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Leadership in Higher Education: A Changing Paradigm

by Allen L. Sessoms

An Evolving Situation

Senior administrators at public colleges and universities have previously been in the enviable position of managing reasonably stable institutions that have enjoyed an essential place in society. These institutions were born of society's desire to ensure access to the fruits of learning by a broad spectrum of citizens and to ensure that the knowledge developed was put at the service of industry and of the nation. In the past, and particularly after World War II, public institutions of higher education enjoyed explosive growth in both the numbers of students and in terms of public support. In addition, after the launch of the first earth-orbiting satellite, these institutions became instruments of public policy and benefitted greatly from the public's largess.

In more recent times, higher education institutions have experienced a degree of turbulence due primarily to events outside their control (for example, the war in Vietnam), but have not suffered crises of self-doubt or severe external questioning of their relevance to society. During times of severe economic stress, as well as times of economic growth, these institutions have benefitted from the belief that they were the keys to progress and advancement in society for the individual who was fortunate enough to enjoy the fruits of a "good education."

Times have changed. Change is being driven by a number of factors, the most important of which is technology. There is concern in today's society that technological progress is not necessarily improving the human condition, and may, in fact, be worsening it. The environmental disasters of "Love Canal" in New York state and the threat posed by nuclear weapons are just two examples that suggest the disadvantages of "progress" have been underestimated. There is also the belief held by some individuals that we are not in control of technology, but, instead, are becoming trapped by it.

Technological progress has, however, revolutionized the work place and, in a real sense, transformed the way we live and learn. Technological changes that stick, those that have economic success and become a part of the fabric of our lives, are those that after a while, we "cannot live without." Television is one such development. Automobiles are another. Microprocessors, which are in everything from automobiles to telephones (another "must" in our society), have literally transformed the global economy.

Microprocessors are also in the process of transforming how colleges and universities do business. These technologies, typically through the media of computers and advanced telecommunications systems, provide students with opportunities to learn skills and job-related knowledge



at significantly less cost and on more individualized schedules than through traditional delivery systems.

In addition, the average cost of attending college has significantly risen as a portion of the disposable income of middle-class families. This, coupled with the tight job market faced by many college graduates over the past decade and the recognition that without a college degree the prospect of getting a good job at all is significantly diminished, has led to an interest in exploiting the benefits of technology outside the traditional university setting to make it possible for students to acquire the necessary credentials in a more cost-effective manner. Another major issue confronting parents and students in public higher education is the question, How much debt is reasonable for a graduate of a *public* college or university? In some sense, these students believe they are paying twice for their education, once through taxes and again through tuition and fees. These concerns have led to intense questioning of the relative value of traditional methods of higher education and the sensitivity of public higher education institutions to the customers they serve.

There are other pressures. With the rapidly changing technological environment there is a growing need for improving the skills of the white-collar work force. The change in the political environment has led to the downsizing of the defense industry and the displacement of many businesses and workers. Changing demographics have led to a major shift in the age of students so that the "traditional" student who enters college at eighteen, lives in a dormitory, and graduates four years later is now in the minority.

The complexion of the campus has also changed. There are now more female students and members of traditionally underrepresented groups. Such groups include African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. This trend will continue. The cultural and social needs of these students must be

recognized and addressed in a positive way if an institution is to succeed.

Essential Leadership Qualities

This situation has led to an evolution in the type of leader needed for success in public higher education today. It is not enough to shepherd an institution and make peace with the faculty. One must challenge the institution and often take significant risks, as well as get out in front of the curve of change. This is perilous in an academic setting and many senior administrators have been beaten back or lost their jobs by taking such approaches. However, if the traditional approaches remain the norm, it is highly likely that public institutions of higher education will become less relevant, and, as a result, their merit as potential recipients of public funds will be questioned or the amount of funds reduced to an even greater degree than has been the case in the past.

Elements of Leadership

Within the context described above, the following is a list of key elements and proposals that should inform and guide all senior administrators in public higher education:

- Revolutionary change is needed in the way the business of colleges and universities is conducted;
- The opportunities afforded by diversity must be embraced;
- The customer is ultimately the student. If the student fails, the institution has failed;
- The only thing that catalyzes change is reward;
- Fundamental change comes slowly in academia, as it does in other fields;
- There is great virtue in excellence;
- Teaching methods must be reinvented and technology will play a major role;
- Perceptions are at least as important as reality and must be dealt with as such;
- Public institutions of higher education cannot work outside society; they are an integral part thereof and cannot be separated from it.
- No “wars” are ever won; only incremental progress is achieved.

African Americans in Leadership Positions

Expectations for African-American administrators in higher education do not, as a rule, encompass many of the above elements. We are often expected to care about only a

couple of these as our primary concerns. This categorization has narrowed opportunities for African Americans and is reflected in our institutional roles. Unfortunately, it is rare, indeed, to find an African American serving as provost or chief information officer in a major public college or university. As we know, this is not due to lack of talent or experience. It is more usual for African Americans to serve in the position of affirmative action officer or dean of students. These positions are essential, of course; however, we must not allow ourselves to be generally limited to them.

Technological progress has revolutionized the work place and transformed the way we live and learn.

This situation is, in part, a relic of history, but it is also the result of self-channeling. We, as a group, have not stepped up to the plate and assumed leadership roles in a number of the key areas. Usually, the African-American administrator has stayed in safe waters, to the exclusion of many of the fundamental issues facing public higher education today. For these and other reasons, it is always surprising to find one of us in the role of president, executive vice president, or other such nonstereotypical positions. This situation must change if we are to exercise the leadership necessary to ensure that, first, our children benefit from the best education possible, and second, public higher education does not address our community’s needs as an afterthought because we have not chosen to engage ourselves in all the issues that are central to its survival.

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