Adapting Leadership in American Higher Education: Confronting Contemporary Academic and Financial Challenges

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Abstract: *Leaders in American higher education are currently facing unique challenges in both academic and financial areas, largely influenced by rapid technological advancements and evolving societal demands. This paper examines these new-era challenges and explores effective leadership strategies for navigating them. Transformational and servant leadership play crucial roles in addressing these complexities. An effective leadership approach combines competence, character, charisma, and team chemistry. The study emphasizes that adaptability, creative problem-solving, and ongoing learning are essential for leaders to effectively navigate the dynamic environment of higher education institutions.*

Keywords: *the Leadership Skills; Higher Educational Administration Leaders*

1. Introduction

With the development of technology and economics, the current complex chaos has brought unprecedented tremendous pressures to all the higher education institutions. These pressures continue to challenge the development of universities in many areas. In the USA, higher education, which maintains a globally leading position, has also led to a series of problems, ranging from academic to financial challenges. Some of them mentioned are unprepared new students, technological shock, diminishing government educational expenditure, contradictions brought by the expansion of the education scale, and the dwindling competitiveness of higher education.

As a result, a more comprehensive transformational educational leader, who can rise to the challenges, is expected by the modern higher education institutions. They should have the leadership skills in finance, academics, technology, and politics. More specifically, they not only need to use their integrity and capability to obtain employees' loyalty and trustworthiness, but should also build great communication with them, lead them as a real team, and motivate them to exert their potentials (Yukl, 2010). They also have to adapt to the changing environment and the development of technology based on their institutional vision and mission, make accurate strategic plans and decisions, and execute them effectively. To summarize, educational leaders are supposed to have consistency in competence, character, and charisma, and produce great chemistry in the educational institutions. The further development of colleges and universities should not be without transformational changes, dealing with both internal and external challenges.

2. Prospective Challenges in Higher Education Institutions

The entire history of American higher education contains a magnificent variation of development (Keller, 1997). The enormous realignments and major revolutionary changes have brought a phenomenal progress in the American educational system. College education, as one of the greatest assets in the nation, constructs dramatic evolution in American social development, ranging from professional skills to technological application (Geranld, 1996). However, with the expansion of institutions of higher education and the development of the social economics, American universities have to face more and more complex challenges both academically and financially.

Considering the aspects of academics, during a colleges' significant growth (in addition to the growth of enrollment rate) the researching capabilities of higher education and the role of the public services are also increasing, which lead to higher educational responsibility and more leadership challenges. First of all, the demographics of the American universities have changed in past few decades. More educational scholars are focused on students' political equality and educational rights (Covey, 1992). They argue that

the minority groups in the U.S. should have different entrance requirements than traditional majorities. For example, some universities admit black and Latino students with lower entrance requirements and enroll Asian students with higher entrance requirements to sustain a certain students' demographics (James, 2012). Also, allowing unprepared international students to have lower entrance rates is considered to be reasonable and feasible for some academic leaders in international departments. These lower entrance rates are believed to attract more working capital, expand international influence, compete with other global universities, provide more learning opportunities, and increase the diversity of colleges' constituency (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Secondly, college academic level has been challenged. Struggling with the financial crisis, and aiming at the huge requirement of the college students in the future labor market, several American provosts pay attention to another international education model from British Commonwealth Countries, like Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Universities in those countries massively expand the scale of their educational institutions and lower their academic requirements to attract more local students. Believing this new model will offer the universities both fame and profits, various American higher education institutional leaders copy this model to construct their diploma mills (Phillips & Epstein & Schweisfurth, 2008). The expansion of the colleges also causes the unevenness of the educational quality as well as the financial situation among universities. This unevenness enlarges the school-college gap across the country (King & Jones, 2012). The poorer academic requirements in some colleges have already made an enormous negative impact on college academic integrity and have resulted in more cheating and plagiarism in the higher educational area (Lathrop & Foss, 2005). There are still a large number of unprepared college students lacking basic learning skills like reading and writing. Some of them cannot even finish the remedial courses to get their college degrees. Also, the most important skills that higher education institutions strive for their students to acquire have been gradually losing in the students who already have their degrees. These skills include collaboration, problem solving, communication, critical thinking, and digital literacy (Nagel, 2012). At the same time, there is an unbearable conflict between increasing social expectations and the declining respect of the public (Scott, 2011). Moreover, the prospective students want a vast array of faster, better, and cheaper education, while the community keeps complaining that the graduates are not capable of social competition. As a result, more and more young college graduates are either jobless or underemployed, which means they are in positions that don't fully use their knowledge gained in their college degrees ("Half of new graduates", 2012). This not only illustrates the weak labor market, but also represents a larger gap existing between the college academics and the working environment. Thirdly, technological innovation has brought unpredictable challenges to academic leadership in the area of higher education. According to research, a greater vacuum is coming in the department of technology from IT leaders in the higher educational system. A variety of chief informational officers (CIO) in higher education change their careers because of a lack of funding and technical assistance (Mccrea, 2010; Dlamini, 2015). What is more, there is an uncompromising contradiction between the traditional instructors and the adoption of new technology (Burnsed, 2011). Therefore, educational institutions should keep up with current trends and innovations in technology, while dealing with the negative impact brought by the technological revolution.

