Transformational Change as a Function of Scale and Diversity: A Historical Perspective on Academic Leadership as Dynamic Process

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Abstract: This article proposes that while it is widely understood that large-scale institutions require leadership, there is little consensus as to its definition or how to judge its degree of success or failure. A distinction is drawn between leadership and management. Historical background is provided to indicate change in the scale of academic and professional institutions. Attention is drawn to the impact of demographic changes and the expansion of academic opportunities to formerly underrepresented groups. The article argues that leadership is a dynamic process rather than the application of particular techniques or procedures to problem-solving or the mobilization of resources. The overall perspective of the article is to shift the focus from the individual as leader to the larger framework of the environments and cultures in institutions as crucial elements of the success of academic leadership.

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Since the end of World War II at least, there has been lively interest in the U.S. not only about the nature and characteristics of leadership, but also the crucial question of how leadership in a democracy differs from leadership in other types of political order. A number of other questions have been debated. Is leadership merely a suggestive label, a definable thing, a complex set of traits and skills, or something else? What are the boundaries of leadership? What characterizes good leadership as opposed to bad leadership? Is leadership a teachable subject? Apart from the personal resources of personality and specialized knowledge, is it possible to judge objectively actual performance in leadership roles?[1]

These specific questions suggest that serious observers should be able to define leadership. Yet it is a surprisingly elusive subject, particularly in light of the ubiquity of large-scale institutions and organizations in American society that require good leadership as a condition of operational growth and efficiency. Defining leadership poses in some ways the now classic dilemma faced by the Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States when they were obliged to arrive at a constitutional standard for defining pornography. In what might be seen as a lament, or even a confession of failure in the task of defining it, Justice Potter Stewart wrote: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it" (*Miller v. California,* 1973). Although many would say the same thing about academic leadership, "I know it when I see it" is not a particularly illuminating position to maintain if we take seriously the need for academic leadership and believe that, in any effort at improvement or the attainment of specified goals, leadership is necessary. As academic professionals, we also believe, for the most part, in the trainability or educability of those who are called upon to assume serious responsibilities in academic and professional life.

Management vs. Leadership and the Corporate Model

It may be useful to begin by stating the straightforward proposition that there is an important distinction between management and leadership. Management, as a term and as practice, implies directed, controlled process, with clarity in chain of command, well-defined roles and responsibilities, and systems that ensure accountability. Leadership

is not, essentially, management or command. It is characterized by the art of persuasion, the successful motivation of a team or group, or a staff, to achieve specified objectives in the context of institutional or organizational goals. Having said that, it should still be stipulated that there is no absolute or inflexible line of demarcation between leadership and management. Many circumstances require a delicate balancing between them—yet another art that may depend more on intuition and experienced judgment than specific rules or guidelines.

In recent decades, professional schools and universities have often borrowed terminology and practices from the corporate world, with the frequently heard admonition to become more "businesslike," indeed, more like business corporations. That, however, can sometimes lead to the creation of unnecessary and at times self-thwarting complications for the simple reason that academic institutions are fundamentally different, not only in terms of mission and purpose but, importantly, in the way they operate. I have in mind the crucial distinction that corporations have personnel/staff to manage, while professional schools and universities have faculty, as well as staff. In the U.S. context, higher education is not managed, but governed, rather loosely, with tenured, largely autonomous faculty a fundamental part of the institutional decision making process. Anyone who has made the misguided attempt to "manage" faculty has learned that the independence of faculty members, essential for exercise of their intellectual and professional functions, is simultaneously an obstacle to the creation of an effective analog to corporate staff efficiencies, systems like management by objective, or goal-setting from above. Top-down administration was the dominant pattern before World War II; afterward, it was eroded by cultural change, institutional expansion, and more generous conceptions of the breathing space needed by faculty for genuine innovation and collaborative practices.

Transformational Change in the Academic Enterprise

U.S. higher education was forced to contract during the Great Depression of the 1930s but was expanded dramatically after 1945, producing many changes in institutional organization and academic culture. Those changes tend to be thought of in isolation rather than as part of a major historical transformation of American society. They were, in fact, a continuation of the modernization of society that was closely linked to the outbreak of World War I. When the U.S. entered the war, it was "discovered" that a substantial percentage of the recruits were not fit for military service because of deficits in health and education. As part of the war effort began the first mass testing of a segment of the population, leading to the development of IQ tests and a concern about the disparities that were evident between definable population groups. In response, many big cities initiated major changes in public schools, particularly building new high schools and raising the expectation that larger numbers of public school students would complete a high school education. In 1919-20, there were 311,000 high school graduates in the U.S; by 1939-40, the number had increased to 1,221,000.[2]

The Great Depression's economic consequences stalled any commensurate growth in college and professional school attendance, yet there was a steady build-up of scarcely noticed unsatisfied enrollment demand. The dimensions of that demand were revealed by the revolutionary measures taken near the end of World War II, when the educational provisions of the 1944 GI Bill of Rights legislation (The Servicemen's Readjustment Act) made it possible by 1956 for 2.2 million veterans to attend colleges and universities.[3] That dramatic expansion of higher education continued into the 1950s. U.S. institutions forcibly learned a profound lesson. Prior to the war, it had been assumed that only a small part of the population was really what was then called "college material." Beyond a certain point, it was thought, mass higher education and, more broadly, accessible professional training were utopian aspirations and certain to fail. It turned out, however, that the World War II veterans (and their successors from the Korean War), who had been drafted from a very wide population pool, were in fact fully capable of such education, and many became outstanding students.

