

A Tale of Two Presidents

Opportunities and Challenges in Academic Leadership

After 13 years as president of Spelman College, Beverly Tatum retired in 2015 amid widespread praise from constituents who credited her for leaving Spelman much stronger than she had found it (Watson, 2014; McAllister-Grande, 2015). One of her contemporaries, Lou Anna Simon, served almost 15 years¹ as president of Michigan State University but resigned in much less happy circumstances, pushed out in 2018 in the wake of a devastating scandal around a serial sexual abuser. Simon and Tatum were both talented, high achievers, but the stark differences in their presidential denouements are emblematic tales containing vital lessons for contemporary academic leaders.

Tatum was new to Spelman, but came with a record as a distinguished scholar and a successful academic leader at one of America's oldest colleges for women, Mount Holyoke, where she had served as department chair, dean of the college, vice president for student affairs, and acting president. Spelman, when Tatum arrived, had a long history as an elite women's college in the world of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) but was facing a challenging new environment with increased competition for talented students and faculty from elite institutions with massive endowments, as well as growing infrastructure needs, a revolving door in the provost's office, and low faculty morale (McAllister-Grande, 2015). Tatum chose to focus on the opportunities the situation presented, describing Spelman as a jewel to be polished and a place that could realistically aim for "nothing less than the best" (McAllister-Grande, 2015).

Tatum quickly engaged her constituents in an ambitious array of initiatives: a more collaborative and metric-driven culture, a new 21st century curriculum, a record-breaking capital campaign, and stronger infrastructure in key areas like advancement, enrollment management, and technology. She infused new life into an inherited strategic plan by translating its 43 pages into a compelling vision under the acronym *Spelman ALIVE* (Academic excellence, Leadership development, Improving our environment, Visibility of achievements, and Exemplary customer service). She created myriad opportunities to engage and excite others about it. In 2013, Tatum became the first president of an HBCU to win the prestigious Academic Leadership Award from the Carnegie Corporation. By the time she retired in 2015, Tatum had “gained the respect of her colleagues, her students, and those outside of the world of higher education” (Commodore & Gasman, 2014).

Like Tatum, Lou Anna Simon had years of notable success at her institution. She was a Michigan State alumna whose career at the university spanned more than four decades and was marked by a steady rise to the top administrative positions of provost, interim president, and then president. In 2008, three years after she became president, Simon won many fans by declining a pay raise in a time of fiscal challenges (Haag & Tracy, 2018). Simon retained broad support until shortly before she was swept away by a wave of criticism over her handling of the scandal around Larry Nassar, a physician who had worked for the university for some 20 years as a faculty member and team doctor.

The first accusations against Nassar dated to 1997, but it was not until 2014 that Simon was informed that a Michigan State University physician had been the target of a Title IX investigation (Thomason, 2018). The victim testified that Nassar had massaged her breasts and vagina, but the university’s inquiry concluded that Nassar’s actions were nonsexual. Nassar was not penalized and continued to see patients (Thomason, 2018). He was only fired two years later when the *Indianapolis Star* reported that he had been

accused of sexual abuse by two women athletes (Evans, Alesia, & Kwiatkowski, 2016). Nassar initially denied everything but eventually pleaded guilty in 2017 to multiple counts of criminal sexual activity.

Simon's presidency still seemed secure until January 2018, when more than 150 women accepted a judge's invitation to attend Nassar's sentencing hearing and share their stories of abuse. Their passionate testimony, punctuated by calls for Simon's resignation, produced a wave of revulsion on and off campus. Michigan State's board initially reaffirmed that Simon was "the right leader for the university" (Kolowich & Thomason, 2018). But the board's resolve evaporated within a few days as a media firestorm and a flood of outraged constituents led to a quick reversal. Simon resigned under pressure, expressing sorrow that a "trusted physician" had inflicted so much harm. In her own defense, she added, "As tragedies are politicized, blame is inevitable. As president, it is only natural that I am the focus of this anger" (Haag & Tracy 2018). After leaving office, Lou Anna Simon was dogged by charges of lying to police about when she first learned of accusations against Nassar (Smith & Davey, 2018; LeBlanc, 2019). A county judge eventually dismissed the charges for insufficient evidence, but Michigan's attorney general affirmed them as "solid" and said that her office likely would appeal the dismissal (Banta, 2020).

