

# Opportunities and Challenges in Academic Leadership

It was front page news in America and around the globe when Lawrence H. Summers resigned the presidency of Harvard University in 2006 after a stormy five-year tenure. Despite his impressive résumé (wunderkind economist, one of the youngest professors ever tenured at Harvard, Secretary of the Treasury under President Bill Clinton, and more), Summers had the shortest term of any Harvard president since a long-forgotten incumbent died in office in 1862. Just about everyone agreed that his rise and fall was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, but there was debate about whether Summers was more like Othello and a victim of betrayal by threatened insiders or like King Lear and a casualty of his own foolishness and ego. “The greatest president in Harvard history has been forced to resign by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences,” thundered a disgusted member of Harvard’s class of 1949. Not so, said many faculty members who saw Summers as “a brash, imperious leader who ran roughshod over the nation’s most-lauded faculty and got what he deserved” (Wilson, 2006).

Much of the commentary treated the story as specific to Summers and Harvard, but it is much more than that. It is an emblematic tale containing vital lessons for contemporary academic leaders. Not because Harvard and its president are typical of American higher education or because Harvard’s perch atop the prestige hierarchy makes it what most institutions would like to be. This saga has much to teach because the similarities among colleges and universities—and what it takes to lead them—are as important

and pervasive as their differences. Every institution of higher education is unique, but all have much in common. That's why variants of the same story—a talented and aggressive leader undone by faculty opposition—played out almost simultaneously in institutions as different as an elite private university in New England, a church-related university in the South, an urban public institution in the Midwest, and a community college in the Northwest. Welcome to the reality of academic leadership!

## Opportunities and Challenges

The basic issues that can cripple university presidents are built into the daily lives of higher education administrators at every level, from chief executive to department chair and in support functions as well as in core academic units. That's because no one person or group can ever control very much at a college or university. Presidents, provosts, and deans are often seen by underlings as imperial figures who bestride their world like a colossus, but experienced administrators are usually more impressed by the limits of their own influence and authority. Outsiders, particularly corporate executives, often ask why universities can't be run more like businesses. They envision the superlative levels of speed, efficiency, and unity of effort that they like to think typify their corporate worlds—and wonder why higher education holds on to arcane practices like faculty governance and cumbersome collegial decision-making processes. But business provides abundant examples of failure as well as success. The 2008 meltdown in the financial sector, for example, took much of the world's economy with it; and it took Enron only a year to change from first to worst, evolving from one of America's most admired companies to the poster child for everything that's wrong in the corporate world. The series of errors and misjudgments that led to BP's 2010 oil spill catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico would have been comic had the results not been so tragic. One study estimates that one-half to three-quarters

of all American managers are incompetent in the sense that their skills don't match the demands of their work (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). But most of them probably don't even recognize the mismatch: the less competent people are, the more they overestimate their performance, partly because they don't know good performance when they see it (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

This is not to say that business cannot serve as a fertile source of management ideas and innovation. Colleges and universities have some of the same elements found in almost any organization: goals, structures, administrative hierarchies, coordinating mechanisms, cultures, employees, vendors, and powerful stakeholders, to name a few. Leaders in higher education should learn from advances in other sectors whenever they can. Not every managerial wheel needs to be reinvented.

But the differences between business and higher education do matter (Birnbaum, 2001). Higher education's distinctive combination of goals, tasks, employees, governance structures, values, technologies, and history makes it not quite like anything else (Altbach, Gumport, & Johnstone, 2001; Thelin, 2004). It is different first because of its educational mission—a complex and variable mix of teaching, research, service, and outreach. Creating, interpreting, disseminating, and applying knowledge through multiple means for many different audiences and purposes is exciting and significant work, but it is not a simple job—nor is it one in which outcomes are easy to observe or assess.

