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Internal Journeys of College Presidents: Diary Reflections About Leadership and Values

Stephen J. Nelson

Abstract

The ideas and thoughts of college and university presidents are most frequently and primarily known through their public roles and rhetoric. Over the past few years nearly three dozen college and university presidents have written diaries for public view as part of the Journal of College and Character. These presidential reflections provide a unique and rare opportunity to gain a behind-the-scenes view of the contemporary presidency, and of the leadership and values of presidents. This article is based on research of the words and impressions of these presidents in these public diaries. Using the perspectives revealed by the presidents, the article assesses, analyzes, and compares and contrasts the major themes which emerge and the content of their reflections. This assessment contributes additional understanding of the presidency by developing an inside picture of presidential thought about the issues with which they regularly grapple. The diaries are an important lens presenting a significant set of accounts and vantage points about what presidents contemplate. We are able to obtain provisional answers to questions such as: What things create and cause unavoidable and sometimes constant tensions and pressures? What do we know about what presidents really think? What do we know about their private reflections about the curses and blessings of the great weight of responsibility they bear in leading colleges and universities? What are the things which concern these presidents as leaders and individuals? How are they trying to exert leadership to the nation's campuses? The reflections in these diaries are of interest because they provide a glimpse of the internal journeys and musings of presidents. These presidents have used this medium to share thinking about the broader implications of what they are doing, how they are leading, what leadership itself is all about and what is required of the leader, not to mention the simple, routine things presidents face in day-to-day life. We also view a picture of remarkable moments and instances, revealing significant candor and disclosure in the stories of their leadership and aspects of presidential leadership much more from "inside" the ivory tower than that commonly and normally observable. The presidents thus contribute significantly to understandings of the office they hold, of the importance which the presidency continues to bear for the hopes and aspirations of our colleges and universities, and of the way in which presidents of today will shape the future of the college and university presidency itself.

KEYWORDS: president, management, leadership

Internal Journeys of College Presidents: Diary Reflections about Leadership and Values: Part I

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PART I

Introduction

The college and university presidency may well be one of the most demanding leadership positions in contemporary society. During the last century or more, the presidency changed, evolving from academicians in the early twentieth century, to managers and fund-raisers and the CEO model of mid-century to the 1980s, and the career presidents--those serving more than one institution--of the 1990s. But regardless of the era and the specific qualifications which may be in ascendancy, college presidents have to perform myriad, diverse, and often highly complicated tasks. These include managing immense bureaucracies; administering institutional functions and planning; leading diverse, divergent, and highly independent faculties; being and presenting the public face of their institutions; handling public relations with its up and frequent down sides; raising non-stop the funds and resources to operate their campuses; providing leadership, guidance and direction to campus communities and the lives of students; and serving governing boards and trustees as well as catering to other internal and external constituencies such as alumni, donors and supporters, politicians, and citizens.

Many observers tend to associate these responsibilities as the duties evolving into the presidency in what might be viewed as the modern, certainly post-World War II era. In fact, this extensive and demanding description of the job has more accurately been the case for presidents, beginning with their colonial college roots. Any look at today's presidents must be conducted mindful that the expectations placed on them are nearly, if not in fact, identical to those faced by presidents such as Eleazar Wheelock, founder and first president of Dartmouth College (1769). Wheelock, along with his peers of that era, did all the things noted above as responsibilities of our contemporary presidents. However, in addition, he taught courses (which admittedly some presidents do today, but on an extremely limited basis), preached in the local church of which he was also the pastor, personally disciplined students, and not only raised the money for buildings, but contributed to construction with his own hands. In short, whether then or now, the college and university presidency is a most difficult and demanding job. At the same time, it is also a vocation which many who have served as presidents would count a significant privilege and honor, as well as possibly even a great pleasure.

By and large for those who reside in and around the academy, let alone those whose lives

revolve well beyond its gates, college and university presidents are most known in their public roles. Certainly there are those, the company of key aides, trustee councils, and more often than not a rather limited circle of close friends, who have the opportunity to see the "public" president in more private roles and settings. But for the most part, while we know something about what presidents say and how they behave in these public--even those which may be slightly more private or confidential--arenas and forums, the question presents itself: What do we know about what presidents really think? What do we know about their private reflections about the curses and blessings of the great weight of responsibility they bear in leading colleges and universities? What are the things which concern these presidents as leaders and individuals? How are they trying to exert leadership to the nation's campuses?

Three years ago, Jon Dalton, former Vice President for Student Affairs at Florida State University, initiated the *Journal of College and Character*. As part of that enterprise and to provide an inside look at the presidency, he began recruiting college and university presidents to volunteer to write diaries for public consumption each for a period of a week or so. To this date (summer 2002) nearly three dozen college and university presidents have agreed to take up this challenge. The disciplined reflections of these presidents present a rare opportunity to get an inside and behind-the-scenes view of the contemporary presidency. Using their own words and their impressions from these diaries, this article provides a profile of what is going on within the college presidency, what presidents are thinking about, and we might go so far as to say, what is in the very hearts of these presidents.

