Higher Education Leadership

Pathways and Insights

Sharmila Pixy Ferris
Kathleen Waldron

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Higher Education Leadership: Pathways and Insights

BY

SHARMILA PIXY FERRIS
William Paterson University, USA

KATHLEEN WALDRON
William Paterson University, USA

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated in loving memory of Maureen Minielli, cherished friend, taken from us too soon. Maureen helped develop the ideas that shaped this book, and her life demonstrated leadership in action.

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Adelphi University and Ramapo College

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Foreword

Many books on leadership in general, and higher education leadership in particular, as well as on presidential failures and successes, are written by those reflecting on their careers. In this book, Dr. Kathy Waldron, President *Emerita* of William Paterson University, and Dr. Sharmila Pixy Ferris, Professor of Communication at William Paterson University, take a different approach. They are interested in examining the variety of pathways to leadership, insights from critical incidents which might benefit others, and concerns for the longer term, expressed by those profiled.

The authors composed an intentionally diverse population of presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans from a cross section of public and private four-year and higher colleges and universities. After confirming the participation of the invited leaders, the authors sent each a set of questions that would be explored in the interviews. In this way, the participants would be prepared to discuss the themes to be examined. The authors then produced portraits of 20 higher education leaders and reported on the "landscapes" in which they worked and grew.

The result is not only an ethnographic exploration of leadership paths, insights, and strategies by what has been called "thick description" but also an examination of both the contemporary contexts in which leadership is displayed, as well as a survey of future complexities anticipated by the leaders.

Leadership involves listening with eyes as well as ears; reading to strengthen the use of language and image; speaking and communicating in formal and informal settings in order to inspire and console; writing speeches and notes of congratulations and condolence; reflecting on incidents as well as on the purpose of the enterprise; appreciating the importance of context and culture; and fostering inquisitiveness and asking "why?" "what if?" and "what can we learn from this?" Leadership involves expressing both empathy and compassion. Above all, it requires integrity, a "moral compass," a sense of self. To develop in these various ways usually takes time, humility, reflection, and mentors.

The stories related give examples of how those profiled developed these attributes and talents, entered higher education, and when they first were offered or took opportunities of leadership. The chapters also relate the critical incidents that proved to be particularly important in their growth as leaders. They demonstrate that we each build "wells" of experience, some from childhood, on which to draw in later times. In each case, the importance of commitment to the institution, even to the point of sacrifice, is evident.

Among the findings I found of special interest were the emphasis on the importance of campus leaders coming from the faculty, the value of scholarly

credentials, the need to respect the faculty and shared governance, and the lessons learned from crossing sectors of higher education. While these are not surprising, it is good to see them presented as priorities at a time when the pressure on many academic leaders is to act like CEOs. Those interviewed fulfill what I consider the CPO role: "Chief Purpose Officer." While CEOs tend to focus on money, markets, and personnel as labor, CPOs focus on mission, students as learners, and faculty as partners in purpose.

Institutional change is difficult, but the lessons learned from these interviews are instructive. Leaders sometimes confuse mission, which is about purpose, with tradition, which may be timebound. Too often, leaders confuse the two. Leaders must be true to the mission and respect tradition, but they also must know that new traditions can be important components in the ongoing narrative of an institution.

Being a leader can be lonely. I commend the references to not being shy about asking others for help. By asking for advice from fellow presidents or deans that one meets at conferences, the leader can learn from others' mistakes and successes. To ask for help is not a sign of weakness, but an indication of confidence. I also applaud the references to building a team. It is only with a talented team that a leader can properly delegate the day-to-day tasks and focus on the longer term.

By using tabletop exercises to help plan for dealing with a crisis, the leader can help anticipate problems and give the team experience in dealing with an issue as a unit. This is useful whether anticipating what to do with a bomb threat or discussing how your team would have handled an incident that occurred at another campus. Such training can help advance flexibility, adaptability, and innovation.

An important plus consists in the examples of present and future challenges and changes these presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans anticipate. Their thoughts on college costs, the use of data, remote teaching and learning, social media and the 24-hour news cycle, and the corporatization of the academy, among numerous other challenges, ring true and deserve the attention of all campus leaders, including boards of trustees. So too do their comments on changes in demographics and the economy, the need for new sources of revenue, and the perils of deferred maintenance.

Leaders are always learning, and this book is an important addition to a leader's reading list. Leaders also have opportunities to help others develop as leaders, thus becoming mentors after benefiting from being mentored. This too is an important lesson imparted by those profiled. We are all students, and students are our priority.

September 16, 2020
Dr. Robert A. Scott
President Emeritus and University Professor Emeritus, Adelphi University
President Emeritus and Professor Emeritus, Ramapo College of New Jersey
Author, How University Boards Work, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018-Eric Hoffer Award 2019
https://www.higheredjobs.com/blog/default.cfm?BlogID=22

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conversations at meals and get-togethers, on walks, at EfM, in the hallways and by the copy machine, on the phone, and on email.

