

Leadership and Universities¹

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Some time ago, Harvard was trying to create a university-wide program in public policy. The idea was to convene people from many different schools and departments who were interested in public policy, and get them to talk with each other and maybe even work together. One vehicle was a monthly seminar by a practitioner. It was hoped that we professors would all learn together from practitioners who were doing public policy analysis on the front lines.

Well, it didn't work out that way.

In would come someone from Washington who had been working, say, on welfare reform. He or she would distribute a white paper in advance. About twenty professors would listen to a briefing. What do you think ensued?

Deborah Tannen could have guessed. You may have seen her books about the way people talk to each other, such as *You Just Don't Understand*, a book about conversations between men and women, or *You're Wearing THAT?* a book about conversations between mothers and daughters. She also is the author of a scholarly paper about conversations in academia.² Here's what she says:

The pervasiveness of agonism, that is, ritualized adversativeness, in contemporary western academic discourse is the source of both obfuscation of knowledge and personal suffering in academia. Framing academic discourse as a metaphorical battle leads to a variety of negative consequences, many of which have ethical as well as personal dimensions. Among these consequences is a widespread assumption that critical dialogue is synonymous with negative critique, at the expense of other types of "critical thinking." Another is the requirement that scholars search for weaknesses in others' work at the expense of seeking strengths, understanding the roots of theoretical differences, or integrating disparate but related ideas.

¹ Informal talk to the Claremont Leadership Roundtable, a monthly meeting of the 25-or-so professors from the Claremont Colleges who teach and do research on leadership, October 30, 2008.

² Deborah Tannen, "Agonism in Academic Discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics* 34:10-11 (2002): 1651-1669.

Tannen might have predicted what happened when professors from eight or nine schools and as many disciplines would have a go at a practitioner's research. "You think that's a beautiful urn? Well, it's not beautiful, and it's not an urn." There was even a bit of competitive acting-out. "You think you guys from Arts and Sciences are demanding? Well, let me tell you, as a business school professor..."

After one seminar I drove the visiting practitioner to the airport. He was bruised and bitter. "I thought I was doing you guys a favor. Why would anyone want to come here to get dumped on?"

The next year, we solved the problem. Here was the trick: we reframed the seminar series by calling it "Where I'm Stuck." Instead of presuming to present a beautiful urn in finished form, the practitioner would describe a policy issue, say why it was important, and give some ideas about how they were thinking about analyzing it. The audience was asked not for criticism but for assistance. Deborah Tannen, listen up: those agonistic academics now vied with each other to be helpful. "Have you thought about using a focus group of this-and-that a kind?" "Have you considered how this issue resembles what looks like the quite different problem of [X or Y or Z]?" Afterwards, the professors spoke in excited voices with the presenter and among themselves about the issue and various ways to approach it.³

And so, it may be an invitation to embarrassment or worse to talk with you today about leadership. I could be that visiting practitioner in front of the professors, inviting your raised eyebrows with each dated or imprecise definition, hoisting for your appreciation an urn that to you looks like nothing more than an uncarved calabash.

Therefore, let me call forth your constructive, courteous selves by focusing on where I'm stuck. Here are three questions. What is similar and what is different about a chief

³ I'm not picking on professors here, by the way. As you may know from your own teaching about leadership, particularly if you've ever taught people who consider themselves to be leaders, the rudeness can go the other way, from practitioner to professor. When I first started teaching at Harvard, there was a course about the case method taught by C. Roland Christensen at the Business School. About seven of us were in the class, from many schools and departments. Chris taught the case method by using the case method. The first case featured a twenty-something assistant professor teaching a group of thirty-something mid-career students. After the teacher had led about two-thirds of a particular class, one of the students raised his hand and said, "You know, professor, I have to say that you don't know what you're talking about. I've worked in this industry for ten years, and it's not like that at all."

That was the last line in Chris's case study. Wow, I thought, what could one say to that? And I came to class ready to hear his advice. He didn't provide any. He asked us, "So, what would *you* say to that?" (It still makes me break into a mild sweat.)

executive in an academic institution as opposed to a corporation, a government agency, a military service, or a nonprofit organization? In higher education, what is the role of inspirational leadership? And finally, what are the important qualities of personality and temperament? To make this a little more topical and less uncomfortably parochial than it might be, I'll make comparisons along the way to the presidency of the United States.

What Is Different about Leadership in Universities?

In 1966 a "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities"⁴ was jointly formulated by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB). According to the AAUP this statement "remains the Association's central policy document relating to academic governance." Here's how this document described the job of the president:

As the chief planning officer of an institution, the president has a special obligation to innovate and initiate. The degree to which a president can envision new horizons for the institution, and can persuade others to see them and to work toward them, will often constitute the chief measure of the president's administration...

