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Abstract

The institution of higher education is experiencing numerous challenges, and questions are surfacing regarding our relevance in an environment where the focus is on workforce development. Concerns are being raised about the preparation of our graduates for the demands of the workplace and, internally, we are dealing with behaviors characterizing a culture of incivility. These are not new concerns, but the prevalence of disconnects between higher education and the realities of the workplace appear to be increasing. These perceptions of disconnects tend to be exacerbated by behaviors occurring on university campuses that in some cases have become violent and/or disruptive to the learning environment. Leadership is critical as we work to maintain our viability, and listening to our various constituents has become increasingly important. We must be intentional in what we value and focus on those things critical to our mission.

Keywords

higher education, leadership, workforce development, incivility, change

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Abstract

The institution of higher education is experiencing numerous challenges, and questions are surfacing regarding our relevance in an environment where the focus is on workforce development. Concerns are being raised about the preparation of our graduates for the demands of the workplace and, internally, we are dealing with behaviors characterizing a culture of incivility. These are not new concerns, but the prevalence of disconnects between higher education and the realities of the workplace appear to be increasing. These perceptions of disconnects tend to be exacerbated by behaviors occurring on university campuses that in some cases have become violent and/or disruptive to the learning environment. Leadership is critical as we work to maintain our viability, and listening to our various constituents has become increasingly important. We must be intentional in what we value and focus on those things critical to our mission.

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Introduction

Today we are faced by many opportunities and challenges that require thoughtful decisions. Many issues that leaders must address involve competing values. If we define leadership as the ability to influence others to achieve a defined goal, consideration must be given to not only the goal but the process by which the goal is achieved. According to Axelrod (2009), the “ends cannot be separated from the means” (p. 126); therefore, how we achieve our goal is just as important as the goal. Leadership operates on a continuum that does not have discrete points of quality. As a leader, the means by which we choose to achieve our goal will, in the long run, define how others view our goals. Leadership carries both responsibility and authority, and how each is carried out is extremely important in higher education. In many ways, we are preparing tomorrow’s leaders, and the authority we use to justify our leadership and the way we carry out our responsibilities will no doubt impact the lives of numerous individuals. We cannot deny we have a moral imperative; leadership is not value neutral.

Leadership

As previously identified, leadership can be defined as the ability to influence others to achieve a defined goal. While individuals may choose to influence the achievement of a goal through a variety of means, there

are a number of characteristics that often have been associated with leaders—integrity, caring, trustworthiness, honesty, visionary, respectful, etc. Additionally, the ability of a leader to communicate with clarity is critical to successful leadership (Dewan & Myatt, 2008). Leaders help develop the beliefs of those who follow, and clarity of communication and intent behind the message become critical. Each of these characteristics involves relationships with others; all individuals have the potential to influence others, and thus, become leaders. Therefore, leadership can promote the well-being of humankind or result in negative consequences.

Leadership takes many forms and surfaces in a variety of cultural, political, economic, and professional settings. Historically, we often have associated leadership with individuals who have achieved greatness through their accomplishments and who have served the greater good of humankind; however, we cannot ignore the fact leaders surface in a variety of settings and the outcome of their leadership can be detrimental to the existence of humanity and the numerous aspects of life we value. Leadership that results in the devaluing and disrespecting of others may fit a definition of leadership but *cannot be accepted under any circumstances*.

We cannot escape the criticism we are currently experiencing, and the criticism has taken on many aspects of what we have valued for a number of years. One of the cornerstones of who we are and what we have been able to accomplish resides within the concept of academic

freedom and the value we place on the freedom of speech. Our ability to engage in research and scholarly activity, absent the threat of censorship and dismissal, enables the institutions of higher education in the United States to achieve a high level of respect across the globe, resulting in solutions to health related issues, environmental challenges, community and social problems, etc., that are unmatched by other institutions around the world. However, the respect we earned and have nurtured since the establishment of the first institutions of higher education in the United States has begun to diminish, and leaders at numerous universities are under the microscope for omissions and commissions associated with their leadership.

