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## Leadership in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for Psychologist-Managers

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Leadership in Higher Education:  
Opportunities and Challenges for Psychologist-Managers

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**ABSTRACT**

This article provides ideas and recommendations for psychologist-managers seeking to transition from the private sector to institutions of higher education. We first describe the differences between the cultures of academia and the private sector and then distinguish between traditional and nontraditional leadership roles at a university or college. We also discuss the challenges and opportunities faced by future academic leaders. Throughout this article, we describe the knowledge and skills sets that make psychologist-managers attractive candidates for campus leadership.

*Keywords:* academia, academic leadership, university leaders

### **Leadership in Higher Education:**

#### **Opportunities and Challenges for Psychologist-Managers**

A recent survey by the American Psychological Association reported that the vast proportion of psychologists with doctoral degrees have jobs outside of academia (Michalski, Kohout, Wicherski, and Hart, 2011). This 2009 survey found that only 26% of psychologists with PhD or PsyD degrees were employed by universities and 4-year colleges. Yet some of us chose to remain in academia. The present authors were among those who after obtaining our doctorates never left university life; we became faculty members and assumed leadership roles at institutions of higher education. Together, we have a have a combined total of 24 years serving in a variety of academic leadership roles including Associate Dean, Dean, Sr. Executive VP for Academics and Research, VP for Research and Institutional Effectiveness, and Interim Provost. The co-authors assumed these roles at a small private institution as well as a large public metropolitan university. It is with this collective experience that we offer our insights for those psychologists who have worked outside of academia, but are contemplating a transition to an academic leadership role.

There is ample evidence to support the notion that psychologists have many of the skill sets and knowledge to be effective leaders *even without formal leadership training*. For instance, Kelly and Finkelman (2011) asserted that “it would be surprising if psychologists as a whole do not skew toward the favorable ends of the relevant leadership and interpersonal skills scales, on the basis of their initial self-selection of the profession, their training, and their experience with people” (p. 203). In their subsequent book (Kelly and Finkelman, 2013) concluded that “the psychologist-manager has the requisite analytical skills, ethical orientation, and networked

leadership style to do well in the 21st-century organization” (p. 38). Similarly, Fassinger and Good (2017) state that “the presence of counseling psychologists in academic leadership may offer institutions potent support in answering key challenges in contemporary higher education, particularly around student diversity and vocational development, assessment and competency-based education, external accountability, community partnerships, and ongoing professional development of faculty and staff” (p. 775). The training standards approved and published by the American Psychological Association reinforce the claims of Fassinger and Good (2017) and Kelly and Finkelman (2013) that psychologists are trained in skills desirable for positive leadership (APA, 2018). The APA goes even further to promote skills training to address multicultural and diversity issues, which are of critical importance in today’s world. It is not enough, however, to have skills training in desirable areas. Each individual must also engage in self-assessment to determine if his/her personality, strengths/weaknesses and values fit within the institution where employed is being considered.

There are examples of specific areas in which the skills psychologists possess could be applied in academic leadership. Now, more than ever, institutions of higher education are developing partnerships with external organizations to help support basic operations, as well as benefit students. Psychologists’ understanding of how to build positive interpersonal relationships with diverse groups in both for-profit and not-for-profit domains would be a great benefit in higher education leadership. Second, movements like #MeToo have affected campuses across the country. Sexual harassment complaints at colleges and universities are increasing, and academia is being criticized for not adequately investigating reported sexual harassment and assault allegations (Felton, 2018). These serious and challenging issues must be addressed by

college campuses and require a combination of strong ethical leadership and knowledge of gender-based policies in order to move our campuses forward, respecting and protecting the rights of all. Based on their training related to diversity issues, legal guidelines and ethical practices, psychologists may be particularly adept at rising to address the leadership challenges resulting from #MeToo.

While having the right leadership skill set is important in entering higher education leadership, it is also important to note that the culture, organizational structure, and leadership norms of the private sector differ from institutions of higher education. It would be prudent for prospective psychologist-managers to be cognizant of these key differences.

