

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

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

### INTRODUCTION

In the first section of this three-part article, I shared my perspectives on the realities currently facing society, and therefore facing higher education. If my assessment of “The Three Realities” (Part I) is accurate, then how do we proceed.

I often become easily frustrated by articles, lectures or podcasts that state the problem, but not the solution... or even propose any solution. Part II of this article moves from the problem statement to the outline of ways to understand the context of higher education as the environment to address these societal and individual needs.

### THE TRUE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

The urgency for true leadership in higher ed requires the prioritization of devoting time and resources to these three issues, challenges and realities. Our students may need 120 academic credits to graduate. Our students need even more to mature and to develop their life values related to these issues and the societal challenges they will confront whether they want to or not. These realities are at the core of good citizenship and living in a civil society. Students will graduate and continue their lives in this complex and contentious world. And unless they plan to live on an island with a population of one, students must be prepared to survive and thrive in communities with other citizens, ideally focused on advancing the Common Good. I implore higher education leaders to reflect on the following questions: Will your students be ready? Have their colleges and universities served them well? Will you as academic leaders accept and embrace this true leadership challenge?

If you agree with me... if you embrace these questions as fundamental to quality education and transformational leadership ... then I implore you to facilitate not indoctrinate. You must do more than send out periodic emails or letters from the president that affirm the values of the institution – messages that typically go unread or unheeded. What you must do instead is to schedule the time for conversations about issues related to racism, prejudice, respect, democracy, human and civil rights, environmental protection, etc. Attendance at these conversations must be required not optional, regularly scheduled not occasionally offered, and most importantly, they must be factual, objective and unbiased. We should not tell our students how to think or what to think. We can and should require and demand, however, that they take the time and the opportunity to think.

Higher education must provide students with the structured opportunities to define fairness, equity, justice, and civility. Students in our institutions must be provided with the time and opportunities to explore attitudes, values and experiences with other students who represent varied perspectives and backgrounds.

True leadership necessitates that this human development takes place in a non-threatening environment of individual respect and without judgment. The goal needs to be providing the path towards maturity and responsibility ... engaged citizenship... through factual knowledge not opinions, leading to commitments of action and attitude.

Students also need to have the time and opportunity to reflect thoughtfully and consider what they want to do with their lives. A major portion of each person's life is devoted to two things - sleeping and work. From my experience, most college students do not need a tutorial on sleeping. They have already mastered this.

But career choices need to be the result of facilitated reflection. The statistic about the number of career changes that this generation will make in their lifetime rarely completes the summary of the research. While these decisions are sometimes precipitated by the need or desire to earn more income, in my experience, many career changes are motivated because the person is unhappy in her or his current profession.

Happiness or satisfaction in work reflects the values and beliefs about life and citizenship that come from reflection. The best example of this essential role of higher education is the number of students who change majors and career paths. The genesis of these decisions might be a specific course or a faculty member who piques a student's interest or excites a student about learning. We cannot wait for these thunderbolts to occur. Consideration of these values needs to be an integral part of the maturing and discerning process.

Students with conservative or alternative views cannot be left feeling isolated. Students who have made or are thinking about different lifestyles need to be supported in this complex process. Every single student needs to be respected and treated fairly. Ultimately, our role is to educate and to provide time and opportunities for our students to think and reason and mature. Our role is NOT to proselytize with a sense of pious correctness.

This is the authentic purpose and true value of higher education. Part III of this article will delineate the necessary parameters to address this leadership challenge effectively.

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