Saving the best until last, we are grateful for the support our partners provided with their presence, their encouragement, and many conversations about leadership. Jon Golby listened and offered advice and thoughts about leadership to Kathy. Brian kept Pixy grounded and insisted on an ergonomic chair and regular meals, aided by Bell-the-wonder-collie who made sure she oversaw all the writing and eating.

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century and the decades leading up to it, higher education has faced challenges and opportunities that demand much from its leaders. Never has decision-making and problem solving been more complex, and many books have been written to guide higher education leaders. What makes *this* book unique as a higher education leadership resource is our ethnographic and interview-based approach. As humans, we learn from each other, and we learn well from each other's stories (Fisher,1985, 1994). In this book, the authentic and intimate voices of 20 expert leaders provide guidance for others along the paths of deanship, provostship, vice presidency, and presidency.

If you are an aspiring leader, whether inside higher education or not, our book helps you learn from experienced leaders' reflections on their paths to leadership; and if you are an insider, a current and/or rising leader, you can learn from seasoned leaders with expertise in a wide range of applications and contextual considerations. The deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents in this book offer strategies that reveal valuable and nuanced elements of leadership. Their pathways, insights, and strategies can help you negotiate the economic, social, cultural, political, and technological changes in the higher education landscape and be better prepared for the stepped up leadership demanded in today's fluid and dynamic climate.[1]

In writing this book, we took an ethnographic and "lived experience" approach to leadership that cannot necessarily be revealed by higher education books that are more narrowly focused. Our book encompasses retrospective contemplation by leaders on situations and events, and captures individual human and contextual elements that influence decision-making and leadership. The type of academic ethnography we use here provides a richer, more meaningful understanding of being a leader in academe, generated from the nexus of epistemic, existential, philosophical, and practical concerns. By including insights and pathways developed from expert leaders' lived experience, we provide real perspectives on higher education, with topics suggested by experts in the area of application, as well as contextual considerations that shape potential resolutions.

[1]We note that interviews took place in the fall of 2019 and winter of 2020, before the COVID pandemic radically changed the higher education experience in the United States and globally.

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Research Design

Ethnography

Our research utilizes ethnography as a technique particularly amenable to our context-bound research focus (Richards, 2005). Because ethnography is research in which the researcher participates, overtly or covertly, in people's lives, collecting whatever data are available to describe behavior (Reinard, 2007) we feel ethnography is the most appropriate way to elicit in-depth information from higher education leaders about their pathways to leadership, strategies for leadership success, and insights on leadership. Ethnography does not specify any particular method (such as observations or questionnaires) or any particular approach (i.e., qualitative or quantitative), so for our particular ethnographic method we chose to use interviews as particularly suited to understanding lived experience and helping understand different points of view (Reinard, 2007). Interviewing is not only a long-established and highly used method of collecting data in qualitative social research methods (Aspers & Corte, 2019), but it is a method that allows for rich data that may not be possible to obtain through other methods (Kvale, 1996; Robinson, 2014).

Critical Incident Technique

We strengthened our interviews by incorporating the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) in order to identify thematic areas of importance in higher education. The critical incident technique was developed by Flanagan to collect, content analyze, and classify observations of human behavior. A critical incident is described as one that makes a significant contribution, either positively or negatively, to an activity or phenomenon (Gremler, 2015). While critical incidents can be gathered in various ways, typically the researcher asks participants to tell a story about an experience they have had. In our research, we asked interviewees to identify and reflect on an experience critical to their leadership, sending them this question in advance.

Procedures

We designed and piloted structured questions before beginning the interviews. After going through the IRB process at our home institution of William Paterson University, we identified senior leaders at the positions of deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents and invited them to participate in interviews (further information on selection processes below). If and when participants agreed to be interviewed, we provided a complete list of interview questions in advance to allow them to prepare for the interview through reflections on their own leadership experiences. We conducted the interviews online via either Skype or Zoom, with each of the authors (Pixy and Kathy)

and the interviewee at geographically separate locations. To minimize obtrusive note taking and ensure accuracy during the interview, we digitally recorded all interviews (with interviewees' consent). Pixy kept field notes with information on impressions, nonverbal behaviors, vocal tone of responses, and keywords or phrases.

Interviewees

The criteria we used to select interviewees were leadership position, type of institution, gender, and race and ethnicity. Leadership position included the senior positions of dean, vice president, provost, or president with substantial (at least five years, preferably more) experience in the position. We chose not to interview department or program chairs as the position of chair is structured with different responsibilities at various institutions. Also, department chairs typically have a set of roles and responsibilities that place them in the middle, between faculty and deans (Sternberg et al., 2015). To identify interviewees, we used convenience sampling, first drawing upon personal networks to identify potential leaders in the position of dean, provost, vice president, or president at a range of four-year institutions of higher education. After our initial invitations to leaders within our personal networks were accepted or declined, we proceeded to identify and invite additional interviewees by doing Internet searches to meet our criteria. We continued the process of invitation and acceptances/declination until we had 20 interviewees in senior leadership positions, 4 deans, 4 provosts, 4 vice presidents, and 8 current and retired presidents or chancellors.

