

*Commentary*

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**POINT OF VIEW**

## **Colleges Need to Offer Clear Paths to Leadership**

By ERROLL B. DAVIS JR.

I came to the University System of Georgia after a long career in the private sector, mostly in the utility industry. When I became chancellor of the system in 2006, many people asked me if I truly knew what I was getting into.

The answer, as it turned out, was not entirely.

Having served on a number of higher-education boards, I took the job with a moderate sense of understanding. I did not feel completely unprepared and knew that to be effective I would have to perform as successfully in academe as I had in the private sector.

But, frankly, I lost about a year because I didn't fully appreciate how hard it is in an academic environment to build the leadership capability to get things done. In large part that's because the route to leadership in the private sector differs significantly from the route in higher education.

What I am about to say should not be viewed as a condemnation of the men and women who teach our students or have made our American system of higher education the envy of the world. I understand that, at many colleges, great leaders are cultivated, accountability is central to the culture, and sustained professional development is a reality. I also know that intensive teamwork — on committees, in the classroom, in departments, in labs — is central to many higher-education institutions. But, generally speaking, there are some essential and fundamental differences in the cultures of academe and the business world.

In academe, you spend your early years focusing on your discipline. To earn a terminal degree, you have to have tremendous focus — which is, by necessity, usually quite self-centered. It takes a median of seven years after graduating from college to earn a Ph.D. in the humanities. You end up with a lot of knowledge, but the process is designed to be all about you — your needs, your learning, your dissertation.

Then, around age 29, your next goal — six years out — is earning tenure. It's the same process that you've followed all along, except now you don't even have a thesis adviser with whom to

interact. Tenure acquisition requires a focus on research, publishing, and supposedly teaching and service. But again, it's all about you — your research, your publications, your persona, your scholarly stardom.

You do well, and now, at 35, you finally earn tenure. And what do we have? We have a person with tremendous knowledge, in one area — and not a lot more than that.

In the commercial culture, in contrast, the focus from the start is on working in increasingly diverse teams and learning skills of negotiation and problem-solving. After some time and training, you may get the chance to manage people. But most importantly, your performance is constantly assessed and formally evaluated.

If you can survive all the filters, you are given more responsibility over more people and more resources. At age 35, you are a pretty well-developed product. For example, I was the chief financial officer of a New York Stock Exchange listed company at age 34.

But let's return to our academic counterpart, the now-tenured professor. How does that person move into a leadership position? It's not just that the path is poorly marked — in some cases, it may not even exist. Further, the background and experience of our newly tenured professors suggest that they often aren't interested in management. The thought process is often "I didn't study for 17 years just to be an administrator, a bureaucrat."

In the academic environment, processes are seen as something bureaucracies do *to* you and not *for* you. The culture reinforces a strong sense of self as opposed to the team — a strong sense of individual goals versus a sense of the greater good or common goal. There is simply no structural focus on leadership.

So, what do colleges do? First they seduce someone into becoming a department chair, then a dean, then a provost or a vice president of academic affairs, and eventually a president. Is there any required management or leadership training in the process? Not consistently. Is there any rigorous and continuing assessment of management ability? Not consistently.

Thus people are thrust into leadership positions who are often unable to work in teams, have short tempers, and display rudimentary social skills. In many instances colleges don't have a formal assessment system but rather a weighing system of "good" versus "bad." As a higher-education leader, it may be that if your "goods" far outweigh your "bads," you can get away with a lot of poor behavior.

The private sector is not immune to some of the same shortcomings. We have only to look at Enron or the mortgage industry to see what happens when the culture allows people to get away with bad things. But those are the exceptions that prove the rule. By and large the private sector has done a reasonably good job of setting clear expectations for performance and providing a well-marked path of growth and accountability for its employees.

As James Collins notes in his monograph *Good to Great*, planning, discipline, and execution are not business principles. They are leadership principles. But the primary lesson is this: You

cannot expect a culture to adopt a more comprehensive leadership style overnight if it doesn't systemically train leaders or encourage people to aspire to leadership. That is the challenge everywhere, including in higher education: to build leaders in a systematic manner.

Trustees of higher-education institutions should be examining what processes are in place to hire and nurture presidents who understand how to instill leadership throughout the institution, including establishing metrics to hold decision makers at all levels accountable for their actions — or inactions.

Both senior administrators and governing boards should also learn to base decisions on leading indicators, as opposed to lagging indicators. Graduation rates are a lagging indicator. Retention rates are a leading indicator. Do we really want to wait six years to recognize and then eloquently explain low graduation rates, or do we want to focus on annual retention and nip problems in the bud? In short, college administrators must be taught to use leading indicators to alter future conditions. That is the essence of what leaders do — manage risks and alter futures.

Our hardest challenge in academe will be to create a system that actively develops leadership skills much earlier in people's careers than we do today. At the University System of Georgia, we are working to develop and reinforce such processes. For example, today we have no systemwide human-resources function. We are changing that and putting in place a human-resources organization that will establish clear paths to leadership. Our new head of human resources is identifying and creating the needed infrastructure, and our next big step will be to develop content. While it is too early to say precisely what form content will take, it will be tailored to our needs. As a result, we will begin to identify talent and make sure those people get their leadership tickets punched early in the game. Without such a system, we cannot expect the 45-year-old manager in academe to have the same depth of leadership skills or managerial maturity as the 45-year-old corporate manager.

We have a tremendous pool of bright, extremely talented people in our colleges. However, we won't be adequately effective, efficient, or accountable if we don't develop our people. In fact, the lack of a deep leadership culture has consequences that we, and unfortunately our publics, see all the time in the form of poor risk management.

Simply put, too many things go wrong, too often. For example, a lack of appreciation for the need for a culture of risk management, coupled with inadequate in-depth training for risk management, led to some serious abuses of a state purchasing-card program by a few employees within our system. The program is intended to reduce the time and costs associated with the purchase of supplies, but with not enough training in the oversight of the program and a lack of appreciation for our exposure to risk, those abuses created significant credibility issues.

At some point, the public simply will not continue to support the truly good and great things we do in higher education if we keep demonstrating that we can't effectively manage the mundane. And until we create a culture of accountability, until it becomes part of our DNA, we are going to remain susceptible to both operational and strategic problems.

As history suggests, it is no accident that America has created a higher-education system that is the gold standard worldwide. But other countries are catching on — and catching up. We have an obligation to sustain and build upon our great historical legacy. There is no question that the private sector can offer tremendous resources to help advance higher-education goals. The challenge is to figure out how to blend the two very different worlds in ways that truly benefit our colleges — and one way to do that is to borrow from the corporate world some of the ways that they have trained their leaders in the art of leading.

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