In viewing the financial perspective, market and economic forces are gradually invading the field of higher education. This creates more competition among American higher education institutions. The higher educational system has to pay more attention to funding and marketing innovation to make the most rapid response to the needs of the community and stakeholders. Otherwise, a university will be defeated by its opponents and lose competitiveness in this era of marketing (Drucker, 2000). One of the most obvious examples of marketing influence in colleges is college sports, especially football and men's basketball. From the television revenue to the shoes of the contract, from the donor of the sports band to the advertisement of soft drinks, they all have increasingly blurred the boundaries between the college and professional leagues. For instance, various reforms are eagerly anticipated in the scandal-plagued NCAA to defend the purity of college academics, including the reforms in requirements of minimum GPA and course completion rates ("NCAA approves scholarship reform", 2011). With increasingly fierce competition in the area of marketing, grand research programs, student loans, and donations all connect with the markets. In the area of college teaching, market factors cannot be neglected either. In some states that pursue performance funding policy, the colleges' source of funding has a direct connection with their academic performance. It forces some colleges to cut low performance programs and lower academic requirement (Hermes, 2012). As a result, current non-profit universities cannot isolate the market influence, which has already connected their advantage and efficiency to the market economy mechanism. They also have to deal with the funding issues including escalating costs, decreased government funding, accompanied by the rising costs of tuition. The "Higher Ed State Funding Report" shows that in 2020, the expenditure of 32 states in the United States on public universities and colleges was less than that in 2008, with an average reduction of nearly $1500 per student(NEA Research, 2022). Let alone, they will have restrictions imposed by the college boards and state governments' policies.

3. Higher Education Leadership Theory

The U.S. higher educational institutions have encountered a complex and constantly changing environment. The deteriorating financial budgets, the developing technology, and the expanding college diversity, undoubtedly exacerbates the challenges of colleges and universities leaders. Therefore, a more effective, adaptable, comprehensive, creative, and powerful transformational servant leadership has become an overriding solution for higher education institutions to construct their viable future.

Transformational leadership requires the leader to take presidential initiatives, active involvement facing, and transformational changes to face the internal and external pressures of institutions (Goleman, 1998). Servant leadership, with its focus on serving and empowering others, is particularly effective in managing the diverse needs and expectations of students and faculty in a financially constrained environment. Transformational servant leadership seeks to use influence and persuasion to accomplish changes and to achieve extraordinary commitment and contributions to its followers (Shotwell, 2011). It also represents a kind of mutually reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers. This relationship elevates followers to a higher level through morality and motivation. Furthermore, this effective college leadership encourages the educational leaders to use their competence, character, and charisma to create the chemistry in their institutions.

Competence means that educational leaders should have multiple leadership skills, which includes the professional skills, interpersonal skills, and leadership for learning. For professional skills, educational leaders should not only be good at academic development, but also appropriately predict the technological changes (Karlgaard, 2008). The digital transformation of the global education industry validates the future roadmap for sustainable education management, which has a significant impact on the formulation of leadership strategies in higher education (Mohamed Hashim,et al., 2022). Educational leaders need to have the ability to propose the strategies. In addition, they have to learn the knowledge from different areas to enhance their comprehensive quality. For interpersonal skills, they need to have the capability to communicate with others and persuade others. This can be shown as a constructive relationship with the boards and as an interactive relationship with the subordinates. Besides these, an outstanding modern leader should have the capability of leadership-for-learning, which involves decision making, goal setting, functional evaluation, personnel promotion, and strategic planning (Lassiter, 2003). Furthermore, leadership-for-learning concentrates on innovation and creative leadership; each of which should not only learn according to their environmental situation, but also learn by constructing knowledge from their experiences (Drath & Palus, 1994).

As one of the most important leadership qualities, a successful leader should have the character of being open and transparent, as well as their integrity based on their values (Palmer, 2001). This character is the key to win the people's trust and the foundation to build the institution. If a leader loses their character credibility, this person cannot lead the organization as effective as before, in spite of his or her capabilities.

