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Higher Education Leadership: Pathways and Insights

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated in loving memory of Maureen Minielli, cherished friend, taken from us too soon. Maureen helped develop the ideas that shaped this book, and her life demonstrated leadership in action.

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Foreword

Many books on leadership in general, and higher education leadership in particular, as well as on presidential failures and successes, are written by those reflecting on their careers. In this book, Dr. Kathy Waldron, President *Emerita* of William Paterson University, and Dr. Sharmila Pixy Ferris, Professor of Communication at William Paterson University, take a different approach. They are interested in examining the variety of pathways to leadership, insights from critical incidents which might benefit others, and concerns for the longer term, expressed by those profiled.

The authors composed an intentionally diverse population of presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans from a cross section of public and private four-year and higher colleges and universities. After confirming the participation of the invited leaders, the authors sent each a set of questions that would be explored in the interviews. In this way, the participants would be prepared to discuss the themes to be examined. The authors then produced portraits of 20 higher education leaders and reported on the “landscapes” in which they worked and grew.

The result is not only an ethnographic exploration of leadership paths, insights, and strategies by what has been called “thick description” but also an examination of both the contemporary contexts in which leadership is displayed, as well as a survey of future complexities anticipated by the leaders.

Leadership involves listening with eyes as well as ears; reading to strengthen the use of language and image; speaking and communicating in formal and informal settings in order to inspire and console; writing speeches and notes of congratulations and condolence; reflecting on incidents as well as on the purpose of the enterprise; appreciating the importance of context and culture; and fostering inquisitiveness and asking “why?” “what if?” and “what can we learn from this?” Leadership involves expressing both empathy and compassion. Above all, it requires integrity, a “moral compass,” a sense of self. To develop in these various ways usually takes time, humility, reflection, and mentors.

The stories related give examples of how those profiled developed these attributes and talents, entered higher education, and when they first were offered or took opportunities of leadership. The chapters also relate the critical incidents that proved to be particularly important in their growth as leaders. They demonstrate that we each build “wells” of experience, some from childhood, on which to draw in later times. In each case, the importance of commitment to the institution, even to the point of sacrifice, is evident.

Among the findings I found of special interest were the emphasis on the importance of campus leaders coming from the faculty, the value of scholarly

credentials, the need to respect the faculty and shared governance, and the lessons learned from crossing sectors of higher education. While these are not surprising, it is good to see them presented as priorities at a time when the pressure on many academic leaders is to act like CEOs. Those interviewed fulfill what I consider the CPO role: “Chief Purpose Officer.” While CEOs tend to focus on money, markets, and personnel as labor, CPOs focus on mission, students as learners, and faculty as partners in purpose.

Institutional change is difficult, but the lessons learned from these interviews are instructive. Leaders sometimes confuse mission, which is about purpose, with tradition, which may be timebound. Too often, leaders confuse the two. Leaders must be true to the mission and respect tradition, but they also must know that new traditions can be important components in the ongoing narrative of an institution.

Being a leader can be lonely. I commend the references to not being shy about asking others for help. By asking for advice from fellow presidents or deans that one meets at conferences, the leader can learn from others’ mistakes and successes. To ask for help is not a sign of weakness, but an indication of confidence. I also applaud the references to building a team. It is only with a talented team that a leader can properly delegate the day-to-day tasks and focus on the longer term.

By using tabletop exercises to help plan for dealing with a crisis, the leader can help anticipate problems and give the team experience in dealing with an issue as a unit. This is useful whether anticipating what to do with a bomb threat or discussing how your team would have handled an incident that occurred at another campus. Such training can help advance flexibility, adaptability, and innovation.

An important plus consists in the examples of present and future challenges and changes these presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans anticipate. Their thoughts on college costs, the use of data, remote teaching and learning, social media and the 24-hour news cycle, and the corporatization of the academy, among numerous other challenges, ring true and deserve the attention of all campus leaders, including boards of trustees. So too do their comments on changes in demographics and the economy, the need for new sources of revenue, and the perils of deferred maintenance.

Leaders are always learning, and this book is an important addition to a leader’s reading list. Leaders also have opportunities to help others develop as leaders, thus becoming mentors after benefiting from being mentored. This too is an important lesson imparted by those profiled. We are all students, and students are our priority.

September 16, 2020

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<https://www.higheredjobs.com/blog/default.cfm?BlogID=22>

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