# ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## A Guide for Trustees, Leaders, and Aspiring Leaders of Two- and Four-Year Institutions

*Robert M. Hendrickson, Jason E. Lane, James T. Harris, and Richard H. Dorman*

Foreword by Stanley O. Ikenberry

2013

Stylus

STERLING, VIRGINIA

# 1

# PRINCIPLES OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

In the summer of 1994 a group of new college and university presidents from around the world gathered at Harvard University to discuss their roles as academic leaders. During that meeting, a small group of those presidents (one of the authors was among them) had the opportunity to meet with distinguished American sociologist the late David Riesman. The purpose of the meeting was to expose these recently hired presidents to some of the research Riesman and his colleagues at Harvard had been conducting on successful academic institutions and the people who lead them.

After a brief presentation of the data he collected and the conclusions he had drawn from his research, Riesman asked if there were any questions. At first there was silence, but then one president raised his hand and asked if there was any one thing he could do as the leader of his university to guarantee he would be successful in his new role. Riesman paused, looked directly at the man, and said, "Become the living embodiment of the mission of the institution you serve." He went on to describe how a successful institution, and the people who lead it, understand the institution's basic purpose or mission and make decisions in alignment with that specific mission. Riesman added that while there were no guarantees, institutions and leaders that were mission driven and democratic in nature were more likely to weather tough times successfully and adjust to challenges than those with less clear direction and purpose.

In many ways, Riesman's advice to the new president seems obvious and logical. It makes sense that leaders of institutions with a clear sense of purpose and direction would make better decisions about how to use scarce resources and face changes in the environment with greater resiliency. Or does it?

## Conflicting Goals, Ambiguous Aims

Many scholars would have us believe that the basic purpose or mission of any institution of higher education could be described as having three basic components: teaching, research, and service. In *How Colleges Work*, Birnbaum (1988) stated that these three elements are interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and to some extent broadly describe the work of individual faculty members and the primary goal of the academy as a whole. Furthermore, he noted that as institutions of higher learning have become more diverse and complex, missions have not become clearer. Rather, they become more complex and create greater tensions between competing constituencies. These tensions may be best characterized by the decades-old conflict between teaching and research, that is, which one is the most prized activity within the academy.

Other scholars (Gross & Grambsch, 1974) have proposed similar ideas, mainly that the problem is not that college and university officials are unable to identify their goals and direction, but rather that they embrace too many conflicting goals, which causes more tension and leads to confusion about an institution's mission. Cohen and March (1974) were more direct when they stated that institutions of higher learning, specifically American universities, were really "organized anarchies" (p. 2) with ill-defined goals, ambiguous organizational processes, and ever changing boundaries.

Because of the increased complexity of higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, one may be led to believe that focusing on institutional mission is not as important as identifying and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of various constituents within the academy—primarily the board, administration, and faculty. Much has been written on the subject, and several major higher education accrediting bodies and associations, including the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (1996) and the American Association of University Professors (n.d.), have issued statements on the importance and predominance of shared governance in the successful management of the academy. These statements speak to the difficulty of managing a complex organization and subscribe to the notion that good governance, however it may be applied at any particular institution, is the key to success in higher education—and is perhaps even a viable substitute for being mission driven. Indeed, with the predominance of literature on the importance of academic governance models, one could almost be led to believe that a good organizational structure is at the heart of institutional success, regardless of whether an organization is producing something that is desirable to the marketplace or related to its mission.



The notion that since institutions of higher learning are too complex to lead the best we can do is hope for collaboration and effective power sharing within wisely devised governance structures is myopic and one dimensional. A highly effective shared governance model is as much the product of an institution whose administrators understand its purpose or mission as healthy enrollments, strategic planning, and clear budgeting and management. In other words, leaders of healthy, thriving institutions understand their purpose and niche in the broader higher education community, and because of this knowledge, their institutions are better governed and positioned to succeed in tough times.

## Importance of Being Mission Driven

What exactly does it mean to be mission driven? The literature is full of examples of the importance of a clear purpose or a set of core values that drives decision making at an institution. Welzenbach (1982) described mission as the "broad, overall, long term purpose of the institution" (p. 15). That broad purpose may be based on religious or philosophical tenets or may be driven by an institution's relationship to the state or federal government (Davies, 1986; Dewey, 1916; Kerr, 1964). Handy (1997) proposed that because of the growing complexity of life in a virtual world, organizations are not necessarily tied in tangible ways to a campus with buildings or a specific location. Under these conditions, the work of the academic leader is to help people in the institution understand how their work contributes to the mission regardless of the location, time, or place in which it is fulfilling its educational purpose. That task requires the college or university to have a distinctive mission, one that helps it to distinguish it from others.

