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A CALL FOR ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

A Personal Perspective

I would often wonder what it would be like to become a college president. As I secured tenure, promotion to associate professor and department chair, my curiosity grew. So, I began to read all that I could regarding the college presidency and attend presidential leadership institutes and other sessions on the topic. I also began asking presidents who I met to share some of their experiences with me. One of the sessions focused on the college presidency provided mentors for all participants for one year. This president shared numerous experiences with me. I want to share some of his experiences with you.

Martin, not his real name, told me that he turned down a college presidency within the same denomination to serve another considered to be the most problematic. Dr. Palmer said that he accepted the fact at the college had a history of fiscal deficits, poor retention statistics, infrastructure issues, and very low graduation rates. The college was small with an enrollment averaging about 600 undergraduate students. The majority of the student population, about eighty-five percent, were considered at-risk in high school. They were not academically qualified for successful admission into most four year institutions. The same could be said regarding faculty. Most of the faculty could not secure similar positions at other four year institutions. Most of them did not work to remain informed of new developments in their area of study and did little in the area of research. So they settled for lower salaries, under-motivated students, and limited resources. There were a few outstanding faculty who had decided to devote their life's work in this type of college. Their work was excellent and could be compared favorably with other individuals in some of the very best institutions of higher education across the country. Martin believed that this college presidency was more than a mere job. He thought of this position as his ministry. Martin had experienced a full career in some very well respected institutions of higher education and truly believed that it was now time to give back to those who represented members of poor and disadvantaged communities similar to his own origins. He also thought that he could lead a process that would turn this college inside-out. Dr. Palmer thought that by developing a superior honors program, hiring a few new faculty to teach in this new program, and offering excellent scholarships to attract academically strong students a foundation for institutional change would begin. Martin dedicated all of his energy to develop a leadership team made up of students, staff, faculty and community stakeholders that would move this college

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forward to become a good liberal arts institution in a somewhat short period of time and an excellent one in the near future. Dr. Palmer thought that financial support from foundations, corporations and philanthropic leaders in the community would follow once the college had a powerful story of success to share. He then told me about other challenges that were discovered soon after accepting the position.

Martin decided to set aside one hour time allotments to meet with each of his direct reports, and a few key faculty and administrators over the first few days of his administration. As you might expect, every meeting lasted well over the hour that was allotted. Much to his surprise, Dr. Palmer found that most of them lacked the knowledge and skill set to hold the position that they were in. For example the person responsible for student affairs had only two years of experience in education. She had no knowledge of student development theories, no understanding of programming for students, and ran her department as if it were a correctional facility. Even the rules, which were selectively enforced, we're archaic. There were no visitation periods for students, a ten o'clock curfew, no peer mediation process, and monetary fines for those found breaking the rules. Student activities were poorly organized, with little input from students. Discussions lead to the conclusion that most activities were put together at the last minute. The former president did not even allocate funds from student activity fees to support any initiatives in this department. Martin was told that historically they had to be tough with the students in order to get them to obey the rules. Most of the staff in this department also lacked the knowledge, skills and experience to do a good job. They seemed more prepared to serve as prison guards. The kind of prison guards who typically look the other way when bad things occurred. Those few that had some valuable contributions to make were threatened and either left the college or remained quiet to keep their job. Many of them seemed to lacked the common sense to know that what they were doing was actually reinforcing the very behaviors and negative habits that they wanted students to change. Rumors were rampant regarding the activities of some of the hall directors. Primarily, rumors focused on hall directors having sex with students. While it took some time to confirm, once the truth was known people were released. Martin was shocked by what he was learning and seeing. When walking the campus for the first time as president, he told those with him that he felt like he was walking through the third ward in Houston, Texas. Student's pants, male and female, we're sagging below the butt, young ladies wore as little as possible, it seemed that just about every student talked loudly with cursing being the norm. Many of the students looked drugged. Many staff members, except those the students called 5-0, seemed afraid of the students on campus and avoided potential confrontational situations. The cafeteria reminded Martin of a prison mess hall. All tables were in a straight row, students dragged in and out and slumped over their food as they ate – between loud talking, laughing, and cursing with other students across the room. What a sight. What a rude awakening to this campus called a college. Security and residence hall managers positioned themselves in preparation of the inevitable fights that often erupted. Martin began to wonder if he had made the right decision.

