

Academic Leadership

Questions

When the concept of academic leadership is discussed on college campuses, we find a good deal of ambivalence...

On one hand, faculty resist...indeed deplore leadership in the traditional pyramid structure of business and government.

In fact, many of us sought careers in academe in part because we really have NO "supervisor"...we can do what we want...when we want to...

We are offended by any suggestion that the University can be compared to other organizational forms such as corporations, governments, ...

Pity the poor administrator who mistakenly refers to the University as a corporation...to its students or the public at large as customers...to its faculty as employees...

We take great pride that we belong to a creative anarchy. Indeed, we look down upon those who get caught in the trap of academic administrators...they become somehow "tainted"...unfit...no longer a part of the true academy, no matter how distinguished their earlier academic accomplishments.

Yet, we also seek leadership...not in detail...but in the abstract
...in visions
...in values
...concepts

We also seek protection from the forces of darkness that rage outside our ivy-covered walls...the forces of politics, greed, populism, mediocrity... that would threaten the important values of the University...knowledge, wisdom, excellence, service...truth, justice, and the American way...

Reality

To be sure, university is very much
...a bottom-up organization
...creative anarchy
...a "voluntary" enterprise

Nevertheless, leadership plays a critical role, as in any organization.

Examine closely any major accomplishment of the institution...the excellence of a program... its impact on society...and invariably you will find a committed, forceful, visionary, and effective leader...whether a principal investigator...a chair...a dean...or (God forbid)... a member of the "central administration"

Perceptions of the Presidential Role

There are many...including many presidents...who believe quite strongly that the modern research university is basically unmanageable...and unleadable.

(Actually, it is in fact true that the modern university is almost incomprehensible...with a scope and complexity far beyond the capacity of most within or without to fathom its myriad of interacting missions and roles...much less to adequately communicate them to others...)

At most a president can hope to deflect the course

of the University slightly in one or two particular areas.

To be sure, there are many examples from the dim past of higher education in which presidents of unusual vision and ability have had great impact...both on their institutions and on higher education more generally.

Angell of Michigan...Eliot of Harvard...Haven of Chicago
...Terman of Stanford (not a president...but a provost...that lowest of all forms of academic administrator life...)

But as the modern university has become more complex...
...with responsibilities not only for the classical triad of teaching, research, and service...but also for health care, economic development, social change, and even big time show biz...

The modern presidency has truly taken on a character more like that of the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation. (In fact, the U of M, Inc, would rank 75th on the Fortune 500 list...)

In others, it has taken on a more entrepreneurial role,
...with the president carrying the primary responsibility for generating the massive resources--from the state, from the federal government, from private donors-- necessary for the teaching and scholarly pursuits of the faculty.

One of my colleagues, Paul Gray of MIT, provides a modern definition for the university president as "a person who lives in a large house and begs for a living"

But there are still other roles...

The president had become a defender of the University
...and its fundamental qualities of
...knowledge and wisdom
...truth and freedom
...academic excellence and public service
against the forces of darkness which rage outside its ivy covered walls...

There are times when I feel instead like the sheriff in a western movie, who each day has to strap on his guns and go out to meet the gunslingers who've come to shoot up the town.

...public officials after short term political gain
...members of the media after cheap headlines
...special interest groups seeking to distract the University from its fundamental missions of teaching and research and focus instead on their political agenda

The leadership role of the president

More specifically, one can identify the following roles for the modern university president:

Substantive Leadership:

The development, articulation, and implementation of visions and programs that sustain and enhance the quality of the institution

Bold and creative long-range thinking about intellectual, social, financial, human resource, physical, and political issues

A focus on the future, an understanding of the present, with a sense of the tradition and values of the past

Symbolic Leadership

A role as the head of the institution, with a responsibility to handle the relationships with various internal

constituencies

The representation of the institution to a myriad of external constituencies

Pastoral Care

Source of emotional support, energy, guidance for institution.

A Fact of Life:

No president can possibly fulfill all the dimensions of this role.

Hence a president must first determine which aspects of the role best utilize his or her talents.

Then a team of executive officers and senior staff must be assembled which can extend and complement the activities of the president to deal with the full spectrum of the University leadership role.

My particular role as president

My top priority is strategic leadership: to provide the vision, energy, and sense of excitement necessary to propel and guide the University into the 21st Century

Internal campus affairs:

- largely symbolic...setting key themes
- not involved in day-to-day decision processes
- strong delegation and decentralization

External affairs

- primary responsibility for interface with external constituencies
- primary responsibility for "institutional advancement"
- involvement in state/national/societal issues

Leadership roles:

Chairs (and Directors)

Faculty nurturing
...Faculty hiring
...Development of junior faculty
...Faculty environment
...Graduate education

Deans

Intellectual life of college
Curriculum, UG education
Resource acquisition
...intra-University
...private fund-raising
...state/federal
Strategic direction of college
Faculty quality control

Provost

Setting university priorities
...resource management
S&C evaluation, strategies
Faculty/student/program quality control

President

Institutional Mission
Institutional Values
Role of University within broader society
Long range visioning
Symbolic leadership
Change agent
Interface with outside world
Resource acquisition

Governing Boards

In theory, responsibilities are

...hiring and firing the president

...approving policy

But here the role and nature of the governing boards
of public and private institutions part their ways

Two Models: Regents and Trustees

Regents (Public Model)

First responsibility...to the body politic

...to protect the public mission and accountability

True lay composition...representing the "common man"

Trustees (Private Model)

First responsibility...to the institution

...to protect and enhance the capacity, quality,
and reputation of university for future
generations

...self-selected, generally comprised of
distinguished leaders from public and
private sector

Note a future essay on the nature of governing boards...

Other references

John Gardner's writings

Henry Rosovsky