

The Art of the Presidency

by Frank Rhodes

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The Academic presidency is one of the most influential of all positions. Frank Rhodes, president emeritus of Cornell University, offers some lessons on effective leadership.

Academic leadership will be viewed by some as an oxymoron—in the same category as “airline cuisine” and “postal service”—yet there was a time when both the uniqueness and the importance of that task were unquestioned. When Yale was searching for a new president in the 19th century, one of its board members characterized the search for the individual—assumed, in those days, inevitably to be a man—as follows:

He had to be a good leader, a magnificent speaker, a great writer, a good public relations man, a man of iron health and stamina, married to a paragon of virtue. His wife, in fact, had to be a mixture of Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale and the best dressed woman of the year. We saw our choice as having to be a man of the world, but an individual with great spiritual qualities; an experienced administrator; but able to delegate; a Yale man, and a great scholar; a social philosopher, who though he had the solutions to the world's problems, had still not lost the common touch. After lengthy deliberation, we concluded that there was only one such person. But then a dark thought crossed our minds. We had to ask—is God a Yale man?

In those days, Americans looked for a degree of perfection in their college presidents that the British hope to find only in their butlers. Today, the job of the president is more likely to involve maintaining the fragile equilibrium of the campus than rising to the noble challenges of leadership. Kingman Brewster of Yale once declared that the typical college president roars like a lion away from home, but murmurs like a mouse on the campus. To Clark Kerr, the task of the president was to provide football for the alumni, parking for the faculty and sex for the students. Small wonder, then, that the average incumbency of a college president is just seven years.

I wish to assert a contrary view of the college presidency: In spite of financial pressures and political concerns, in spite of public disenchantment and campus discontent, the academic presidency is one of the most influential, most important, and most powerful of all positions, and there is now both a critical need and an unusual opportunity for effective leadership.

The college presidency is one of the most influential of all positions because the future leaders of the world sit in our classrooms. Across our quadrangles stroll the future political reformers, captains of industry, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, inventors, and citizens. They are influenced—for good or ill—by every aspect of campus life.

The academic presidency also is one of the most important of all positions because it is chiefly on the campus that knowledge—the foundation of the future—is created. Knowledge is the new economic currency. In the past, a nation's natural assets—its geography, its climate, its landscape, its natural resources, its population, its wealth—shaped its destiny. All these will remain important, but more important still will be knowledge. Unlike other natural resources, it is undepleted by use; it is endlessly renewable, auto-catalytic in its influence, undiminished by its application. It is multiplied even as it is shared; it is refined and perfected even as it is challenged and tested. The academic presidency is important because the university is the creator, conservator, and mediator of knowledge.

The university presidency is one of the most powerful of all positions because of its persuasive influence and its long-term and wide-ranging leverage. Its power is most effectively exercised not

in managerial aggression or the pursuit of quarterly results, but by championing creative ideas, creating new alliances, and supporting simple, but transforming goals. But it is a power that must be exercised. Passive presidents litter the landscape, and their pallid institutions reflect their listless leadership.

College presidents are quick to point out that leadership today is difficult because of the magnitude of the problems they confront. But the very conditions that create such challenges for colleges and universities—financial constraints, curricular disarray, public concerns, the uncertain role of new technology—also provide a rare opportunity for bold and effective leadership. Indeed, without that leadership, our colleges and universities cannot prosper in the challenging years ahead.

How, then, can a college president become an effective leader? The task of the college president, reduced to its essentials, is to define and articulate the mission of the institution; develop meaningful goals; and then recruit the talent, build the consensus, create the climate, and provide the resources to achieve them. All else is peripheral.

The most important task, and also the most difficult one, is to define the institution's mission and develop its goals. That is the first task of the president. Everything else follows from that; everything else will depend upon it. The mission and goals must be ambitious, distinctive, and relevant to the needs and interests of campus constituents. Too many mission statements are shallow and self-serving, full of academic buzzwords and scholarly clichés, but empty of substance and bereft of significant purpose. The aspirations and achievements of trustees, faculty, students, and alumni, as well as the expectations of the public, will reflect those initial statements of mission and goals.

The president should employ his or her best skills to dream the institution into something new, to challenge it to greatness, to elevate its hopes and extend its reach, and to energize it to new levels of success and galvanize it to higher levels of achievement in every area of its institutional life.

