b8-4cf1-5cd7-9ad8-fbe29ff44154.html

Joanne Soliday, an evangelist for CREDO's paradigm in print and in recorded media, served at the vice-presidential level at Elon and West Virginia Wesleyan University (admissions and external relations roles) before becoming a consultant in 2001. Some of her public statements may resonate with our community:

“The most important element to the health of an institution in today's urgent times is a strong and capable leadership team.”

from CREDO's site, <https://www.credohighered.com/services/leadership-development-executive-search>

“Often the mission of an institution, college, or university can be compromised by one person...because that person will not move, and there is a fear on the part of administrators to do something about that.”

from the podcast “Pivoting toward what is possible” from *31 minutes*, 20:40
<https://ha-31.com/2019/09/pivoting-toward-whats-possible/>

“What courageous colleges have in common... Successful colleges have a culture of accountability”.

Ibid 22:45

Applying Soliday's criteria of capable and accountable leadership to our community is a worthy exercise. It is apropos to consider her statements regarding the impediment of particular persons in implementing institutional mission.

When asked about the need arising for increased academic program prioritization she states:

“Yes, yes, yes...but, colleges will have to be very careful not to eliminate programs that are mission-central, and not to use only a financial measure to make a decision like that.”

from “Pivoting to a new university...” 36:28 via YouTube,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f6Ln3Kpfy0>

Soliday offers a thoughtful and sensible caveat, but what if the institution or the constituent colleges have recently undergone revisions to their mission or vision statements? The alignment of “Mission with market” is crucial, according to Pivot. Therefore, this might “inadvertently” result in the elimination of programs that do not align with a newly articulated mission.

Revised mission statements that might or might not have been designed by committees can become-the basis for future program elimination in the upcoming academic prioritization process. Incidentally, Rider administration may seek to escape criticism by using CREDO to guide the academic prioritization process after the contrived mission revision is completed. This would mimic the gradual

evolution of programs via shared governance, rather than as part of an unethical long-term strategy.

Resources previously dedicated to eliminated programs (i.e., salaries of faculty and staff; donor bequests, trusts, and endowments) could be directed into administrator's pet projects, deficits, or listed as evidence of fiscal responsibility or successful leadership. Additionally, facilities previously dedicated to those eliminated programs (individual buildings, specialized equipment, or entire satellite campuses) are now unneeded, and could be repurposed or sold. In this way a feckless administration could engage in reckless fiscal behavior and then liquidate successful programs and resources to pay for their errors. Malicious leadership could emerge from the carnage appearing ethical (of importance to donors), competent (of importance to trustees who award corporate-style bonus pay), and respectful of the best traditions of shared governance (to calm remaining or naïve faculty).

In this light, Soliday's statements seem less like thoughtful warnings, and more like a means of providing cover for unethical leadership.

Robert Dickeson – Dickeson's writing serves as a 'deuterocanonical' companion to CREDO's writings, and the "Dickeson Model" is a major influence in CREDO's work. On August 31, the "Dickeson Model" was specifically mentioned by Rider's Provost as the guiding methodology that will be used during the partnership with CREDO.

Dickeson was initially censured by the AAUP for his conduct in 1984, while president of University of Northern Colorado. He left UNC and higher education in 1991, becoming a consultant whose theories, processes, and recommendations have consistently gutted programs and eroded academic freedom. His work has guided a generation of higher education administrators who have presided over questionable fiscal decisions, endless branding campaigns, and administrative bloat at the cost of programs endemic to the best traditions of higher education.

"His [Dickeson's] guidance blamed faculty salaries for rising college costs and argued that tenure had evolved from a safeguard of academic freedom into "a system to protect job security."

"He made a name for himself as an advocate of the winnowing of academic programs with his 1999 book Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services. In it he advises colleges to have faculty panels conduct unsparing, data-driven reviews of academic programs, deciding which to expand, keep as is, or eliminate. The criteria he proposed to guide the process include demand,

various measures of faculty quality, graduate success, costs, and how much revenue a program generates.”

from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/meet-the-college-consultant-the-aaup-seeks-to-shame>

It is disturbing that Dickeson’s work might feature so prominently in the solutions administration and CREDO seem sure to suggest and implement. It is short-sided, overly reliant upon arbitrarily measured data (i.e. a McNamara fallacy), undervalues the liberal and performing arts, and allows administration to boldly undertake disruptive and destructive change without scrutiny or accountability.

Part I Conclusions:

Ambiguous or misleading credentials; inexperience; accusations of misdoing; contrived arbitrary data; and self-aggrandizing pseudo-texts are not individually damning. Individually, these are sometimes to be expected, especially in a profit-driven corporate model. However, when these markers are present in the environment of academia, understandable concerns regarding expertise, motivation, and relevance demand address. When these traits are part of a larger trend, credibility is at a serious deficit. CREDO seems to possess all of these indicators of such a concerning trend.

CREDO’s reliance upon, and commitment to, theories and practices constructed by contentious and divisive administrations is concerning. While some notions taken from their written or spoken canon surely have merit, these easily be abused by autocratic leadership.

Bargaining Unit Members should carefully consider and weigh any assertions made by CREDO or those who cite CREDO’s expertise. If Bargaining Unit Members believe aspects of CREDO’s recommendations are proper, they should then consider if current leadership is capable of interpreting and implementing any such change.

In the next installments:

Part II: Who does CREDO serve, and what are CREDO’s outcomes? An institutional survey

Part III: Conclusions and AAUP recommendations for faculty response