Institutional leaders who clearly identify their mission and articulate in unequivocal terms what matters most to them have a greater opportunity to claim a distinctive position in the marketplace and to have the greatest impact on society. In his book on strategic planning, Keller (1983) emphasized the importance of an organizational charter in developing a clear mission for an organization that would help drive decision making at all levels. Maurrasse (2001) believed an institution's mission should address the overall reason for its existence and establish a set of norms and expectations of a "way of doing business" (p. 6).

For this book, the word *mission* refers to the purpose, philosophy, and educational aspirations of a college or university. A college's or university's

educational philosophy or mission statement should direct an institution and its leaders. It should provide a rationale for the way a college or university administrator approaches decisions about every aspect of the academy, from whom the board selects to lead to what the curriculum should be to how resources should be distributed. In the end, it should provide the focus or glue that binds the organization together as well as offer the core values that guide the institution's decision making. In other words, a mission statement should help organization administrators determine not only what the institution will do but, equally importantly, what it will not do. As was pointed out earlier, the lack of a clear and distinguishing mission can diminish an institution's focus and lead to unclear goals and objectives, which in turn can create problems internally and externally.

BoardSource's (2010) authors outlined 12 principles of governance they believe powers exceptional boards. Among the 12 recommendations for board members are remaining strategic in their thinking, creating an ethos of transparency, and being results oriented. Most important, however, is the underlining theme that all decisions—from selecting new leadership to budgeting—must "ensure the congruence between decisions and core values" (p. 23). That is, exceptional board members recognize that their primary role is to mold and uphold the mission of the institution they serve.

The value of mission statements is exemplified by the fact that all major accrediting bodies require that an institution demonstrate that its mission is appropriate and achievable in some reasonable manner. For example, the authors of *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2008) require that institutions seeking accreditation or reaffirmation be compliant with a specific set of standards and that each standard be "interpreted and applied in the context of the institution's mission and situation" (p. viii). The authors explained that an institution's mission "defines the institution, delineates the scope of the institution, explains the institution's character and individuality, and articulates values as appropriate" (p. 1). Furthermore, they argued that the main purpose of governance is to realize fully the stated mission of the college or university.

The mission of an institution has long been believed to be important in the creation of the academic curriculum and the promotion of democratic ideals. For example, in 1977 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published a report in which it asserted that "governing boards have a responsibility for making the institutional mission an explicit instrument of educational policy" (p. 258). In 1987 Boyer wrote a report on the



state of undergraduate education in which he noted that several things reduce its quality. In his opinion the main problem was a lack of a clear understanding of the goals and purposes of higher education. In other words, he discovered that while some colleges and universities do reasonably well in helping students understand and even become competent in specific fields, most higher education institutions lack a clear sense of direction or purpose, which ultimately diminishes an undergraduate's education. The implication is clear: Institution administrators who understand their institution's core purpose and tie it to their educational outcomes provide the richest learning environments for their students.

In this book we make the case that one of the core purposes of all colleges and universities is to promote democratic ideals. In fact, evidence suggests that the broad support American colleges and universities have enjoyed over the centuries is because of an implicit understanding that higher education exists in part to help our democracy flourish. It is not enough, however, for administrators, faculty, and staff of colleges and universities to encourage students to develop into responsible citizens equipped to work collaboratively in a global society. Rather, they must model the same behavior. Institutions can best exemplify this aspect of their mission through the creation of reciprocal, democratic alliances locally and globally.

In their discussion on civic education, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) argue that the schools that are most successful in promoting a democratic agenda have a core institutional commitment that is "intentional and holistic" (p. 9) and shapes most, if not all, aspects of a student's experience while in school. In describing the more successful models of civic education, Colby and associates reaffirm that the mission of an institution is the starting point for the creation of a unique learning environment.

Having a clear sense of mission not only improves a college's or university's ability to obtain important accreditations, has a positive impact on student learning outcomes, and promotes civic education. It also helps institutions' trustees to assess leadership. In an essay by Colgan and de Russy (2006), sponsored by the Institute for Effective Governance in Higher Education, the authors argue that it is imperative for trustees to tie the assessment of a president to the institution's three most critical documents: its mission statement, strategic plan, and corresponding budget.

## Adjusting to an Ever-Changing Environment

Being mission driven is no guarantee that an institution will enjoy success, however. In fact, Chait, Ryan, and Taylor (2005) suggest institutions will

suffer if their board members assume that being mission driven insulates them from threats from outside the academy. Their research shows that administrators who have chosen to ignore environmental factors such as changes in technology or enrollment trends because they believe they are mission driven have done so at their peril. Therefore, boards and institutions that have found ways to engage continually in boundary-spanning assessment and planning are better able to adjust to the ever changing environment and ensure that the mission of the institution remains relevant.

