29 Years and Counting: A President's Journey
By Robert A. Scott, President Adelphi University[1]

When I became a college president nearly 29 years ago, my goal was to bring together people, ideas, and resources in order to shape an environment that would help people advance in knowledge, skills, abilities, and values so that they can become even more effective as citizens, professionals, and neighbors. College is, after all, America's great opportunity vehicle. We know that someone born into a family in the lowest fifth of income earners who graduates from college has a good chance of joining the highest fifth of income earners in adulthood, and more than a fifty percent chance of joining the middle class or better. We also know that education leads to more civic engagement. This is my story, and I want to pass it on. I love what I do, and my goal continues.

However, the internal and external challenges related to resources have become even more central to all campus discussions. It is no longer sufficient, if it ever really was, to be an "academic" president or chief education officer only. Today, more than ever, college and university presidents and boards of trustees must understand the financial as well as the academic structure of their institutions. They must monitor risks of all types, and ask questions about that which they don't understand. When a plan or result suggested by a consultant or a staff member sounds too good to be true, it may be.

Sometimes, people from business will ask what expertise they can bring to a decision about tenure; leave it to those from academe, they say. Yet the decision to grant tenure is a multi-million dollar investment in today's dollars, and must reflect goals and strategy. Think of the questions that would be asked about a capital construction project or equipment investment of a similar size.

A campus president plays many roles, including budget master, lobbyist, high stakes fundraiser, cheerleader, and land development entrepreneur. Nevertheless, the president must always remember that he or she is first and foremost an educator. You must know yourself, your philosophy, and your goals. It is all about the students and their satisfaction, success, graduation, opportunities, and engagement as alumni.

Now, more than twelve hundred years old, universities serve three distinct roles --as creator, curator, and critic. Think of it: the university creates new knowledge through fundamental research into what is not known, new applications of what is discovered, and new interpretations of human activity through poetry and prose, body movement, music, and visual expression. Universities create, or prepare, new professionals and citizens.

At the same time, the university is the curator of human activity, of our heritage as cultural beings, and the repository through archives as well as databases of past accomplishments, whether for good or evil. This is why history is so important as a field of study. In fact, I think the study of history, the nourishment of imagination, and the fostering of compassion are the essential elements in a college education and the preparation of citizens.

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The university is also a critic. In this way, the university is at the margins of society just as in its roles as creator and curator it is at the center. As critic, it questions the status quo; it raises ethical questions.

It is in this role as critic that the university supports the free exchange of ideas which is the essence of its character. I know this, but know as others do that there are topics in society whose discussion is shunned, and whose mention can provoke catcalls of "appeaser," "racist," "jihadist," "anti-Semite," "unpatriotic." But if we cannot raise fundamental questions or discuss controversial topics on a university campus, where can we? This is the role of the campus as critic, as the source of ethical questions, and it must be ready to be held to the same standards.

Even as the president must be mindful of the budget and investments, he or she must be mindful also of the quality of student learning and general education, department and faculty scholarship and creative activity, and off-campus experiences. The president must be a philosopher who knows the curriculum, the campus, and the community, representing the three major spheres of educational activity over which he or she has influence. Therefore, we must think of these areas when we initiate and support activities intended to advance student achievement.

A campus president performs these varied roles by drawing on a well of experience gained on the playground, in Scouts, in school, and in camp. We are always filling our "well" of experience with life lessons, whether professional or personal, on campus or on vacation. We must always ask: What can we learn from this? I have found that many early lessons helped influence later results.

I recall attending a program at the Japan Society on department stores because of a Japanese donor, the speakers on the program, and the setting. Part way through a presentation on the department store as "theater," I realized the same could be said about a college campus. The next day, I asked the drama department chair to give me a tour of our campus as a theater set, highlighting points of focus and energy flows that support our institutional storyline. I took notes, discussed some ideas with the head of facilities, and we improved our "stage" for current and prospective students, faculty, staff, and visitors.

In this way, my well grew deeper in ways that in later years supported visions for arboretum status for the campus and biennial outdoor sculpture exhibits.

When thinking about the various roles of the campus president, one must also consider the size of the institution. I have never wanted to be at a large university because I want to have the experience of watching students grow in the many ways that a transformational educational experience can encourage. Once, as a consultant to a large research university, I was invited to become a senior officer. I was intrigued because of the location and mission of the institution, but decided I could not work in a high-rise office tower separated from the campus green and student activity.

For me, strategic leadership consists of three words that begin with the letter C: communication, cash, and credit. Communication involves speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Too often those who refer to "communications" think it is only one way. It isn't. Not only do we need to listen to others, we need to "listen" to data and ensure that the data we measure are and then relate them to our priorities. Our data book, dashboard, and enrollment by design matrices include historical trends and comparative information. These are essential to good communications and routine documents for decision making. We also believe that data, that which we like and that which we wish were different – should not be hidden, but should be shared. I learned long ago that the source of reliable information with relevant comparisons gains credibility and assists in moving an organization forward.

Communications also involves an understanding and interpretation of the institution's history, heritage, and culture. Too often, I have seen leaders join an enterprise only to talk about change and new goals without grounding those ideas in the history and culture of the organization.

Another element of communications is – "no surprises." This has been my mantra with the board of trustees, senior staff, deans, faculty, union leadership, and the whole campus.

