

## The True Meaning of Leadership in Higher Education – Part I

(This is the first part of a three-part article on leadership in the post-pandemic culture.)

### INTRODUCTION

As we move in a glacially incremental way towards the next normal, most colleges and universities continue to focus on enrollment, budgets, and revenue in hopes that they will survive the pandemic and have a successful upcoming academic year. I applaud the skillful “leadership” of presidents, provosts, CFOs, faculty leaders and Board members who have navigated through the pandemic over the past 16 months.

But maintaining fiscal stability, controlling the incidents of physical and mental health, and supporting online learning are not really leadership ... to me, this is good management or better described as crisis management. Leading through a pandemic is reactive management, not proactive leadership.

I am convinced that there is an urgent need to identify and embrace the true meaning of leadership in higher education. There is a crisis in America that cannot be solved by a mask or a vaccine. We need to focus and act with the kind of leadership that is proactive and more concerned with issues related to the Common Good.

### THE THREE REALITIES

My sense of urgency and commitment to a renewed paradigm of higher education leadership has developed over the past year because of three experiences and observations. These three realities have served as the impetus for this article, and led me to three conclusions.

First, I have been revisiting the fundamental idea of higher education. During the forced solitude of the pandemic, like others, I decided to learn how to bake bread. But after eating more bread than I should, I decided that I needed to focus on intellectual pursuits and physical exercise. My “pandemic life” has drawn me to rereading books and articles about the history and meaning of higher education.

I still believe strongly in the values of liberal education and professional preparation, but these goals have too often been reduced to exposure to the humanities and the sciences and getting ready for a job. In too many cases, liberal education has become a hollow statement of mission or identity rooted in a series of courses that may be independently valuable, but disconnected from the real challenges and issues of life. Professional preparation has too often been a pathway to passing an exam and gaining a credential.

To me and other educators that I have studied, the true meaning of higher education is the engagement of students in their development of values and life practices. This is true for all college students, but especially true for traditional age and resident students.

For traditional age students, college is a time of maturation during which each individual student develops in her or his own time and unique way, even if the students are enrolled in the same courses. For these students, college is a time of moving from teenage years to adulthood. For proof of this dynamic, just consider the differences among your students in terms of maturity and intellectual curiosity, as well as in their current life choices. I have rarely witnessed Spring break trips taken by students to the National Gallery in Washington, DC or the Metropolitan Opera in New York rather than the beaches of Daytona, Florida or Cancun, Mexico.

The idea of the university is to provide the opportunity to immerse students in the life of the mind, but also, to provide a safe and challenging environment to develop and mature ... to grow up intellectually, spiritually, physically and emotionally. My first conclusion is that moral development, social development, intellectual development, spiritual development, and even physical development require proactive leadership, not just checking the boxes on a transcript.

Second, I have come to the clear and immutable conclusion that we have a responsibility in higher education to directly and fully address social issues. In 1967 as a junior in high school, I remember attending a civil rights rally in Boston. I had been active in other activities for several years thanks to a teacher who was involved in marches including Selma. The 1967 rally I attended was more of a celebration of all that had been achieved in the prior few years. Martin Luther King, Jr. was still alive, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banning discrimination had been passed.

I am sure that at that moment I believed that justice, equality and peace had been achieved, or at least were imminent. Now over 50 years later, I sadly realize that I was wrong. In 2020 and 2021, during the pandemic, we have experienced repeated examples of prejudice and racism. The injustices against, demeaning treatment of, and physical attacks on African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans, as well as the discrimination and threats against immigrants of color either on the path to citizenship or toward a life of safety and gainful employment are prevalent and seem to have no limits or solutions.

As the President he served, our new President frequently says that “we are not blue states and red states, but the United States.” Sadly, even if that is true, we are still not one united America. Americans still seem to be living in a caste system with classes, limits and prejudices as well as endemic discrimination.

If the reality of the way so many people feel about skin color, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and the accumulation of wealth was not bad enough, we continue to see constant examples of sexism and misogynistic behavior. We see violence and the proliferation of guns and weapons. And since January 6th, we have exposed the fact that our democracy is fragile. While the Capitol is now more secure with its new bunker mentality, the threat to democracy is being played out in several states that are trying and seemingly succeeding to redefine elections and the meaning of citizenship.

Regardless of your political views, it is beyond question that the past four years have left us with a legacy of incivility, verbal abuse and a lack of trust. Boorish behavior and the litanies of insults and accusations and ad hominem attacks with no concern for the truth or the obvious facts are commonplace.

The pandemic itself is sufficient evidence of this reality. If you want to be enlightened, frightened and depressed, I encourage you to read books like “The Premonition” by Michael Lewis. If the unnecessary and avoidable death toll in this country is not bad enough, look at what is happening in India, a country with no oxygen, no vaccine, and no plan.

My second conclusion is that true leadership does not mean defining the truth. True leadership requires the courage to confront what is unequivocally wrong and providing an environment for dialogue and respectful appreciation for legitimate differences. There are no divergent facts or truths. There are, however, authentic differences related to values, ideas, beliefs, and preferences. We need to create the pedagogical and dialogical opportunities where truth can be named and differences can be understood.

The third perspective that most recently alarmed me was a plethora of stories and articles about major corporations and business leaders and their future employment needs. These corporate leaders have formed a business model where they value young people without college degrees who can be fully trained in their systems. In fact, they prefer these “undereducated” (my term) applicants. This approach is sometimes described as a way to increase opportunity for those without privilege. If systemic racism is the problem, the solution is not to bypass higher education but to create more opportunities for educational access and persistence.

This corporate approach is also promoted as a way to eliminate the burden of college debt and avoid the so-called needless focus on credentialing. College debt is a real issue, but again, the solution is not to avoid higher education but to make it more affordable. Credentialing is not a higher education creation, rather it has generated from business, accrediting bodies, and government. If you believe these business visionaries, to be successful in corporate America will only require completing a connect-the-dots training program. In reality, it is a way to create sycophants who all follow the same script without thought or question.

This approach to the future of corporate America, if it is successful, both saddens and scares me. It saddens and scares me not because I am a higher education zealot (although I am), but because I fear the ultimate impact on society without the opportunity for women and men to grow and develop during the formative years of college life. There are already too many individuals who choose not to attend college or fail to persist in their studies due to multiple reasons.

If you question the concept of the formative value of college for traditional age students, I suggest you consider the differences between a freshman and a senior...or even those between a freshman and a sophomore. The differences do not necessarily correlate with intellectual ability, acquisition of knowledge, or the skills in approaching learning. The differences are maturation, sophistication, confidence, and a more holistic understanding of both the world and themselves. College allows and nurtures the important process of growing up.

Part II of this article will explore the key elements of the “next normal” call to leadership to address these challenges and realities.

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