

Democracy, Leadership, and Higher Education

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The tradition of philosophy once concerned itself with the subject of leadership. Plato's *Republic* clearly held the responsibilities of leaders to be of utmost philosophical importance. Today, by contrast, philosophers tend to focus on particular problems requiring philosophical exploration. Is affirmative action unfair? Is abortion morally permissible? Such questions are excellent ones for philosophers to examine. The overarching questions important for the development and education of leaders, however, have largely been ignored. For the most part today, authors on the subject of leadership come from the business world. It is believed, so it seems, that those who have achieved financial success must be persons worth imitating.

In this paper, I hope to examine philosophically some central characteristics of leadership. Among the main challenges I will address for contemporary leaders are the demands of uniting significantly different groups of people, especially in democratic contexts, but also in certain kinds of international cooperation. While government offices can offer excellent examples of democratic institutions needing leadership, I will focus instead on public institutions of higher education. The example of public universities offers a special case for recognizing issues that are important for a thesis I have argued in several papers: social and ethical policies and institutions should be led with a public, experimental approach. Ethical conduct and decision-making, as a human aspiration, should be understood as always in development. And, the experimental method of pursuing social and ethical meanings and projects collaboratively allows for the flexibility requisite of a virtuous democracy and international coalition.

In this paper, I argue for an outlook on leadership that puts into practice the experimental method in the American public university setting, including developments that came about at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, as well as in the Caribbean, regarding the University of the West Indies. The UWI is a unique educational institution which unifies various peoples across national divides in the region. These examples showcase the development of universities, and the challenges that arise when competing visions of higher education emerge amongst university representatives. The question: "What should be the role of the public university?" can be answered in many conflicting ways. Thus, the task of determining what the leadership of a public university ought to do in an effort to handle growing conflicts calls for serious philosophical consideration.

In what follows, I will discuss the two examples of public universities that I have mentioned in order to isolate the challenges for leadership that each has faced. I will show that it is one of the great responsibilities of leadership to aid a community in determining what its problems and challenges are, such that the community may then focus careful attention and effort on overcoming them. The experimental method of leadership is crucial for democracy as well as for effective international cooperation, furthermore. Antecedent philosophical dogmas, or understandings of ethical situations independent of the express input of the people, can lead to ignoring a community's true needs. A public university is a living institution that is a

paradigmatic example of a public community in need of leadership, and which can change radically with the times as the demands of the people and the vision of leaders change.

A Unique University

One can gain a strong sense of the fragmentation of the West Indies given some basic facts about their history. According to a dated, callous, and arrogant paper by Jock Campbell, entitled “The West Indies: Can They Stand Alone?” from *International Affairs*, 1963, “Mail between Jamaica and Trinidad passed through London.” Campbell explains that “Good governors of small islands have, of course, always seen the need for some sort of federation.” But, what he calls the “long history of fragmentation” of the region has only aggravated its plight. He claims that “The Caribbean sea is criss-crossed by ... multitudinous umbilical cords” (Campbell, 1963: 336-339).

Although Campbell’s language and tone are offensive, portions of his analysis are empirically founded, and the rest demonstrate the terrible struggle the region has had to face against the mentalities of outsiders and their deplorable sense of superiority. Campbell writes that “The smallness of many of these West Indian islands is both their charm for others and their curse for themselves. Indeed, considering their smallness, it is surprising that they are not more petty minded. Separately, it is difficult to envisage any relationship other than a colonial one, however euphemistically described ... [But,] the fact that they have all had a common tie with Britain does not mean they have all had a common tie with each other” (Campbell, 1963: 337).

The ignorance and insensitivity of the author are nowhere as pronounced as in his claims about race relations. He writes that “race relations are on the whole good,” while elsewhere referring to a certain kind of person as a “coal-black negro” (Campbell, 1963: 338). But despite Campbell’s utter ignorance of his palpable prejudice, the author contributes sporadically interesting points about the West Indies. In particular, he writes that “A thousand miles of sea are a much more effective division than a thousand miles of land” (Campbell, 1963: 340). To this fact he attributes the cause for troubles federating the West Indies. A proposal to federate was made in 1947, though “the engagement was accepted ten years later; only to end in divorce for non-consummation after a mere five years” (*ibid.*). Fortunately, some scholars are more understanding of the troubles of poverty in the West Indies than Campbell.