Being mission driven does not mean that an organization cannot adapt to change. Instead, being mission driven allows an institution to use its mission as a lens to interpret changes in the environment and connect institutional aspirations with what is happening in the world. For example, most early colonial liberal arts colleges emphasized the classics for all students, which included language training in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. As Rudolph (1962) stated in his history of American higher education, these languages served as "tools with which teacher and student found their way" (p. 25) through ancient texts. Today those languages, while still offered at some institutions, are not required because of the broad access everyone has to translations of those texts. Although core language requirements may have changed in response to a major environmental shift, no one would suggest that those institutions are not fulfilling their mission as liberal arts colleges because they no longer require those texts to be taught in their original languages.

The ability of academic leaders to understand and adjust to changes in the external environment while remaining in alignment with the core values of their college or university requires the discipline to interpret change through the lens of their institution's mission. For example, when developing a strategic plan, leaders must scan the external landscape as well as the internal workings of their institution to ensure that the future direction of their institution will be in alignment with its core values. This discipline is easy to ignore, however, when colleges and universities face environmental threats, and such disregard has led many administrators of higher education organizations to neglect their core mission in favor of becoming more like institutions they believe are more prestigious or ranked more highly.

A risk of emulating other colleges and universities in the hope of acquiring resources and prestige is *mission creep* (Lane, 2005). A particular problem with mission creep is not that schools have added new programs or services to enhance their mission, but rather that the additions make them more closely resemble other institutions in the marketplace. In a 2001 letter to the California legislature, Clark Kerr described mission creep as "a phenomenon in which one segment of higher education redefines its mission to include the responsibility already being performed by another" (as cited in Lane, pp. 4–5). Beyond diminishing the diversity of higher education institutions, this mimicking of another mission to attain additional resources or prestige rarely results in a sustainable model of education and often moves an institution away from its original purpose.



The practice of imitation as a means to advance a college's or university's reputation differs significantly from the historical tradition of major shifts through which new institution types emerged. For example, the Morrill Act of 1862 facilitated the development of land-grant institutions, which advanced the American priority of agricultural and industrial education. The emergence of the German research university in the late 19th century had a tremendous impact on higher education in Europe as well as in the United States, and the creation of community college systems in the 20th century expanded access to higher education to many more Americans. Over the years, individual states have expanded the missions of particular higher education sectors to meet societal demands, but in these cases expansion of mission did not mean copying other institutions. Rather, through these reforms new institutions with distinct missions were developed.

Administrators of colleges and universities that are mission driven yet responsive to societal change do not allow their institutions to creep into an area that is incongruent with what they are or what they aspire to be. Rather they only add programs, services, or responsibilities that advance their basic purpose and are in harmony with their core values. Deciding what to add (or eliminate) is best completed through a rigorous, systematic, and ongoing planning and assessment process that leads to institutional renewal. Such a process is a sign of institutional vigor and sustainability and typically leads to better decision making and resource allocations. Institutional renewal in alignment with the mission is enhanced when the process has transparent aims and is inclusive of myriad constituents. In other words, the process of institutional renewal and growth is imbued with and guided by basic democratic decision-making principles that view participants as partners in the process.

## Importance of Democratic Partnerships in Advancing the Academy

So far we have made the case that alignment with mission is paramount in all decision making in higher education. Moreover, we have argued that

institutional renewal and change should be tied to a systematic assessment process in harmony with the core values of the organization. The remaining element of effective academic administration is ensuring that all decision making is congruent with democratic principles commonly associated with effective shared governance.

It is important to recognize that ultimate responsibility for any institution of higher learning rests with its governing board. Governing boards are required to have authority over all matters pertaining to the operation of the organization including academic, administrative, financial, and compliance issues. Although they retain ultimate authority, governing boards delegate their responsibilities through a shared governance model that is tied to the mission, history, and traditions of their institutions. While all shared governance models have unique characteristics, it is not the model that matters, but whether the institution has developed a democratic way to share governance.

Colleges and universities that are mission driven and have developed a process for institutional renewal also need to develop ways to engage their diverse constituencies. Such engagement requires time for appropriate discourse, is respectful of the distinctive role of each constituent group, and fosters an environment of mutual understanding and respect. To accomplish these goals, administrators of an organization must view each constituent as a partner in the shared governance process and adhere to basic democratic principles such as transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. Adhering to these principles does not mean that everything is open to debate and a vote. Rather, it ensures that there is a mechanism for civil and rational discourse to occur, and that in the end the appropriate people in the governance structure are held accountable for the decisions that are made.

For many, this matter of accountability is the sticking point in governance. Board members have fiduciary and legal responsibilities that make them personally liable for damages, and presidents' and other senior administrators' jobs are on the line for their decisions. In contrast, faculty members have neither fiduciary responsibility nor career accountability for the decisions in which a typical governance structure allows them to participate. When tenure is considered, the lack of accountability within the faculty is almost ironclad. Fortunately, at most colleges and universities the majority of faculty members involved in governance understand these issues and participate with the best interests of the institution at heart.