This trend was accelerated in 1957 when the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik spurred the passage of the National Defense Education Act in a crash effort to catch up with Soviet advances in science and technology. For a time, the U.S. led the world in the percentage of its population in higher education, including professional schools, a statistic that was viewed as an index of the nation's international competitive strength. Although private institutions grew in this period, the larger share of the expanded enrollment took place in public higher education.

The Challenge of Authentic Expansion of Opportunity

While change in scale brought new challenges in the management and governance of universities and professional schools, more complex institutional issues emerged during the 1960s with the nearly parallel development of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement. These reform efforts highlighted the underrepresentation of women and racial minorities across the spectrum of private and public institutions, as well as the professions, and led to a steady expansion of the varied demographic pools from which student bodies would be drawn. Massive protests against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War were also a propulsive dimension of the demands for institutional change. "Campuses in crisis" became a conspicuous part of the U.S. social and political landscape.

Many of the contemporary institutional complexities we are called on to address now are the result of those turbulent times. Particularly significant still is the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities and women in particular disciplines and professions (notably the physical sciences, mathematics, engineering, and the more highly compensated health specializations). There are also significant variances by geographic region and by type of institution. All of these changes have increased societal and institutional pressure for effective academic and professional leadership.

The Contemporary Situation

What is current academic and professional leadership called upon to produce? Perhaps because there is no solid national consensus about the demographic changes outlined above, that question is seldom asked explicitly, often leading to confusion and disappointment. Among the most divisive issues have been the policy changes that increased opportunities for minorities and women. Paradoxically, the actual record of achievement of the more diverse student cohorts has perhaps been highlighted far less than the politicized reactions to affirmative action policies, seen by some of the once presumptively privileged as "unfair" and constitutionally dubious. These objections must, of course, be acknowledged. That should not mean, however, that a permanent state of turbulence ought to be regarded as normal or acceptable. Such a state of affairs harms the institutions and the professions served. They can create yet another artificial barrier to the success of the targeted students or faculty at the center of the by now predictable objections to gender and institutional diversity. To move beyond that, institutions must be clear, through their policies and actions, that they are not simply making gestures but are serious about becoming authentic communities of diverse persons.

Achieving that goal implies institutional transformation. It is impossible for institutions to retain the forms and substance of their earlier exclusionary existence as monoracial or monocultural. More is required than the admission of racially/ethnically different students or the appointment of faculty and staff from formerly underrepresented groups. Without other changes, diversity policies will not produce optimum results. The objective should be to achieve an authentically inclusive community in which individuals from various backgrounds flourish, unimpeded by unarticulated assumptions and superstitions about the groups with which they are identified. A paradox is involved here.

While the point of diversity policies is to include formerly excluded *groups*, it is vital that the members of such groups be dealt with as *individuals*, not representatives or emissaries of that group. In other words, authentic community requires a transition from group thinking to interaction with individuals. This transition imposes on academic leaders a multifaceted obligation that may appear contradictory. On the one hand, continual attention must be given to the issue of excluded groups, while simultaneously interacting with members of those groups on an individual basis. When that is achieved, institutional transformation in terms of its functional life and purpose has been realized. That degree of change is not achievable by a few deft institutional moves.

Institutional transformations are multiphasic, seldom linear, and must be done in broad daylight. Transparency in such matters is more than a suggestive phrase. Leadership is required to enunciate the goals of each phase of the process. Simultaneously, leadership is also necessary to facilitate the dynamic processes that enable successive modes of inclusiveness and fuller participation to be achieved. It is fair to say that this is a process based on experience rather than mere acceptance of principles or policies. Institutions learn how to adapt most effectively to new population balances by consciously experimenting

with ways to build positive experiences related to creating and sustaining a new, more open, and supportive professional environment. All of this implies shared responsibility for achieving the common goal and direct involvement of the highest tier of administrative leadership. To be more explicit, leadership for these kinds of changes cannot be pigeon-holed to a special office or become the sole responsibility of a diversity official. Changing institutional norms requires authority. It is not something that can be delegated to ad hoc committees or to the purported beneficiaries of the new policies. The top authority figure in the institution, school, or department must be more than symbolically involved, with at times conspicuous hands-on involvement.

Observations on Leadership and Complexity

With the distinctions that have been presented, and the historical context for some of the current complexities academic leaders must confront, it may be useful to shift from the perspective of the overview to the particularities of leadership itself. In making this transition, I would note that there tends to be a focus on the issue of leadership in crisis situations or when there is a recognition of a chronic set of circumstances that have negative consequences or frustrate the stated goals of organizations, institutions, or indeed, entire nations. There is often a search for either a "leader" or for the more elusively generalized "leadership." That may be a perfectly natural reaction, but it can lead to unrealistic expectations. Leadership is not magic; it is not reducible to formulas or easily repeatable patterns of behavior, clearly delineated techniques, or stock answers to common complications and problems.

