There are more than enough challenges to higher educational institutions to keep even an energetic and innovative leader such as President David Van Zandt busy over the next years.

David Van Zandt was the first dean I appointed at Northwestern and he became the longest serving one during my tenure. When David came in, the law school was in the red that was an unusual color for the budget of a major law school. I asked David to close the budget gap but not at the expense of quality. In fact, David improved the standing of Northwestern’s Law School by many metrics: quality of incoming students and faculty; placement of graduates; exciting new programs.

He vastly expanded the joint degree program between law and the Kellogg School of Business and Management; he globalized the law school with new LLM programs in Spain and Korea and by bringing LLM students to Chicago. He pioneered with a two year accelerated law degree which I am convinced will be widely emulated. He made new appointments for law faculty who also had Ph.Ds. in the social sciences.

President Van Zandt’s willingness to think outside the conventional boxes and programs of law schools bodes well for his leadership of The New School.

Every institution of higher education, no matter whether it is a liberal arts college or a large research university will face budget issues. How the balance is struck between revenues and expenditures, finding new revenues for exciting new programs, these are crucial issues for higher education. So is affordability and preparing students for a more exacting economy, perhaps one with low growth, with changing employment criteria, and with global concerns and connections abounding.

I am very cognizant of changing employment issues as the current chair of a for profit institution of high education. The for profits have been more “fleet afoot” than the not for profits in distance learning and career education. I am not suggesting that The New School should follow the patterns of the career education institutions. I am suggesting that David Van Zandt saw earlier on the changing hiring and practices of major law firms and moved to take account of them, better preparing students for a new world in law related careers.

While higher educational institutions should be aware of employment issues, universities should maintain the quality of core competence and knowledge in and of the humanities, social sciences, sciences and performing arts. This is no mean feat. Again, I am confident that President Van Zandt is more than up to the challenge and it will be a challenge. For example, we can count on lower federal and state support for the arts. The New School has a fine tradition in the performing arts.

Perhaps, there will be less government support for financial aid. This will hit all schools and require increasing private endowments for financial aid so that private colleges and universities don’t price out a diverse student body. David has been an active and successful gatherer of support for his endeavors.

I don’t think there is a handy dandy recipe for leadership success in higher education. Rather, I believe that leadership in higher education, and perhaps leadership everywhere, is time, place, task and context specific. The abilities and personal qualities that may serve well for leading one university may not serve always at another institution.
However, there are some qualities that are givens or necessary to most situations: energy, courage, clear thinking, good humor, perspective and being able to respect diverse views and people. All these David Van Zandt has.

He has another quality that I saw amply at Northwestern. Even when you are making change, and sometimes breaking some eggs in the bargain, you need to understand the culture and traditions of the place you have been asked to lead.

The New School has stood for innovation and creativity. It was open to scholars from abroad before, during and after World War II, before opening up to foreign scholars was fashionable in American higher education.

David understands public policy issues. He is someone with private sector financial and regulatory experience and he is entrepreneurial. He understands politics and bureaucracies as a necessary element of public policy. He understands these so well that I learned of some of his new initiatives ex post on occasion. But I am sure his Board will be foretold and forewarned!

The New School has traditions of teaching and research on major public policy issues. And, as a major university in one of the world’s greatest cities, it needs to be a player in helping think through the challenges New York and other cities face. President Van Zandt can and will bring his knowledge and experience to these issues.

Let me end with very personal words. David and his wife, Lisa Huestis, are among my wife’s and my closest friends. We bike in Europe with a group though the Bienens lag behind the Van Zandt-Huestis duo. We send David on search parties for lost bikers because he both knows where he is going and has strong legs. Both will serve The New School. We have already missed them at Northwestern. However, we see them in New York and maintain our friendship.

The New School will be holding a conference on the Future of Higher Education in early December. I’ll come back to speak at that conference and perhaps by then, with another semester under his belt, I will be able to grade David’s performance.

I fact, I am confident of a high grade because President Van Zandt has already proven by his long tenure as Dean of Northwestern University’s Law School and his fast start at The New School that he is an innovative, tough minded, durable, and exciting leader in higher education.

It is rare that a University gets so lucky that the two partners can serve it so well. Thus I congratulate The New School, its Board, faculty, student, and staff for having David Van Zandt as its President. You are in good hands.