In an article from *The Journal of Higher Education* from an earlier period, May of 1950, R.G. Baskett tells us of “Higher Education in the West Indies” (Baskett, 1950). Although Baskett’s tone is far more considerate and balanced, the history his article offers us is no less colonialist than Campbell’s. He explains that “In January, 1949, a Royal Charter was granted which incorporated the University College of the West Indies ... [and] the university starts its career with high hopes and consciousness of the importance of the task which lies ahead” (Baskett, 1950: 237).

Though the spirits which Baskett describes were high, he explains that “The next few years will witness the growth of a university whose buildings, standing in glorious surroundings, are specially adapted for the climate of the West Indies, and whose students will be encouraged to maintain the high traditions of learning set by the universities of Britain” (Baskett, 1950: 238). Thus, the standards of the UWI were to be set against Britain’s objectives. Whereas institutions

of higher education today focus especially on teaching when working to develop local economies (as do many community colleges in the United States), “It was the hope of the Irvine Committee that all departments of the new university should undertake active research work...” (*ibid.*). Certainly it is important for a people to have an intellectual voice in scholarship. It is difficult, however, to conceive of research as a fundamental priority of a people desperately in need of learning from active teachers, rather than researchers. The value of research at the inception of the UWI must surely have been inspired by Britain’s standards of quality. But, at least Baskett noted one common difficulty in the West Indies. He writes that “One of the problems which faces the University College, which serves the comparatively isolated populations spread over the length of the Caribbean Sea, is that of maintaining touch with each of the seven Colonies” (Baskett, 1950: 238-239).

Despite its odd historical relationship with the British, the University of the West Indies bears many exceptional virtues as an institution of leadership, unity, and growth in the region. James Patrick Kiernan, in his 2004 article, “Caribbean Model of Memory,” has explained that “Over that past forty years ... the nations of the Caribbean were establishing their independence and were involved in the process of nation building” (Kiernan, 2004: 5). And on his account, the UWI is “Perhaps the most successful, sustaining, and integrating Caribbean-wide institution...” (*ibid.*).

In 2000, prior to Kiernan’s article, J. Zamgba Browne wrote an article in *The New York Amsterdam News*, titled “Colin Powell honored by University of the West Indies at gala celebration” (Browne, 2000). There, Zamgba relates award recipient, Harry Belafonte’s remarks, such as his stress that “the University of the West Indies holds the key to the future of the young people of the Caribbean, and that “Without the university’s input, there can be no meaningful and sustained progress ... [And, those] who support the institution understand its strategic contribution to the region’s development economically, politically, socially and morally, and will continue to support its mission” (Browne, 2000: 9).

Given the history of the region and of the University of the West Indies, we can easily see the complexity of leading such a unique, yet diverse population, spread out across a vast body of water. The challenges that leaders of the UWI have faced have largely been international, especially given that the university serves fifteen countries, according to the UWI’s Web site.¹ An article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from 1994, named “Caribbean Academic Hopes to Rally Universities,” offers us insight into the qualities that leaders of the UWI have exhibited in unifying diverse populations around the values they share. According to Paul Desruisseaux, the author of the article, Alister McIntyre of the University of the West Indies has argued that the 21st century “will be a knowledge century” (Desruisseaux 1994: A20). According to Desruisseaux, McIntyre has explained that he wants to “build a number of strategic partnerships to make [his] university more of a window to the outside world for Caribbean students than it has been in the past” (*Ibid.*). And, given the great distances that separate the 15 countries that take part in the University of the West Indies, the vision of leaders such as McIntyre is crucial.

¹ “Brief History,” <http://www.uwi.edu/aboutuwi/briefhistory.aspx>.

