

Presidential Leadership for the Public Good

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Introduction

Given the centrality of public good in the history of public higher education, the fact that we are writing a book on higher education for the public good may suggest that we, as leaders, have veered off track. It is my hope that a book on the subject may inspire others, just as it signals the end of doubt and confusion about what the 21st century demands of leaders in higher education. I believe a rekindling of higher education's distinctive and honorable call is needed – a call that summons leaders to deliver a bold response. That response centers in a movement of transformation for public universities as we serve the public good in our communities, our states, this nation, and the world.

Following is a short description of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) and a list of ten leadership principles that, on reflection, have been central to my leadership in moving UMKC toward a focus on the public good.

Context for the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC)

A vital defining feature for UMKC is that, while our public mission is statewide, we are in a city. In my view, leading a public research university in a city is a special privilege, because cities are where mainstream America resides, cities are where economies are growing, and cities are the domain of the great social issues of our times. And, public universities have, as their core mission, to educate mainstream America, drive economic development, and support social progress.

UMKC has 14,200 students in a College of Arts and Sciences, a Conservatory of Music, and Schools of Business and Public Administration, Computing and Engineering, Education, Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Nursing and Biological Sciences. In fact, 43% of our students are professional or graduate students, an unusual profile for a public research university. UMKC's mission, as defined by the University of Missouri Board, is to focus programming in the visual and performing arts, health sciences and urban affairs. Of our degree seeking students for whom ethnic origin is known, approximately 32 percent are minorities or non-resident aliens. Of the total, 12 percent are African American, six percent are of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, four percent are Hispanic, one percent is American Indian/Alaskan Native, and nine percent are non-resident aliens.

Leadership Principles

A. Bring the vision to life

1. Make certain “the public” is expressed in the vision statement for the university

Little will unfold relative to the “public good” if the importance of the “public good” is not expressed powerfully in the vision for the institution. A vision statement inspires and causes people to feel that they are part of something meaningful, something larger than themselves -- something that matters for society. UMKC's vision is: *A community of learners making the world a better place.* The public good matters in our vision in the word *community*, as we

have discovered how much people want to be part of a community working together, and in the phrase *making the world a better place*, as it expresses our relationship to “the public”.

In *The Role of the American University: The Creation of the Future*, Frank H.T. Rhodes describes the role of the president as one who “should devote his or her best skills to dream the institution into something new, to challenge its greatness, to elevate its hopes and extend its reach, to energize it to new levels of success and galvanize it to high levels of achievement in every area of its institutional life.”

2. Make certain a critical mass of the campus “owns” that vision statement

Development of UMKC’s vision such that the vision is now owned by a critical mass internally and externally took 18 months in a highly engaged, somewhat chaotic, and creative planning process. This was not a consensus building process, rather we refer to it as a process that builds toward alignment. The leader or, in this case, a group of 80 leaders, “plants a stake in the ground” as a draft vision. That same group then engages the campus and the community in dialogue sessions around questions such as “what do you think; what might be possible” inside this vision. In an iterative fashion over many months, a vision emerges around which people align. By the time it emerges, most already own it because they explored for themselves what might be possible in their work in the context of that vision.

3. As the leader, take a stand for the vision over and over and over (and over) again

As a campus changes, the old culture is like an immune system trying to dominate and expel the new vision. That immune system operates unconsciously, voluntarily and relentlessly. Any change requires the leader to (i) talk about the vision all the time, literally all day, every day in every meeting and every set of remarks, (ii) make decisions from that vision, always using it as the context for the decision, and (iii) make clear to others in communications the relationship of the decision to the vision.

B. Make certain that values matter

4. Design institutional core values for the public good

While vision inspires people to create actions about what to do, values are as important in inspiring how to do it (as manifest in administrative processes and individual behavior, especially the behavior of leaders.) This is obvious to most leaders, but rarely are we able to bring values alive in a public institution. At UMKC our core values were developed using the same process of iterative alignment as was the vision. By the time we finished the dialogues about a set a values, there was “ownership”. The value that has proven the most powerful is: “open and candid communication”. As we faced the withdrawal of state revenue support for our institution, relying on that value caused us to communicate the flaws, mistakes, special deals and issues with the budget and the budgeting system. That, in turn, produced trust, a vital element in serving the public good. In fact a cross campus team redesigned the budgeting processes in accordance with the values and won a national award for that design.

5. Use values to engage and create possibilities, not to judge

As leaders, our role is to embrace the values in conversations about what might be possible if we “behaved” in accordance with the values or if we redesigned a procedure in accordance with the values. A university’s values come to life, quite literally, in conversations about possibilities. When we get into trouble with values is when we succumb to the temptation to judge someone’s behavior (as out of step with the values) and, therefore, judge them as illegitimate and their ideas as invalid. In the world of judging others, values can be a negative influence. Operating in the domain of conversations about possibilities, they produce remarkable outcomes and changes. For example, several of our values include respect, collaboration, and accountability. When designing a process, a procedure, or goals or when considering how to handle a situation; asking what might be possible if we (or I) were accountable, demonstrated respect, collaborated, and so on----that conversation produces remarkable creativity and outcomes. What can cause difficulty is the judging, after the fact, that an individual, an event, or a process is “out of step”.

