

Leadership in Higher Education in the USA

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Leadership in higher education in the USA has been an area of intense scrutiny over the past several years as the debate over the quality of higher education continues and the demand for assessment of outcomes grows. Attention in the media to increased incidents of racism on campus, to alleged tuition, to falsification of scientific data, and numerous other issues exerts increasing pressure on the leadership in higher education to deal decisively with ethical implications of these issues.

American scientists define leadership as “the process of persuasion or example by which an individual or leadership team induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her follower” (Gardner 1990, p.1). Leadership becomes “ethical by serving the common good, by being responsive and caring of constituents and by working within a framework of shared beliefs concerning standards of acceptable behavior. Effective leadership is distinguished by vision that creates focus, by ability to grasp the big picture” and communicate meaning, to develop commitment, by engendering trust, and by fostering the process of renewing values, goals, energy and human possibilities.

Comparing the culture and experience of business to the needs of higher education suggests a five-step process for developing transformational leadership: create readiness, overcome resistance, articulate a vision, generate commitment and institutionalize implementation (Cameron and Ulrich 1986).

Leaders can serve as symbols of moral unity for their institutions. They help “lift people out of their petty preoccupations” and get them to confirm that their efforts remain directed towards “objectives worthy of their best efforts” (Gardner 1990, p. 12). Often this kind of leader seeks to extend important opportunities for making decisions toward others in the institution. The preference for shared governance itself reflects a democratically based ethical assumption that simultaneously values the contribution of the many and the executive efficiency of the one.

Two organizational models began to gain prominence in the 1980s. The first focuses on strategic planning, the second-emphasizes the importance of institutional culture (Peterson and Metz 1987). These models move the task of leadership in the direction of a stronger presidential role. This role requires skill in organizing & guiding decisions in two areas: (1) making major decisions about the institutional mission in the face of external & internal opportunities and constraints, and (2) communicating a vision for institutional direction that empowers constituents to work toward shared goals.

Clearly the moral & ethical vision of an institution of higher learning must be promulgated & protected by all its members. College or university presidents must be particularly aware & committed to ethical concerns. These requirements are especially important in a learning community that seeks to recognize and value the multifarious voices of its diverse populations.

The president, as leader, is accountable for all that happens within the institution & assumes the obligation to provide ethical as well as academic leadership. Leadership is a moral act infused with a vision and commitment to action.

Every action taken – or not taken – conveys information about the values of the leadership. This axiom seems especially true with regard to the routine interactions centering around how presidents spend their time, the questions they ask, the reaction they make to critical incidents, and their decisions as to what or who gains rewards.

Institutions with a strong positive ethos are led by individuals who clearly articulate the values expected in a democratic community, including a respect for and a responsibility to others, a sense of justice and fairness, and the development of both character and intellect in a caring community. The leader must have a vision of the institution's ethical life & then be able to “make it live in the imagination of all the members of the community” (Grand 1988, p. 197).

Although the role of leadership is attributed to the president within the college or university, the organizational characteristic of an institution of higher education that differentiates it from other organizations is the expectation that governance is a shared responsibility.

Literature on structures of campus governance describes the distinctive organizational characteristics of academic institutions, including the often ambiguous and abstract goals, & the desires of professional employees and clients (students) for a part in decision making and their special vulnerability to environmental factors.

Three models of academic governance have been described: academic bureaucracy, the university collegium, and the university as political system, with the leadership and management strategies implied by each (Baldrige et al. 1977). The academic bureaucracy model is seen as hierarchical, formal, and efficient, with the leader as the “hero” who possesses technical problem – solving skills. The collegium, or “community of scholars” model is characterized by shared decision-making, the professional authority of faculty members, and more humane education. The collegium manages by consensus, with its leaders considered “first among equals”. This model often deals inadequately with conflict and the actual workings of the academic institution. The political model focuses on the processes of forming policy that encompass different interest

groups with diverse viewpoints. These processes involve negotiation, bargaining, and external & internal influence and can offer useful insights to the bureaucracy & collegium models. Leaders in higher education would be more accurately described as “academic statesmen” whose critical skill is the ability to lead & facilitate the expertise of key administrators in the increasingly complex work of the university, especially in the processes of strategic decision making.