Charisma represents an ability to attract and influence people, and emphasizes the communication with its followers. It can be an inborn disposition, but also it can be developed by showing more interest in other people than by showing how wonderful they are (Shotwell, 2011). Different leader will have different charisma (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Therefore, leaders need to form their unique leadership styles and distinctive charms of personality.

Educational leaders also need to create extraordinary chemistry in their organizations. It requires them to build their institutions into a real team. There are some key factors that higher educational leaders are supposed to accentuate in their daily operation to create this great chemistry. First of all, they should formulate a shared vision and mission of the institution and build a consensus on compelling goals derived from this new vision. The vision should arise from the inspiring ideas that leaders and followers are passionate about and have the strength to build and escalate the team (Miller & Fennell, 2012). The educational leaders also have to articulate the goals of their institutions and ensure that all their employees understand what the institution stands for and works for (Wageman & Nuners, 2008). Secondly, they need to extend and distribute various resources in accordance with appropriate strategic plans for accomplishing those goals. Thirdly, they should maintain the high standard of performance, efficiency, service and accountability, for the institutions. The challenging and consequential organizational values, including a proper engagement culture, can exert the group's potential and promote it to an upper level (Roth & Leimbach, 2011). Fourthly, the leaders are to exercise the authority already inherent in the institutions and build the healthy environment with interdependencies among the institutional members. Fifthly, the educational leaders need to explore public respect and community politics for institutions of higher learning. Higher educational institutions cannot thrive and prosper without social support which

includes stakeholders like students, parents, local government, donors, and so on. The phenomenal public relationships are the foundation of the success of colleges and universities (Diamond, 2002).

4. What should Educational Leaders do

To synthesize, in reality, in order to deal with the leadership challenges in new era, there are a number of techniques higher educational leaders should use in managing their team development and in improving their college operations. First of all, leaders in educational institutions should be the leading people with the skill sets to set up a suitable mission, a vision, and an organizational value. They can accomplish these by applying their organizational ideas to their situation (Drucker, 2000). These missions, visions, and organizational values should be seen as the basic principles and the core values that all the organizational behaviors need to follow. It also indicates that the effective leadership in colleges is supposed to concentrate on principle-centered leadership (Covey, 1992). The college leaders need to make sure that the faculty members and staff understand and operate according to these principles.

Secondly, successful leaders need to further determine the long-term goals and short-term actions, and develop a plan derived from the organizational mission statement and the phase of organizational development. All changes should be allowed to be added to plans by the leaders at any time. Besides keeping an eye on the varied environment, one of the most important ways for leaders to envision the future is to look back to any personal preceding events and learn from the past (Karlgaard, 2008). The past can make leaders gain deeper understanding about the organizational experience and capability, and then find out the most appropriate ways and get a better picture of the future.

Thirdly, in an educational organization, leadership is the strength of cohesion, especially with the high-profile college employees. Rather than coming up with good ideas, great college leaders need to learn to promote good ideas from their constituents (employees and team members). These successful leaders should be able to connect their points of view about the future to the hopes and dreams of their constituents. So that, every day, each of their employees comes to work with a hope that they can do something great. Their values and beliefs will influence their behaviors (Goleman, 1998). As a result, the leader should guide them in an appropriate fashion in developing their potential. Moreover, the leaders should show appreciation for team members' contributions and require them all to be devoted to their colleges. Other effective ways leaders can enhance the employee's morale's are by creating the environment of collaboration and the culture of communication, and teaching and strengthening others to model the values through consistency between words and actions (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). On the other hand, the changing and challenging model and competitive systems are also necessary in educational organizations because they help to improve cohesiveness and competition among the employees (Drucker, 2000). However, the conflicts and challenges in college require a healthy and positive team value and culture. The result of the healthy conflict will promote more refined solutions to the problem in a team. Although this level is not so easy to control, it will greatly benefit the individual daily functioning in college. An individual is faced with challenges in interpersonal relationships and work that affects their college leadership. However, these normal pressures from both internal and external work environment can influence them and make them contribute more to bring them up to their full potential. The leaders should build a community structure that allows the employees to help each other in dealing with the changes and challenges as a group (Pree, 2001). In summary, as transformational leaders, they should have the four leadership roles which include leader, manager, organizer, and executor. This means they can handle all types of situations and be flexible enough to change according to the tasks or environment.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, educational leadership should be based on the transformational leaders' competence, character, charisma, as well as the teams' wonderful chemistry. In the dynamic environment of higher education, leaders must not only embody the principles of transformational and servant leadership but also actively cultivate adaptability and creative problem-solving skills. These competencies are essential for navigating the complex academic and financial challenges identified. By seamlessly integrating adaptability and innovative approaches into their leadership style, educational leaders can more effectively respond to the rapid technological changes and evolving societal demands impacting higher education today.

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