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Leadership Implications for College and University Administrators as the Present Morphs into the Future

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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. It is argued participative leadership is more desirable and effective than other approaches and such this leadership style will be even more important in the future. 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. The issue is examined within the context of available data concerning trends of issues including changing student demographics, cultural shifts, and budgetary matters.

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 such as GPA, GA, TA, ACT, SAT, BA, BS, BM, SGA, RA, FAFSA, and FERPA. Depending on geographic location, one may be concerned with MSACS, NEASC, NCA, NWCCU, SACS, or WASC. Specific academic areas concern themselves with AACSB, APA. ASBSP, NASM, NATA, NCATE, NLN, 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 various 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 academic leadership styles may be autocratic, participative, or laissez faire.

A Preferred Approach to Leadership

While definitions of leaders and leadership abound, one may find descriptions more helpful than definitions. For example, Claire L. Gaudiani (1997), former president of Connecticut College states "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). 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.

Participative leadership seems to produce the most effective and desired results in higher education. 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 unpleasant consequences occur if something goes wrong.

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. The value of trust must be paramount. One might argue that trust is much more important than agreement. On a personal level, I discovered long ago that individuals I like and those with whom I agree are not necessarily the same people. 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, it could be rationally argued the characteristics of such a system should be modeled and should strongly influence the way we teach others.

Many effective educational leaders 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 significant period of time. 3) Action which might be in the best interest of the student might never be possible. For example, eliminating tuition would remove a serious roadblock to a great number of students. However, the vast majority of us realize that will never be possible in our own institutions.

Structural and Unit Aspects

Academics 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 subscribe to that obvious value. Few would likely argue 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 all 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 all do not seem to be in agreement. Obviously, social scientists work harder those in any other department. Class sizes, which sometimes number in the hundreds, tend to be significantly larger than others. Others should understand that reality, but all 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 all do not seem to be in agreement. Hopefully, the idea is clear.

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 is 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. Certain distinctions are typically made in higher education. Such distinctions are often artificial and more apparent than real.

Consider typical operational divisions within a college or university. Academic institutions are 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 aspects such as food services, the physical plant, landscaping, the bookstore, and post office. Advancement has perhaps the least visible and 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 beginning to see 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, many of whom have very busy lives outside academia, 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.

Changing Culture and Demographics

Privacy Issues

Privacy is an illustrative example of the many cultural shifts which continually take place and affect the way colleges and universities operate. For many years, colleges were allowed and expected to act *in loco parentis*. Now, administrators and faculty members (and I include myself) tend to err on the "safe" side of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and are very guarded (perhaps overly so) with *any* kind of student information. However, even this approach is changing. Recently revised policies, or interpretations of them, allow universities to disclose more student information, especially that which is in the interest of safety. Unfortunately this particular change is largely due to recent incidences of violence such as those at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois.

Enrollment History and Trends

Between 1997 and 2007, the proportion of 18-24 year olds enrolled in college increased from 36.9% to 38.8%. While proportions increased among all groups, Hispanic students showed the greatest percentage increase, and white students were among those who increased least. In terms of raw numbers, enrollment has increased by approximately 3,745,800. White students have accounted for less than 40% of the increase. Furthermore, in *every* recorded racial and ethnic category, the growth of the population of female students has exceeded that of males. (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009).

By the year 2017, an overall increase of over 1.6 million students, or slightly over nine percent, is expected. Again, an increase is expected in *every* recorded racial and ethnic category. Hispanic students will account for more of this increase, both percent wise and numerically, than any others. In terms of gender, women presently account for approximately 56.95% of students. The disparity will continue to grow with women accounting for over 61% of the anticipated growth (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009).

Approximately 3,327,000 students are expected to graduate from high school in 2010. A decrease to approximately 3,307,000 in 2017 is forecast (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). One may well inquire as to what might account for the enrollment increase when the pool of traditional students from which to draw continues to shrink. The answer of course lies in the increase of programs for older, or non-traditional, students. While there have long been some types of disparity, such as gender, student bodies of colleges and universities have become, and will continue to become, less white, less male, and less "young."

State Support of Public Higher Education

On the surface, the overall picture of state support for higher education may appear encouraging. After all, every year between 1998 and 2008 (with the lone exception of 2004), changes in state appropriations for higher education have been positive (Center for the Study of Education Policy, 2009). Of course, the economy has changed more recently, and the long-term effect on state support for colleges and universities has yet to be fully realized. Even between the stated years, support was far less than uniform from state to state. The change from fiscal year 2008 to 2009 was actually negative for 17 states, six of those in the southeast. South Carolina showed the lowest drop at 17.7%. Of the 33 states, Wyoming showed the greatest increase at 10.9%. The disparity is staggeringly noteworthy. While the news is certainly important for public institutions, the effect is also profound for private colleges. The increase in the striving of public institutions for more private dollars puts them in direct competition with private institutions. In other words, the amount of state support has a direct effect on *all* institutions.

Other Issues

Many other issues, both practical and philosophical, influence the way colleges and universities effectively operate. A practical example is the necessary increased focus of administrators and staff members, who have responsibility for such things, on marketing and branding. For years, institutions have operated along the "If you build it, they will come" approach, which is become ineffective in most cases. A larger issue which is inclusive of marketing and branding is that of planning, both short-term and strategic.

Philosophically, administrators, faculty members, and staff members at all types of institutions must periodically revisit the education versus training debate. One's position in the argument has direct bearing on all matters, including the curriculum, particularly in terms of program expansion (and contraction) and general education.

Finally, a particularly inclusive issue is technology. Technology has virtually become a basic literacy. While some of us are finally getting used to email, twitter is already becoming passé in some circles.

While the aforementioned issues do not even hint at the myriad of factors with which higher education leaders deal, those leaders must "multi-

task" in the context of the interaction of multiple complex variables in such a way to be of the greatest benefit to all parties of the institution. Perhaps the "best practice" answer lies, not in the "doing," but is more a matter of attitude.

Conclusion

While all entities and individuals are important and necessary to any organization, they are not all the same. If asked who the most important person is on a college campus, most of us 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.

To anyone with whom we discuss any aspect of our institution, whether internally or externally, we *are* that institution. One may recall the story about Columbia University President Dwight Eisenhower's address to the faculty. When he addressed them as "employees of the university," one of the faculty members reportedly replied, "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. Finally, because the answer constantly changes, we must *continually* ask, "What is best for the students?"

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