And it is here that most presidents fail. "Make no little plans," Daniel Burnham once urged. "They have no magic to stir men's blood." But it is not setting small goals; it is setting no goals that leads to presidential failure. Aimless, day-to-day management, busy inertia, preoccupied drift, and high-minded indecision mark too many presidencies, because incumbents set no goals. The first and greatest task of a president is to articulate the vision, champion the goals, and enunciate the objectives. "There can be no great creation without a dream. Giant towers rest on a foundation of visionary purpose," Morris Bishop once declared. He was right.

Creating this visionary purpose is not the work of a day or a week. Nor can it be a solo effort. It requires imagination, perception, cultivation, creativity, and boldness. It also requires help, criticism, and time. Trusted colleagues—past and present—knowledgeable advisors, and respected external consultants can offer invaluable assistance. The president should use them. By building on the traditions of the institution, harnessing its strength, recognizing emerging needs, seizing new opportunities, developing new niches, and building new constituencies, the vision and the mission gradually take shape, to be tested, refined, and sharpened in active debate with all the stakeholders, both on and off the campus.

The vision drives the goals, as the president establishes the benchmarks and articulates the values on which the day-to-day life of the institution will depend. Those goals, developed item by item, unit by unit, set the agenda, the blueprint for action, the mandate for change. This, too, is a joint effort: Trustees, provosts, vice presidents, deans, faculty, staff members, students, alumni, the public, advisors, and consultants—all have a role and a proportionate voice, but it is the president who outlines the process, frames the discussion, and establishes the tone of the debate;

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and it is the president who carries it through to conclusion, not as a finished report, but as a living program, actively influencing decisions, motivating effort, and channeling resources.

It is the president's task not only to ensure the development of the vision, mission, and goals, but also to carry the flag for them once they are developed. It is the president's task to encourage understanding, promote discussion, incorporate positive suggestions, and accommodate concerns, not to dilute the vision—it must have substance and the goals must have teeth—but to carry everyone on campus along as active partners in the venture. Without consensus, there can be little progress. This requires time, perseverance, and effective advocacy.

Three more things are needed for success, and each is a presidential responsibility.

The president must:

- Create the climate
- Recruit the team
- Provide the resources to achieve the goals

Creating the campus climate is among the most challenging and most subtle of all presidential roles. It also is one of the most vital. It means generating trust, encouraging initiative, building partnerships, promoting teamwork, rewarding achievement, celebrating success. It means not only tolerating, but also encouraging a willingness to break out of the box to experiment with new approaches, dismantling bureaucratic barriers, eliminating administrative layers, nurturing an expectation of success and an atmosphere of openness, and exemplifying enthusiasm for the task in hand and a commitment to the well-being of the institution and all its members.

The president creates the atmosphere. He or she is everywhere, walking the campus; meeting with students at breakfast, faculty at brown bag lunches, alumni at reunions, everyone at campus events; and entertaining at home. The president understands the hopes and concerns of the campus, energizes its efforts, challenges its complacency, raises its aspirations. No encounter is too brief, no event too small, no action too limited to have an influence—positive or negative—on the atmosphere of the campus.

And, if this task is demanding because the president is never “off duty,” it also is exhilarating and satisfying. The effective president will embody a level of energy and enterprise, of optimism and openness, that is infectious. It is this spirit, and the teamwork it promotes, that achieves success. But the campus atmosphere requires and reflects a foundation of values. The fact that values are not emblazoned over every campus doorway, or discussed in every lecture, does not make them any less real or significant. No effective president has ever been value-neutral. The traditional virtues of the academy—reason, integrity, fairness, respect, civility, community, discipline, and industry—are values that the successful president will embrace and embody. They will be reflected by the president in every speech, every relationship, every meeting, every priority, every decision, every policy. The president is the personal embodiment of the institution's values. The successful president accepts that high obligation.

The successful president also selects the leaders who will carry the institution forward. These must all be championship players, at the top of their form; they must be what Jack Welch, chairman of General Electric, calls ‘A’ players, single-minded in their commitment, unswerving in their loyalty to the university, and unambiguous in their willingness to serve its members. Search committees, head-hunters, faculty advice, and student input all will play a part in the selection of these campus leaders, but the president must establish the structure, define the tasks and responsibilities, and set the expectations and standards for each senior position. The president also must have the ultimate voice in making these appointments. Their incumbents will share the president's dreams and will be committed to achieving his or her goals.