### **KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

Do you wonder why long-sleeved gowns, hoods, mortarboards, and scepters are associated with college commencements? It is because the culture and values espoused by today's colleges and universities trace their lineages to the medieval period when these institutions were sponsored by the church. In fact, "a university inherits many of the elements of the monastery of which it is a direct descendant" (Levinson, 2010). These outward appearances underscore the fact that in many ways this medieval heritage underpins the academic culture of universities and why they differ operationally from the private sector.<sup>1</sup> These roots are deep and hardy, providing academia with a unique culture and identity that is still vibrant and intellectually strong. Therefore, leaders entering academia should also be aware of some of its fundamental values, which tend to be change resistant.

One consequence of this culture is that effective academic leaders adhere to the principles of shared governance (for definition in academia, see AAUP 1966, 1994) and decision making

that require sensitivity to the many constituents of a campus community: particularly the faculty. Typically, faculty members are important stakeholders in the life of a university and will not hesitate to voice their opinions either as individuals or via a collective body such as a faculty senate. The practice of tenure and its associated concept of academic freedom reinforce the cultural norm of faculty providing input in many areas of campus governance including academics and administrative affairs (Gerber, 2001). Many universities have recognized faculty primacy in managing academic practices, such as promotion and tenure, faculty evaluation, workload management and others, through creation of a Faculty Handbook, which then becomes the governing document for policies that affect faculty.

Faculty unions or senates are also present on many campuses, so academic leaders who ignore either the faculty senate or faculty union do so at their own peril. There are numerous cases of Provosts and Presidents who ignored the faculty union and found themselves facing a vote of no confidence from their faculty. While today a vote of no confidence may not guarantee an administrator's firing, it does reflect an animosity with a core group on campus whose support is needed for successful academic functioning (MacTaggart, 2012). Consequently, effective campus leaders should not only keep in mind the *goals* of their institution, but embrace the deliberative, consultative *process* whereby these goals are reached (Kim, 2012).

Having just asserted the importance of the faculty and shared governance, in recent years some states (most notably Wisconsin) have been viewed as weakening the power of the faculty in academic leadership by undermining tenure protections (Flaherty, 2016). As this trend continues, it is up to academic leaders to redefine the norms of the institution and what it means to be a faculty member. Professional psychologists in academic leadership will need to be aware

of and focus on positive socialization practices for faculty in order to maintain cohesion and productivity in the academy.

Academic shared governance also requires an organizational structure that formally requires the input of faculty members. Important decisions are usually based on the recommendations of faculty committees. For instance, suppose a campus leader proposes a change to some requirements in a university's curriculum. In order for this proposal to succeed it must pass through several layers of faculty-based committees: departmental curriculum committees, the curriculum committee for a college (if a university is composed of several colleges), and an enterprise-level group (typically, a university curriculum committee). Positive recommendations from each of these committees is needed before final approval by the provost or president of the university. Ignoring or bypassing the recommendations of any of these committees can lead to the so-called "curriculum wars" that many campuses have experienced.

This bottom-up approach to academic governing (as opposed to the corporate top-down system) means that dozens, perhaps hundreds of faculty members will have been heard when the campus makes important decisions. While seemingly a tedious process, remember that faculty are thinkers; they get paid to think and love to play with and debate ideas. This point is underlined because it is so critical to understanding academia. It is also why academic decision-making, while highly formalized and deliberative, can proceed at an exceedingly slow pace (Birnbaum, 1989). For example, in the case of proposed curriculum changes, implementation may occur after years of discussion and negotiation.<sup>2</sup> So it behooves campus leaders to cherish patience and good listening skills as important virtues for their success. It is also important for



campus leaders to earn the trust of the faculty and the most effective means of achieving this is by being collegial and actively listening to the faculty when recommendations are being made.