These two presidential sagas have much to teach about the similarities and the differences among colleges and universities – and what it takes to lead them. Intellect, skill, experience, and vision are always essential. So is a fit between individual and institution. Simon and Tatum both brought history and skills that aligned with the needs of their respective workplaces. The chair of Spelman's presidential search reported knowing at their first meeting that Tatum was the right person for the job: a visionary leader with the "academic bona fides" that faculty would accept, respect for Spelman's history and culture that alumnae would demand, and demonstrated fund-raising prowess that Spelman sorely needed

(McAllister-Grande, 2015). Michigan State praised Simon's "strategic and transformative" leadership as vital for adapting the institution's land-grant heritage to twenty-first century global challenges, citing accomplishments like the early and above-goal completion of a \$1.5 billion capital campaign and the hiring of more than 70 new faculty members in the university's most promising research areas (Michigan State University, 2020). Skill, strategy, and opportunities to play to one's strengths are foundations of leadership success. *Know thyself* is a basic requirement for the job.

Every institution of higher education is unique, and its leaders face distinct challenges as a result. Spelman, a small, historically Black, women's liberal arts college in Atlanta with some 2,100 students is a very different place from Michigan State, a vast, public, land-grant research university with a complex mission serving roughly 50,000 students. Spelman had a "highly personal, loyalty-driven" campus culture (McAllister-Grande, 2015), and Beverly Tatum had a personal relationship with a high percentage of Spelman's 600 employees. It was almost impossible for Lou Anna Simon to know all of the 13,000 employees who worked for her university, which multiplied the opportunities for someone, somewhere, to engage in corrupt behavior at a distance from her purview. Context matters, and understanding the unique leadership demands of an institution's culture, size, mission, and organization is vital. These two stories also underscore the importance of luck and of ethical principles: fortune sometimes causes bad things to happen under the watch of even highly competent leaders. When bad things happen to good leaders, how they respond is fateful.

Institutions across the higher education landscape also have much in common. Simon and Tatum faced many of the same challenges that confront leaders throughout higher education – fundraising, recruiting and retaining a talented workforce, fostering academic excellence, balancing complex priorities and budgets, and supporting student success. Both were demographic exceptions in the president's role, given that "[t]he typical college president is

a 62-year-old white man with a Ph.D. who thinks his faculty just don't get it and that his college never has enough money" (Strippling, 2017). They were also atypical in that both served more than a decade as head of their respective institutions. The tenure of college presidents has been getting shorter as the job has been getting harder – down to an average of 6.5 years in 2017 from 8.5 in 2006 (Strippling & Tugend, 2019; Thomason, 2018, May1). Not surprisingly, evidence also points to a declining pool of qualified candidates (Harris, 2019; Harris & Ellis, 2018; Pierce, 2014). Welcome to the daunting reality of academic leadership!

Opportunities and Challenges

The basic issues that can cripple presidencies are built into the daily lives of higher education administrators at every level, from chief executive to department chair, 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 their underlings as imperial figures who stride their world like a colossus, but experienced administrators are usually more impressed by the limits of their influence and authority. Outsiders, particularly corporate executives, frequently ask why universities can't be run more like a business. 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 onto 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. It took only a year for Enron to evolve from one of America's most admired companies to the poster-child for everything that's wrong in the corporate world. More recently, two iconic firms, Volkswagen and Wells Fargo Bank, plunged into legal, financial, and public relations nightmares by

cheating customers and regulators. Volkswagen somehow hoped not to get caught selling diesel automobiles designed to fudge emissions tests (Ewing, 2015). Wells Fargo advertised itself as a warm and friendly community bank while cheating student borrowers, manipulating customer transactions to increase overdraft fees, and signing customers up for credit cards and other “solutions” without their knowledge (Randall, 2010).