One academic administrator was proud of the math and vocabulary flash card program that she established. She encouraged all faculty to participate in this program during the first ten minutes of class. Please remember, this is a college! Another administrator spent his mornings checking to see if faculty arrived at work by eight o'clock each day, whether they taught that day or not. He demonstrated great excitement when talking about the disciplinary write-ups for those who were late. Mind you, nothing was done with these write-ups. His supervisor, the vice president for academic affairs, simply stated that this was an accommodation, a show of respect for this elderly gentleman. The vice president for academic affairs did not see a need for a great deal of professional development activities. Therefore no funds were allocated for faculty to travel to present their research or to simply participate at state, regional, national or international conferences. No professional development activities included outside presenters. Instead activities focused on the importance of taking class attendance, grade reporting, health insurance updates, and policy changes. It seems that the same agenda was simply recycled for the start of each academic year.

The chief financial officer had a degree in History. He had moved up the ranks in the business where he started as a cashier after graduating from the college many years ago. The development officer was a very good friend of the former president who boldly shared that his largest gift to the college, \$25,000.00, was given by his fraternity two years ago. I am simply sharing the facts here, with no exaggerations.

Martin was equally surprised to discover that board leadership said that he knew nothing about the depth of these issues. As a matter of fact, Martin was accused of exaggerating these and other issues and was told by board leadership to relax, that he was not use to this type of college environment and, after some time, would get used to it.

Retention and graduation rates over the past six years were much worse than reported. Both were in single digits. After more discussions and review of real data, Martin realized that more than eighty-five percent of the students currently enrolled read at or below the fifth grade level. Similar findings were found regarding basic mathematics. Most students were repeating remedial level courses, or simply did not return. Student attendance in class was horrible. Actually students with good attendance were guaranteed passing by some faculty despite incomplete assignments and failed examinations. Academic leadership explained that they had to show some level of success in order to remain accredited. They blamed recruitment staff and the former president for the quality of students attending the college. A review of student credentials confirmed these beliefs, but did not make Martin support the actions of academic leadership. A preview of transcripts told him that over twenty percent of the students currently enrolled had taken a special education curriculum in high school, making their 3.0 and better grade point averages questionable. Yet many of these students started with academic scholarships, which were soon lost, at the college. Well over fifty percent of students graduated from alternative high schools. About ten percent entered college with GED certificates. The majority of the remainder graduated from their respective high schools in the lower twenty percent. These high

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schools represented those considered some of the lowest performing in the entire state. Deans lacked leadership skills, adequate knowledge of subject matter in their teaching areas and had no plans in place to make improvements of such a deplorable situation.

After more research Martin found that documents sent to the state and federal agencies were full of misleading data. The academic challenges were indeed far worse than reported and initially believed. Martin wondered how the doors of the college managed to remain open all of these years. It was the misleading reporting of data that seemed to keep officials from the kind of analysis that would have lead to probationary status. Actually it seemed as if no one really cared. There were a few faculty who really tried to teach. Records told Martin that most of them lasted one or two years. Those that remained were paid poorly but earned less than they were paid. Members of the faculty constantly complained about low pay, horrible students, the crumbling infrastructure, lack of adequate supplies and little to no up to date technology. Yet they remained year after year applying at other institutions, but failing to secure other positions. There were few that really demonstrated that they cared for the students and the college, but instruction and content was dumbed down, often below high school standards. The nightmare became more vivid as Martin continued to ferret through the lies and half-truths of his direct reports and others. Conversations with students made clear their lack of preparedness for college, or even a real high school curriculum. There was no way that they should be enrolled in college at this time. They needed a great deal of remedial work before attending college.

