

The courage to lead: cases in American higher education

Jon E. Travis
Texas A&M University-Commerce

Joyce A. Scott
Texas A&M University-Commerce

Abstract

Courage is a rare quality among today's political leaders, many of whom even struggle with the ability to understand leadership as well. Leadership and courage are also critically important characteristics of college and university administrators. Yet, one may wonder if courage is nonexistent among leaders in higher education. Furthermore, the skills of good leadership seem to be lacking among administrators who rule as if they were convinced of some divine right. At a time when public colleges and universities are being threatened as never before by forces committed to their destruction, administrators desperately need to find the courage to lead. This article highlights selected case examples of leaders who have demonstrated courage over self-interest.

Keywords: colleges, courage, ethics, leadership, universities



INTRODUCTION

The short best seller of 1956 reported the story of a Mississippi congressman who risked his political career, not once but three times, by angering his constituents and speaking from his conscience in favor of issues they opposed (Kennedy). Another story told of a senator from Ohio who went against public opinion and risked his hopes for a presidential candidacy by challenging the authority of the Nuremberg trials because of their inconsistency with American judicial principle. These and other *Profiles in Courage* recounted selfless acts that put principle and conscience ahead of personal goals. But if someone were to attempt a modern-day sequel to John Kennedy's book, the stories might be few indeed. Perhaps such examples of courage no longer exist in the halls of government, but what about the halls of the nation's colleges and universities?

Courage is not a common quality among politicians who value their careers over all else and prefer political survival to ethical principles. Not surprisingly, administrators in American public higher education have a similar concern for the continuation of their privileged positions. Perhaps too few are eager to risk their status to do what is right or honorable. However, tales of courage about college administrators do exist. Consider a community college faculty member who reluctantly accepted the position of president at a time when the college's only building was deemed structurally unsound and its regional accreditation was in doubt. Understanding the weighty tasks confronting him, Dean Travis supervised the reconstruction of the institution's infrastructure and prepared the college's regional accreditation application almost single-handedly. Although his community college was subsequently awarded accreditation and he was able to supervise the construction of additional buildings, the political atmosphere throughout his three-college district became so untenable that he recognized he could not continue in his position.

Another selfless act to protect his multi-campus college district was taken by Chancellor Paul Elsner, when the Arizona legislature threatened to reduce the funding for all of the state's 2-year colleges by more than 15%. His wise, but unpopular, decision to halt all out-of-town travel throughout the district had repercussions that reached as far as a national association and the state legislature. His effort was also successful, even though it did not forestall another fiscal challenge the following year. Yet, the question remains: Is courage nonexistent among administrators in higher education today? Both of these examples of administrative courage also demonstrate a key quality that only the best executives possess, the ability to lead.

Leadership may be the least understood concept in modern organizations. A common error is to use the terms *leader* and *manager* synonymously. Yet, a leader works with people, whereas a manager works with paper. Modern leaders are expected to "focus on collaborative relationships, team building, and shared governance" (Eddy, 2010, p. 6). A leader is more involved with asking than telling. Empowering others is paramount: "If you are leading, but no one is following, you are just taking a walk" (Juston, 2012). Leaders routinely are capable of bringing out the best in the members of their organizations, helping them to find the way rather than showing them the way.

A true leader is a facilitator who empowers and encourages people to accomplish great feats, because real leaders have the ability to make people believe in themselves. Leadership is about vision, communication, respect, trust, influence, empowerment, wisdom, empathy, judgment, a desire to learn, and a host of other considerations (Travis, 2012a). Leadership is not a mantle that administrators acquire with the position appointment, but a role that is earned as one acquires respect from followers. And people in positions of power are not born with this

ability to lead, as Vince Lombardi so correctly stated. It is an attribute that must be learned as well as earned. “Being a leader is not the same thing as being a boss, just as authority is not the same thing as authoritarianism” (Buller, 2011).

At a time when public colleges and universities are being threatened as never before by forces committed to their destruction (Travis, 2012b), administrators desperately need to find the courage to lead. To do so, administrators will need to abandon self-interest, committing themselves to what is right and honorable, and to demonstrate that they are willing to risk their careers for their people and their organizations. Taking such a stand is not easy, given the pressures that most leaders face: to be liked, to retain their positions, and to respond to continuous demands from constituents and interest groups. This case study is an examination of leaders in higher education who put everything on the line, who have clearly demonstrated the courage to lead.