Although we acknowledge the rich diversity of higher educational institutions in the United States, we did limit our selection of interviewees to four-year degree granting institutions as senior leaders at these colleges and universities share somewhat similar responsibilities (Table 1). We included leaders from public and private institutions (see Table 2), as well as from historically Black institutions, different sized colleges and universities (small, medium, and large) and some religious denominational institutions (see Table 3). We note that we followed the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2018) in describing colleges and universities, especially with reference to research institutions (R1 and R2) which are doctoral granting institutions with high research activity. We also tried to include colleges and universities from different parts of the country (see Table 4) while recognizing that the east has the largest concentration of higher education institutions in the United States.

Table 1. Interviewees by Position.

Dean	Provost	Vice President	President/Chancellor
6	4	2	8

Table 2. Institutional Type.

Private	Public
9	11

Table 3. Specific Institutional Types.

Research University	HBCU	Religious Affiliation
6	2	3

Table 4. Institutions by Geographical Area (as designated by the U. S. Census, n. d.).

West	Midwest	Northeast	South
4	3	9	4

In our selection of interviewees we purposively sought insights from underrepresented groups in higher education leadership by ensuring that half of our sample were women (see Table 5) and taking care to include representative voices of Black, LatinX, and Asian higher education leaders (see Table 6). We feel it was important that pathways and insights of underrepresented leaders be shared, as the data show that women and minority participation in the leadership structure of the academy has not increased relative to their increased numbers in higher education (ACE, 2017).

We did not purposively seek to address intersectionality as we recognize the complexity of intersectionality and we do not want to make the error of conflating or ignoring intergroup differences (see Museus & Griffin, 2011). During the interviews, however, we discovered serendipitously that three of our invited leaders were immigrants (from China, India, and the United Kingdom, respectively) and one leader was gay, out, and an LGBT advocate (see Table 7). We are especially pleased to present their intersectional perspectives on leadership as we recognize that multiple identities shape the lived experience of all leaders. In this

Table 5. Interviewees by Gender.

Male	Female
10	10

Table 6. Interviewees by Race and Ethnicity.

White	Black	LatinX	Asian
12	4	2	2

Table 7. Interviewees by Intergroup Differences.

Native Born	Foreign Born	LGBT
17	3	1

book we are careful to accept our interviewees' personal perspectives on how (and if) multiple social identities shape their leadership and do our best to avoid imposing our own viewpoints upon their narratives.

Analysis

Our interviews were transcribed verbatim and we applied Lanigan's technique of phenomenological description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1977, 1988) to describe our interviewees' pathways to leadership in higher education, insights on leadership, and strategies for effectiveness.

The first step we undertook was phenomenological description, which involves the interview process and transcription of the interview. Our interviews were structured to focus on what Lanigan calls "conscious experience," focusing on the experience itself and trying to avoid external presuppositions from influencing descriptions of experiences (Lanigan, 1977, pp. 5–6). Our second step was reduction, which involved examining the narratives from the interviewees for essential themes. We determined "which parts of the description are essential and which are not" (Lanigan, 1977, p. 6; 1988, p. 10) and focused broadly on several themes of pathways to current leadership position, critical incidents, insights on higher education, and advice for aspiring, current, and rising leaders. Thirdly and finally, we proceeded to interpretation where we sought to reduce and describe the conscious experience of interviewees (Lanigan, 1977, p. 8).

After completing our analysis we devoted a chapter to each interviewee's reflections on their pathways to leadership and their insights about leadership in higher education. In the conclusion to our book, we followed Lanigan's technique (1988) again in reducing initial themes to identify the most essential feature of the phenomenon, and also to relate the themes to one another and to insights about higher education. In writing each chapter, we took a feminist perspective by calling our interviewees first names and by referencing ourselves in the first person.

Throughout our analysis of interviews, and in writing the chapters, we took the approach of *accepting* the information that our interviewees chose to share. We accepted their voices and viewpoints and as far as possible did not insert our own views. We underline that we framed the chapters around the *interviewees*' perspectives, so did not comment on their inclusions or possible omissions.[2] We did fact-check interview information through official curriculum vitae and public information such as press releases from universities, statements from Boards and Faculty Senates, and statements from organizations to which interviewees belonged. However, our perspective was generally that of acceptance of interviewee's self-reported pathways, accomplishments, and insights, as presented to us.

We feel that our appreciation of our interviewees' stories, insights, and experiences as the freely given gifts they are reflects our ethnographic and feminist perspectives. We laud our interviewees for their leadership, and recognize and value their generosity in sharing their time and knowledge, grounded on their lived experience, and a diversity of perspectives. And now, we invite you to learn from our conversations with our interviewees to gain a deeper and broader understanding of higher education in general and the complexities of leadership in particular. We also hope that you will feel each and every one of our interviewees' presence and see their "evocative and vulnerable heart(s)" (Ellis, 2015, p. 10) as you discover their pathways to leadership and share their insights, strategies, and advice.

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[2]In particular, if an interviewee did not comment on the role played by their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or immigrant status in their own leadership, we did not comment on these issues in their chapter. We also note that in the chapters we use our interviewees' terms with reference to race. However, we made the conscious choice to capitalize the word Black (see for example Eligon, 2020).

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