Leadership Challenges at Urban and Metropolitan Universities: Communities, Stakeholders, Money, Diversity, and Change

Adrianna Kezar, Guest Editor

Urban universities face unique leadership challenges that need explication and research to improve practice. These institutions are currently in a time of unparalleled change in which leadership is being called upon to address a host of issues, including setting priorities among competing community and constituent groups; competition for funding and capacity building; establishing a vision, plan, and decision-making process that includes multiple stakeholders; context-based assessment; and incorporating community knowledge. Leaders are looking for advice on the issues unique to their institution. The majority of the leadership literature in higher education provides global strategies that often ignore important issues of context. This volume addresses this weakness in the literature by presenting research specifically concerning leadership issues within urban institutions.

The last issue of *Metropolitan Universities* that focused on leadership issues was published almost a decade ago.[1] In the intervening years, noteworthy leadership research has been conducted that can assist change agents within urban institutions. Many of the leadership themes discussed previously in *Metropolitan Universities* remain important, including being responsive to the needs of the metropolitan area served, fostering shared and collaborative governance, creating meaningful partnerships with communities, and dealing with financial constraints. For example, authors in the previous leadership issue engaged the debate over the challenges and pitfalls of shared governance within institutions that need to respond rapidly to changes in the environment. Yet, over the last decade it has become clear that urban institutions must engage communities in their decision-making processes; thus, the issue has changed from *whether* to *how*. New leadership issues are also highlighted in this volume, such as approaches for addressing urban problems; change and assessment strategies; and responding to the growing diversity within institutions. The literature included in this volume does not advocate approaches to leadership; instead, it provides the needed strategies for meeting these leadership challenges.

[1] Leadership in Metropolitan Universities, Winter 1994: Vol. 5, No. 3

The first article in this volume reminds us of the historical precedents for urban leaders and their institutions, and their active involvement within their communities. No other theme emerges as more important for urban leaders than defining ways to partner successfully with communities. John Gilderbloom provides guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of institutional leaders in the process of developing successful community partnerships. The president and governing board play key roles because of their visibility and positional power, yet no partnership can succeed without the investment of all members of campus. As Gilderbloom points out, the faculty must be actively engaged in meaningful partnerships that support the urban mission of the institution. This article provides a framework for presidents and boards as to the ways they can support campus efforts at college-community collaborations. The author recommends providing direction and priority through formal mission statements, formally assessing partnerships, providing adequate resources, helping develop partnerships and alliances with businesses and other groups that want to help revive the city, developing a coordinated institutional strategy, and altering reward structures. The appendix of this article provides examples of institutions that have developed model community-college partnerships based on the leadership principles outlined in the article.

The second article, by Martha Soto and Marcy Drummond, provides guidance to institutional leaders on developing a strategic plan that includes voices of the community and other stakeholders, which ensures that campus-community partnerships are institutionalized. This article outlines several planning approaches and highlights models that are more aligned with the urban context. The authors describe the University of Southern California's collaborative strategic planning process, from vision setting and creating steering groups, through the actual implementation of the plan. A typology of planning strategies is described based on the degree of involvement that an urban institution seeks to develop, ranging from minimal to extensive. Most importantly, principles—common ground, commitment, and compromise—for planning within a collaborative context are presented. Institutional leaders will feel equipped to approach planning in a new way that institutionalizes campus-community partnerships and builds stakeholder trust and relationships. Although this article focuses on external stakeholders, it also presents the importance of internal stakeholders' involvement in the planning.

Sheley reminds us that community needs to be thought of more broadly than the local community. Urban institutions have a role in the global society as well. Sheley examines the role of urban presidents in addressing crises such as September 11th. He focuses on how community-oriented universities potentially encounter pressures to conform activities and speech to popular notions of patriotism. However, they also encounter opportunities to provide leadership in public discussions of appropriate responses to crises. This article explores "precepts" for the responsible management of the role of active promoter and facilitator of public discussion of the implications of government policy in times of national peril. Urban universities face other crises beyond national and international political concerns; they also experience financial crisis, the theme of the next article.