One such leader was William Friday, who was president of the University of North Carolina System in 1960 when a gambling scandal erupted in the Dixie Classic basketball tournament. After he learned of the situation, as well as threats against some of the basketball players, Friday convinced his university chancellors to support him in a “politically unpopular decision” to end the tournament (Stripling, 2012c, para. 7). Committed to maintaining the integrity of college sports, Friday later became founding co-chairman of the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. However, during his 30 years as academic leader, Friday confronted and overcame far greater challenges: a legislative ban on controversial public speech, the General Assembly’s creation of a state university system, and the successful desegregation of that system. Following his mandatory retirement in 1986, Friday moved more fully into the national arena, serving on the Carnegie Commission on the Future of American Education, a White House Task Force on Education, and the Knight Commission.

Leaders of California colleges and universities have had an especially trying experience over the past 20 years. Serving as the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges for 8 years until 1996, Chancellor David Mertes frequently criticized the state for inadequately funding the colleges. The last 6 years of his tenure, according to Mertes, were “very, very difficult, primarily because of the inability of the state to fund any of its services at an appropriate level due to a major recession” (Wright, 1996, p. 7). Mertes went on to say, “We have also had some very bitter relationships between the governor and the legislature that, in my view, have become more and more difficult with each passing year” (Wright, p. 7). He was particularly frustrated with the state board, which he said “wanted very much to be involved with the day-to-day administration of the system” (Wright, p. 7). The board’s persistent micromanagement eventually led Mertes to resign.

When Mary Sue Coleman left the University of Iowa to become president at the University of Michigan in 2002, her new employer was facing U.S. Supreme Court rulings over the university’s affirmative action position in its admissions policies. Not reluctant to offer her opinion over such a critical higher education issue, Coleman stated,

“A ruling overturning Bakke could result in the immediate resegregation of our nation’s top universities...we have only to look at the impact on flagship campuses in Texas and California to see the effects that such a change in policy would bring.” (Goral, 2003, p. 5)

Although the high court did uphold its prior Bakke ruling in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), Michigan voters approved a ballot proposal to ban affirmative action by 58% just 3 years later. In reaction, Coleman “was emphatic that the university would fight to preserve its diversity and would ‘overcome the handcuffs’ that the measure is attempting to place on it” (Jaschik, 2006, p.

1). In an address to the campus, Coleman (2006) stated,
You have my word as president that we will fight for what we believe in, and that is holding open the doors of this university to all people...I am fully and completely committed to building diversity at Michigan, and I will do whatever it takes. (para. 16)

Later in the same address, Coleman quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who provided his own perspective on the courage to lead: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy” (para. 48).

Carolyn A. (Bidly) Martin became chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison just as the state began a hard right turn, politically. Seeking to protect the rights of her university’s employees, Chancellor Martin pursued an outspoken defense of collective bargaining that was unsuccessful against the political force of Governor Scott Walker. Stripling reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2011 that Martin finally decided to leave “a public research institution that she describes as besieged by reduced public support and onerous state regulations” (para. 3).

Another university president who was committed to doing what he thought was right was Richard Lariviere, who was fired by the University of Oregon’s board in 2011. Lariviere sought to elevate the university’s academic quality, pursued a plan to resolve the institution’s fiscal dilemma, and granted staff and faculty raises against the wishes of Oregon’s governor. “There is a fundamental conflict between the welfare of the institution and the welfare of the board,” stated Lariviere (Kelderman, 2011, p. A18). He added, “I’d rather be fired...trying to seize an act to make the university better than watch it on the glide path to mediocrity” (Kelderman, p. A18). His faculty overwhelmingly supported him as “a maverick who pushed for making the university better, and he ran into a bureaucracy” (Kelderman, p. A18). As a result, Lariviere sacrificed his position.