Dr. Palmer also discovered that the college was running budget deficits for each of the past six years. Funds from the endowment had been withdrawn each summer to cover these deficits. These withdrawals and recent economic downturns had depleted well over sixty percent of the endowment. One had to wonder if restricted dollars had been used inappropriately. Martin discovered the misuse of federal and state funding of well over one million dollars. The college had to borrow funds to cover what state auditors forced the college to repay and to corrective misuse of federal funding before a federal audit was conducted. He also found well over an estimated ten million dollars in deferred maintenance. He just could not understand why the college never established funding budgets for deferred maintenance. Every building on campus was in need of major repairs. The college administrators also failed to establish an annual capital budget. It became very clear to Martin, after asking chief financial officers from other organizations to conduct mini audits that the college was on the verge of financial collapse.

Trustees were asked to attend a retreat conducted by one of the financial consultants to better understand the college's financial challenges and approve a plan to address these concerns that Martin and his team had developed with the help of his three financial consultant friends. Many board members were shocked at the findings. Some apologized for their lack of due diligence over the years. The plan was approved by the trustees, but continuously challenged by board leadership, despite the gradual improvements that were shared. The plan established standard accounting practices in the business office that included balancing the books monthly instead of annually,

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yes I said annually – just before the annual audit! Monitoring spending variances became a monthly standard practice, along with calculating annual revenue streams. The student recruitment plan, including targeting specific programs for growth, would bring focus to recruiting better prepared students, resulting in better retention and enrollment projections. The college consolidated bank accounts to secure better rates, and implemented better budget building processes to estimate more precise revenue and expenditure projections. President Palmer also negotiated several contracts with companies that the college outsources services, implemented an energy savings program, and selected vendors offering more competitive rates. This small campus began to see significant savings immediately. The college actually ended Dr. Palmer's third year as president with a \$1.2 million dollar surplus.

Martin, after developing some positive relationships, learned that people in the surrounding community called the college Hood U. They were pleased with the changes that were taking place and believed that the institution just might become a real college in the near future. A few felt that the campus was now safe enough to attend sporting and musical events.

The strategic plan developed in partnership with stakeholders (trustees, students, staff, faculty, alumni officers, and community leaders) called for three major initiatives.

- Establish a more engaging and rigorous academic environment
- Develop a process leading to financial sustainability
- Improve the physical plant

After two years the following goals from the strategic plan were accomplished:

ESTABLISH A MORE ENGAGING AND RIGOROUS ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Established the Office of Student Academic Success. Services provided through this office include:

- Opened the Office of Student Academic Assistance
- Provide free tutors for every subject and course
- Provide workshops to improve study, note taking, test preparation, and thinking skills
- Established a communications center to help students improve their oral and written communication skills
- Instituted a first year mentoring program
- Increased cumulative grade point average from 1.6 to 2.4

Academic Affairs

Implemented a series of action steps in Academic Affairs designed to better standardize course content, and promote the development of a more engaging teaching and learning environment.

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- Developed learning outcomes and assessment measures for all courses
- Created a master syllabi for all courses
- Developed curriculum maps for all academic programs
- Developed learning outcomes and assessment measures for each program of study
- Increased student and faculty fluency with learning management systems (LMS)
- Established professional develop series designed to increase faculty proficiency of instructional delivery
- Developed and established student advising process that includes mentoring and career development.
- Established course rotations to increase the predictability of course offerings.
- Created a new honors program.
- Redesigned student advising process to ensure successful matriculation
- Created a Math and technology lab
- Established four computer labs on campus for students

DEVELOP A PROCESS LEADING TO FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- Established and implemented a budget building and management process that has resulted in the end of deficit spending
- Implemented 'Best Practices' in the business office and hired new staff
- Consolidated bank accounts to secure better rates
- Implemented better budget building processes to estimate more precise revenue expenditure projections
- Negotiated several contracts with companies that the college outsources services
- Implemented an energy savings program
- Selected vendors offering more competitive rates
- Developed a more focused and intestinal student recruitment program