Abraham Flexner (1930), an early 20th-century educator, described colleges and universities as organisms, and Kerr (1964) believed the various



components of those organisms are "inextricably bound" (p. 20). If an institution of higher learning is an organism, to remain robust and healthy, the various components within it must discover ways to function in unison and recognize that no single element is predominant. In real terms, this realization requires a balance among and between an institution's various constituencies. While the ultimate responsibility for an institution rests with its governing board, it would be unrealistic to think that any board could manage every aspect of an organization as complex as a college or university. Institutions that create democratic processes to share this management fare better over time.

Unfortunately, shared democratic governance often is thought of only as an internal mechanism for ensuring that an institution can continue to function effectively. In highly effective institutions, however, the same principles and practices used inside the academy also apply to dealings with external groups and issues. Colby et al. (2003) assert that commitment to reasoned and honest discourse and respect for others are two basic values all colleges and universities should uphold, and those same values should guide decision making when dealing with issues outside the academy. The very notion that what is considered good democratic practice within the institutional governance structure is what should be modeled when dealing with people and organizations outside it is an idea that has been part of the lexicon of higher education for centuries but only recently has reemerged as a leading indicator of institutional strength and rigor. No longer can the members of colleges and universities remain inside their ivory towers and expect to be relevant to the outside world. The events of the second half of the 20th century coupled with the globalization of higher education has rendered such a quaint idea obsolete in the 21st century.

If the academy desires to maintain its exalted place in democratic society, the sharing of authority through thoughtfully designed and institutionally appropriate democratic processes cannot simply be an ideal practiced by college and university administrators within their own walls; it must be an imperative in their work outside the academy as well. Moreover, if institutions of higher learning do not engage their students in democratic and responsible ways, how can leaders of colleges and universities expect their students to behave as responsible members of society once they graduate? Over the past decade, many school officials have decided that one way to demonstrate their commitment to acting in a democratic and responsible way is by incorporating these principles into the learning environment. The rapid growth of service-learning, community-based learning, and other

forms of experiential learning—in which faculty lead students in the "active construction of knowledge" (Colby et al., 2003, p. 2) requires the teacher and the student to consider the impact of their work on others and engage in democratic practices that advance democratic partnerships, scholarship, and learning.

In this book, we assert that higher education institutions that have committed to three essential principles—being mission driven, practicing adaptability in alignment with that mission, and perpetuating democratic partnerships—have consistently fared better than those institutions that have not adhered to these ideas. Therefore, administrators of institutions should consider them as key building blocks for success in the future. In the chapters that follow, these three principles are applied to the study and practice of effective academic administration and provide a framework for the reader to comprehend the nuances of the complex organizations that are colleges and universities.

## References


American Association of University Professors. (n.d.). *1940 statement on principles of academic freedom and tenure.* Retrieved from http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1940statement.htm

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (1996). *Renewing the academic presidency: Stronger leadership for tougher times.* Washington, DC: Author.

Birnbaum, R. (1988). *How colleges work: The cybernetics of academic organization and leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

BoardSource. (2010). *The handbook of nonprofit governance.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (1977). *Missions of the college curriculum: A contemporary review with suggestions.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Chait, R., Ryan, W. P., & Taylor, B. E. (2005). *Governance as leadership: Reframing the work of nonprofit boards.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Cohen, M. D., & March, J. G. (1974). *Leadership and ambiguity: The American college president.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.





Colgan, C., & de Russy, C. (2006). *Essays in perspective: Assessing the university president.* Washington, DC: Institute for Effective Governance in Higher Education.

Davies, G. K. (1986). The importance of being general: Philosophy, politics, and institutional mission statements. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 2, pp. 85–102). New York, NY: Agathon Press.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Flexner, A. (1930). *Universities: American, English, German.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gross, E., & Grambsch, P. V. (1974). *Changes in university organization, 1964–1971.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Handy, C. (1997). Unimagined futures. In F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith, & R. Beckhard (Eds.), *The organization of the future* (pp. 377–383). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Keller, G. (1983). *Academic strategy: The management revolution in American higher education.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kerr, C. (1963). *The uses of the university.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lane, J. E. (2005, November). *Politics of mission creep: A framework for understanding the phenomena.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Philadelphia, PA.

Maurrasse, D. J. (2001). *Beyond the campus: How colleges and universities form partnerships with their communities.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education. (2008). *Characteristics of excellence in higher education* (12th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Author.

Morrill Act of 1862, 7 U.S.C. 301 et seq. (1862).

Rudolph, F. (1962). *The American college and university: A history.* New York, NY: Random House.

Welzenbach, L. F. (Ed.). (1982). *College and university business administration.* Washington, DC: National Association for College and University Business Officers.