The president is largely responsible for the maintenance of existing institutional resources and the creation of new resources; has ultimate managerial responsibility for a large area of nonacademic activities; is responsible for public understanding; and by the nature of the office is the chief person who speaks for the institution. In these and other areas the president's work is to plan, to organize, to direct, and to represent.

The president does these things, or tries to, in a particular context. Universities have "shared governance," which often frustrates business leaders who act as trustees. The AFT says,

Shared governance is the set of practices under which college faculty and staff participate in significant decisions about the operation of their institutions...

Shared governance, in turn, arose out of a recognition that:

- academic decision-making should be largely independent of short-term managerial and political considerations;

⁴ <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/governancestatement.htm>

- faculty and professional staff are in the best position to shape and implement curriculum and research policy, to select academic colleagues and judge their work; and
- the perspective of all frontline personnel is invaluable in making sound decisions about allocating resources, setting goals, choosing top officers and guiding student life.

In higher education, there is a high turnover rate among top administrators; this means that faculty and staff are often more knowledgeable about the institutional history that is so valuable to institutional planning. Without that institutional history, institutions are apt to repeat past failures.⁵

What does this entail for leadership at universities? It seems to mean that presidents have even less authority than do chief executives of businesses, NGOs, or governments.

How big a difference is this? Shared governance is not unique to universities. For example, hospitals and health care systems increasingly emphasize shared governance, if not entirely convincingly. “But nursing shared governance is hard to define,” notes Robert Hess. “Its structures and processes are different in every organization; and its implementation is like pinning Jell-O to a wall.”⁶ Regarding local government, Max Leighninger has a new book out called *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule Is Giving Way to Shared Governance*.⁷

As we are only five days away from the presidential election, we might contrast the situation and powers of the president of the United States, the most powerful person in the world, as the saying goes.

In his classic book, *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt observes: “The Constitutional Convention of 1787 is supposed to have created a government of ‘separated powers.’ It did nothing of the sort. Rather, it created a government of separated institutions *sharing* powers.”⁸

⁵ American Federation of Teachers Higher Education, *Shared Governance in Colleges and Universities: A Statement by the Higher Education Program and Policy Council*. Item NO. 36-0696. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers (n.d.): 4. Available online at http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/higher_ed/shared_governance.pdf

⁶ Robert G. Hess, Jr., “From Bedside to Boardroom: From Bedside to Boardroom – Nursing Shared Governance.” *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing* 9:1 (Jan. 2004): 1.

⁷ Max Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule Is Giving Way to Shared Governance—and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

⁸ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990: 29 (emphasis in original).

What about the president's mighty powers, certainly compared with a poor old university president? Neustadt defined presidential power simply as the power to persuade. And, as he reminded readers in the preface to the 1990 edition of his classic originally published 30 years earlier, "Presidential weakness was the underlying theme of *Presidential Power*."

Inspiration and Knowledge Workers

So, if shared governance and presidential weakness are not confined to higher education, what about those tenured professors, whose loyalties are to knowledge and craft rather than the old school tie?

Here, too, colleges and universities are not unique. "The productivity of the newly dominant groups in the work force, knowledge workers and service workers, will be the biggest and toughest challenge facing managers in the developed countries for decades to come," Peter Drucker wrote in *Managing for the Future*, in 1992. "And serious work on this daunting task has only begun." Drucker emphasized that knowledge workers are more like volunteers than employees. And as Craig Pearce has emphasized in his work, shared leadership is particularly important in organizations and situations where employees' commitment is important (not just their compliance), when creativity and innovation are important, where interdependence is high, where tasks are complex, and urgency is not great.⁹

Knowledge workers, argued Henry Mintzberg, "respond to inspiration, not supervision."¹⁰ It is precisely here where one might expect universities to excel. After all, we have such noble missions, such rhetorical skills, and such beautiful ceremonies. And yet, it is in inspiration where our leaders apparently fall short. Clark Kerr argues that universities now lack "great visions to lure them on."¹¹

Academic leaders of this new century, or at least of its early decades, may be able to identify no great single vision to guide them or great and compatible forces to dominate them; they may need to look in more directions, to be sensitive to many diverse opportunities and to many threats... No great visions to lure them on, only the needs of survival for themselves and their institutions.

Here's where I'm stuck. Do you think Clark Kerr is correct? If he is, what is "inspirational leadership" in a university setting?

⁹ Craig L. Pearce and Charles C. Manz, "The New Silver Bullets of Leadership: The Importance of Self- and Shared Leadership in Knowledge Work." *Organizational Dynamics* 34:2 (2005): 130-140.

