

The True Meaning of Leadership in Higher Education – Part III

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

INTRODUCTION

In the first two sections of this three-part article, I shared my perspectives on the realities currently facing society, and therefore facing higher education, and the environment necessary for addressing these realities objectively. If my assessment of “The Three Realities” (Part I) is accurate, and my description of the environment for the optimal educational experience which I call “The True Leadership Challenge” (Part II) is viable on your campus, then the following provides details on who and how this could take place.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

To serve students in this important way will take more than rhetoric and even more than leadership ... it will take resources. It is likely that you do not have the right people on your campus to lead these conversations objectively and skillfully. Let's start with who should NOT lead these discussions:

- Those in power roles at the institution should not lead these discussions – i.e., those with power over students, institutional policy, or over other faculty and staff. For example, I would be and should be disqualified. While I might try to be objective, accepting, and affirming, I could not disguise or leave behind my role.

If I were still on a campus as a president, provost, dean, or department head (all positions I held over the years), these roles of power and judgment would make the dialogical playing field uneven. Even if I said and believed that I was not acting as the president, no student could or should believe me.

Power roles will necessarily exclude student life personnel who make decisions over behavior and residence life, senior faculty or department heads who influence tenure, promotion, or continued employment. If you think about it, I am sure that you can identify others with strong and well-known expressed views.

- Those with “functional bias” in their roles should not lead these discussions – i.e., anyone who is employed to advocate for a position or is known for her or his values and convictions based on position, discipline, research, or community engagement.

Like senior administrators, this would exclude diversity officers, student life co-curriculum leaders, and many faculty members. Diversity officers are hired to advocate for their positions and priorities. While faculty need the protection of academic freedom to bring integrity to their scholarship and teaching, this does not correlate with leading

these critical student sessions. And student life professionals are those on campuses most often passionate about their beliefs and views.

- Anyone who might be openly judgmental in learning about students' true values and ideas should not lead these discussions. If this program is successful, students will (or should) share and discuss openly and fully. They should not be inhibited because of who is in the room and the leader in the room should not be put in an awkward position or inherently violate students' privacy rights.

So, who is left on campus? Likely no one! This is why you will need to dedicate new resources (more about this later).

Leaders of these discussions should ideally be independent individuals who are skilled in facilitating discussions, who are capable of remaining non-judgmental during and outside of these conversations, and who are able to engage in meaningful dialogue with students. These "specialists" also need to be available for follow-up conversations with individual students and small groups. They need to have counseling skills to help students work through the unavoidable conflicts, tensions and emotions that will occur.

These leaders also need the time to research and study. They will need to learn about your students and must immerse themselves in the issues. If they are skilled in facilitating dialogue (the first priority), they need not be knowledgeable about every issue, every cultural bias, every historical perspective or every profession that will be raised. Their primary goal is to successfully engage students in open and honest discussion and reflection.

In my recent article on leadership ([A Model of Leadership in the New Normal: Part 3](#)), I discuss my rationale for using the term "the next normal" rather than "the new normal." These "next normal leaders" will also need a budget for support staff to organize this "citizenship project" and to secure resources for students. Resources will include materials and technology as well as experts who can provide content and context. Citizenship development will require more than just conversation and dialogue, it will require experience and engagement.

Resources will necessarily include the costs of travel to experience history and the meaning of citizenship. At a minimum, for example, every student might need to travel to Washington, DC to experience the heart of our democracy with visits to historical sites such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Holocaust Museum. I haven't met anyone who has not realized the meaning of democracy, freedom, and justice after having walked through the Capitol, climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, stood in front of the White House, or spent time in the National Archives.

These initiatives will need to be carefully planned and fully assessed. You will learn how to adapt and adjust your programs as you move towards completion each semester or academic year. Assessment needs to focus on leaders and students. Do you have the right people? Are students developing on their path to citizenship and in their understanding of the Common Good?

THREE QUOTES

In conclusion, I would like to reference some possible guiding principles presented in the thoughtful words of three historical leaders. In my opinion, one of our most under-appreciated political leaders was Harry Truman, our 33rd president. A man of integrity with a respectful demeanor towards everyone he met, Truman once stated, “In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still.” We have ample evidence that we cannot afford for society to stand still. We cannot afford to focus on management and forfeit the responsibility to lead our students.

Secondly, in his seminal book, “The Idea of a University,” John Henry Newman, wrote that in order to have good members of society, “It is the education which gives a (person) a clear, conscious view of their own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them.” What a meaningful goal statement for your new “Project Citizenship.”

Higher education in the post-pandemic world needs to take its rightful place, its important place, the only place for building a strong society. There are days when I am not sure that we can wait until Fall 2021 to take action. But I am positive that we cannot wait any longer.

I also know that the greatest minds and the most able leaders can be found in the repository known as American higher education. I urge you to make citizenship and student development your top priority. I guarantee that it is the best use of your time and resources. Your students need this, the world needs this. I leave the last word to the American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, who said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

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