The “production process” in higher education is far more intricate and complicated than that in any industrial enterprise. . . . Students vary enormously in academic aptitude, in interests, in intellectual dispositions, in social and cultural characteristics, in education and vocational objectives, and in many other ways. Furthermore, the disciplines and professions with which institutions of higher education are concerned require diverse methods

of investigation, intellectual structures, means of relating methods of inquiry and ideas to personal and social values, and processes of relating knowledge to human experience. Learning, consequently, is a subtle process, the nature of which may vary from student to student, from institution to institution, from discipline to discipline, from one scholar or teacher to another, and from one level of student development to another. (Berdahl & McConnell, 1999, p. 71)

It is no surprise then that teaching and research are complex enterprises, requiring significant financial and intellectual capital. In today's world, academic leaders at all levels and in both the private and the public sectors scramble to find talent, resources, donors, income-generating projects, and tuition dollars in an intensely competitive environment. Colleges and universities must respond to a host of forces. They face pressures from multiple fronts to become more accountable, businesslike, and market-oriented in service to individuals, government, and industry. They have to cope with profound changes in technology, major demographic and global shifts in student populations, formidable new competitors in for-profit and virtual universities, and widespread concerns that higher education lags in giving today's citizens and tomorrow's workforce the twenty-first-century skills and values they need. In the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown, for example, budgets at many institutions were decimated by precipitous drops in endowments or state funding at a time when student demand for courses and services kept growing. Academic leaders are under tremendous pressure to initiate change (Fullan & Scott, 2009) and to embrace an entrepreneurial mindset in order to keep pace with rapidly evolving conditions—and they need to find a path that avoids either of two unproductive extremes. Those who move too slowly will fall behind speedier competitors; but those who move too precipitously will sow confusion, breed

discontent, and undercut their institution's traditional purpose, contributions, and strength (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004).

Higher education's mission requires that many of its key employees be teachers and scholars whose contributions depend on their unique expertise, dedication, and capacity for professional judgment. As in many other specialized professions, much of their performance can be assessed only by their peers. Their expertise supports faculty claims that they are uniquely qualified to make decisions about the core teaching and research activities of the institution. Faculty thus attain levels of individual autonomy and collective power beyond most employees in other sectors. The faculty role in institutional governance varies by institution; but it consistently creates challenges and dilemmas for administrators, who often find themselves in a turbulent and contested in-between zone, chronically buffeted by the conflicting concerns, viewpoints, and agendas of faculty, students, other administrators, governing boards, and a variety of important external constituents.

This governance conundrum gives rise to distinctive assets and liabilities in higher education. The same processes that foster individual creativity, initiative, and flexibility also buttress institutional inertia. The same safeguards and freedoms protect both the highly productive and the ineffective. The same arrangements that give faculty substantial control of their own affairs and contributions can lead to departments or schools that get sicker every year as personal and intellectual conflicts lead educated professionals to behave much like squabbling children or bullying mobs (Twale & DeLuca, 2008). Colleges and universities are centers of learning and hope. They are also complex organizational beasts—and the work of academic leaders in taming and directing them only becomes harder as demands increase while public support erodes (London, 2002).

A major national survey, for example, asked more than five hundred academic leaders to provide analogies that capture their daily life at work (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). Among the

most popular were familiar classics like herding cats and juggling. Others were more creative and idiosyncratic: trying to nail jelly to the ceiling while putting out spot fires with one's feet, hanging wallpaper with one arm in a gale, pushing a pea uphill with one's nose, rowing without an oar, and driving nails into a wall of pudding (little resistance, messy, but no results). Taken together, these images add up to a familiar portrait of complicated and chaotic work in which great effort produces scant impact. They also point to the need for understanding and for solid preparation in order to tackle the complexity and to strengthen leadership skills and resolve.

But such preparation is rare in the context of academic norms and higher education career paths. Research on department chairs, for example, confirms that most assume their role with no prior administrative experience or training (Gmelch & Miskin, 1993, 2004). The same dearth of preparation is true across administrative ranks (Debowski & Blake, 2004). A study of two thousand academic leaders in the United States surveyed between 1990 and 2000 found that only 3 percent had received any type of leadership training or preparation (Gmelch, 2002). Additional research in the United States and abroad aligns with these findings (Fullan & Scott, 2009; Aziz, Mullins, Balzer, Grauer, Burnfield, Lodato, et al., 2005; Debowski & Blake, 2004). With the work of colleges and universities so difficult yet vital to the lives of individuals, communities, industries, and nations, findings like these are cause for deep concern. They were also a driving force behind the development of this book.