¹⁰ Henry Mintzberg, "Covert leadership: notes on managing professionals." *Harvard Business Review*, 76:6 (Nov-Dec. 1998): 140-7.

¹¹ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th Ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001: 208-9.

Let me share a few ideas, in hopes of stimulating a conversation [details of bullet points omitted in this written version].

- Appreciative inquiry: what it is and how it worked at Claremont Graduate University. Inspirational leadership reminds us more than changes us. We recall what we value and what we do as well or better than anyone else. Inspirational leadership helps us focus our efforts on our outsized impact.
- “More like us”: James Fallows for the United States vis-à-vis Japan – and good advice for colleges and universities as well.
- For Claremont Graduate University: Across the disciplines and out into the world. Convening. And, in the educational domain, recruiting through made-to-stick messages and leading-edge programs.
- For the Claremont Colleges: What is liberal arts in the globalize context? What is a library in the digital age? How can we take advantage of the synergies between undergraduate and graduate education?

Personal Characteristics

Inspiration is one thing; personality is another. Let us turn our attention now to this side of leadership in universities, without getting too personal [details of bullet points omitted in this written version].

- Fundraising is a key goal of a college or university president. Inspiring ideas, being distinctively valuable outside Claremont, are necessary. But they are not sufficient. Fundraising builds on relationships.
- Fundraising must focus on the right tail of the distribution. In philanthropy, we face not an 80-20 rule, where 80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people, but a 95-5 rule, where 95 percent of the funds raised come from 5 percent of the donors.
- And so presidents have to be able and willing to build relationships, particularly with people of means.
- CGU: for a graduate university, the task is different than simply working with alums and evoking the old school tie. Here, it’s about game-changing research and a different kind (or kinds) of graduate education.

What personal characteristics are important in a college or university president? Listen to Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State and formerly the president of three other universities. <http://chronicle.com/media/audio/v54/i34/gee/>

Key traits? “I think you really do have to have a very thick skin,” Gee says, as his first piece of advice. His third piece? Have “nerves like sewer pipe.” An unusual metaphor,

don't you think, one that perhaps reflects the metaphorical place where Gee believes a lot of the work of a university president is done.

Again, how different is this advice from that you would give to other leaders? Let's return again to the presidency of the United States of America. Consider a recent article by David Brooks on Barack Obama.¹² Brooks distinguishes presidents or candidates who "are motivated by something they lack," from others, like Obama, who "are propelled by what some psychologists call self-efficacy, the placid assumption that they can handle whatever the future throws at them. Candidates in this mold, most heroically F.D.R. and Ronald Reagan, are driven upward by a desire to realize some capacity in their nature. They rise with an unshakable serenity that is inexplicable to their critics and infuriating to their foes."

Of Obama, Brooks says: "There has never been a moment when, at least in public, he seems gripped by inner turmoil. It's not willpower or self-discipline he shows as much as an organized unconscious. Through some deep, bottom-up process, he has developed strategies for equanimity, and now he's become a homeostasis machine." (See also a similar characterization of Obama by Gavin Hewitt of the BBC, which appears in Annex 1 below.)

Because of Obama's temperament and ability, Brooks says "it is easy to sketch out a scenario in which he could be a great president. He would be untroubled by self-destructive demons or indiscipline. With that cool manner, he would see reality unfiltered. He could gather — already has gathered — some of the smartest minds in public policy, and, untroubled by intellectual insecurity, he could give them free rein. Though he is young, it is easy to imagine him at the cabinet table, leading a subtle discussion of some long-term problem."

But these same traits may also be associated with an unsuccessful leader.

Of course, it's also easy to imagine a scenario in which he is not an island of rationality in a sea of tumult, but simply an island. New presidents are often amazed by how much they are disobeyed, by how often passive-aggressiveness frustrates their plans.

It could be that Obama will be an observer, not a leader. Rather than throwing himself passionately into his causes, he will stand back. Congressional leaders, put off by his supposed intellectual superiority, will just go their own way. Lost in his own nuance, he will be passive and ineffectual. Lack of passion will produce lack of courage. The Obama greatness will give way to the Obama anti-climax.

¹² David Brooks, "Thinking about Obama." *New York Times*, October 17, 2008.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/17/opinion/17brooks.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

Brooks doesn't hazard a guess about which way it will turn out, should Obama win. But I want to note two points in the failure scenario, which may resonate in higher education.