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These people are the “A team,” and the president will be the manager, coach, and cheerleader for the team. But he or she is not the owner and not the quarterback. The president will achieve results through others, designing the strategy, writing the play book, coaching, shaping, encouraging, and inspiring the team to success, trusting their various skills, and celebrating their victories. If I overstate the athletic model, it is to emphasize the difference between this winning style of leadership and the dreary, budget-bound “management style” of so many campus leaders. Achieving results requires high morale, joint effort, and shared objectives; it also requires frequent contact, regular meetings, and close working relationships with all team members. There is a particular energy that comes from this contact; energy, enthusiasm, and confidence are highly infectious qualities.

Perhaps the weakest link in the chain of institutional responsibility is that of the department chair. Too many department chairs serve reluctantly and ineffectively. If colleges and universities are to prosper in hard times, they need to redesign the position of chair by redefining the role, improving the selection process, providing training, and creating new incentives, support, and recognition for those who occupy this crucial position. The president and the provost need to work with deans to correct the present weakness.

The president also is responsible for providing the resources necessary to support the life and work of the campus. It is a natural law of academic life that every program could be far more effective, every institutional ranking elevated by ten places, every facility greatly improved, and every program wonderfully enriched by having another million or so dollars. No curriculum is ever properly covered, no program ever adequately supported, no need ever fully met.

Many presidents—never recognizing that the academic appetite is insatiable, as it should be—become slaves to a mendicant treadmill, camping out on unwelcoming legislators’ doorsteps, endlessly wandering inhospitable Capitol corridors, criss-crossing the globe in weary pursuit of prosperous, but uncaring alumni, exhausting themselves in the search for financial support. Let me be clear: The president must raise funds, must provide resources, must cultivate the legislature, must somehow scratch together the extra funding needed for important stretch-goals and ambitious new developments. But, in doing these things, he or she must retain a focus on the things that matter most. I believe fund raising is immensely important—I’ve just edited a book on the subject—and I believe an inattentive and ineffective fundraiser is most unlikely to be an effective president. But fund raising must not become all-absorbing. It generally is easier for the president to find first-rate help in fund raising than in those things that matter even more: the mission and goals, the climate, the programs, and—most of all—the people who make up the larger campus family. Fund raising can so divert a president’s attention that those other things are dangerously neglected; the successful president will be committed to both fund raising and friend raising, but they will not displace these other vital tasks.

Of course, other things are distracting, too. There will always be surprises, some welcome, others unwelcome: state financial crises, federal budget cuts, litigation, student behavior, athletic compliance, zoning restrictions, political intrusion, tenure controversies, medical school and hospital problems (the latter a guaranteed monthly occurrence), loss of research support, and a host of others. To all these, the effective president pays attention, not shouldering any one as a personal obligation, but using his or her team, assigning individual responsibility, requiring solutions, marshalling resources, “following the case.”

If there are problems, there also are delights along the way: faculty achievements, splendid books, breathtaking creations, sparkling performances, Pulitzer prizes and Nobel laureates, life-saving new procedures, winning teams, Rhodes and Marshall scholarships, facilities improvements, and growing library treasures. There also is immense satisfaction in being a member of a community with outstanding faculty colleagues, devoted staff members, bright students, loyal alumni, supportive trustees, and generous benefactors—all these and so much more are part of the rich tapestry

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and interplay of campus life. And, beyond these, there is high purpose, discoveries of fundamental importance, and learning of transforming influence. What a privilege to be a part of such a society! What an extraordinary opportunity to be entrusted to lead it!

But why do so many presidents fail so soon, departing, by desire or direction, frustrated, exhausted, and disillusioned? And why do so many who continue to occupy the position regard the presidency with such ambivalence? Why do so many constantly represent themselves as the burdened victims of administrative burn-out, trustee neglect, faculty mistrust, and campus opposition? There are, I suppose, as many reasons as there are presidents, but five areas of presidential neglect seem to be all-too-frequent causes of frustration and failure.

First, personal exhaustion takes a terrible toll. Lack of sleep, no time for exercise, shortened vacations, and repeated involvement in crises are the warning signs on the road to personal exhaustion. Only a disciplined routine, a managed calendar, appropriate delegation, a willingness to say "no," effective personal support staff, and the unswerving personal conviction of the ultimate value of the university's work can prevent personal exhaustion. Overburdened university presidents do not suffer burnout; they create it, inflicting it upon themselves by their lack of responsible work habits. The campus is unlikely to prosper if its leader is so worn down by the burdens of office that he or she conveys a sense of joyless routine and weary resignation.

