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Reflections on the Present and Future of Leadership in Higher Education

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Reflections on the Present and Future of Leadership in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities are unique organizations and, as such, require a different type of approach to leadership than might be effective in other types of organizations. A participative style of leadership is advocated. It is argued participative leadership is more desirable and effective than other approaches. The effectiveness of participative leadership on structural units within institutions of higher education is discussed with the focus upon making decisions with the greatest benefit to students, now and in the future, as a top priority.

Uniqueness of and Within Higher Education

Those of us who labor in the fields of higher education; whether as a faculty member, an administrator, or as staff; do so as members of a peculiar and unique type of profession. For example, those in other professions, such as law or medicine, operate in a climate where the objective is to *protect* what they know and can do. We, however, seek to *distribute* what we know and can do. As another example, most institutions have this mysterious and often misunderstood thing called “tenure.” The meaning of that term is certainly important, as well as what it does not mean. Regardless, the concept seems to be diminishing as we see more and more institutions moving away from some form of tenure and more toward extended contracts.

In other ways, most professions have similarities. For example, we each seem to have our own language, or more pejoratively, jargon. In higher education, many terms are in the form of somewhat coded initials: GPA, RA, ACT, SAT. In this geographic region, we speak of SACS. Some academic areas concern ourselves with NCATE, ASBSP, NLN, NASM, etc.

In addition to differences and similarities between our profession and others, differences and similarities exist between our own institutions. Institutions differ in type and other characteristics: small/large, public/private, 2 year/4 year, liberal arts colleges/comprehensive universities, and so on. Likewise there are differences in governmental structures and leadership styles within those structures. One need only note how decisions are made within institutions to ascertain something about the dominate leadership style. For example, decisions in some institutions tend to be made strictly according to the organizational chart (Bureaucratic), while decisions at other institutions tend to be made by consensus (Collegial), and decisions in other settings may be made by negotiating and bargaining (Political). Therefore, dominate leadership styles may be autocratic, participative, or laissez faire.

A Preferred Approach to Leadership

While definitions of leaders and leadership abound, I tend to prefer descriptions rather than definitions. One of my favorites is by Claire L. Gaudiani (1997), former president of Connecticut College. “Leaders need to be primarily in service to the people and values of the organization they lead. Leaders almost never need to exercise power. They need to lead in ways that create a vision that motivates people” (p. 175).

Having held various leadership positions in higher education over the past 15+ years, I have developed more than a few thoughts and practices which have served me well concerning leadership. While I cannot speak in terms of absolutes, I *can* say what has worked for me.

An effective leader's focus must be on both tasks and people. The essence of leadership involves working cooperatively by encouraging and motivating oneself and others toward constructive ends.

I subscribe to the concept of participative leadership. Commonly shared goals are essential and must be developed inclusively. While not all people can individually make or be responsible for all decisions, all those who have a stake in any decision should participate in the process.

Certain traits such as courage, autonomy, involvement, responsibility, and willingness to take reasonable risks should be encouraged.

This democratic and collaborative concept of leadership stands in stark contrast to the more traditional bureaucratic or authoritarian approach. In an overly bureaucratic system, people are beaten down and treated negatively. As a result, people feel the need to protect themselves and "look out for number one." Responsibility is then to be avoided, because if something goes wrong, unpleasant consequences occur.

Conversely, in an environment of participative leadership, people are lifted up and treated positively. A teamwork attitude is fostered. Concern changes from focusing on self-interest to how one can best be of benefit. Reasonable risk is encouraged and rewarded.

Occasionally, internal competition and other kinds of conflict directly result. While some types and levels of conflict are inevitable, it need not be seen as negative. One of the values I hold is trust. I would argue that trust is much more important than agreement. Long ago, I discovered

that individuals I like and those with whom I agree are not necessarily the same people. I especially prize those who I trust. Since trust is not automatic or instantaneous but must be built over time, effective leadership requires a great deal of patience.

Most people would prefer to operate in a participative environment where they are not only happier, but more productive. Therefore, I believe the characteristics of such a system should be modeled and should strongly influence the way we teach others.

I have tried to let one particular question guide much of my thinking: "What is best for the students?" - not what they *want*, but what is *best* for them. Let me quickly add there is not always agreement on the answer to the question! Even the answers on which we might agree fall into various categories: 1) We might be able to take immediate action on some matters. For example, a simple procedure might be changed to make for greater efficiency. 2) Action may be possible that is in the best interest of the student, but cannot be taken or happen right away. For example, new residence halls may indeed be of benefit to students, but they take much planning, and construction which require a period of time. 3) Action which might be in the best interest of the student might never be possible. For example, it would be great if we could eliminate tuition, but none of us expect that to ever be possible in any but a very few institutions.