The first is Brooks' mention of Obama's "supposed intellectual superiority." Among all varieties of chief executive officers, university presidents have to be intellectuals. At some point in their lives, they have been selected for their brain power. And as we know, those who are told they are very smart seldom develop the trait of humility. Arrogance lurks, indeed barely lurks; yet as Jim Collins and Jean Lipman-Blumen (among others) have noted, the best leaders are humble. In a 2004 interview with *Optimize Magazine*, a publication that I'm sure is on your bedside table, Collins distinguishes five levels of leadership:

Level one is about individual capabilities; level two is about being a great team player; level three is about managerial capabilities; level four is about effective leadership. And finally, there's level-five leadership. We found that leaders of great companies to be level fives, and companies that are good or mediocre are run by level-four leaders.

Level fours are classic charismatic leaders. "Level fives," Collins says, "are characterized by a special brand of humility and, paradoxically, a ferocious will to do whatever needs to be done."¹³

Humility is a challenge to all those with power. It may be a particular challenge for those who are, or have been identified as, intellectuals.

David Brooks makes a second point I'd like us to consider. A lack of passion can lead to a lack of courage. Passion. Courage. Presidents need more than a thick skin or a disposition as hard to penetrate as a sewer pipe. One needs to be more than, as one reporter admiringly put it, "no-drama Obama." One also needs to have, build, and refresh that burning passion, a passion that I believe Senator Obama and the other candidates display but which, Brooks warns us, the office of the president can erode or even extinguish.

Now, to return to our topic of leadership and universities. Is our academic world especially prone to both of the ingredients of failure David Brooks identifies— "supposed intellectual superiority" and "a lack of passion"?

If so, should we discover and cultivate disciplines of humility in order to combat that "supposed superiority"?

Should we constantly remind ourselves of what inspires us and our colleagues?

¹³ "The Narrow Path to Leadership: What the Great Have over the Good," an interview with Jim Collins. *Optimize Magazine*, No. 34, August 2004.

Should we put our passions up front, and focus on them through the flux of everyday events?

Should we, in short, keep our focus as leaders on the power to persuade, the opportunity to inspire, and the requirements of passionate courage?

Annex 1. Gavin Hewitt, "The Enigma of Barack Obama"¹⁴

Oct. 19, 2008

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI: Most politicians I have covered betray something; a weakness; a hunger; a passion. We as journalists try to smoke out their demons or insecurities. Barack Obama reveals little.

I watched Barack Obama closely the morning after the final debate. He was in Londonderry, New Hampshire. We were bone-weary after four hours sleep. I was looking for signs of strain after the pressure of 90 minutes in the ring with John McCain. I half expected a slight deflation in the candidate after the high-octane of debating before 63 million people.

The rain was falling by the time he arrived. He was wearing a casual rain jacket and what I noticed was his walk. There was something jaunty about him. He wasn't cocky but he almost strolled to the stage. Not only had he debated the night before but he had attended a fund-raiser in New York before appearing in New Hampshire.

And that is part of his enigma. At these events he is accessible but unreadable. He shows no strain. He is the effortless politician. After 21 months of speeches and shaking the hands of strangers he seems unhurried and at ease. His pursuit of power does not mark him as it does other politicians.

I remember with President Clinton his need to win you over. At a press conference you had to wait until he looked at you and then you asked your question. You held his gaze and he locked on to you enabling you to ask maybe two or three further questions. You could feel his desire to be liked and admired.

I covered the Kerry campaign. With John Kerry you could sense the sheer effort to be a popular politician. I remember after a brief interview with him, the speed the smile dropped. The famous jaw set rigid as he walked away. Towards the end of the campaign I detected a weariness as he sought to sell himself as an ordinary American.

Gordon Brown, too, finds campaigning difficult. It is not him. The small talk, the easy aside. I have watched him sitting with a group of ordinary people, his arms resting on the table, his hands clasped in front of him. You can almost sense his desire for the event to be over and for him to get back to his papers and his advisers. His long pursuit of power is never disguised.

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http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/gavinhewitt/2008/10/the_enigma_of_barack_obama.html

Barack Obama is a natural. I remember a few years ago meeting him in Chicago with a few other journalists. In the ballroom, where we talked, he was already turning heads. Way before he ran for the presidency the hands were outstretched, waiting for him. Back then he was curiously detached from all the attention. He listened to us, he looked down while we spoke. He was intellectually curious. He did not dominate the conversation.

As a candidate he is immensely disciplined. During the second town hall debate the candidates rested on stools between questions. The Obama team had worked out that their candidate looked at his best with one foot resting on the floor, the other on the rung of the stool. The pose breathed assurance, relaxation, a man totally at ease. Having chosen this position he never strayed from it. Just one small example of his attention to detail and his ability to deliver.

During the primaries Hillary Clinton and her team said he was "untested" but it often seemed to me that what they were hinting at was that there was something "unexplained" about him, precisely because he gives so little away. He is on stage every day. He speaks, gives interviews but as to what really drives this extraordinary politician we as watchers, voters cannot be sure.