

A President Should Lead by Teaching

Over the past several years, I have had the honor and privilege of serving as a resource and mentor for those inside and outside of the academy who are either thinking about applying for a presidency, or who are currently functioning in the role of a president and need some advice. Having served as the president of five small, private colleges, I do have some experience. But in giving advice, I try very hard to be both careful and honest.

I openly share the ideas and strategies I tried that didn't work out, as well as those that worked at one institution but not at another. I admit openly when I don't know the answer. I try to listen more than speak, because many times people just want someone to listen to their ideas.

The questions I love the most are those for which I believe that I have the right answer ... and can speak from repeated experiences of success with many examples. Sometimes the question is framed as, "What did you like best about being a president?" My answer usually surprises people.

One of the best things I did at every institution was to keep my "faculty appointment" as more than just an honorary title. When hired, I always received rank and sometimes tenure. I regularly continued the pursuit of my research interests and presented at conferences, preferably with some of our full-time faculty. And most important, I taught a course every semester. Over the years at every institution I led, I taught incoming freshmen, upper level courses, senior seminars, graduate students and online courses. Sometimes I taught alone, and sometimes I team taught.

It is at this point that you may be ready to stop reading this article. And often the colleagues I am "advising" react the same way, too. They say (and you might be thinking this, too) that they are just too busy with administration, fundraising, community engagement, etc. to teach a course. Or they say that they haven't taught in years and are out of practice.

My response ... teaching is one of the most important things for a president to do. It is a critical element to authentic servant leadership. The following is a list of why this is so based on my own experiences.

1) The Mission of the College/University

Most institutions have the teaching and learning process and the focus on students as central to their mission. In my addresses to prospective students and their families, I would emphasize the importance of student learning. While we always had talented faculty who were engaged and supported in their research agenda, teaching was most important. I would say, "At (name of institution), everyone teaches!" And it was true. Teaching was expected of all qualified administrators. And I would say loudly and

proudly, “And I teach, too.” Simply said, for the president to teach is an important demonstration of the commitment to mission and the importance of student learning.

2) Understanding Students

While as president, I would spend as much time as possible with students (small group meetings, attendance at their events and programs, stopping by the dining hall, informal conversations around campus, etc.), I learned so much more about the students through the classroom interactions. Through teaching, you really get to know and to understand their abilities and interests. You become more aware of the challenges they face in their lives.

This student knowledge was critical to making decisions about programs and services. It was central to understanding enrollment and retention strategies. I remember how often members of my leadership team or groups on campus would appeal to me to fund a program or support some initiative. It always helped to have my own sense of student needs and interests.

3) Understanding the Faculty Experience

The greatest asset of every college or university is the intellectual capital of its faculty. While the student experience is enriched by the multiple co-curricular programs and services as well as the interactions with classmates and friends, the value of their investment in their education correlates with the quality of their classroom experience.

By teaching myself, I better understood the challenges our faculty faced in terms of the students, the workload and balancing their schedules. I better understood the student assessment of their programs, their classes and the support they received from advisors and mentors. And when faculty complained or were frustrated (and this happens), I could respond from my own experience. I believe the faculty appreciated and respected my commitment to the faculty experience.

4) Role Model

Finally, the president is by the nature of the position, a role model. I believe strongly that by teaching every semester ... and teaching all types of students, I was an important role model to the faculty, the students, the parents/families, the alumni and the community. Everyone understood how important teaching was to our institution. Everyone could see that students were our top priority, not just in words, but in actions. I made sure that the Board understood and supported that this was an important part of my job. And my role as a faculty member was critical to our success in acquiring grants and funding.

My recommendation to prospective and sitting presidents is to make teaching a priority. It will be a challenge, but you need to make time. You will need to remain current in your discipline and, more importantly, become even more of an expert in it. It will help you in many ways to engage in professional development activities. I always asked a senior faculty member or two

to serve as my mentors ... to help me to become a better teacher. And it also helps to team teach, especially if you haven't taught in some time.

I provided the four reasons why I think that president-professor is important. But there is one additional reason. And in full disclosure, it was probably number one for me. I loved to teach. I don't know how good I was, but serving as an educator was why I decided to try and find my way into higher education. Teaching was always the best part of my day. Unquestionably, it was the most enjoyable. I loved the in-class teaching; I enjoyed the reading, research and planning required in preparing to teach; I even looked forward to grading papers! I loved it all.

I have to admit that since I stepped down from my last presidency, I don't really miss very much about my work. I miss the arrival of freshmen, the first day of the semester and commencement. Why? I miss those landmark days because I miss students. There are many reasons why presidents should teach. But I hope that for you, as I experienced, teaching reminds you of why you chose a career in higher education and why you have embraced the noble profession of helping students to grow, to develop and to achieve their goals. And in the end, as students arrive at your classroom door, and you get ready to engage them in the teaching-learning process, you will realize that you are not only teaching, you are leading.

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