A comprehensive description of theories of leadership in higher education suggests that leaders who use an integrated approach to governance that employs more than one organizational model might be more skillful in fulfilling the numerous and often conflicting expectations of their position. This “cybernetic” model (Birnbaum 1988) encourages more flexible responses to administrative tasks because the leader is aware the multiple realities in the organization, of differing interests, perspectives, and values, and of the need to maintain a complex approach to administration. The usefulness of the integrated model in the promotion of an ethos of community resides in its emphasis on maintaining a creative balance among various organizational systems – bureaucratic, collegial, political, and symbolic. This model has the potential for motivating people with conflicting value systems to work together with a common purpose in an atmosphere that encourages collaboration and trust.

Shared values derived from the mission statement communicate the meaning and significance of the organization. They foster strong feelings of personal effectiveness, promote high levels of loyalty to the institution, facilitate consensus among organizational goals, encourage ethical behavior, and promote strong norms about working hard and caring. Leaders who are clear about their values and whose behavior constantly reflects their values make a significant difference in an organization. Getting people committed to common goals is one of the leader’s most significant strategies. The process can be encouraged by using the shared vision of the mission statement to foster collaboration, to build trusting relationships, and to seek integrative solutions.

Collaboration as an approach to organization has gained new importance in higher education. Collaboration connotes a more intense relationship than cooperation and implies a relationship among equals pursuing a goal of mutual interest. The idea of collaboration still faces strong natural barriers because of the lack of clear lines of communication in the organizational structure and because of the traditional individualistic nature of faculty.

Trust is an essential element of organizational effectiveness. It could be the most basic value in an institution of higher education, because without it no sense of community is possible.

The challenge for leadership is to search out innovative opportunities for collaboration among campus constitutions and to support efforts that might have an effect on increasing the level of trust.

Strategic planning is the process that offers an opportunity for the faculty, administration staff and students to work collaboratively and constructively with conflict in values. It is the process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the organization and its changing marketing opportunities. The steps of the institution to follow include analyses of the external environment in the present and the probable future, determination of the institution's major resources, formulation of goals and strategy based on cost – effectiveness, a necessary change in the organization's structure, and design of systems of information, planning, and control.

Strategic planning is an active, outward process that focuses on keeping the institution directed and oriented to the future.

Situations of moral responsibility occur within the institutional roles of most members of the campus community. The increasing complexity of them creates a real dilemma in reaching the “right” decision.

Ethical decision making results from the act of reflection; to be effective, it must be a legitimate part of the everyday process of making decisions.

The process of rational and moral decision making to be used in conjunction with a set of “academic principles of responsibility” includes a proposed code of professional ethics for the academic community (Reynolds and Smith 1990). Within the context of this code, the first step in making a moral decision is to define the concrete ethical issues, as not all issues have moral dimensions. The second step is to review the alternatives for resolving the issue. The third step is to carefully consider each alternative in relation to the academic principles outlined as well as any other set of values. The fourth is to check the proposed solution against one's intuitive moral judgment, imagining oneself in the position of those individuals who will be affected by the decision. Finally, one must act on one's deliberate judgment.

Another model describes the process of ethical decision making as having two distinct levels (Kitchener 1985). The first is intuitive based on prior experience and similar to a “common sense” response. The second is the critical evaluation level involving ethical rules, ethical principles, and ethical theory (Kitchener 1985).

Ethical rules include codes of conduct that apply to professional practice. Ethical codes are generally developed by professional groups and organizations. Codes can be used as teaching tools, as a method of socialization of new professionals to the values and standards of the specific profession, and as a guide for practical situations. Five ethical principles are particularly

relevant for higher education: respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful.

These five principles serve as ethically consistent, relevant guidelines upon which ethical decisions can be based. They would be overturned only by strongest ethical obligations, related to doing the least amount of avoidable harm.

The role of leadership is attributed to the president, who has the obligation of ethical and academic responsibility. The organizational characteristic of higher education institutions that differentiates them from other types, however, is the expectation of shared governance. Successful leadership in higher education requires the ability to use more than one organizational model to respond to different situations and multiple realities. Collaborative efforts that encourage dialogue, an emphasis on the shared values of the mission statement, and the creation of an atmosphere of trust all contribute to integrative processes and solutions.

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