We should always seek and value advice throughout the decision making process. One of my first duties as Vice President for Academic Affairs was to select new band uniforms. I did *not* take that course in graduate school. I was in serious need of advice.

Structural and Unit Aspects

As academic leaders, we can sometime tend to be overly narrow and parochial. For example, a faculty member may sincerely believe and advocate that 19th century Albanian literature is quite obviously the most important matter in the world. Surely we should all agree with that obvious value. I'm not arguing that that particular area of study is *not* important, just that others are as well. We too often fail to look beyond our own immediate environments. Each entity has its own perspective, values, and unique characteristics. Let us further consider some academic units.

Obviously the English faculty works harder than those in any other department. Consider all the writing which must be graded. Others should understand that reality, but they do not seem to be in agreement.

Obviously, the science faculty works harder than those in any other department. Labs must be set up, and lab time does not factor fairly into calculating teaching loads. Others should understand that reality, but they do not seem to be in agreement.

Obviously, social scientists work harder those in any other department. Class sizes are sometimes in the hundreds and tend to be significantly larger than others. Others should understand that reality, but they do not seem to be in agreement.

Obviously, education faculty work harder than those any other department. Consider all the state and federal political bureaucracy. Others should understand that reality, but they do not seem to be in agreement. Hopefully, the idea is clear.

I suggest, in reality, we are all in the same metaphoric boat, with more similarities than differences. If I am sitting in the back of that boat, it should greatly matter to me if there's a leak in the front.

While there is a great deal of this kind of compartmentalization, we are seeing at least a bit of change from this kind of linear and categorical thinking. We are beginning to see various aspects of life in more integrated ways. For example, we frequently multi-task, a term which has come into relatively recent use. Perhaps we have always multi tasked, but did not have the term. One might argue that acknowledgment of multi-tasking is a reflection of the reality that things are often not as linear and categorical as we might superficially believe. We too often make such artificial distinctions in higher education.

Consider typical operational divisions within a college or university. Academics is usually comprised of colleges, schools, or divisions; departments; registrar; library; etc. Student Life typically includes residential life and student activities. The business or finance office deals with food services, the physical plant, landscaping, the book store, post office, and so on.

Advancement has perhaps the most thankless task. Other entities may not have typical homes. For example academic support may be housed in either academics or student life. Enrollment may be in academics or part of a separate unit, perhaps called something like Enrollment

Services. Financial aid may be in academics, finances, or enrollment services. Athletics may be a separate entity or part of student life.

Regardless of structure, entities need to communicate with each other. Trust can be more difficult to develop with unfamiliar operations. Weick (1986) describes educational systems as “loosely coupled systems” where interaction between components is frequent, but often weak.

We are seeing more integration of services and operations in some arenas. For example, in non-traditional programs, institutions are attempting to lure potential students with the promise of “one stop shopping.” Students may be able to registrar, get their textbooks, have IDs made, and pay their fees all in a single visit to a single location.

College deals with various aspects of a person’s life: certainly academic, but also socially, physically, and emotionally (and in some colleges, spiritually). No matter our specialty, all individual aspects are part of the larger context, whether we deal with, or even acknowledge, them directly or not.

In fostering this integration and understanding of context, we may need to relinquish some control. For example, colleges were allowed and expected to act *in loco parentis* not too many years ago. Now, we (and I include myself) tend to err on the “safe” side of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). However, even this approach is changing. Recently revised policies, or interpretations of them, allow universities to disclose more information, especially in

the interest of safety. Unfortunately this particular change is largely due to campus shootings as those at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois.

While all entities and individuals are important and necessary, they are not all same. If you asked who the most important person is on a campus, most would say the president. But, how often do most people even see the president? Is it even evident when he or she is on campus or even in town? Consider what happens to a unit's operation if an administrative assistant or some of the housekeeping staff is absent. We cannot function. All of what all of us does matters.

Conclusion

To anyone with whom we discuss any aspect of our institution, we *are* that institution. I am reminded of the story about Columbia University President Dwight Eisenhower's address to the faculty. He reportedly addressed them as "employees of the university." One of the faculty members replied with something like, "Mr. President, we are not employees of the university, we *are* the university." The professor was correct, but incomplete. Yes, faculty members are the university, and so are administrative assistants, so is the housekeeping staff, so are those who work in financial aid, admissions, the bookstore, residence life, athletics, advancement. Certainly so are the students. It is the students who should be central to our thoughts as we continue to contemplate how best to lead institutions now and in the future. We must ask and continue to ask, "What is best for the students?"

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