One study (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994) estimates that one-half to three-quarters of American managers are incompetent in the sense that their skills don’t match the demands of their work; another report puts the number of underqualified managers even higher at more than 80 percent (Gallup, 2015). But 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). Skilled professionals are more apt to know when they don’t know, but nonexperts often think they know when they really don’t (Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

This is not to say that business can’t 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; Bowen, 2012). Higher education’s distinctive combination of goals, tasks, employees, governance structures, values, technologies, products, and history makes it not quite like anything else (Altbach, Gumport, & Johnstone, 2001; Bok, 2013; Thelin, 2004). It is different first because of its academic 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 easy, and outcomes are often difficult to observe and 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 intellectual and financial capital. In today’s world, academic leaders at all levels and in both the private and public sectors scramble to find talent, resources, donors, income-generating projects, and tuition dollars in an increasingly competitive environment. Colleges and universities must also respond to a host of forces. They face pressures to become more accountable, businesslike, and market-oriented in service to individuals, communities, government, and industry. They have to cope with profound and ever-evolving changes in technology; major demographic and global shifts in student populations; formidable new competitors in virtual and foreign universities; escalating pressures to increase access, diversity, and affordability; and widespread

concerns that higher education lags in giving today's citizens and tomorrow's workforce the twenty-first-century skills they need.

In the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown, budgets in many institutions were decimated by precipitous drops in endowments or state funding at a time when student demand for courses and services kept growing – and many institutions still have not fully rebounded from the fall. In recent decades, continuing decline in state support has steadily shifted more of the financial burden onto students, making college increasingly unaffordable for many poor and middle-income families. The pandemic of 2020 created another dramatic blow to budgets – increasing costs while cutting revenues from students, fee-generating services and events, and public funding.

Academic leaders are always under tremendous pressure to initiate change (Fullan, & Scott, 2009; Mintz, 2019; Selingo, 2013) 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 lose touch with their markets and fall behind speedier competitors; but those who move too precipitously will sow confusion, breed discontent, and undercut their institution's traditional purpose, contributions, quality, and strengths (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004). Even when circumstances like an unprecedented pandemic force academic leaders to move quicker than they should, the results were not pretty. The fast move to 100 percent online education with campus closings from the arrival of Covid-19 in Spring, 2020, was necessary, but still left faculty, staff, students, and families confused, angry, or unprepared for what they faced. Institutions too quick to announce the full reopening of their campuses in Fall 2020 generated predictable faculty conflict and student pushback by failing to bring key constituents along with their plans. And those who needed to reverse or modify their reopening decisions close to the start of term only added to the chaos.

Higher education's mission requires that many of its key employees be teachers and scholars whose contributions depend on their

unique training, 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 and faculty composition, but consistently creates challenges and dilemmas for academic 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 and their families, other administrators, governing boards, and a variety of important external constituents.

This governance conundrum gives rise to distinctive assets and liabilities. The same arrangements that foster individual creativity, initiative, and flexibility also buttress institutional inertia. The same safeguards and freedoms protect both the highly productive and the unfit. The same provisions that give faculty substantial control of their own affairs and contributions can lead to departments or schools in which 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 discovery, learning, and hope. They are also complex organizational beasts – and the work of academic leaders in taming and directing them only becomes harder as the demands increase while public support erodes (London, 2002).

A survey asked more than 500 academic leaders in Australia to provide images 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 sling, pushing a pea uphill with one's nose, rowing without an oar,

and driving nails into a wall of pudding (little resistance, pretty messy, but no results). Taken together, these images add up to a familiar portrait of complicated and chaotic work in which great effort can produce scant impact. They also point to the need for understanding and for solid preparation in order to navigate 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 (Debowksi & Blake, 2004; Flaherty, 2016; Fullan & Scott, 2009). Research on department chairs, for example, confirms that most assume their role with no prior administrative experience or training (Flaherty, 2016; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gmelch & Miskin, 1993, 2004). The same dearth of preparation is true across administrative ranks (Debowksi & Blake, 2004). A study of 2,000 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 (e.g., Aziz et al., 2005; Debowksi & Blake, 2004). Morris & Laipple (2015) found that most academic leaders became less enthusiastic and interested in the work once they were in the role, and about half reported that the pressures of the job interfered with their sense of well-being and quality of life. On the plus side, the authors found that those who had taken courses in management, human resources, leadership, and psychology felt better prepared. 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 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 doggedly 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 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 experiences and to consider new ways of thinking and leading. You may already suspect that what got you here may not be enough to get you where you hope to go in the future.