There are, however, some features commonly found when successful leadership is analyzed. First is an avoidance of simplistic characterizations of institutions and problems. Second is an appreciation of complexity and the variety of components in any situation, particularly when dealing with issues that have a long history of poor outcomes or worsening conditions. Complex problems have histories. Disaggregation of the components of a problem requires analysis of how they arose, how they compounded and changed, hardened or shifted shape. An effective leader understands how and why issues developed. That knowledge provides one basis for understanding

what components of a problem or issue must be given priority attention. Beyond the knowledge of how a problem evolved is the intellectual task of grasping what the key imperatives of any solution must be and tackling them first. Some "problems" are in fact epiphenomena, merely secondary issues that are linked to the fundamental or core issue.

Third, while the appreciation of complexity is essential, effective leaders do not allow complexity to become an excuse for obfuscation. They achieve clarity without succumbing to superficiality or the easy verbiage of empty catch phrases. Real leadership requires an analytical grasp of problems and their causes, which is more an intellectual than an intuitive matter.

Fourth, addressing complex circumstances requires an acknowledgment that they typically are not static and do not freeze in time at the point of successful analysis. Even as action is under way, there is inevitable shifting of the variables. Problems are in motion; therefore, our plans to deal with them must allow for continual shifting and regular adjustment of the means employed to deal with them. Leadership, accordingly, is dynamic, always in motion. To be effective, it must also be sustainable. A key component is that the leader has the confidence and trust of the organization or institution. Only a trusted leader can be given the maneuvering room necessary to cope with the many new forms that problems assume as they evolve. Actions usually provoke reactions, plans must be adjusted, allocation of resources recalibrated, and new data and arguments communicated. Rarely is it the case that issues remain in the same relation to each other or are responsive to approaches that were effective at the beginning of the process. *Process* may be the controlling term. Leadership is not a thing. It is a process. It is experienced differently from circumstance to circumstance, from leader to leader. Recognizing that leadership is a process also implies the necessity of elastic tolerance of experimentation, even openness to mediocre results when solutions are attempted, and willingness to adjust and try again. Perseverance is one of the most commonly observed aspects of successful leadership.

Fifth, in academic environments, ironically, there are often low levels of tolerance for experimentation with leadership and the search for solutions to endemic problems. The habit of judging and serial fault-finding can stymie serious attempts to produce consensus goals or outcomes. Where genuine processes are involved, final judgments are definitionally inappropriate. The aim should not be final judgment,

but provisional estimates of degrees to which success has been achieved and the adjustments that the leader and the institution need to make in the next phase of the process.

For leadership conceived as a process to be effective, there must, therefore, be an environment that is supportive of the kinds of relationships that are grounded in mutual respect and tolerance, not as isolated virtues, but as commonly understood requirements for success of the institution. The leadership process takes place in an environment. It is not merely a transaction between the leader and others, whether a program, department, school, or university. Concern about leadership and the achievement of academic excellence or other programmatic goals ought to translate into earnest examination of our academic environments, from the larger institutional frame to its sustaining microenvironments. Such an understanding mandates that all parts of the academic environment are responsible for the success of the institution and its leadership. It is also important to note that institutions undertaking initiatives to increase access and equity must analyze the processes by which scarce resources are allocated. Those processes are often embedded in past practices and assumptions that retard both excellence and greater equity.

Conclusion

Academic leadership is most usefully conceived of as part of a dynamic process. It is not simply the product of a talented individual, but the result of successful analysis of problems and mobilization of the resources to achieve sustainable solutions. Such leadership takes place in a particular environment. The success of academic leaders is either amplified or hindered by the way institutional environments respond to change, particularly in terms of what might be called "institutional metabolism." Some institutions build on experience in ways that are responsive to focused leadership, while others have developed patterns of resistance to change by entrenched veto groups. Judgments about institutional patterns are a critical element of successful academic leadership. This is particularly true in the U.S. because of the large size and diversity of its population and great variation in institutional histories, modes of support (e.g., public vs. private), governance, and organiza-

tion. The demand for successful academic leadership has intensified at the same time its tasks have become more daunting. What must be remembered is that beyond the solution of immediate problems is the imperative that the well-established goal of excellence be accompanied by our more recent ethical attention to a parallel goal of equity. The challenge of contemporary academic leadership is to achieve both, finally removing the old academic superstition that equity and excellence are in practice antithetical principles.

The argument that leadership is a process and an emphasis on its institutional dimensions is not intended to obscure the indispensability of securing outstanding individuals to provide the type of academic leadership required by changing circumstances. The qualities in a leader that have been salient for generations remain the same: trustworthiness, personal integrity, and credibility as a role model. Similarly, the academic leader's principal tasks have not changed: providing direction, creating structure to support it, and fostering a supportive and collaborative work environment. Effective academic leadership, regardless of environmental variability, aims to maintain an environment in which faculty and staff can flourish professionally on an individual basis while simultaneously achieving institutional goals.[4]

Editor's Disclosure

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