## **Purpose of the Book**

*Reframing Academic Leadership* is designed to serve all who labor in the academic trenches to bring quality teaching, research, and service to those who need it. It offers perspectives for understanding the unique dynamics of the academy as well as realistic and

practical ideas and strategies to get the cats to follow, the jelly to stick, and the pea to move uphill—without too many scraped or bent noses. It was written to challenge readers to reflect on their experience and to consider new ways of thinking and leading. You may already know or suspect that what got you where you are now may not be enough going forward.

Leadership preparation for higher education is of two kinds, and this book is written to offer both. One is intellectual: the acquisition of a conceptual road map, if you will, that helps academic leaders see more clearly what they're up against and what options they have. Leadership sage and former university president Warren Bennis captured this mission well when he noted, "When you understand, you know what to do" (Bennis, 2003, p. 55). Knowledge is power; and academic leaders empower themselves when they know where they are, where they want to go, and what will get them there.

A second mode of preparation is more personal and behavioral. Leadership requires individual qualities like courage, passion, confidence, flexibility, resourcefulness, and creativity—the foundations of healthy leadership resolve and stamina. Academic leaders strengthen those in themselves when they compare their worldview with what others see and when they understand how the mindsets they have formed from their everyday experiences close them off to options and to new learning. Higher education cases that are sprinkled through the book offer opportunities to think about what you might have done—or done differently—in similar situations. Leadership success rests in the quality of the choices made by leaders, and leaders make better choices when they are mindful about their thought processes and actions. Research and experience tell us that academic leaders go awry for two reasons: (1) they see a limited or inaccurate picture—they miss important cues and clues in their environment—and as a result take the wrong course; and (2) they fail to take people along with them—they move too fast, too unilaterally, or without full appreciation of the power

of cultural norms and traditions to enable others to buy into their plans. Larry Summers at Harvard is a case in point. The goal of this book is to reduce your risk of falling into similar traps by helping you expand the ideas and understandings that you bring to your work and the self-awareness essential for using them effectively.

You can enhance your capacities to sidestep the snares through better understanding of three overarching issues: (1) links among thinking, learning, and effective action; (2) major challenges and dynamics in the academy; and (3) strategies for sustaining yourself and your leadership. We've organized the book into three parts to provide you what you need to know about each. Part One (Leadership Epistemology: When You Understand, You Know What to Do) explores leaders' ways of knowing. Leading is a social process that involves relationships of influence, learning, and exchange. How leaders think about others and their situations, learn from their experiences, and translate that into effective action make all the difference. Informed choice requires knowing self, others, and context. Part Two (Reframing Academic Leadership Challenges) takes a big-picture look at academic leadership and addresses four recurrent challenges for campus administrators: how to bring institutional clarity, manage differences, foster productive working relationships, and enact a powerful vision. It lays out a framework for action: what you need to do to get things done. Part Three (Sustaining Higher Education Leaders: Courage and Hope) strengthens academic leaders for the inevitable twists, turns, and bumps in the road. Courage and confidence come from knowing how to handle thorny situations and from recognizing that there is hope and possibility on the other side of challenge.

Our approach builds from our work as higher education teachers, scholars, and administrators and from the experiences of the many other academic leaders with whom we have worked, consulted, and studied. We draw on ideas and concepts from a variety of sources, including work on organizational learning (for example,



Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990), professional effectiveness (for example, Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983, 1987), cognition (for example, Groopman, 2007; Langer, 1989), and academic leadership (for example, Birnbaum, 1992; McLaughlin, 1996; Padilla, 2005). Our perspectives in this book are deeply informed by a conceptual framework, developed by Bolman and Deal (1984), that has been important to our individual and collective work<sup>1</sup> and that leads us to argue it is easier to understand colleges and universities when you learn to think of them simultaneously as machines, families, jungles, and theaters. Each of those images corresponds to a different *frame* or perspective that captures a vital and distinctive slice of institutional life. The capacity to embrace multiframe thinking is at the core of the model of academic leadership effectiveness developed in this volume.

The image of the machine, for example, serves as a metaphor for the task-related facets of organizations. Colleges and universities are rational systems requiring rules, roles, and policies that align with campus goals and purpose. Academic leaders succeed when they create an appropriate set of campus arrangements and reporting relationships that offer clarity to key constituents and facilitate the work of faculty, students, staff, and volunteers.