This multilayered approach to shared governance requires numerous campus leaders. At the department level there are program coordinators and chairs. Department chairs report to deans who lead colleges that are typically composed of several departments (e.g., College of Arts and Sciences). The deans, in turn, report to the provost (the campus's chief academic officer). The provost reports to a president, or in some cases a chancellor, who in turn reports to a governing board. These positions are all formal with varying degrees of defined responsibility and authority.

There are also senior faculty members who serve as chairs of committees. Informal leadership can occur as a result of expertise or knowledge (Zaccaro, 2007). Senior faculty are often esteemed by their colleagues through their experience and expertise. Becoming a committee chair, especially of a campus or university-wide committee can be a means to exert authority in a more narrowly defined area. This approach that relies on a multitude of campus voices is an important means whereby prospective leaders can hone their skills, be visible, and take on greater responsibilities, as they assume increasingly important leadership roles at a university. This is unlike the private sector where advancement and promotion are relatively well-defined, since administration in higher education does not have a well-defined career ladder for progression.

The advantage of the academic approach is that any faculty member with the skill set, knowledge, and ambition to ascend the administrative ladder has the opportunity to do so. In a sense, the playing field is open to those faculty members who seek the challenges of leadership

on their campus. It is not unusual at colleges and universities to find faculty who have served in administration for a time and then returned to a faculty role with no negative repercussions of such action. In fact, both authors of this article have done just that and continue to enjoy successful faculty careers. However, the expectation that faculty will move into administrative roles, can also be a disadvantage on campuses where there is a lack of faculty “volunteers” for leadership positions. A lack of faculty willing to move into leadership roles can be especially troubling when tensions exist between the administration and its faculty. Under these circumstances, faculty members will remain in their faculty roles and eschew moving over to the “dark side.”<sup>3</sup>

Another important issue is that universities and colleges do not always have a formal system in place for identifying, selecting, and training their academic leaders. There are few classes on “Chairship 101” or “Deanship 101.” Those that do exist tend to be offered by national educational organizations, such as the American Council on Education (ACE), and while many are outstanding, they can also be inconvenient to attend and costly. As a result, selection of campus leaders-particularly department chairs-are based on an individual’s reputation as a teacher, researcher, and colleague. However, the qualities that enhance a candidate’s scholarly reputation and popularity among peers do not always translate into effective leadership. This can result in unrealistic expectations regarding a colleague’s ability to manage/lead successfully as well as removing a person from a productive role into an ineffective one. Under the worst-case scenario, the “Peter Principle” (Peter & Hull, 1969) would then emerge in this administrative setting.

As just described, the setting for academic leadership is unique. One particular strength professional psychologists may bring to academia is their experience in managing a private business, and being able to bridge the gap between the priorities of the for-profit and not for profit sectors. Tight budgets, more stringent timelines, and outcome-based assessments are standard in the private sector. An experienced professional psychologist understands those concepts and could be effective in translating them into the academic environment. Doing so, requires not only knowledge, but outstanding interpersonal skills to connect with, and garner buy-in from, multiple constituencies.

### **TRADITIONAL VERSUS NONTRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES**

In the previous section we focused on issues associated with faculty governance. Issues that relate to faculty hiring, development, and promotion are overseen by an “academic affairs” division of a university or college. So the faculty, department chairs, and deans ultimately report to the provost who leads this division. Under these circumstances, the faculty and their academic leaders occupy tenure-track lines that are housed in academic departments. In addition, academic affairs is responsible for overseeing courses, curriculum, academic program development and accreditation. These “traditional” roles and responsibilities stand in contrast to the “nontraditional” enterprise of a campus which focuses on business and support operations (Leske, 2015). We now consider the nontraditional leadership roles that would be available to psychologists. To provide a short glimpse into these possibilities, non-traditional leadership roles can include positions such as an administrative dean, dean of students, HR director, director of sponsored research or other faculty or student-based programs, or Title IX officer.