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that diary writings intended for public consumption may not provide the fullest and most candid revelations. Certainly aspects of decision making, difficult personnel matters, the fears and anxieties of the presidents themselves, and the *realpolitik* of their daily leadership and administrative lives and responsibilities are not going to be fully and publicly borne. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, President of Sweet Briar College, confirms this assertion in a diary entry, first acknowledging that "...my days are literally filled with issues that involve the weighing and balancing of rights and goods, dilemmas that require me to clarify my values—and sometimes," she continues reflecting a profound tension in leadership, "if truth be told, to set aside deeply held personal beliefs in favor of communal needs. I also know that of the most interesting and difficult issues along these lines that beset me last week, or last year, for that matter, I cannot write here about any of them without so watering down the problem that it would lose its compelling questions, or so disguising the issue that it becomes fiction."(1)

President Muhlenfeld's admission leaves to our imagination--though she offers her own lengthy list--the precise nature of these issues. But to anyone familiar with the college campus, and even those who are not, it would not be difficult to guess. Interestingly, Muhlenfeld concludes with a note telling us that some pieces of content are able to be generally conveyed while keeping anonymous the precise sources of anecdotes and examples: "And so, these presidents' public diaries often speak in the aggregate, resorting to general discussions, when our personal and immediate experiences could so easily provide us with the names and faces to make these dilemmas come alive."

These diaries are thus only a lens which has to one extent or another, and for obvious reasons, been to some degree screened. Nonetheless they are an important lens because they present a significant barometer and vantage point of an inside track of the presidency, what presidents contemplate, what things create and cause, if not sleepless nights, at least unavoidable and sometimes constant tensions and pressures. In one sense these *Journal of College and Character* presidential diaries, by their very existence, make a significant contribution to our understandings of the presidency.

Using the perspectives of these presidents as revealed in their diaries, this article is an attempt to assess, analyze, and convey the content of their reflections. In doing so we will be enabled to view, compare and contrast the themes which emerge. This assessment will contribute additional understanding of the presidency by developing an overview picture of presidential thought about the issues with which they regularly grapple.

Before going further, a brief word about the demographics of these presidential informants is in order. They are a fairly diverse group, leading institutions which vary from major state universities such as Penn State, Bowling Green, and Kent State Universities to small, elite liberal arts institutions like Connecticut and Rollins Colleges. There are all manner of schools in between. Many have religious heritage and some (like Berea, St. Peters, and Central Methodist Colleges) are highly defined by their religious roots and affiliation. Some of the presidents who have kept diaries are quite new in their tenures while others have been about the business of being a college president for quite some time, including those serving presidencies at multiple institutions. They are male and female, and most appear to have spent the bulk, if not the entirety of their careers in education, mostly at the college and university level. Most, though there are some exceptions, appear from their comments to have come to the college presidency through what today appears to be the "traditional" route of moving up the ladder in academic and other administration, even if beginning that journey from the position of faculty.

The presidents who participated in the diary project were asked to reflect on issues, dilemmas, and concerns which were moral and ethical in nature. Thus, the individual and composite lens provided by these presidents includes a glimpse of the specific matters with which they are wrestling morally (as opposed to extracting that meaning from the content of the concerns themselves). Though the presidents had this specific charge, they do not constrain themselves uniformly or exclusively to address concerns related to ethics, values, and morals. At times they shift their reflections to more generic topics which suggest only a passing or tangential relationship to moral concerns. For example, one of the themes we will examine concentrates on the development and strengthening of boards of trustees, and the ways in which trustee leadership and wisdom is critical to the sound running of institutions (not to mention the political connections and fiscal ties and resources which they bring to the table).

Despite this built in, yet in and of itself important, bias toward presidential moral and ethical reflections, a number of general questions are still worth applying to the data. The overarching question is: what do these reflections tell us about the state of the presidency?

Beyond this fundamental question are a number of others no less important. How does what these presidents commit to their diaries inform us about the presidential mind? And through these diary reflections what are we able to learn about what presidents believe about their responsibilities and what they believe they ought to do in exercising leadership? What do they feel is expected of them? Do they believe their actions are able to make a difference about the concerns and issues confronting them? In short, what do they grapple with and what should they be doing with their presidencies?

We thus turn our attention to discussion of the major themes which appear in the content of these presidential diaries. The goal here and throughout this article is to permit the voices of these presidents to present their view of the presidency, its place in higher education, and the major concerns of colleges and universities and of society which presidents have the duty and responsibility to address.