IMPROVE THE PHYSICAL PLANT

Established and implemented a deferred maintenance priority list that has resulted in:

- Repaired HVAC systems on campus
- Installed wireless technology throughout the campus
- Repaired all campus roofs to stop water leakage
- Installed distance learning and state of the art video technology in four classrooms and both auditoriums
- Established ten 'Smart' classrooms

Funding for projects came from the appropriate use of federal grants. Many of the trustees were pleasantly surprised with the amount of progress being made in the monthly reports and expressed solid support for President Palmer. They even voted to extend his contract three additional years. However, the chair of the board

would not allow President Palmer to run the college without an enormous level of interference. Martin did not like to be micro-managed and saw no need for the interventions given all of the success. The chair would challenge every decision, want to be involved in every aspect of the college, demanded detailed written reports for every move, and called Martin all day, every day. Dr. Palmer's leadership style had always called for a great deal of involvement in the decision making process from all sectors of the enterprise. He enjoyed the vetting process and believed that results produced more informed and better decisions. Yet Martin was beginning to dread any conversations with, actually attacks from, the board chair. The board chair had no experience leading any organization. He reminded Martin of a fish out of water when discussing the next steps for the college. The chair wanted to wait even though the step by step process for making change was followed and had been very successful. He was often the only negative vote when seeking board approval. At times it seemed that the chair saw Martin as a competitor. Martin would often remind the chair that this work was not about him as President, but rather was focused on improving the college. In reality the board chair was overwhelmed with the speed of positive change on campus. He told other board members that he never thought this college could improve like this, especially at the current pace. What a shame!

Martin told me that he made a huge mistake when he decided to ignore some of the chair's calls on the weekend and before five in the morning. While he still supported the premise that an engaged group of stakeholders presented the best chances for successful decision making, Martin found himself making fewer and fewer calls to the chair of the board. President Palmer said he made another mistake when he decided to stop the chair from being so involved in the day to day running of the campus. Martin did this to avoid all of the micromanaging attempts from the chair of the board, his negative vibe and to avoid being called insubordinate. This decision caused an even deeper disconnect between Martin and the board chair, his boss. These decisions also began the end of Martin's presidency. Martin was abruptly removed from his position, without a majority vote from the board, just short of his third anniversary despite the huge success of the college during his tenure and extended contract. The chair told a handful of the board members that Martin failed due to low student enrollment. The enrollment plan, approved by the board nearly two years prior to this time, clearly outlined an initial drop in enrollment as the college worked to improve the academic profile of the student body. The chair also cited issues related to accreditation and budget. He even told this small group of trustees that Martin had been insubordinate with him on numerous occasions. All statements were blatant lies and proven to be so just a few months later. The external audit that was finalized just after Martin's departure was the best audit in the recent history of the college. The college ended the fiscal year with a small six figure surplus. The current year was on schedule to end with over a one million dollar surplus. The college was indeed headed for fiscal sustainability. The college had turned the corner and was now positioned to become a good liberal arts institution of higher education. It would need to continue along this path however without Martin.

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Martin told me that he moved away from his philosophy of engaged leadership. Dr. Palmer no longer inspired stakeholder participation at the level needed. Martin began to shy away from meaningful discussions, first with the board chair and then with his gang of four, regarding the future of the college. This president no longer exhibited the kind of enthusiasm needed to keep stakeholders actively engaged in their process of change. He had just grown tired of the backwards mentality of the board chair and his gang of four. Martin said that this anchor felt like it was wrapped around his throat, getting tighter each day.

He also said that moving away from engaged leadership was a huge mistake on his part. Martin said that he should have realized that he set himself up to be released by giving up on his relationship with the board chair. He could have employed a much slower process of change, but just could not make himself do it. Martin just hoped that the next president would be able to work better with the board chair and continue to help the college move forward.

Just what was this concept of engaged leadership that Martin kept referring to? How would this form of leadership have made a difference?