The academic enterprise, while the *raison d'être* of university life, cannot survive without the “business side” of campus operations. These operations include student services, faculty and staff support, campus finance, athletics, and a fund raising foundation. Units that serve students include advising offices, health and counseling services, testing centers, residential life, and enrichment programs (e.g., internships, community service, study abroad, cooperative education opportunities). Faculty and staff are served by a Human Resources unit that may offer employee assistance programs, job-related workshops, staff training, and resources to support employee relations, diversity initiatives and affirmative action. Staff positions in these various units are *not* held by faculty members and the unit head typically holds an advanced degree with the title of director, assistant vice-president, or vice-president depending upon the size and complexity of the unit’s operations. “Increasingly, higher education boards and search committees seek ‘entrepreneurial candidates’-people who are able to assess and manage risk in developing new initiatives” (Leske, 2015). In other words, there will always be a need for nontraditional leaders who can bring fresh ideas to the campus environment. Consequently, psychologist-managers seeking to make the transition from the private sector to higher educational should emphasize how their “real world” experiences and insights can be beneficial for the campus community.

Depending upon degree specialization, specific opportunities may be available in higher education. Advanced degree holders who specialize in clinical, counseling, and educational psychology would find opportunities for employment and leadership in the areas of advising, counseling and testing centers, and numerous student support/service program areas. In recent years, universities have seen the need for counseling and student support services increase significantly, and openings in these areas may be starting to increase (New, 2017). In addition,

individuals with a counseling background would also find leadership opportunities in offices of human resources. I/O psychologists could transition into HR leadership roles that oversee personnel selection, training, and evaluation. Individuals with I/O expertise can also be called upon to assist with work flow and organizational issues experienced by other campus offices.

As might be expected, employment and decision-making practices of nontraditional units operate under a “commerce model” rather than the traditional approach of academic affairs. Consequently, the top-down approach is more evident and the time to implement new policies and directives is more similar to the private sector than academia. Financial exigencies, revisions in governmental rules and regulations, and ever-changing market demands require that these business units must respond with some urgency to external deadlines for the well-being of the institution.

### **FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAMPUS LEADERS**

Institutions of higher education must adapt to changes that occur in the economy, demographics, technology, and work-force needs in order to remain viable (Kok and McDonald, 2017). While this may be evident for nontraditional units on campus, increasingly, academic leaders must respond to these changes with a commerce model in mind. For instance, many states are focusing on developing performance metrics for colleges and universities that drive funding models. If a state legislature revises its performance measures for higher education, universities and colleges must respond (by deadline) in order to not lose state funding.

Academic units must be nimble in gathering and disseminating information that is required for their healthy existence. As another example, during the economic recession that started in 2008, there ensued a heightened national demand for Master’s degrees by the unemployed and

underemployed work force. The academic affairs units of many universities and colleges responded to this new demand by increasing access and enrollments for the needed graduate programs, both in person and through online programs.

In recent years, most public institutions of higher education have experienced significant reductions in state funding. For many campuses, this meant that academic leaders were required to increase tuition and schedule larger class sizes in order to cover budget shortfalls. Some were faced with even more unpleasant decisions that led to the elimination of academic programs, the termination of faculty members, and hiring freezes. At the same time, private institutions were forced to provide increasing amounts of institutional aid to maintain stable enrollments, while keeping tuition increases low. Private institutions (especially smaller, less well-endowed institutions) engaged in strategic planning exercises to maintain academic excellence with less revenue. As with public institutions, private colleges and universities grappled with class size increases, program cuts and partnerships across institutions to remain viable.

On the positive side, this financial downturn provided the impetus for many institutions to seek creative solutions for managing their tight budgets. Many forward-looking institutions redoubled efforts to promote public-private partnerships between their campuses and other entities such as local government and businesses. Universities and colleges established economic development organizations with local/regional governments, or partnered with private companies to create research centers focused on a specific area of university strength and industry need. The development of intellectual property, patent submissions and technology transfer agreements have become commonplace at many universities, as a means to increase both revenue and status.

