The Anatomy of Leadership

By Kenya McCullum

For Daniel Little (left in the first row), chancellor of the University of Michigan Dearborn from 2000 to 2018, establishing trust was essential for leading the university.

John Delaney (left), president emeritus of the University of North Florida, came to the presidency from a nontraditional background and immersed himself in the academic culture to gain student and faculty trust.

From the financial to the societal to the interpersonal, new university presidents have to face many challenges as they grow into their role. Whether they have come into a university setting from another career path or spent their entire working life in academia, all presidents have something to learn about being a strong leader to best serve their campus community. To help provide the guidance these new presidents need, we asked former presidents at AASCU institutions to share their experiences and offer insights on what college leadership means to them.

Finding work/life balance helped Barbara Gitenstein (center) lead The College of New Jersey for 19 years.

Learn Your New Environment

When John Delaney began his tenure as the president of the University of North Florida (UNF), he was charged with not only becoming accustomed to his new leadership position but also to leading in an academic environment where he was often met with skepticism. Delaney had previously served the local community as the chief assistant state attorney for northeast Florida, the general counsel for the city/county of Jacksonville and a two-term Jacksonville mayor—rather than coming from a traditional academic background.

"Nontraditional presidents have to overcome much faculty suspicion," he noted. "I became friends with a faculty member who initially opposed my selection. She was an immense help in understanding our university. In one lighthearted email exchange about halfway into my tenure, I emailed, 'Will I ever be forgiven for the lack of a Ph.D.?' Her response was, 'In a word...No!! Unless you have gone through the dissertation, tenure and promotion process—NO!!'"

But despite this, Delaney was able to overcome this challenge by completely immersing himself in the academic culture. He listened to the concerns of the faculty, staff and students, which gave him the insight he needed to make sound decisions that would affect all of UNF's stakeholders. Before making any big decisions, he knew he needed to truly understand UNF and earn its trust.

"The best advice for a new president is to not do anything dramatic the first year. Learn the history, traditions, customs, practices, and assimilate governance ideas of the campus," Delaney said. "Above all, listen. Faculty will accept change if they are part of the dialogue and decision—not so if they are not consulted."

Although nontraditional presidents must learn the intricacies of their new environment to lead, Delaney stresses that previous experience can guide them because, ultimately, this work environment is not as completely foreign as it seems.

"People are people," he said. "As my 33-year-long assistant observed, a university is not all that different than any place else. People are people; org charts and budgets work the same; people need motivating and leadership; problems are everywhere to fix. Leave the place in better shape than when you arrived."

Little (second from the left) walks the University of Michigan Dearborn campus with some students.

Little (center) created an open environment by having a series of discussions about the identity of the university and where everyone wanted it to go.

It is clear Delaney earned the respect of the campus community. In May 2018, after Delaney retired, UNF's Board of Trustees awarded him the title of "president emeritus" to recognize his distinguished record—he is the only UNF presidents to gain this title.

Build a Strong Team

Although presidents are the face of a university during their time of service, the position is very much a team effort—and keeping this in mind may help presidents get through the issues they encounter.

When Linda Bennett began serving as president of the University of Southern Indiana (USI) in 2009, the country was facing the worst economic recession since the 1930s, which dramatically affected state revenues. In addition, higher education institutions around the country were the subject of negative rhetoric and various charges from the public, ranging from ideological indoctrination to poor productivity. To tackle the problems USI faced, Bennett needed to have a strong team around her.

"Take time to build the right team, and give those already in seats a chance to be a part of your team," she said. "Make certain they feel comfortable telling you when you are barking up the wrong tree. It could save you a lot of embarrassment later. The good news is you don't have to know all the answers, but you should be a keen listener and ready with probing questions."

With the help of the team she built, Bennett was able to handle her first order of business—revamping the way public budget presentations were made and building funding request clusters for the university's different colleges, offices and divisions based on strategic planning priorities. Although it was not a smooth transition, Bennett found that over time these changes helped USI implement new financial initiatives, rather than trying to do more with less.

While building and maintaining a strong team is important, Bennett notes a team should not be static. An effective leader must evaluate how well the team is working and not be afraid to make adjustments as needed.

