

Transformational Leadership

An Interview with Dr. Donna E. Shalala, Interim President, The New School

EDITORS' NOTE A nationally recognized leader in higher education and government, Dr. Donna Shalala brings decades of distinguished leadership in higher education to The New School. She served as President of the University of Miami, Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and President of Hunter College of the City University of New York (CUNY). A dedicated scholar and teacher, she has held tenured professorships at Columbia University, CUNY, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and most recently was a faculty member at the University of Miami. Her leadership in U.S. government began as one of the country's first Peace Corps Volunteers. For eight years she served in President Bill Clinton's Cabinet as Secretary of Health and Human Services, following which a Washington Post article described her as "one of the most successful government managers of modern times." Most recently, she was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for Florida's 27th Congressional District.



Dr. Donna E. Shalala

Where did your interest and passion for education develop?

I think I grew into it because I wanted to be a journalist. I believe that it was the Peace Corps that really shaped me and focused me on trying to make the world a better place, and the vehicle was education. I have also always had a major focus on the social services and have been very concerned about providing young people with opportunities – and it is not just in the classroom, it is all the other things needed to support them.

Is the right conversation taking place when it comes to addressing the needs of young people around education and social services?

I would say that the answer is yes, but sometimes it stalls. An example is the child tax credits that the House has passed which are waiting for the Senate to pass – this is part of the general movement to invest in children early on. The recognition that young people

need to eat breakfast and lunch, so the importance of providing free breakfasts and lunches in the schools, is critical. There are many things that young people need to support them so that they are able to learn. When it comes to higher education, I have been concerned about affordability, especially for students that are vulnerable, to make sure that they have opportunities no matter what their income was or where they came from.

Do you feel that there has been positive change when it comes to K-12 education?

There has been positive change, especially due to technology. Teachers are better educated, and students have more opportunities in our schools. We still have not paid teachers adequately and we have not supported teachers adequately, but when I look back at how I was taught and how students are being taught today, it is fundamentally different in large part due to the impact of technology as well as having teachers who are better trained and much more sensitive to the differences of the students in their classrooms.

INSTITUTION BRIEF The New School (newschool.edu) is a new kind of university in New York City, one where scholars, artists, and designers come together to challenge convention and create positive change. The university takes full advantage of its location in one of the most vibrant and diverse cities in the world. Its colleges and graduate schools include Parsons School of Design, Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, the College of Performing Arts, The New School for Social Research, the Schools of Public Engagement, and Parsons Paris. Since its founding in 1919, The New School has redrawn and redefined the boundaries of intellectual and creative thought as a preeminent academic center. Its rigorous, multidimensional approach to education dissolves walls between disciplines and helps nurture progressive minds. At The New School, students have the academic freedom to shape their unique, individual paths for a complex and rapidly changing world. With leading-edge faculty and world-renowned alumni, The New School is committed to developing students who will have an impact on the world and address the most pressing social issues of our time. This effort is bolstered by the university's commitment to fostering an equitable, inclusive, and socially just environment for its community.



The New School

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What interested you in the opportunity to lead The New School?

I was interested because The New School is a unique institution, and I never repeat the same job. There is nothing like The New School in higher education. I had lived in New York for a long time, so I knew the history of The New School, and I knew that I could address the real needs that it was facing. When the previous President left, there was a need for an Interim President who was able to step in immediately and deal with a large deficit which we have been able to completely eliminate. We were also in the middle of finalizing negotiations with two unions on our campus, including our graduate students who teach. I am pleased to share that both negotiations have been successfully resolved.

I knew that it was critical to build consensus on the campus about what we were going to do, not only with the trustees, but with all those who were involved in The New School. We had open meetings for faculty, staff, and students and complete transparency about what we intended to do. We made sure that whatever we did would not impact the academic core, and that we would find other opportunities for people who would no longer be in their same positions, which resulted in minimal disruption.

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Do you feel that the uniqueness of The New School that you highlighted is well-understood?

The New School has many parts, such as the Parsons School of Design which is the leading design school in the country, and many of these parts are well-understood. We have highly branded schools within the university, and you want it to go both ways. You want people to recognize a world-class college within your university, and at the same time to understand that there are other parts of the university that are very distinguished. At The New School, we have both world-class colleges within the university, and a world-class university.

Will you discuss The New School's focus on building a diverse student and faculty population?

Social justice has always been a priority for The New School, and that is why we are in the process of rebuilding enrollment management and financial aid. Private universities struggle because of their price, and New York City is expensive, so you have to look at all the pieces and create opportunities to drive impact in your diversity and inclusion efforts.

How valuable has your past experience in business, government, and education been in your role leading The New School?

It is very valuable, but it does not mean that I repeat things from other institutions. I look at the uniqueness of each institution and I try to understand the specific culture. There is no question that my many years running complex institutions helps, in part because it makes you fearless, but my focus is on what is needed at the time for the institution I am leading.



Parsons School of Design

You mentioned being a transformational leader who takes on challenges and fixes them. Are you thinking about your next opportunity?

In terms of The New School, we've completely eliminated the deficit and have developed a five-year plan that will grow the university's revenue. The strategy will point people in the right direction, and then help them to continue to move in that direction. You need to build consensus and an understanding that this work is not about a quick fix, but about creating a long-term solution. It takes discipline, focus, and intentionality to thrive in the future. My strategy has always been not to be Ms. Fix-It, but to build a consensus for the long-term.

I have no idea what my next step will be when I conclude my service with The New School.

How do you describe your management style?

Fun and unflappable.

What advice do you offer to students as they look to start their careers?

I was teaching a class on Presidents' Day at the University of Miami some years ago. It was a very large class of about 300 students focusing on the politics and economics of healthcare, and I was trying to convince the students that the politics of healthcare were really interesting. I could see that their eyes were glazing over, and finally I asked them what day it was, and they said Presidents' Day, and then asked me why we were in class. I told them because they should hear from a President on Presidents' Day, and in walked Bill Clinton.

President Clinton and I had talked about the importance of Medicare and the need for a healthcare support system for a whole generation of people – the Greatest Generation – and at the end of the class he told the students they could ask him any question. A young man stood up and said that if he wanted to be President of the United States, what courses should he take? I thought President Clinton's answer was brilliant. He said to be a sponge. He said that he could not predict what you are going to need to know 20-30 years from now, but that you need to learn about all sorts of subjects, and you need to learn how to keep learning. He said that this is how he prepared to be President of the United States. This advice from President Clinton is the best advice I can offer to any young person. ●