As leaders, we are responsible for what occurs under our watch. It is impossible to know everything that is occurring at our institutions; we must trust those around us to keep us informed. With the increased complexity of institutions of higher education, the characteristics associated with leadership need to be expanded if we are to be effective in our current environment. Listening, and specifically listening to all of our constituent groups, is becoming more important if we are to maintain our effectiveness as leaders. Success can take many forms but also has the potential to become a curse individually (Burch, Cangemi, & Allen, 2017) and institutionally. While institutions are facing numerous challenges, including relevance to workforce development and increased incivility, how we respond to these challenges is becoming increasingly important and could define our future both institutionally and as leaders.

Relevance of Higher Education to Workforce Development

The acquisition of a knowledge base and skill set requisite for success in varied careers has been a hallmark of higher education for centuries. The ability to solve problems and think critically, along with the possession of “soft skills” (Koppelman, 2016), is essential for the workplace today and in the future. These skills often are associated with the liberal arts or general education component of undergraduate degree programs. Over the past centuries, higher education has valued and supported the liberal arts as an area of study, as well as providing the foundation for a variety of majors across the university community. Questions are being raised in various sectors of society about the value of higher education and whether colleges and universities are preparing graduates for the workplace. Busteed (2016) presented data indicating a possible disconnect between higher education’s perception of preparedness for the workplace and perceptions of employers. While 98% of Chief Academic Officers

felt their institutions were “very/somewhat effective at preparing students for the world of work” (p. 18), only 11% “of business leaders strongly agree that graduating students have the skills and competencies their businesses need” (p. 18). While this data are not a sole reflection on the liberal arts component of undergraduate degree programs, they raise questions about a possible disconnect between higher education and workforce development. In a recent report, Chief Academic Officers “strongly agree (63%) or agree (26%) that the liberal arts are central to undergraduate education, even in professional programs” (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018a, p. 10). When questioned about the fact that “Liberal arts faculty members are not sufficiently interested in the desire of parents and students for career preparation” (p. 12), “38% of respondents from all sectors of higher education strongly agreed or agreed with the statement” (p. 12). This finding should be of concern to those of us in leadership positions in higher education, especially in the current partisan climate. Findings from a recent Gallup Survey (Busteed & Newport, 2017) of U.S. adults showed only 44% of participants had “A great deal/Quite a lot” of confidence, where 56% had “Some/Very little” (p. 8) confidence in colleges and universities. While perceptions of respondents classifying themselves as Republicans “nosedived” (p. 8), perceptions of those identifying themselves as Democrats remained stable between 2015 and 2017. This impression of higher education takes on additional meaning within the context of a recent finding published in the *2018 Survey of College and University Presidents* (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018b). Overwhelmingly, presidents participating in the survey expressed concern about Republican perceptions of higher education, with 45% strongly agreeing and 32% agreeing with the statement that “perception of colleges as places that are intolerant of conservative views are having a major negative impact on attitudes about higher education” (p. 26). Nevertheless, this acknowledgment of concern does not mean presidents feel the skepticism is warranted.

While the preceding data reflect recent concerns regarding higher education, these concerns are not new. Arum and Roksa (2011) summarized findings from numerous studies that raised concerns about the quality of undergraduate education and the level of preparedness of graduates to enter the workforce. As such, it begs the question: Have we as leaders and members of the faculty become complacent in our expectations of undergraduate students? We know the teacher/faculty member is the most important variable in student learning; however, have expectations in higher education changed to the point where the focus has drifted from students and their accompanying learning to the point employers are questioning the level of

preparedness? We are responsible for the learning climate. The question is, Are we accepting this challenge?