How can a leader bring together people so spread out, divided by great water? Fundamentally, unity across distance and differences is most accessible when themes employed are broadest. And, in the West Indies, two common themes are shared by many. The first concern of many people is poverty. After the independence of the nations in the West Indies, the islands exhibited the expected difficulties of poverty that Campbell depicted. Indeed, the population of the West Indies was largely imported in the region's terrible history. Thus, a commonality across differences of peoples and places was the tremendous poverty they endure.

A second feature of importance across many of these nations was the recognition that education holds the promise of economic growth and democratic development. Indeed, in the 1994 article, in which McIntyre offers his support to the re-establishment of the institutions of education in Haiti, Desruisseaux explains that "the hunger for education runs deep among Haitians, who view it as the only way to escape grinding poverty" (Desruisseaux, 1994: A20). Thus in this case, McIntyre from the University of the West Indies showed the strength not only of his affiliated countries with branch campuses, but also the shared values of Haitians to whom he hoped to reach out in their time of need. Countries vastly spread out in the West Indies have been able to hold to a common vision. They follow leaders who have touched on shared values. Although necessarily broad, these included working to overcome poverty through the growth and strengthening of the empowering institutions of education, among which the University of the West Indies is a pillar.

A Common American University with Uncommon Problems

I earned my Ph.D. at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. In my time there, I learned a great deal about a university with conflicting leadership. In Illinois, a state without the dividing distances and water of the West Indies, great differences in vision arose.

Walter Wendler was hired as Chancellor of the university's main branch campus. Above Wendler there was a university system president and the board of the university as a whole. Given changes in leadership in the post of university president, the relations between the campuses and their overall leadership were somewhat unstable. Wendler saw an opportunity to offer a vision for what SIUC could become.

Before it became a major research university, SIUC had been a small teacher's college. With several great growth spurts which occurred for a number of reasons, the university grew significantly. New structures were built in the 1960s, but which were poorly maintained over time. In my time there, SIUC sorely needed new construction, not to mention a renewed vision for its purpose. For, the university had grown so big that either it needed to grow further, or have significant portions of its cost, and thus activities, cut.

Wendler's vision was of significant growth. For many years, the university, a state institution, had kept its tuition level artificially low in comparison with competing institutions. The university's identity over time had been shaped into the cheapest school to attend as a four year university. There are numerous significant two-year colleges, and some affordable four-year colleges. But, SIUC served a different niche, offering a major research university's resources at

the lowest price, by a significant margin, in the state. Thus, Wendler's plan, given that it was not intending to cut costs, required a significant increase in resources. The primary conflict that arose as a result of Wendler's plan concerned the source of funds for the improvements he sought, followed by the ways in which he wanted to make use of new expenditures.

Students were worried that Wendler's construction projects would be paid for with their rising tuition costs, a reasonable worry. The Illinois State Legislature consistently reduced its proportional support for the university's budget. Thus, only two sources of funds could fill the needs of Wendler's vision. One is private fundraising. Public institutions of higher education in America cannot fundraise for themselves, but can be supported by non-profit organizations established as foundations to support them. SIUC has such a foundation, but could not raise enough money for Wendler's vision. Thus, Wendler made presentation after presentation to students, faculty members, and other stakeholders regarding the need to raise tuition, the second possible source of funds, to rates comparable with competing institutions. No surprise, there was much opposition to raised tuition.

What we can learn about leadership in studying Wendler's experience concerns the ways in which he sought to fashion a vision for the stakeholders of SIUC. With the use of a variety of committees comprised of faculty members, students, alumni, and the administration of the SIUC campus, Wendler fashioned the following mission statement:

Southern Illinois University Carbondale is a contemporary, comprehensive student responsive research university committed to serving the society that supports it. We will serve by providing quality educational opportunities to our students so that the cause of a free society is advanced. Our teaching and scholarship will be perceived as being among the very best. We will lead by example in our service to others, embrace the value of service, and inspire our students to become citizen-leaders with global perspectives.²

Given the multitudinous voices that took part in fashioning the vision that Wendler developed with these committees, under the title of "Southern at 150," it is unfortunate that his efforts were cut short. The purposes and plans that Wendler wanted to put in place did in fact conflict with a crucial component of the university system, its board, and particularly the chairman. Chairman of the board, Glenn Poshard, was selected to be university system president, overseeing Wendler and other campus chancellors.

