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Leading by Example

Miguel Martinez-Saenz, Wittenberg University, and Johnny D. Pryor, Butler University

Inspired and challenged by a diversity lecture series event at Butler University (April 7, 2006) that featured two of the most powerful intellectuals in the United States today—Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West—we have been re-examining our own perceptions of success and commitment to student development. During his presentation, West encouraged the sold-out crowd to be courageous, to avoid defining success too narrowly, and challenged those in the crowd to aspire to live lives of magnanimity and integrity. With Peter Drucker, we believe that mission fulfillment depends on strong leadership that embodies explicitly the values embedded in the mission and vision of an institution. (Drucker, 1990) Therefore, universities and colleges would be served well if students were being exposed to people who exemplify and illustrate in their daily lives the values of their institution. Our goal is to illuminate why academic advisers, other academic affairs professionals, and faculty can (and should) serve as role models who exemplify the mission, vision, and values of an institution. This would enable students to learn about the institution's mission and also how to live lives of magnanimity and integrity.

That advising programs should be about more than student retention is something all are willing to accept. That students require role models might also be accepted. Nonetheless, although many would agree that academic advisers and faculty should serve as role models for students, a “role model” mentality is either only implicit or lacking in most programs and models. The National Academic Advising Association's “Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising” states not only that advisers are responsible to their educational community, but also that “academic advisers interpret their institution's mission as well as its goals and values.” Further, “advisers may become models for students by participating in community activities” (National Academic Advising Association, 2003). Because academic advisers are invariably in leadership roles, they have an ideal opportunity to advance and embody the values of their respective institutions. As John Maxwell, leadership expert and best-selling author, asserts, “Leaders provide direction and meaning, generate and sustain trust and integrity, and display a bias toward action, risk taking, and curiosity” (Maxwell, 1998). Moreover, because people, including students, tend to imitate what they see, to sense underlying attitudes and values, and to respond to high standards, advisers, as leaders, should be mindful that they represent the mission, vision, and values of their institution. (Maxwell, 1998). When advisers are mindful of their potential impact and intentionally strive to embody the aims of the institution, the results can be transforming not only for students, but for advisers as well.

One of the ways faculty and staff can begin fostering mentoring relationships and serving as role models is by creating ongoing relationships with students beyond course selection or troubleshooting. For example, Hamilton College “views the advising relationship as an ongoing conversation that transcends mere course selection and attempts to assist students as they explore the breadth of the liberal arts curriculum, experience college life, focus on a major concentration, and prepare for life after Hamilton” (Hamilton College, 2006). In this model, faculty and students are able to engage in dialogue beyond scheduling that could evolve into a mentoring relationship and opportunity for a faculty member to serve as a role model.

In order to create a long-lasting impact on students beyond their college experience and to achieve the aims of the institutional mission, universities must create a culture where academic advisers and faculty of the institution serve as role models for students. The ideals of good citizenship, integrity, and respect and celebration of diversity are learned attributes. On a college campus, administrators, faculty, and staff, as leaders, are in position to model values that they want their students and, ultimately, graduates of their university to possess. For example, prior to employment at Cedarville University, a small Christ-centered college in Ohio, administrators, faculty, and staff must agree to a faculty and staff community covenant that states: “As a Christ-centered learning community, we understand that we are role models; and students, as well as others, observe our values, our conduct, and our work ethic. This not only takes place as we perform our University function, but in our non-work and home environment as well” (Cedarville University, 2006). Mentoring that includes modeling behavior can have a tremendous impact in a secular liberal arts community as well.

In 2004, one of the authors, serving as an adjunct faculty member at a University, volunteered to advise a group of students preparing for a regional mock trial tournament. He coached the team two days a week for three months. During this period, the adviser set very high expectations for the students, and all the students, except one, met those expectations. After the competition, the team did not advance to the national tournament, and the adviser called a team meeting before returning to school to talk to the students about their accomplishments. When the adviser finished his last words to the team, one student said to the adviser, “I know I didn't do well as I should have, but I think you're Superman! You've been a role model for me. I want to be like you when I grow up. I know you're not paid to work with us, but I truly appreciate everything you've done for us. I tried to always make sure I was on time to practice because you were always early, never late, and usually the first person to arrive to practice.” That this student learned the meaning of accountability and teamwork is quite clear. And, while this encounter was not part of academic advising, it shows a situation in which an “adviser” for a student organization was in a position to serve as a role model and empower students to strive for excellence.