These perceptions raise questions as to whether higher education is helping to address concerns regarding workforce development issues or whether we are fostering a perception of “ivory towers” disconnected from the larger needs of society. The previously mentioned findings also raise questions as to whether we are helping our graduates develop the soft skills associated with success in the workplace. Higher education expounds on the value of the liberal arts as a necessary component of the curriculum, and the liberal often are associated with the development of soft skills. However, as higher education institutions, are we fostering the development of problem solving, thinking, creativity, collaboration, etc. (Koppellmann, 2016; Partnership for 21st Century Skill, 2009) in a way that prepares graduates for the demands of the workplace, or are we fostering these skills from the perspective of who we are as members of the faculty and administration? Business leaders have been raising questions about the level of preparation of our graduates for the workplace, and these concerns are beginning to translate into economic reality, i.e., return on investment in higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Institutions are experiencing declining enrollment and state funding which has resulted in increased tuition. Furthermore, are we committed to making the necessary changes to ensure our graduates are prepared for the workplace, and do we have the structures in place to facilitate the needed changes? As institutions of higher education, we tend to focus on academic quality; however, with a greater focus on accountability, performance-based funding, and competition, higher education leaders must be knowledgeable in strategic areas including external relations, finance, etc. While the demands on leaders are increasing, faculty members tend to resist necessary interventions (Policano, 2016). This is not unexpected, as the Hall and Hord (1987) “Stages of Concern about the Innovation” (p. 60) identifies impact on self as one of the earliest stages.

If one accepts learning as “a by-product of an organism’s attempts to meet its needs” (Wilson, Robeck, & Michael, 1969, p. 28), we must meet the students where they are in our efforts to develop a knowledge base and skill set aligned with the demands of employers. This is a critical aspect of our work, especially when we think about where our students are born and raised. Many attend comprehensive universities close to their home area, and many are first-generation students. Comprehensive universities enroll approximately 70% of all undergraduate and a large majority of African American and Hispanic students (Schneider & Deane, 2015). Many faculty members graduate from Research 1 (R1) universities which

have historically been the preparation point for university faculty. This presents a potential point of disconnect until we are intentional in our efforts to ensure faculty members truly understand the nature of their roles and responsibilities in the area of teaching. Medical schools are teaching future doctors bedside manners and interviewing skills. It may be time for higher education to dedicate time on the development of interpersonal skills and aspects of teaching that encourage or motivate students to achieve success, i.e., socializing future faculty members to the profession (Brenner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day (2010). Likewise, we may need to develop a greater understanding of the various places where our graduates are employed. Higher education educates most of our P-12 teachers and other school personnel, and we educate most of the faculty employed in postsecondary education settings. During a discussion regarding workforce development in our region with Chamber of Commerce personnel, institutional leaders were quick to point out most of the careers within six sectors of employment (Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, 2017) require only a high school diploma, on-the-job training, postsecondary education, short-term training, or general educational development (GED). This lack of understanding of the pipelines associated with workforce development points to the need for higher education leaders and faculty to spend time in varied businesses and industries to gain a better understanding of the demands of the workplace. Otherwise, our relevance in the larger society may continue to diminish (Kayvani, 2016). We cannot consider ourselves to be successful based on the number of graduates. Success must be equated with success in the workplace. Lumina Foundation (2016) reported 75% of CEOs were having difficulty in finding qualified applicants and 65% of jobs required some type of postsecondary education, which could include a college or university four-year degree or higher. In the current economic climate, the challenges for employers will probably increase.

The challenge is greater than what occurs in the classrooms of today’s universities. While leaders and faculty are integral to student learning, Smith (2004) contended the challenge is structural in nature. How we are structured and how we use the available tools and strategies could be an underutilized asset to student learning and perceptions of higher education. Do we acknowledge the mere fact that students bring different experiences to the higher education classroom and different skill sets relative to their chosen fields of study? How we approach the learning process is critical to our success. Admission to colleges and universities and the placement in introductory-level courses often are based on standardized test scores, departmental exams, or other assessments. This process is

consistent with principles that have been acknowledged for decades associated with the teaching and learning cycle (Kourilsky & Quaranta, 1987). We know there is more to the success of students than their academic ability and the subsequent placement in freshman-level courses. The social and emotional development of students can be as important, if not more important. Success is built on relationships both inside and outside the university classroom. How we respond to our students could be a missing link in preparing graduates for success and the demands of the workplace. Busteded (2016) identified three aspects of emotional support during the higher education experience that relate to engagement in work and overall well-being: “At least one professor who makes me excited about learning, professors cared about me as a person, and a mentor who encouraged my goals and dreams” (p. 20). Only 14% of participants had experienced all three aspects of emotional support.