Poshard's vision for the university may have been in some harmony with the criticisms raised against Wendler's plan to raise tuition, but it was not based upon a system of committees that sought to unify campus stakeholders under a common mission and plan. Poshard fundamentally held the affordability of SIUC to be a central value. He expressed this value in his inaugural address as president. He explained his vision as follows:

² "Southern Illinois University Carbondale. (2003). Southern @ 150: Building Excellence Through Commitment. <http://news.siu.edu/s150/>. I am indebted to Annie Davis Weber for her work on the subject of SIUC's difficulty with leadership, which she discussed in her unpublished case study manuscript, "SIUC's Crisis of Leadership."

Together, we will honor our tradition of accessibility and affordability. Together, we will build good citizens of America and good citizens of the world. Together, we will ensure that the face of SIU reflects the face of America in our faculty, staff, and our students. Together, we will join the ranks of America's great research and comprehensive universities. Together, we will be a "good citizen" university in reaching out to our surrounding communities with our resources. And together, we will build unity, build community, on our campuses and across our system - and then we shall renew our spirit of greatness for our beloved SIU.³

While Poshard's stance here on the values of accessibility and affordability of SIUC were shared by those who were opposed to higher tuitions, Poshard's act of firing Walter Wendler only exacerbated SIUC's descent into further dysfunctional leadership.

Surely it is a value to have accessible and affordable education. Yet, there are cases in which universities or other institutions must grow or cut out important projects. No one wants his own projects cut, yet no one wants to pay more tuition either. The conflicts involved in growth demand a commitment on the part of communities and leadership to follow a common vision. The trouble in Wendler's approach was surely a combination of things. First, his plans were most likely too ambitious in terms of the costs of building projects. Second, although he sought a variety of sources for a unified plan of action and mission for the university, upon arriving at its 150th birthday, he did not have the crucial support of the leadership above his position. And, furthermore, had the history of the university passed down to Wendler been rosier, with rising rates of enrollment, Wendler could have considered enrollment growth as an excellent opportunity for growth of revenues for new projects. The reverse of the optimal conditions in each of these cases lead to Wendler's ultimate demotion from the position of chancellor.

What we can learn from this study of leadership is at least two things. First, the good judgment that Wendler exhibited in the formation of university committees of stakeholders is a virtue worth repeating, both intra-nationally in democratic societies and internationally in regions of small countries with a plurality of peoples. Second, one must be very cautious of the scope of the institutional change that is sought. For, without great similarities in the values of those affected, there can be opposition to change that means well. Thus, even though the West Indies bears greater distances and divides geographically and practically, Illinois appears to have presented a more difficult case for the pursuit of common vision.

Conclusion

It is easy to assume that long distances will prevent people from cooperative association, and that differences in ideologies will follow from differences of national identity. Yet, in the two cases I have discussed here, we can see a number of important components in the determinations of successes and failures of leadership. Common struggles, such as great poverty in the West Indies, generally render the development of a common vision more achievable. Also, the broader and more widely applicable the solutions to shared problems, the greater are the

³ Poshard, Glenn. 2006 Inauguration Speech, Version 3.0, November 28 (Web)
<http://www.siu.edu/pres/inauguration/Inauguration%20Speech%20-%20web%20version.pdf>

differences and distances that can be overcome in people's efforts in pursuit of common goals. Finally, it can be extremely effective and important to unify people in the effort to draft their own mission as a people, involving them democratically in the important process of self-determination. But, if as a leader one does not consider carefully the overwhelming powers above oneself in one's community, all the careful planning in the world will not avoid failure. Institutions of higher education, as in the two examples I have discussed here, can have dramatic impacts on the economic development, democratic virtues of citizenship, and promise of engaging a century of knowledge. And, in cases, comparatively poorer countries can serve as excellent models for how best to pursue the growth that we so hope to see in a university's involvements in the larger communities they serve.

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