**Successful academic leaders . . .**

1. Create campus arrangements and reporting relationships that offer clarity and facilitate work
2. Create caring and productive campus environments that channel talent and encourage cooperation
3. Respect differences, manage them productively, and respond ethically and responsibly to the needs of multiple constituencies
4. Infuse everyday efforts with energy and soul

The family image focuses on the powerful symbiotic relationship between people and organizations: individuals need opportunities to express their talents and skills; organizations need human energy and contribution to fuel their efforts. When the fit is right, both benefit. Effective academic leaders create caring and productive campus environments where all find ways to channel their full talents to the mission at hand and to work cooperatively with important others.

The jungle image encapsulates a world of enduring differences: diverse species or tribes participating in a complex dance of cooperation and competition as they maneuver for scarce resources and for influence. Diversity of values, beliefs, interests, behaviors, skills, goals, and worldviews often spawns destructive campus conflict. It is also the wellspring of creativity and innovation—and hope for the future of higher education. Skilled academic administrators are compassionate politicians who respect differences, manage them productively, and respond ethically and responsibly to the needs of multiple constituencies without losing sight of institutional goals and priorities.

Finally, the theater image captures university life as an ongoing drama: individuals coming together to create context, culture, commitment, and meaning as they play their assigned roles and bring artistry and self-expression into their work. Good theater fuels the moral imagination, and successful campus leaders infuse everyday efforts with energy and soul.

Multiframe thinking is necessary because colleges and universities are messy and difficult organizations that require from their leaders simultaneous attention to vastly different sets of needs. Academic institutions require a solid organizational architecture—rules, roles, policies, procedures, technologies, coordinating mechanisms, environmental linkages—that channels resources and human talents to support institutional goals and purpose. At the same time, they need workplace relationships and a campus environment that motivate and foster high levels of satisfaction,

cooperation, and productivity. Innovation comes from managing the enduring differences and political dynamics at the center of university life that can spark misunderstandings, disagreements, and power struggles. Finally, every institution needs a culture that aligns with its values, inspires individual and collective efforts, and provides the symbolic glue to coordinate diverse contributions. In such a complex institutional world, multiframe thinking keeps university administrators alert and responsive to the demands of the whole while avoiding a narrow optic that oversimplifies a complex reality—and sends academic leaders blindly down the wrong path, squandering resources, time, and credibility along the way.

Strong academic leaders are skilled in the art of *reframing*—a deliberate process of shifting perspectives to see the same situation in multiple ways and through different lenses. Experience, training, and developmental limitations leave too many leaders with a limited range of perspectives for making sense of their work. The dearth of training and preservice preparation for college and university leaders only exacerbates this gap. As a result, academic leaders can stay stuck in their comfort zones—shielded from experiences that challenge them to see beyond current preferences and to embrace more complicated socioemotional, intellectual, and ethical reasoning (Gallos, 1993a and b, 2005). When things turn out badly, they blame circumstances, the environment, a lack of resources, or other people, unaware that limits in their own thinking have restricted their options and undermined their efforts. More versatile habits of mind enable academic leaders to think in more powerful and comprehensive ways about their own leadership and about the complexities and opportunities in leading colleges and universities.

Above all, our goal is to encourage optimism, confidence, and clarity of purpose. Academic leadership is a noble enterprise—and a challenging one. It is too difficult and too important for the faint of heart or light of mind. We may never fully escape error and imperfection, but we can do better—and we need to. Educating

students, creating knowledge, and serving society demand all the intellect, skill, and commitment that academic leaders can muster. This book can help. Read it thoughtfully, yet playfully. Engage the ideas. Argue with them. Test them against your experiences. Try them out at work. As reward for your efforts, you will find that you expand your thinking, strengthen your resolve, clarify your purpose, and deepen your commitment and capacity to achieve your full potential as an academic leader.

### **Note**

1. Readers can trace the evolution in our thinking about leadership effectiveness by exploring our other work, such as Bolman and Deal (1984, 2006, 2008a and b, 2010), and Gallos (1991, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2008c).