

Leadership and Change in Twenty-First Century Higher Education

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Colleges and universities are in a period of disruption. State funding for education will probably continue to decline for the foreseeable future. The federal commitment to research is declining, and its near-term future is uncertain. Private philanthropic support for research is growing and, with it, the prospect of increasing inequality. Costs at public and private schools continue to increase, and students will have to pay more and will demand more. At the same time, technology and social media have the potential to change higher education in ways that we are just beginning to imagine.

Such a swiftly changing research and education environment calls for rapid adaptation and a prominent role for people who can lead at the institutional level, as well as at the levels of individuals and of groups of researchers and educators. The average faculty member must be aware of a larger set of issues than he or she would have in the past, and qualities associated with leadership can contribute to success and survival in such a world. However, the current culture of most US colleges and universities, which tends to value individual scholarship or teaching and (for some) management skills, is poorly suited to developing the sort of leaders who are needed—individuals who can inspire and persuade. Faculty members need to think now about what sort of leadership their institutions need, then recruit people who will be effective in that environment. And they should commit to facultywide training to foster innovation aimed at managing and stimulating change.

I was reminded of how leadership styles can clash when, some years ago, I was at a meeting at a US federal agency

that included a division director and two program directors. At the meeting's end, the division director told the two program directors to prepare notes summarizing the discussion. The program directors were faculty members on leave—one from an elite liberal arts college and the other from a prominent university. The direction seemed startling, because, although a strong top-down institutional hierarchy that allows staff members to be told what to do is standard at federal agencies, “leadership” in US colleges and universities rarely entails someone in a position of authority telling a faculty member to do something in such a direct way.

Effective leadership in any organization relies on persuasion, but this is especially true in not-for-profit colleges and universities. Any effort to encourage and teach leadership will fail unless it is sensitive to the distinctive challenges of higher education's individualistic culture. Promotion and tenure policies often reinforce the priority afforded to individual achievement. Group or institutional leadership is usually encouraged and supported only by other administrators and only after someone makes a transition to a leadership position.

For a couple of decades, US colleges and universities have made progress toward interdisciplinary research and education, diversity of the professoriate and the student body, and improvements in how we teach. Making comparable progress in leadership will mean abandoning some deeply held assumptions that are now common.

One is the idea that, if someone wants a leadership position, the main way to get it is through having an excellent research program. For example,

election to offices in professional and honorific societies is often based on a candidate's record of research scholarship, less often on accomplishments as an administrator or leader or teacher; peers typically regard a colleague as a “leader in the field” on the basis of his or her publications and rarely on the basis of administrative positions held.

A second common assumption is that good research scholars automatically make good leaders and administrators. They may sometimes, but, at present, these traits are not always linked.

A third assumption is that the best researchers avoid administration, because they know that their colleagues do not see administrators as leaders—except in the sense of being managers. In fact, being a “leader” and being a “manager” are different skills; academic leadership can be a creative and intellectually challenging career choice and rewarding enough for any researcher.

A fourth widespread assumption is that many people who pursue academic careers do so because these careers offer independence. It is, therefore, supposed that most faculty members are not looking to be led.

These four features of academe combine to set a high bar if a leadership program at a university or college is to succeed. The culture often ensures that higher education's environments do not encourage faculty members to develop as academic leaders. Consequently, many institutions of higher education lack leadership-training programs for the average faculty member, even after someone commits to administration. But the limiting effects of this culture go deeper. Graduate students are taught to do research largely as

an independent activity, postdoctoral associates are often told what research to do, and leadership training is rare for either group. Many opportunities are lost.

What sort of culture change is needed?

The decline in federal funding for research and the near-term uncertainty about it are clear (Howard and Laird 2013), as are the increase in philanthropic research support (Broad 2014) and the other changes that I mentioned above. These trends raise serious questions not only about whether the future will see increasing inequality among institutions—prestigious research institutions being better able to attract private research dollars—but also about whether the types of research supported will change. Such changes will undoubtedly become important challenges for faculty members.

I believe that many current and future faculty members will benefit in this turbulence by embracing the qualities of successful leaders. Gary Krahenbuhl, a former dean of my university's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, called these faculty members "difference makers" (Krahenbuhl 2004). His argument accords well with Boyer's (1990) views on scholarship. What would change if our colleges and universities had more, better, different leaders; that is, what outcomes are desired? And not everyone can lead, so how would we reconcile a desire to increase the number of good leaders with recruiting effective participants to any endeavor?

I have argued (Collins 2002) that, in the 1990s, a department might have considered transforming itself by recruiting faculty members who were particularly open to collaborations.

This remains true, but if a fast pace of change is to be normal in the years just ahead, we must envision a new state that colleges and universities can reach by recruiting faculty and staff members, as well as students, with leadership qualities that are sensitive to the culture. Simply issuing directives will not work.

Recruiting such individuals should be coupled with an institutional commitment to training in ways that foster leadership and innovation for managing and stimulating change. AIBS offers an example of this sort of changing vision. It redefined its nominating committee, whose task was to identify candidates to serve on the Board of Directors and in other leadership positions, as a *leadership development committee*. The revision emerged from a realization that an institution seeking to be at the forefront of change among scientific societies must nurture its leaders, a view that has been advanced in general for organizations (Coerver and Beyers 2011) and for individuals involved in research (Howard and Laird 2013).

Institutions of higher education might, for example, require at least some new junior faculty members to spend their first year in activities devoted to learning leadership skills, pedagogy, establishing a research lab, and writing proposals related to teaching and research. The best features of an entrepreneurial culture in an era of rapid change highlight the fact that everyone should be prepared to be a leader at some times, a team member at different times, and an independent thinker and actor at still others. If institutions of higher education are to achieve their twenty-first century potential, we need a convincing counternarrative to the traditional view of a college or university leader as

merely making sure faculty members complete their paperwork on time. Making leadership an enduring feature of a faculty member's life is an essential investment in the future.

Here is the larger question for any institution of higher education: Would we like to create a higher education culture that supports the recruitment and development of individuals at all levels—faculty and staff members, as well as students—who will be admired nationally and internationally for their capacity to initiate, support, and lead innovative scholarly and institutional change? If the answer is *yes*, we need leadership development programs and recruitment plans that will make that happen.

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