



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2015

HIGHER ED AS A BUSINESS

The Peter Principle is Alive and Well in Higher Education

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Cronyism, nepotism and political appointments are still ubiquitous in American higher education and, unlike in other industries, the people in the academy, one would think, should know better. Both public and private colleges have seen unprecedented administrative bloat. The traditional coordinator, director, department chair, dean, provost, vice-president and chancellor positions are apparently no longer enough for the different divisions within institutions. Now it is routine to see byzantine organizational charts (if a college still bothers to update or produce one) that add the words assistant, associate, special assistant to, senior, and executive in front of such senior management titles. Some private universities (both nonprofit and for-profit) even borrow from corporate lingo and also use administrative titles such as CEO, CFO, CIO, and COO.

One case in point is the University of Miami, a private, top-tier research university of 16,000 students. According to its website, in addition to its 13 deans, the university has four vice and associate provosts, and 14 vice and senior vice presidents. In contrast, the public University of Central Florida, a metropolitan state research university with over 60,000 students and 11 regional campuses, has just 11 vice presidents, including one vice president emerita. With further layers of authority created by added administrative offices, it is logical to assume that more coordination is necessary just to make sure that decisions and policies are consistently applied throughout the institution.

Additionally, with the recent trend of all but two or three states

defunding their public higher education systems while simultaneously demanding increased four- and six-year graduation rates and adopting performance-based funding models, this growth in personnel at the top is disturbing as it affects overall morale and productivity. Nonetheless, the burgeoning of administrative positions, extra layers of red tape, and shameful compensation costs is not a new phenomenon. In the early 1990's, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was calling for faculty to demand administrative cutbacks instead of cuts in spending to the academic programs.

Many academic departments have now become "lean and mean" in some institutions with little clerical help or teaching and/or research support. However, administrative bloat is not the sole reason for the bureaucratic abyss that permeates some college campuses and which hinders dramatic transformational change. As the title of this commentary indicates, the selection of the wrong people for key executive leadership and mid-level management positions can also make long-lasting change a challenging process.

Forty-six years ago, educator Laurence J. Peter co-authored the best selling satire *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong*. This popular classic asserted that essentially everyone in a hierarchal organization keeps on being promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. It argued that people get rewarded (and promoted) based on their performance in current roles rather than on their abilities, intelligence or characteristics for the intended new role. Peter

further contended that even when people exceed their fields of expertise and inevitably underperform, they are rarely demoted. Yet in higher education, executive “dead wood” often hold on to their inflated salaries as some colleges try to mitigate the harm (or prevent lawsuits) by diminishing their responsibility and delegating their work to others, or moving them to faculty.

Certainly, academicians have all too often witnessed cronyism in the appointing of friends to positions of authority in higher education. It is not just positions for which they are unqualified (i.e., not having the required graduate degree in the appropriate academic discipline or relevant work-related experience), but often many such appointees have never even worked at another higher educational institution. Therefore, they have no firsthand knowledge or experience of how other colleges and universities approach and solve day-to-day problems or manage larger escalating crises as they have tunnel vision. And it is not just faculty who have “paid their academic dues” that are being promoted to administrative leadership positions based upon their scholarship and/or perseverance to positions where they now have to manage resources (e.g., financial, human, technological, etc.) other than their own. It is rare to see people refuse promotions. Peter summed up his management principle with the saying “the cream rises until it sours.”

The appointment of an incompetent academic administrator can result in a toxic workplace with disengaged faculty and staff. The dysfunction seeps down to the students, but the potential damage to the overall reputation of the institution from inept, feckless administrators overseeing consequential matters (such as collective bargaining; accreditation; state authorization; licensure; curriculum renewal; the budget; a new strategic plan; marketing, recruitment, and retention initiatives; etc.) is immeasurable.

Even more vexing is that for some insecure, thin-skinned administrators, blind loyalty is valued and rewarded over all other traits.

This results in not just typical sycophant behavior, but also in the failure to point out when an administrator is making a wrong decision or jeopardizing the integrity of the institution. Hence, the classic Hans Christian Andersen fictional tale, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, is frequently a harsh reality, as these subordinates become faithful acolytes for their supervisors who promoted them.

Moreover, colleges and universities often appoint familiar people (or their spouses or relatives) to unadvertised new positions or circumvent official search committee recommendations by not bothering to look outside of the department, division, or university for a fresh new perspective. This is tougher to do at public institutions, especially in a state such as Florida with its Sunshine laws; however, it is not impossible, as we have seen a number of recently bungled executive searches (i.e., Florida State University). Although this is not a piece on presidential derailment or fatal leadership at the top, it is worth noting that the State of Florida’s legislature recently tried unsuccessfully to exempt the search process for a state college/university president from public records.

Politics in the workplace has also long been a part of campus culture as in any other sector. The tenure process is a prime example. No doubt Peter experienced this firsthand when he moved to California in 1966 to become a professor of education at USC. Higher education has long been viewed as glacially slow to change as academic culture is steeped in tradition and the status quo is honored.

However, according to research conducted by the American Council on Education, 58 percent of today’s college presidents are over the age of 61. It has also been estimated that more than 40 percent of the nation’s almost 1,200 community college presidents are likely to retire in the next five years, presenting an inevitable leadership crisis. Yet the current pipeline to replace them with qualified and willing personnel may not be up to the task. This leadership vacuum is further exacerbated with the increasing turnover of other senior-

level academic administrators. Moreover, it is also well chronicled that women and racial minorities are still experiencing difficulty moving into leadership roles in higher education.

Former Harvard University president (1971-1991, and then again interim president from 2006 to 2007), Derek Bok (2013) wrote at the end of his *Higher Education in America* text, “Choosing leaders is always a difficult undertaking, and an element of luck is forever present to some degree,” (p. 401). While the idea is not new to corporate America, higher education has only recently become aware of the need for formal succession planning. Unlike cronyism or nepotism, it is a systematic way for an institution to identify and then nurture internal emerging leader candidates to ensure an ample source of possible leaders. This process creates an intentional and presumably transparent process by which colleges and universities can establish a diverse in-house talent pool with both the capacity and the skills to lead, thus hopefully avoiding both the reliance on mere luck and the risk of the Peter Principle.

It cannot be stated too strongly that if colleges are ever going to strategically plan and proactively meet the central needs of their key stakeholders both today and in the future, they must start by selecting and then mentoring the right people in leadership roles. Academic administrators should heed the advice of so many leadership gurus who have written about the importance of hiring good, smart, talented people and then refrain from meddling or micromanaging so that they can do their jobs.

References

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