It is not just the acquisition of the requisite knowledge and skills necessary to help individuals address real-world problems that is important, but also how we work with students during their educational experience. Universities have been and continue to be criticized by some individuals, organizations, and segments of society for exposing students to specific ways of thinking and/or requiring students to espouse particular ways of thinking if they are to be successful in their coursework (Will, 2006). Whether efforts to expose students to specific ways of thinking and/or requiring students to espouse particular ways of thinking is perceived or real, the potential impact can be detrimental to the learner, and the issue raises questions related to liberal education. If individuals accept Lucas’s (1984) definition of liberal education “. . . learning that leads to personal growth and development, independence of thought and judgment, heightened sensitivity and awareness, informal decision making, and effective action” (p. 131); those aspects of the curriculum, formal or hidden, that inhibit one’s ability to openly discuss issues or debate particular beliefs or individuals holding such beliefs have the potential to negate the value of a liberal education and create opportunities for individuals to question the value of higher education.

Incivility

Preparation for the world of work includes more than the development of knowledge and skills related to the chosen career of the graduate. *Soft skills are essential for success* and include problem solving, critical thinking, and the ability to interact with others in a way that leads to the attainment of common goals identified by the group and

valued by society. Concerns about incivility on university campuses have existed for a number of years, and institutions have developed policies to help address these concerns. Members of the faculty play a critical role in addressing the concept of incivility in classroom settings. The development of relationships is important in fostering student success and ultimately becoming a contributing member of society. Cole (2007) identified several variables that can contribute to a positive learning environment and student interactions with faculty members. These variables include “enthusiastically engaging students in the learning process (i.e., they are not bored); valuing students and their comments; strategically creating racially, ethnically structured student groups; and allowing students the opportunity to constructively challenge professors’ ideas” (p. 28). The essence of these variables focuses on a learning environment where *students are engaged and the focus is on student learning and not faculty teaching*.

Regardless of whether behaviors are instigated by faculty or students, the impact of incivility can be significant on either or both parties, negatively impacting self-concept, morale, and placing individuals in an environment where they do not feel emotionally safe. Berger (2000) identified a number of beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors that are likely to contribute to incivilities on the part of both faculty and students. These include:

1. Irrational beliefs . . . whereby faculty beliefs about students are not based on reality and students believing they are consumers . . . and faculty work for them, not the university . . . ;
2. Inaccurate assessment of student’s prior knowledge . . . including underestimating or overestimating what students know . . . ;
3. . . . Classrooms with teachers who are less competent and less immediate in their behaviors, . . . or the converse . . . where faculty employ prosocial behaviors and give off verbal and non-verbal signs of warmth, friendliness, and liking . . . ; and
4. Boundary violations . . . that allow relationships to become ambiguous . . . (pp. 446-447)

All behaviors have underlying causes that may go beyond these variables. Friedmann (2001) contended incivility is rooted in one or more of the following psychological behaviors: “(a) need to express power over another, (b) a need for verbal release due to frustration over an apparently unsolved situation, or (c) a need to obtain something of value” (p. 137). Regardless of the root cause and subsequent behavior, individuals may not recognize the impact of these behaviors until harmful consequences occur.

Unfortunately, we see a rise in behaviors on university campuses and in communities across the country that easily

could be characterized as acts of incivility. Newspapers and information carried by various media sources, including social media, raise questions as to whether we are doing enough to prepare individuals to engage in social discourse in a way that respects the views of others and could lead to the resolution of issues and problems instead of exacerbating them. *Hatred cannot be tolerated under any circumstance*, but at the same time disrespect can only deepen misunderstandings and problems between and among various groups within a society. Since our beginning as a country, various segments of society have been marginalized and in many ways misunderstood. The 1960s was characterized by conflict, and in some instances, violence instigated by various groups across society. Individuals tend to mistrust those they do not understand and hatred can result from a lack of understanding. Bullying behavior, which often we associate with P-12 educational settings, can result when individuals are trying to increase their position in a group or society by putting others down, and universities are not exempt from such behaviors and actions (Kowalski, Cangemi, & Rokach, 2017). As institutions of higher education, we prepare the future leaders of our society. Therefore, we must accept some responsibility for ensuring graduates, including those who may feel marginalized and set apart from the mainstream of society, are able to communicate and interact with others in a way *that shows respect for diverse viewpoints*. In light of the current environment, including increased negative perceptions of higher education, what are our roles and responsibilities as leaders to foster a culture of respect on our respective campuses, as well as in the larger university community?