C. Manage to Vision

6. Develop a leadership team that is committed to the vision

Not all leaders are interested in the public good. Success, defined as real outcomes, depends on a top leadership team who is genuine and transparent in their commitment to the public good. That said, I discovered when a vision speaks powerfully to the public good, it causes incredible leaders to show up in order to be a part of it. They are drawn to be a part of that vision. People want to contribute their wisdom, passion and energy to make the world better. From a personal perspective, I have been extremely fortunate; I have been amazed; and I am grateful for the leaders that have shown up at UMKC.

7. Create opportunities and a culture for others to “fulfill” the vision

The word “fulfill” is purposefully used here because the vision is not prescriptive. Rather, it operates as the boundaries of a giant sphere which needs to be filled up, from the middle outward, with initiatives and accomplishments. When their creative spirit is tapped, people design for themselves what actions should be taken to fulfill the vision. You do not have to prescribe what to do. The wisdom, passion, and creativity of people engages and produces actions far better than those you might think to prescribe. The role of leaders is to create the “clearing” for others to “show up” with that creativity. People want to make a difference; they want to be part of something that makes the world better; they will create to the extent the leaders provide the clearing for it.

8. Produce some early results that demonstrate vision for the public good

Results, early in a process, that demonstrate a vision for public good are essential. Alignment around a vision and values requires at least a year or more in a large university. Credibility and momentum depend on results which demonstrate the rhetoric about the public good. We identified 12 breakthrough projects on which to produce results quickly even as we carried out the dialogues about vision and values. For example, because we are in a city, it was natural for The Center for the City to be launched as a breakthrough project. Designed to leverage the intellectual and human resources of the university with the challenges, issues and needs of the

urban core, its Advisory Board is comprised of 10 UMKC faculty and administrators and an equal number of civic leaders. The Center engages students, faculty and staff and the Kansas City community in partnership connections, research projects and student learning opportunities.

9. Align management practices with the vision and management behaviors with the values for the public good

As leaders, recognize that management practices and behaviors must extend from and always return to the context of the “public good” as expressed in the vision and values. Reward systems, promotion guidelines, performance evaluation processes, budgeting, planning, revenue development, compensation guidelines, procurement, technology plans, scheduling, and the many other business, administrative, facilities, human resources, and academic processes that exist in a university eventually must undergo scrutiny framed by the question: what might be possible if this process were aligned with the vision and values. At UMKC, we have only begun to examine management practices in the domain of what might be possible. We do know because of the award winning budget process that the scrutiny and change are worth doing.

D. Lead from a Place of Self-Knowledge

10. “Know thyself”

Only if you know yourself (who you are and what you are up to with your life) can you stay the course through the challenges and breakdowns that are inevitable. Kahlil Gibran said “self is a sea boundless and measureless.” However, we all have beaches and reefs with which we are quite familiar. And, Friedrich Nietzsche offered: “It is not simply a question of having the courage of one’s own convictions, but at times having the courage to attack one’s convictions.” The power that resides in leadership positions is dangerous in its ability to seduce one to believe she is right. And the demands made on our time, character and courage provide further psychological justification for “being right” and having it your way. Thus, the ultimate challenge in “leadership for the public good” is the challenge to examine one’s own life all the time. Yet, that challenge is also the ultimate opportunity and privilege, for “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates). In the domain of leadership for the public good, make no mistake about it—a leader does have the privilege of examining her life.

External Challenges

Many challenges external to our individual universities act against our work inside. In particular, the pressure for faculty to be judged successful by their professional associations rather than by their impact on the public good is enormous. Adjusting our internal policies can help, but this breakthrough requires a change much greater than that which can be brought about by any one university. Secondly, the shift of the cost of public higher education from the general taxpayer to the students and their families is a shift away from the public good. Again, no one university can handle this challenge. Indeed, it is unlikely that any one state can shift it. This one requires a federal initiative, but as leaders of higher education we can impact that conversation dramatically.

Conclusion

For this leader the term “higher education” is synonymous with the phrase “higher education for the public good.” If we are not educating people and creating knowledge for the public good, then what are we doing? No one has much doubt that the American democracy depends on good citizens (requiring education), the American economy depends on the discovery of new knowledge, and the human spirit requires nourishment from the arts and the humanities. Not so obvious is the “how” – how to bring about a powerful conversation among us as leaders and how to work inside our campuses as leaders such that outcomes shift to the public good.

REFERENCES

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- 2) Frank H.T. Rhodes, *The Role of the American University: The Creation of the Future*, page 223, Cornell University Press, (2001)*Final-Presidential Leadership for the Public Good*