The Two Cultures of Academic Leadership

Charles McClintock
Fielding Graduate University, United States

ABSTRACT

This essay explores faculty and administrative leadership culture in the context of the pandemic health crisis. Differences and opportunities for leadership collaboration are identified that can help American higher education adapt to and prosper from the intense pressures for change.

Keywords: academic leadership; academic culture, organizational change

The classic essay by C.P. Snow (1959) on the two cultures of science and the humanities has direct bearing on how higher education in the United States, and indeed in other countries as well, will fare in the pandemic reality that is uprooting so much in society. Snow's premise, though contested in many ways in relation to academic disciplines, survives in its appropriate focus on the power of different pursuits, languages, and ways of knowing to block broad collaborative efforts for social innovation and change.

Instead of applying the two-cultures idea to academic disciplines, it is worth considering how it applies to academic leadership and the often contentious relationship between faculty and administrative worlds in American colleges and universities. Given the certain impact of the pandemic-driven public health and economic crises, there is an urgent need to bridge these two cultures of faculty and administrative leadership to create change that strengthens academia and its positive impact on society (McClintock, 2001; Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

The two-culture conflict

The two-culture conflict applies to leadership in higher education, often centers around feelings of besiegement, and spawns polemical communications aimed at a convenient enemy. A good example of this is Ginsberg's (2011) jeremiad that the growth in academic administration is the source of all problems in higher education. Ginsberg's argument conjures an idyllic past on college campuses when faculty handled important institutional leadership tasks, beyond their leadership of curricula and scholarship. In actuality, the modern American university system derived much of its governance structure from European models in which administrative and academic responsibilities were mostly distinctive spheres (Chou & Chan, 2017; Synder, 1998).

Yes, Ginsberg has observed the growth of administrative positions over his multi-decade career. But he neglected to observe the multitude of factors that higher education has had to respond to over these years. A short list of items that increase administrative work for American higher education include affirmative action, Title IX, federal financial aid (Title IV), FERPA, reduced state government support, campus crime and safety (the CLERY Act), international students, sponsored programs, labor relations, human resources/benefits, information technology and internet requirements, and accreditation (all of which come with legal and financial risk). These, and many similar demands, cannot and should not be located in the faculty bailiwick. This sphere of academic leadership requires considerable administrative expertise and specialization to manage, just as many administrators cannot pretend to have the scholarly expertise to manage the teaching and research enterprise.

The institutional and societal need to work collaboratively is intense (Wolshok, 1995). Never has so much change happened so fast in the change-resistant institution of higher education. The faculty has been besieged by the need to rapidly shift to virtual instruction (and in many cases research too). In addition, faculty members are pressed to incorporate decolonizing ideas into their teaching and research in order to illuminate systemic racism and sexism and their manifestations in societal problems such as health disparities, wealth and income gaps, and reparations related to Black slavery and Native American genocide. Especially at upper-tier institutions, the tenured professoriate needs to grapple with its complicit participation in such inequities by re-thinking its social and economic privilege in relation to low-wage employees in their institutions. Where one group enjoys six-figure salaries and paid sabbaticals, the other cannot afford childcare.

Administrators too are up against the biggest challenges ever to face higher education. They must make difficult decisions, albeit with significant collaboration with faculty and other groups, for example, about how to re-

open campuses, based on data and multiple guidelines and advisories that change by the day. Legal and financial risks will abound from students, staff, and faculty who become ill on re-opened campuses. Academic planning must cope with bleak financial scenarios from enrollment and tuition uncertainties due to online instead of in-person education, along with reduced state and federal financial support. Senior leaders need to be closely engaged with faculty to ensure that academic quality is maintained in this mix of unknowns. Given the ever increasing regulatory and risk management landscape, leaders will have more intense 24/7 work lives that will make it harder to interact with students, alumni, and trustees on a personal basis. It might end up being lonelier at the top than ever before.

Considering their respective worlds of besiegement, what are some of the issues that would benefit from collaboration between the two cultures of faculty and administrative leadership? The following list could easily be expanded.

Re-dedication to shared governance, a foundation for healthy leadership and campus resilience, has never been more challenging given the rapid pace and scope of changes in how teaching and research are conducted.

Showcasing faculty expertise through virtual events for alumni engagement and public service to re-build societal confidence in higher education.

Taking meaningful action against systemic forms of discrimination that go beyond stating principles and that compensate for structural inequities.

Redesigning the academic calendar to a year-round cycle that would allow undergraduate students who choose to graduate in three years and reduce their financial burdens.

Managing a physical campus to minimize the health risks to those staff, faculty, and students who are in close proximity to one another.

Rethinking what a sustainable campus should look like with fewer large gatherings for sports and other purposes.

These tasks will require considerable time and energy from standing committees and governance processes as well as special task forces. These groups will need to draw upon input from students, staff, and the larger public to ensure that stakeholder concerns emerging from the pandemic are carefully addressed.

Conclusion

The cry for transparency is a familiar touchstone in the contest between the two cultures of academic leadership. Administration is criticized for not sharing information and engaging faculty about plans and decisions, while the faculty is accused of not paying attention to the information and calls for engagement that are offered. Reflecting on C. P. Snow's analysis in the face of current challenges, faculty and administrative leaders must move toward recognizing their cultural differences and give deference to their respective cultural and professional strengths in service of newly shaped higher education and the society it creates.

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Author Bio

CHARLES MCCLINTOCK, PhD, is Dean Emeritus and Director of the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University and Professor Emeritus at Cornell University. His major research interests are in the areas of educational leadership, graduate education, program evaluation, and organizational change.