Second, muddled priorities, or no priorities, contribute to presidential failure. Every task is not of equal importance; every invitation not equally pressing; every meeting not equally urgent; every objective not equally vital; every decision not equally significant. Choices must be made, tasks must be delegated, priorities must be established. It is not only personal exhaustion that is prevented by this discipline; it is also squandered effort and ineffective leadership. The priorities I have listed above should top the president's list.

Third, too many college presidents neglect their families and those naturally closest—the very ones who can best support and encourage them in their role. Family members are always next on the list for attention, but easily displaced; always close, but easily overlooked and taken for granted. The president is impoverished and the family deprived by this neglect.

Fourth, personal isolation is an occupational hazard of the busy college president. Meeting hundreds of people, the president is friends with none. Addressing scores of listeners, he or she remains a stranger to them. And, if family estrangement undermines personal support, personal isolation can undermine institutional effectiveness. It leads to lack of insight and understanding, lack of trust, lack of cooperation and teamwork, lack of joy. Too many presidents become prisoners of the office, spending their lives glued to the meeting chair, chained to the mahogany desk, isolated from the broad body of people whose interests they were appointed to represent and on whose partnership and understanding their success depends. Trustees, faculty, students, staff, alumni, civic and political leaders, colleagues from other campuses, and members of the president's cabinet all can provide friendship of immense importance to presidential leadership and personal fulfillment.

Fifth, because most college presidents are drawn from the faculty ranks, intellectual starvation is a particularly threatening disease. Busy with this, preoccupied by that, distracted by a dozen pressing issues, presidents develop an inner emptiness and personal hollowness; they are starved of the intellectual and spiritual nourishment which is the sustenance of the campus. Hollow men and moral nomads—Robert Bolt's phrase—are found as frequently in the president's chair, perhaps, as in any other. But there is something particularly poignant in this inner poverty in the midst of the intellectual riches the campus provides.

And the antidote? Serious reading, continued teaching, participation in lectures and symposia of substance, maintenance of a meaningful research interest, nurture of the inner life: These are the

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means of intellectual grace, the essential basis of the scholarly community. The effective president's schedule will have a place for each of them, though not, inevitably, to the degree the president once enjoyed as a member of the faculty. The president should teach, in however limited a role, should be a serious reader, should participate in the intellectual life of the campus, should remain an informed scholar in his or her own field. The pressures of the day will converge to squeeze out these activities. They must be resisted. Time must be found. Space must be made and it can be done. I used to escape to Cambridge University for three weeks every summer, to read and write on Charles Darwin. I found that time precious, not only because it gave me time for reflection and renewal, but also because it allowed me to see Cornell in perspective; to view affairs from a reasonable distance.

What makes the temptation to neglect one's own intellectual needs so powerful is that it is so reasonable, so completely understandable, and so well-intentioned. What could be more selfless than to put the work of the university first? But what makes this neglect so corrosive to the presidency is that, in diminishing the person, it also diminishes the office and its effectiveness. The hollow president goes through all the motions—the meetings, the planning, the budget cycle, the speeches, the ceremonies—but lacks the inner fire, conviction, and personal zest that make those activities meaningful.

One final thing: The president must lead. Everything I have written so far is a prelude to leadership. But it is not a substitute for it. For all its supposed limitations, the authority of the office is substantial; the president must exercise that authority. Effective leadership all too often is blunted by endless debate, excessive consultation, and unwise accommodation. Effective leadership requires the president to be both a listener to others and a teacher, clarifying, simplifying, and specifying the nature of governance, the division of responsibility, and the process of decision making. Effective presidential leadership means not only framing the agenda, but also driving it to a conclusion. It means being accountable, but also being bold. It means building support, but also retaining a degree of independence for those times when support is not forthcoming.

The Chinese symbol for danger, we have been often reminded, is also the symbol for opportunity. America's universities stand at just such a point, approaching the new millennium confronted with both threats and opportunities that seem greater than any before. Perhaps there was never a time that provided such extraordinary opportunities for presidential leadership or such great consequences from presidential failure to exercise that leadership.

CONTACT@TheAdvisoryGroup.com
www.TheAdvisoryGroup.com