Perhaps the most recent example of a leader exemplifying such courage is Teresa Sullivan, president of the University of Virginia. In a highly publicized series of events, Sullivan was forced to resign by the university’s Board of Visitors in June 2012 as a result of the Board’s disagreement with Sullivan’s approach to several administrative issues, in particular, the Board’s pressure on her to accelerate change at the University of Virginia. Sullivan was reinstated only a month later (Stripling, 2012b). Although the Board did not publicly explain its prior decision in detail, the dispute with Sullivan appeared to focus on her decisions regarding the pace of moving the curriculum to online delivery and her allowance of more self-determination in resource allocation among the institution’s units (Stripling, 2012a). Apparently, Sullivan’s concerns about the reputation of the institution and the role of personnel in shared governance were not appreciated by the Board.

However, following much public outcry as well as dissatisfaction within the university, the board reversed its decision and reinstated President Sullivan (Stripling, 2012b). Throughout the strained situation, Sullivan chose to avoid seeking any kind of spotlight, even to the point of declining a public hearing, which she said would not be good for the university. In a video interview with the *Washington Post* in June 2012, Sullivan declined to delve into speculation about “other forces at play” in her dismissal. Even though President Sullivan did not have to sacrifice her position as a result of her courage to lead, the consequences of the “summer of strife at Virginia” are likely to have a negative impact on the institution and Sullivan’s leadership for the remainder of her tenure and beyond.

In contrast to these case examples of the courage to lead, other administrators have more frequently demonstrated the cowardice of self-promotion, leaving observers to wonder if such a personal agenda has become a trend in American higher education. In such an atmosphere, politics will replace governance, and the principal concern will be the politics of survival. As a result, the public good becomes an afterthought at best, but more often than not, neglected entirely. Ronald Ehrenberg, director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, commented in 2011 that “In the current environment, being the president of a public university is not that fun” (Stripling, 2011, para. 24).

Although examples of leaders who have courageously exemplified the characteristics of true leadership do exist, the cases cited herein are certainly not representative of higher education administration in America. As public higher education continues to deal with budget crises, erosion of quality and mission, unforeseen competition from the for-profit sector, loss of public trust, claims that the profession is in crisis, and numerous calls for a shift to the business model, good leaders are more desperately needed than ever before. Perhaps President Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* as well as these exemplars of the courage to lead should serve as role models for college and university leaders.

REFERENCES

- Buller, J. L. (2011). The academic leader as guru. *Academic Leader*, 27(7), 4.
- Coleman, M. S. (2006, November 8). Diversity matters at Michigan. *U-M Diag*. Retrieved from <http://president.umich.edu/speech/speeches/061103div.php>
- Eddy, P. L. (2010). *Community college leadership: A multidimensional model for leading change*. Sterling, VA: Stylus
- Goral, T. (2003). Affirmative action gets its day in court. *University Business*, 6(1), p. 5.
- Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 982 (2003).
- Jaschik, S. (2006, November 9). Still fighting for affirmative action. *Inside Higher Education*, pp. 1-3.
- Juston, P. (2012, May). *Learning to lead: Developing a leadership philosophy*. Paper presented at the 34th Annual International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence, Austin, TX.
- Kelderman, E. (2011, December 9). U. of Oregon’s president is fired after clashing with board and governor. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A18.
- Kennedy, J. F. (1956). *Profiles in Courage*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Stripling, J. (2011, June 14). After a contentious year, Chancellor Martin is leaving Madison. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/After-Contentious-Year-Martin/127919/>
- Stripling, J. (2012a, June 10). Teresa Sullivan will step down as UVa’s president after 2 years in office. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Teresa-Sullivan-Abruptly/132205/>
- Stripling, J. (2012b, July 6). UVa’s painfully public lesson in leadership. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/UVas-Painfully-Public-Lesson/132701/>
- Stripling, J. (2012c, October 12). William Friday, ‘Grandfather’ of North Carolina System, Dies at 92. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/William-Friday-Grandfather/135112/>

- Travis, J. E. (2012a). *Leadership lecture: Seminar in instructional leadership*. Commerce, TX: Author.
- Travis, J. E. (2012b). The anti-egalitarian mission to destroy public education in America. *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, 28, 91-102.
- Wright, S. W. (1996). California's Mertes to resign: Colleagues say leader performed well in "impossible job." *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 13(1), 7.

