

**THE COURAGE TO LEAD: CASES IN AMERICAN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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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 sequel to John Kennedy's book today, the stories might be few indeed. Sadly, no such reports have been heard recently 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 the president of a small college who, because of a pronounced reluctance by his factionalized faculty to share in the task of preparing the institution's first regional accreditation application, took on the responsibility himself. Although he accomplished the task almost single-handedly, and the institution was subsequently awarded accreditation, the president eventually recognized that he could not continue in the position. Another selfless act to protect his multi-campus college district was taken by a chancellor when the state 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 prevent another fiscal challenge the following year. Yet, the question remains: Is courage nonexistent among administrators in higher education? Both of these examples of administrative courage also demonstrate a key quality

that only the best executives possess, the ability to lead.

At a time when public colleges and universities are being threatened as never before by forces committed to their destruction (Travis, 2012), administrators desperately need to find the courage to lead. Yet, leadership in any organization is often a misunderstood concept. 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 Vice Lombardi so correctly stated. It is an attribute that must be learned as well as earned. Leadership is about vision, communication, respect, trust, influence, empowerment, wisdom, empathy, judgment, a desire to learn, and a host of other considerations. “Being a leader is not the same thing as being a boss, just as authority is not the same thing as authoritarianism” (Buller, 2011).

Empowering others is paramount: “If you are leading, but no one is following, you are just taking a walk” (Juston, 2012). A true leader is a facilitator who empowers and encourages people to accomplish great feats. 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. Most of all, true leaders have the ability to make

people believe in themselves.

This case study is an examination of leaders in higher education who put everything on the line, risking their careers to do what is right for their people and their institutions. The most recent example of such a leader 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 as a result of the Board's disagreement with Sullivan's approach to several administrative issues. Sullivan was reinstated only a month later (Stripling, 2012a, b). 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 the 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 (Stripling, 2012b). 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.

Numerous examples of leaders who have courageously exemplified the characteristics of true leadership exist. The presenters will provide a basic overview of leadership qualities and highlight a range of cases that represent profiles in courage among leaders in higher education. As public higher education continues to deal with budget crises, erosion of quality and mission, unforeseen competition from the for-profit sector, 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. These, and other exemplars of the courage to lead, can serve as role models for new leaders.

References

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