Michael Baer further elaborates on the commitment to internal stakeholder involvement in his article about a financial crisis at Northeastern University. Planning processes and partnerships are prone to collapse in environments of resource constraint. This article highlights the way that urban institutions can effectively meet the challenges of rapid decline in resource availability, a key challenge for institutional leaders, while also maintaining a shared or collaborative decision-making process. Effective responses by the president, vice presidents, and deans are described. These include a clear and consistent message, active communication and information sharing, shared priority setting, clarification of stakeholders' roles in governance, and fostering a long-term perspective among internal stakeholders. A detailed case study of Northeastern's experience provides institutional leaders with an overview of the process involved in regaining ground during a time of severe financial difficulty in a way that maintains optimism and results in institutional survival, health, and growth. Capacity building will remain a challenge for urban institutions that have always struggled to obtain adequate funding.

Administrators and faculty need guidance on how to successfully engage all internal and external stakeholders to become pluralistic leaders. When involving people from such a diversity of backgrounds, leaders need to develop skills in perspective taking, questioning their own assumptions, and understanding their own biases. A respect for pluralism necessitates the ability to understand one's own approach to leadership, to identify how others may define or think about leadership, and acknowledge and negotiate distinctive leadership voices. Adrianna Kezar's article presents a reflection tool for urban leaders who are engaged in collaborative processes such as the development of campus-community partnerships. Urban leaders are provided a case study of an institutional leader who examines how her background, institutional context, and power conditions have impacted her beliefs about leadership. A series of questions is provided to help leaders conduct self-analysis and to grow in their leadership style and approach. Leaders are less likely to be successful if they are unwilling to learn and grow within the new diverse and collaborative environment of the twenty-first century.

In addition to collaboration, the ability to adapt is a significant imperative for institutional leaders. Adrianna Kezar's next article reminds urban leaders of the plethora of technological, social, and economic changes that are predicted for this first decade of the twenty-first century. In order to effectively guide institutions through the labyrinth of challenges, Kezar arms urban leaders with successful change strategies. A framework for change, called the "mobile model of change," that includes five primary strategies is presented: (1) senior administrative support; (2) collaborative leadership; (3) vision; (4) staff development; and (5) taking visible action. The main premise of the article is that intentional change at urban institutions needs to take into account the unique institutional culture of these campuses. Two case studies illustrate the way change can emerge on campuses based on their culture, highlighting that urban institutions need to be aware of their distinctive environment. Leaders are provided guidance about conducting an institutional culture assessment before engaging in the change process.

In addition to institutions being faced with unprecedented change in an era of accountability, institutions are being asked to document change on campuses. While other institution types enjoy more autonomy, urban higher education institutions face greater calls for accountability. Peter Eckel reviews strategies and approaches for assessing change, a key process in ensuring continued funding and public support. A framework for assessing change is presented and includes explicit indicators, such as enrollment numbers, as well as less concrete cultural markers, such as sense of community. Proven strategies for collecting evidence are presented based on the experience of 26 institutions that attempted to assess their level of change. Strategies range from linking assessment to change processes, to not getting hamstrung by incomplete information, to handling negative reactions if little change is found in the assessment.

Each article in this volume refers to what might be termed "the ecology of campus-community relations." There is a complex web of relationships that urban leaders need to consider when they engage in collaborative leadership on their campuses. Each article presents different parts of this web such as community leaders (Gilderbloom; Kezar; Sheley), schools (Gilderbloom; Soto and Drummond), business and industry (Baer; Gilderbloom; Soto and Drummond), social systems (Gilderbloom; Soto and Drummond), politicians (Gilderbloom; Soto and Drummond; Sheley), and different racial and ethnic groups (Kezar, Soto and Drummond), to name a few. Urban leaders need to be aware of this complex web of relationships as they make decisions, plan and allocate resources, develop a vision, and set priorities. This complex ecology can seem overwhelming, since the needs and perspectives of so many groups are included and accountability is hard to determine. But this task only seems overwhelming because we lack the strategies for negotiating the system. The clear leadership challenge for the future is developing effective mechanisms for conducting institutional processes in collaborative ways. This volume brings together successful approaches to help urban leaders solve their leadership challenges that range from clearly defining roles and responsibilities, collaborative stakeholder planning approaches, and strengthened shared governance systems, to leader self-assessment, institutional cultural analysis, and collaborative assessment.

Author Information

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