The Fall 2017 semester was replete with instances on university campuses across the globe that could be characterized as an absence of civility. As academics, we value the freedom of speech; however, that value is sometimes defined by what we *personally* value and feel is correct. Numerous speakers have been shouted down because some disagree with the point of view being expressed. These can become teachable moments on university campuses; however, this will require dialogue and intentional efforts on the part of campus leaders and members of the faculty. If we are going to encourage an open dialogue, we must convey this in an intentional way. We must be clear in what we value as institutions and we must be mission critical in our work. The use of panels reflecting differing viewpoints can be an effective strategy in classrooms along with materials expressing various points of view. Point Counter Point conversations can be invaluable, but they may not be effective in the absence of advance preparation and learning experiences on the part of students and faculty. Bartlett (2017) reported an

incident whereby a graduate student was highly criticized by her department head for showing a video including a particular individual on a panel who held views that were in opposition to those held by the department head. While one hopes this was an isolated incident, it points out a potential problem in higher education regarding respect for differing points of view. For academic freedom to truly exist and “to explore and broaden knowledge, all perspectives must be surfaced and vetted” (Wajngurt & Keashly, 2017, p. 134). Perspectives and beliefs evolve over time, and exposure to different beliefs and the accompanying cognitive dissonance can strengthen our ability to think critically and solve problems.

Changing the Culture of Higher Education

Historically, institutions have had policies governing student behavior and faculty responsibilities; however, some recent activities on university campuses involving students and faculty have become violent and in some ways reflect behaviors in the larger society. As such, one could surmise our current policies are not working. Not all inappropriate behaviors are reported and, for a variety of reasons, responses to inappropriate behaviors vary and raise the stakes for all parties involved. Incivility that goes unaddressed can lead to larger problems in the classroom, at the university, and in the larger society. History also informs us institutions cannot dictate morality nor change incivility by policy. Recent reports of NCAA violations also confirm a need for change. Likewise, an absence of civility on university campuses could play a role in the declining perception of relevance of higher education and preparation for the workplace.

Socialization is a key component of one’s acceptance of a professional role and, as leaders and members of the faculty, we are educating individuals for a variety of professions. Brenner et al. (2010) provided the following ideas relative to socialization into the nursing profession: “the development of perceptual abilities, the ability to draw on knowledge and skilled know-how, and a way of being and acting in practice and in the world” (p. 106). Faculty behavior can interfere with socialization into professional roles, as evident in a study by Del Prato (2013) on associates degree nursing education. While the socialization process may include unique components associated with varying professions, success builds on the development of relationships; the one adjective many individuals associate with others who have made a difference in their lives is “caring.” In order to care about others, we must first listen and, through our actions, show we truly care about our students. Change cannot be mandated from the top down,

but through our actions we can model those values that make a difference in who we are as higher education institutions and how we are viewed by our various constituent groups. There are times when our actions must be timely and decisive, others require greater deliberation. One's failure to act is an action!

Conclusion

Change is inevitable and we must attend to the culture in which we live and work. Evidence indicates higher education is in some ways losing ground, and other entities are engaging in what has been the providence of public and private institutions of higher education (Kayvani, 2016). In some ways, "someone keeps hitting the snooze button" (Crow, 2010, p. 60). Like the ignoring of economic realities in our country, we appear to be ignoring the realities facing higher education. Various indicators point to disconnects between our work in higher education, workforce development, and the realities of the workplace. Exacerbating the challenges associated with the declining relevance facing higher education is the increased incidents of incivility. In some ways we are a victim of our own success as institutions of higher education. Our structures associated with academic freedom have enabled us to solve numerous problems associated with humankind; however, those solutions may have come at a cost in terms of current realities. Without question incivility and ultimately bullying behaviors have increased, which negatively impact the development of relationships and collaborative endeavors necessary to solve the myriad of problems facing the world today. Higher education is a business and we cannot continue to approach our challenges from a short-term perspective. We must take a more long-term approach while attending to the challenges we are currently facing. Higher education is in a precarious position. If we do not evolve in a way that addresses our challenges and opportunities, we run the risk of becoming a relic of the past.

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