Coping with the demands of the office

A nearly universal defining characteristic and universally applicable description of the college and university presidency, almost regardless of institutional size, scale, and scope, is that it features both enormous demand and constraints. The demands are not just ones of time, though the moniker "twenty four-seven" well applies. Given the relentless nature of the demands on presidents their intellects, wills, concentration, and literally their physical endurance are challenged daily. These responsibilities make it difficult for many presidents to find the time to be reflective, to ponder what they are doing, and the implications of their actions (or inactions) and decisions. Thus for many of the presidents involved in the project the commitment to keep a diary was an opportunity, but at the same time yet another task. And the diary challenge was ironically somewhat daunting because the discipline of self-reflection, even rumination, is not something presidents normally have the ritual or luxury to do.

The demands of the presidential office are expressed in a number of ways in the diaries. One, not surprisingly, is the provision of the litany of daily activities, the rigors of the schedule of meetings, events, programs, and appearances that most presidents face in and out of the academic year. The cynic might presume that this is merely a way of bragging (or complaining) about how extraordinarily busy "my life" is in order in some fashion to impress the observer. While that may be true in some of these cases, by and large what comes through is simply a *de rigueur* recounting and repetition of an incredible and relentless range of daily activities. Thus, we hear presidents discussing the demands on time, the personnel and management realities, the various, albeit essential, processes through which information gathering, collaborative thinking, and decision making must pass, and the seemingly endless stream of ritualistic and visible public events which fill a president's calendar, sometimes crowding out, by their own admission, other highly important things to which they could and maybe should be attending. The academy is quite routine, almost liturgical, in its complexion and expectations. Pomp and circumstance is not the exclusive province of commencement parades. And presidents are expected to fill the public role of the office with their presence at a sometimes overwhelming list of events.

Second, the diaries offer presidents the opportunity to express simple things which help them to cope with this extremely heavy load of expectations and demands. The reality emerges that by assuming the responsibilities of their positions, most presidents either know before taking the job or certainly learn early on, they give up large portions of what would otherwise be their lives. So, presidents in these diaries relate how important some regular physical activity, the morning jog, for example, whether alone or with a running group, becomes. They reflect on the necessity of maintaining some "family" or domestic time and space, even if that is just trying to preserve Sunday afternoons away from work-related obligations. They talk about going to bed a bit earlier on an evening where there have been fewer social commitments or the take home paperwork has been less than usual or is simply, for a change, being put off until tomorrow.

Merely finding time, especially for personal reading and reflection, is something with which most presidents struggle. One of the presidents' diaries addresses this problem briefly and speaks for many of his colleagues. John Roush, President of Centre College, writes in one of his diary entries that "today marked the first time in many weeks when I could read, make some notes, and think about these sorts of things."⁽²⁾ He continues by citing what he had learned from two "mentors," Bruce Heilman and Rich Morrill. These two fellow presidents were instrumental in "helping me understand the importance of doing this. Bruce created time for this by including it in his travels. Rich worked hard to keep his calendar clear of meetings where his attendance was not essential." For himself, Roush acknowledges being "a cross between the two," concluding with his belief that "it is important for chief executive officers to 'create' time for thinking and, yes, even day dreaming."

Many presidents express this profound difficulty in finding "time" in order to recharge themselves and presumably to handle with greater insight and freshness the work the face. Strategies such as Heilman and Morrill suggest are among the ways presidents cope with the rare species of time itself.

It is clear from the diaries that the juggling act required in the personal lives of presidents cannot and should not pass without further mention. One example will suffice, though many presidents express similar thoughts about the role of spouses and life partners in the mix of being a president. Larry D. Shinn, President of Berea College, offers a lengthy and heartfelt set of thoughts about the necessary trade offs. He speaks of his wife having "retired" from a twenty five year teaching career at the beginning of his tenure in order to accommodate his life as a president. A portion of what is asked and demanded of both partners is captured by Shinn, reflecting on his week in and week out schedule: "This means that while my wife and I are in the same house, and often in the same room together, she has a husband poring over papers each night rather than a spouse with whom to communicate. This is perhaps the most difficult part of my life as a president."⁽³⁾ He goes on to acknowledge his gratefulness at groups like the Council on Independent Colleges that includes spouses and spouse programs at their annual meetings. "This is the only professional group," Shinn adds, "that really understands how much a president, whether male or female, is dependent upon the support or encouragement from his or her spouse." He concludes these thoughts with the candid admission that "This is a side of this job few presidents are willing to talk

about.”

Part II continue....

Footnotes

(1) Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, President, Sweet Briar College,
<http://www.collegevalues.org/diaries.cfm>

(2) John Roush, President, Centre College, <http://www.collegevalues.org/diaries.cfm>

(3) Larry Shinn, President, Berea College, <http://www.collegevalues.org/diaries.cfm>