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LEADERSHIP THROUGH CONSENSUS: REFLECTIONS ON MY FIRST YEAR AT HAVERFORD

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When I was first appointed President of Haverford, I was asked several times how I understood the practice of academic leadership to function in a community that operates on the basis of consensus. I was told by those who knew Haverford well that on some occasions difficult decisions might require several years of discussion and deliberation by various members of the community, including students, faculty, staff, the Board of Managers, the Corporation, alumni, and perhaps other stakeholders, before consensus could be achieved. Moreover, it was suggested that the “problem” of consensus decision-making might be particularly acute in the years ahead because the educational environment would require more rapid response times due to the significant challenges before us, including new pressures on budgeting and financial management, the rise of powerful and potentially transformational technologies, a more complicated competitive landscape, and rising skepticism about the professional advantages of a liberal education. How, then, was a president to lead such a community in challenging times?

Of course, Haverford has longstanding and deep commitments to Quaker practices, including especially consensus decision making, and these have served the College very well. Distinctive though our practices may be, I do not believe that they are actually very different from other shared governance models practiced at peer colleges and universities. If the principal difference concerns the relative importance of consensus decisions over those made by a simple majority, both rely on the strength of meaningful community participation and the recognition that many voices contribute to institutional leadership.

One might conceive of the difference between consensual shared governance at an organization like Haverford and a more traditional command-and-control organization like IBM or a military unit as the difference between a seminar and a lecture. Both can be effective modes for a group to achieve its goals, but each requires different skills and dispositions among its participants. Delivering a lecture, mass producing a consumer product, or leading a regiment into battle are exercises in authority and bringing individuals into alignment with a preconceived outcome. There are times when that kind clarity and efficiency are of the utmost importance.

In contrast, teaching a seminar or exercising leadership on a campus like Haverford’s requires the “leader” to focus more on questions than answers. Group members derive meaning by engaging each other with queries and propositions. Success only happens when the whole group has together developed a sound argument, or at least articulated the key questions that need further attention. In a seminar, that exercise can lead to tremendous intellectual growth; in governance it leads to improved strategies for realizing our shared objectives in fulfillment of the College’s mission. Such rigorous dialogue takes time, to be sure, but in my experience the results are well worth it.

No president can succeed at Haverford or any other college without the support of the many individuals who contribute to the wellbeing of the institution. These include centrally the faculty and students who bring the academic program to life, the staff who sustain the College in myriad

ways, as well as those who pay tuition or provide philanthropic and other financial support. It is in this sense that academic leadership stands in contrast to executive management. Institutional success—and by implication the effectiveness of its leaders—depends above all on a shared commitment to a strategic vision and operational agenda, for which the leader can serve as champion but cannot compel allegiance.

The leadership challenge resides in understanding the institution's distinctive culture and engaging the many community voices in the development and execution of strategy and key decisions. In practice that often means a president must attempt to minimize real or perceived power differentials in order to engage individuals as genuine partners, much as a skilled teacher draws all students around a seminar table into dialog. Listening carefully to diverse perspectives, probing disagreements for deeper truths, and participating in a robust exchange of ideas leads to better outcomes for all.

At Haverford I have found, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, that the community's general commitment to the idea of consensus has sustained a healthy commitment to the open exchange of views and the skills needed to negotiate dissent and differences of opinion. I have been very pleased to see that dissenting voices are generally not an obstacle to progress, but rather a valuable way of broadening our perspectives and improving the quality of our decisions. When implemented responsibly and with some measure of goodwill, the consensus model is empowering for all. With power comes responsibility.

In our commitment to working toward consensus rather than simple majority, Haverford's approach to academic governance may be somewhat more deliberate and exacting than elsewhere. But having spent a significant portion of my career in positions of academic leadership at three quite different institutions, I have become convinced that shared governance—regardless of particular local customs—is essential to the wellbeing of the academic enterprise. During my first year at Haverford, I have tried to model this approach, even as we have pursued an ambitious agenda and I continue to learn.

I came to Haverford because I believe deeply in the College's educational mission and its commitment to Quaker values. I have found that the consensus model of decision-making has helped us to make better decisions and develop support for our shared objectives, even if we have not always been in full consensus on every issue, for example the modification of the no-loan policy or the proposal to divest from fossil fuel companies. In seeking to develop workable, values-centered solutions to these kinds of complex problems I have started with the premise that, as in a good seminar, my colleagues and I must listen carefully and seek to learn from all voices. Even when full consensus is not always possible, I am deeply committed to our model of shared governance as the best way for all of us who care about Haverford to work together to meet the challenges ahead.