Keep in mind that there are numerous opportunities on a college campus for faculty, administrators, and staff to lead by example. Let us consider a specific statement of purpose. Hamilton College maintains that “students should be able to address problems and challenges in a morally and intellectually courageous manner” (Hamilton College, 2006). How could faculty embody or fail to embody Hamilton's call to moral and intellectual courage? In the classroom, faculty can lead by example through setting high standards of academic achievement that they also strive to meet in their own work, or they can choose to violate the fundamental tenets of honesty and integrity. While Stephen Ambrose, one of America's most renowned historians, received a great deal of attention regarding his alleged plagiarism case, we know that not all faculty uphold many of the same honor codes that they “impose” on their students (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004). What message does this send to their students?

At Wesleyan College, as at many other institutions, students are expected, as they explore different academic disciplines, to become knowledgeable about cultures other than their own, and a student's faculty adviser helps guide the student through this exploration. When advisers embody the idea of global citizenship by traveling abroad, learning and becoming adept at second and third languages, and by committing themselves to learning about others and how others perceive the world, students will learn to value and respect “the other.” It becomes easier to guide someone down a path if the leader has already traveled down that same path. If faculty and staff strive to become good citizens, serve the common good, and celebrate diversity in their personal and professional lives, students will not only recognize it, but also embrace it through their own actions.

Outside the classroom, administrators, faculty, and staff can lead by example, by volunteering at the local soup kitchen, by helping raise funds for the local literacy center, or by taking students on service trips that demonstrate their commitment to serving others. Even by attending athletic and cultural events at their respective institutions, advisers demonstrate a commitment to the campus community that speaks much louder than words. Reviewing his tenure file, one of the authors noticed that students who chose to write in support of tenure kept referring to two common themes, namely, mentoring and the importance of role models. The following two comments illustrate this point.

- As a mentor, Dr. X is always honest, straight-forward, and yet still encouraging. He never allowed me to think of things—be it a term paper or the process of applying to graduate school—as easier than they were, but forced me to realize how great the challenge was in front of me and to have the patience and perseverance to work toward that standard or goal. I think this is what great professors, great mentors do: they force us to reach higher than we

have ever tried (or believed we could) before and are willing to patiently, repeatedly, teach us and encourage us as we stretch and grow.

- Outside the classroom, Dr. X takes on a number of roles. His simple participation in activities such as basketball, running, and golf has affirmed that university professors need not be social outcasts many have come to believe they are. Such participation in the community stresses to students that academic study is merely one aspect of good living and must be complemented by other pursuits. ... Moreover, his devotion to humanitarian projects such as Bridges to Community, literacy campaigns, and activism for local schools signals his belief that professors should be involved in the social life of the community. In these respects, Dr. X provides a sound role model for students (and professors), both in and out of the classroom.

Like Hemwall and Trachte, we believe that “... confrontations produce moments of disequilibrium and discomfort. While denial is one possible reaction, acknowledgement that these perturbations contradict our current understanding is also likely. A search for a new understanding that accommodates the new information may be initiated.” (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005, p. 81). If we are committed to challenging our students, to making them uncomfortable in order that they may learn, then what institutional practices are in place that reflect that commitment? Institutions could, for example, provide release time for faculty members, administrators, and staff who are willing to take a college course (for a grade). While we recognize that at most institutions administrators, faculty, and staff are permitted to take a course, most on campus cannot find the time. This type of program would demonstrate quite explicitly that lifelong learning is a commitment embraced by the institution. Moreover, administrators, faculty, and staff could model what the institution understands as “good student behavior.” If students do not perceive the importance of lifelong learning in action, then it is unlikely that they will adopt it themselves. What we are suggesting is that we have to move away from the dictum that says “Do as I say, not as I do” and embrace the motto “Do as I do.”

There's no doubt that academic advising at its best is invaluable to student learning and student development. While retention remains one of the primary drivers of student success and advising programs, institutions must strive to ensure that such success is not defined exclusively by retention and graduation rates. Advising programs that include advisers who are leaders that set high standards and embody the values of an institution will be poised to empower students not only to persist and graduate, but also to live lives of magnanimity and integrity.

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