It also became apparent that more campus leaders needed to engage in fundraising. Historically, college advancement was largely the responsibility of a foundation whose primary mission was to raise funds to support academic programs and scholarships. This situation has changed so that now most academic leaders (from chairs and deans to the president) will have fundraising included in their job descriptions. It is now common for university foundations to work in a coordinated fashion with academic leaders and their faculty in securing external funds (Hodson, 2010). For example, as Dean one of the present authors expended about 20% of his effort in fundraising.

Many traditional campus leaders who began as faculty members find it challenging to begin fundraising and to adopt commerce models in their decision making (Schwartz, 2017). According to Schwartz (2017) there are at least two important reasons why faculty members feel uncomfortable in assuming the role of fundraiser. First, most have never been in a position to acquire the skill set and knowledge needed to cultivate, solicit, and steward gifts. Without proper training, their lack of confidence in taking on this endeavor should not be surprising. Second, and perhaps more significantly, faculty members have embraced the life of the mind, whereby the value of ideas is paramount. The thought of asking for money and adopting a business-like mentality simply does not mesh well with their professional persona and faculty worldview.

However, psychologists-managers who have worked in the private sector have prior experience working with the commerce model, and are familiar with the continuing need to generate revenue. This experience, coupled with risk-taking and an entrepreneurial spirit, would be advantageous for psychologist-managers seeking to make a transition to higher education.

The challenge now for higher education leaders is to strike the right balance between budget priorities and the academic mission of their campuses. In this vein, it is important to remember that when campus leaders adopt the commerce model “there is no profit motive or agenda, the purpose of doing business is to maximize resources to achieve the end of providing as much value, service, and support to learning, teaching, and research as possible” (Leske, 2015).

### CONCLUSION

In this article, we have discussed some challenges to higher education, not unlike challenges faced in the private sector. Setting those challenges aside though, the work environment in higher education is still positive and hopeful. The authors of this article have more than 50 combined years of service in academia and neither of us can think of a workplace we would enjoy more. Each and every day, we get to interact with young people whose lives are just beginning and whose dreams may change the world. We get to share ideas with smart people who are interested in them, and there is a great deal of autonomy and variety in our daily work. Colleges and Universities still remain vibrant places where professionals can work and make a difference to others. We believe that psychologist-managers seeking to transition from the private sector to higher education possess the knowledge and skill sets that would be highly advantageous for them, as well as their newly adopted institutions. These advantages include people skills, analytical skills, and an ethical orientation. In addition, psychologist-managers working in the private sector would be familiar with the commerce model and revenue generation; knowledge which would be unfamiliar to the traditional academic leader. Moreover, having an understanding of the differences between the culture of academia and the private sector would be a necessary ingredient for making the successful transition to academic



leadership. Finally, to those psychologists who have or will make this successful career transition to academia we say “welcome back!”

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**ONLINE RESOURCES FOR ACADEMIC JOB SEEKERS**

Chronicle of Higher Education: [https://chroniclevitae.com/job\\_search/new?cid=UCHETOPNAV](https://chroniclevitae.com/job_search/new?cid=UCHETOPNAV)

Jobs in Higher Education: <https://www.higheredjobs.com/admin/>

Inside Higher Education: <https://careers.insidehighered.com/>

Academic Head Hunting firms: <https://www.higheredjobs.com/career/SiteListings.cfm>

**FOOTNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the title “dean” derives from Latin term *decanus* which means the religious leader of ten men.

<sup>2</sup> Recently, the president of a large metropolitan university was asked why it took three years to implement a curriculum change. His response was “because we fast-tracked it!”

<sup>3</sup> A system that is peculiar to some liberal arts colleges with small departments is the “rotating chairship.” In this system, senior faculty members rotate the chairship on a three- or five-year basis. While this serves to democratize leadership in the department it can also promote faculty members into leadership roles who are reluctant or unable to be effective chairs of their department.