"If there is someone who simply is not a good fit, make the decision sooner rather than later, and if they have been professional and honest, help them to have a good transition," Bennett said. "Look for professional development opportunities for executive and academic team members. It's great to recruit a strong external candidate, but there are also potential leaders on campus."

By building this support within their office, university leaders can have the strength they need to get others to rally behind them and their choices, which Bennett admits is not an easy process.

"My strongest belief is that you have to be prepared to explain your decisions, even painful ones. I have known a few [presidents] who have withdrawn from their campuses, overwhelmed by the enormity of some of the choices they faced. In the end, they lost the support of their campus colleagues and boards," she said. "By being more public in explaining my decisions, I found great help across campus in faculty and administration. People want to feel some sense of participation in their own fate, and presidents need to hear their voices."

Establish Trust

As Daniel Little, chancellor of the University of Michigan Dearborn (UM-Dearborn) from 2000 to 2018, began his leadership role, he knew the first hurdle he faced was establishing trust and creating a culture of collaboration with faculty members at the university's four colleges.

"Key in this regard was to spend a good deal of time meeting with faculty groups and coming to know each other," he said. "It was especially important to learn about the academic priorities of various faculty and to see where we have common ground in terms of fundamental academic values."

Delaney (left) speaks with a student.

Little also created an open environment by having a series of discussions about the identity of the university and where everyone wanted it to go as an institution in the future. Many tough questions about the mission of the campus and the institution's strengths and weaknesses needed to be answered to help determine how well its faculty and staff were serving the students and the greater community.

"Direction-setting is part of the job," he said. "It is crucial that the values and directions that the leadership advocates should be authentic to the values of the campus, and to oneself, and should emerge as the result of ongoing dialogue with campus leaders and constituents."

Thanks to this ongoing dialogue and the trust he built, Little said the school was able to create an ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion, the academic quality of their programs and the success of their students. In addition, under his leadership, UM-Dearborn was able to create valuable partnerships outside of the university, which was vital to the success of the larger community.

"I've learned how impactful a university can be in its partnerships with the communities it serves," he explained. "Universities cannot solve by themselves alone the problems of poverty, health disparities and limited opportunities for young people that are found in most urban environments; but they can be highly impactful partners in addressing all of these issues if they choose to be."

Find Balance

For Barbara Gitenstein, being the president at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) for 19 years meant many lessons in balance. She faced several serious challenges when she began her role in 1999—including budget pressures, concerns about student safety issues, and racial and religious intolerance—and she found that not only did the pressures of the job affect her and her team, but they also impacted her home life in ways she had not anticipated.

"I wish that I had fully appreciated just how much pressure the job placed not only on me, but also on my family. It is a wonderful job, but it is 24/7, 365 days a year. The emotional toll is a big one," Gitenstein said. "I would urge presidents to carve out personal time and remember to enjoy those things that have nothing to do with your job in academic administration and to pay attention to your partner/children/family if you are fortunate to have those support people."

Gitenstein said she was also fortunate to have strong support from the leadership team around her, including the board of trustees, who were able to provide assistance and counsel during the times when tough decisions needed to be made. Although many presidents feel like they gain strength from going it alone without the input of others, she stresses that attempting to deal with the university's problems without that support, especially during times of conflict and stress, is actually a sign of leadership weakness. In addition, Gitenstein believes another sign of a strong leader is knowing when it is time to leave the position.

"I would advise a long-term president to continue to ask himself if he has outstayed his value for the institution," she explained. "If at all possible, leave before the board and/or the faculty want you to leave. This is not only because it is much more pleasant, it is also because it is better for the institution."

To make this transition into the next stage of life, she suggests presidents consider where they want to go and what they want to do next. In her case, she began working as a consultant for the Association of Governing Boards so others can benefit from the knowledge she gained in her leadership roles at TCNJ; Drake University (Iowa), where she served as provost and executive vice president; and the State University of New York at Oswego, where she was the associate provost. Also, Gitenstein said it is important for presidents to be a source of support for their successors—but from a safe distance.

"I would advise the president to offer to be available to the new president, but to put distance between himself and the institution," she said. "I personally believe that distance should be geographical as well as psychological. The most problematic relationship for a new president can be that former president who remains a gray shadow on the campus." P

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