Leadership preparation for higher education is of two kinds, and this book is written to offer both. One is intellectual – the acquisition of ideas and a conceptual roadmap, if you will, that help 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 simply 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 to go, what they are up against, and what they can do about it.

A second mode of preparation is more personal and behavioral. Leadership requires a moral compass and individual qualities like courage, confidence, agility, resourcefulness, and creativity – the foundations of healthy leadership resolve and stamina. We strengthen those qualities in ourselves when we compare our worldview with what others see and when we understand how the mind-sets we have formed from our everyday experiences open us up or close us 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 principal reasons: (1) they see a limited or inaccurate picture – they miss or misread important cues and clues in their environment – and as a result take the wrong course; or (2) they fail to engage others and take people along with them – they move too fast, too unilaterally,

or without full appreciation of the power of existing cultural norms and traditions to help or hinder buy-in. 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.

Our approach builds from multiple sources: our work as academic administrators, our teaching of higher education leadership to aspiring and seasoned professionals, our experience as students of organizations and leadership, and our own and others' scholarship. We draw on ideas and concepts from a variety of sources, including seminal work on organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1992; Senge, 1990), professional effectiveness (Schön 1983, 1990), cognition (Bargh, 1994; Dane & Pratt, 2015; Gladwell, 2005; Groopman, 2007; Kahneman, 2011; Langer, 1989), and academic leadership (Birnbaum, 1992, 2001; McLaughlin, 1996; Padilla, 2005). Our perspectives are informed by a conceptual framework that has been important to our individual and collective work offered by Bolman and Deal (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Gallos, 2008), who argue that 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 distinctive slice of institutional life. The capacity to embrace multi-frame 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, policies, lines of authority, and coordinating mechanisms that align with campus goals. Academic leaders succeed when they create an appropriate set of campus arrangements and reporting relationships that offer clarity to key constituents, coordinate the efforts of multiple people and units, and facilitate the work of faculty, students, staff, and volunteers.

Successful academic leaders . . .

1. Create campus policies, arrangements, and reporting relationships that offer clarity, coordinate the efforts of multiple people and units, and facilitate productivity for all.
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 work cooperatively and to channel their full talents to the mission.

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 influence and scarce resources. Diversity of values, beliefs, interests, behaviors, skills, goals, and worldviews often spawns destructive campus conflicts. But diversity is also the wellspring of creativity and innovation – and hope for the future of higher education. Skilled academic administrators are compassionate politicians who anticipate and respect differences, manage them productively, and respond 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.

Multi-frame 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 need a solid organizational architecture that effectively channels information, resources, and human talents to support institutional goals. At the same time, they need workplace relationships and a campus environment that motivate and foster high levels of satisfaction and productivity. Innovation comes from managing the enduring differences 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 constituents and contributions. The continuing success of institutions like Harvard and Stanford rests as much on their culture as on their money and talent. In such a complex institutional world, multi-frame thinking keeps university administrators alert and responsive to the demands of the whole while avoiding a narrow optic. Oversimplified views of reality cause academic leaders to stumble 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 many leaders with a limited palette of perspectives for making sense of their work. The dearth of training and pre-service preparation for college and university leaders exacerbates this barrier. As a result, academic leaders can get stuck in their comfort zones – shielded from experiences that challenge them to see beyond their current preferences (Gallos, 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 comprehensive ways about their own leadership and about the complexities and opportunities in leading colleges and universities (Aziz et al., 2004; Debowski & Blake, 2004).

Above all, our goal is to encourage optimism, confidence, and clarity of purpose. Academic leadership is a noble enterprise, albeit a challenging one – made even more complex by a pandemic that turned the world upside-down overnight and raised deep questions about what we need and do and about where and how we work. We may never fully escape human error and imperfection, but we can always do better – and we need to. Educating students, creating knowledge, facilitating life-saving research, and serving society demand all the intellect, skill, and commitment that academic leaders can muster. Our hope is that this book provides opportunities to 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. Simon was appointed interim president of MSU in 2003, and was given the permanent title in 2005.