Before each board meeting, I send the trustees a confidential report on a standard set of topics, including highlights of the issues to come before each committee and the full board. We also use a chart showing institutional development in phases, over the past dozen years or so, including Board Governance; Academic Strengths; Undergraduate Admissions Selectivity/Pricing; Financial Strength; Board Giving as a % of Total Annual Fund Giving; Undergraduate Alumni Participation; and Public Perception.

Communications also requires a rigorous questioning of assumptions and an ongoing sensitivity analysis of those levers of change and markers of progress that can go awry. This type of questioning requires a culture that encourages staff to speak "truth to power" and know that their questions and suggestions will be respected.

A strategic plan is an essential element of communications and an important point of leverage for leadership. A strategic plan is all about principles for decision-making, priorities for action, and metrics for monitoring progress. Such choices can be difficult, even contentious, but we must abide by the idea of open dialogue based on valid information to guide our thinking. During times of demographic, technological, and economic challenges, difficult choices need to be made, but our work over past years has enabled us to go to the "bargaining table" with credibility.

Our rallying cry at Adelphi has been that "enrollment is everyone's job, if everyone is to have a job." This includes the faculty in the classroom, advisors after class, secretaries at the department office, custodians in the hallways, and members of the Public Safety staff as well as admissions officers. Accurate and enthusiastic communications with prospective students and families can affect admissions yield and enrollment. Equally important are our communications with current students, their successes and concerns, all related to retention and graduation, and saying "thank you" to all those who make the campus a welcoming place.

Communications is all about people, not only listening to them and informing them, but selecting, developing and training them. It also includes the involvement of people from off campus to serve on both formal and informal advisory boards and councils. We have used such groups with great success in reviewing plans and critiquing assumptions.

Important stakeholders include donors and prospects. We need to listen to them, keep them informed, get them involved, thank them, tell them the university's "story," ask them to comment on visions and plans, be with them at personal events as well as professional settings, and help them understand priorities. In difficult times, we can help them network. At all times we can ask them to give career advice to students.

Years ago I learned that the editor of a successful magazine called a subscriber or advertiser each evening before going home. I thought, "What a great idea." This started me on a pattern of calling school and community leaders periodically to ask what we could do to help, what we could do better, what we should change. I ask students, faculty, staff, and alumni the same questions, and have learned many helpful lessons this way.

Communications also involve quality, the level of our expectations, as well as external forms of validation such as arboretum and museum status, in addition to formal academic program reviews, operations audits, and annual goal-setting and post-tenure review. While perhaps seemingly tangential to our core enterprise, these investments signal points of pride for our community. For instance, the beauty of our campus is

one of its signature characteristics. Often, we hear that students choose our campus based on their emotional connection to grounds and facilities, not just the faculty. Seeking recognition for our 75 acres as an arboretum signaled our support for our grounds crew, validated their work, and engaged them in the recruitment and retention process.

The design of the curriculum and extra-curriculum, as well as faculty and staff appointments, should communicate our goals and the outcomes we expect. Communications is the sea on which we adapt to the wind, but always tack toward our goals.

It has become evident again during the recent financial turmoil that "cash is king," liquidity is essential. How could we forget such a basic lesson? Cash requires consistent controls on positions, salaries, and expenses. Rigor must be a routine, not episodic. The standard analyses we all know in terms of tuition diversity, expense and financial aid ratios, debt ratios, liquidity ratios, FTE revenue and expense ratios, and FTE expenditure ratios all must be monitored routinely, along with enrollment ratios in terms of inquiries, applications, offers, deposits, and student contacts. The priority for cash should be well known through the strategic plan, the facilities master plan, and the technology plan, each of which, in a coordinated way, sets priorities for the campus. These priorities must guide the annual budget process, including plans for non-tuition income, and be the foundation for any deviation from spending plans. In all of these areas, and others, the CFO is a critical strategic role in any organization.

As everyone knows, expense control is essential; amenities can drag an institution down both fiscally and in terms of reputation. The best time to install controls is when times are good. We have seen that institutions which have taken on extensive amounts of debt in order to build new and varied facilities can get into difficulty and need to furlough employees and freeze salary increases because of the requirements for debt service. Some of these projects can be called frills, exemplifying the "edifice complex" charge leveled at colleges by critics. In our recently completed $116 million construction of new centers for recreation, sports, and the performing arts, there are no frills. These are inspiring state-of-the-art LEED-certified "green" buildings that support our core programs and demonstrate fiscal prudence to our students, alumni, and potential donors. Their very physicality—clear glass that enables pedestrians to see through the centers into our classrooms and onto our fields—is a metaphor for transparency and our financing of these facilities.

We monitor a set of enrollment and financial statistics weekly as a senior staff. The CFO does so daily, and our deans, often viewed as points of expense control and not revenue generation, are critical to our Enrollment by Design management structure, as enrollment equals the revenue necessary for positions, equipment, and facilities.

We also monitor facilities and grounds maintenance. Keeping the facilities and grounds in good shape should never be lowered in priority. We have seen what happens to institutions when that occurs.

Cash is also related to investments and investment policy, the allocation formulas used, and whether or not and to what extent investment income is used. As we have seen in recent years, those who have relied upon investment income to support a significant portion of the operating budget ran into difficulty because of declines in value and the lack of liquidity. We have not drawn on investment income for the operating budget in over thirteen years. Our goal is to build for the next 100 years, not to ease the management of the next few.

We have seen that institutions which took on variable-rate credit, expensive credit, and taxable rate debt, sometimes for operating purposes, are heading down the wrong road. The amount, type, and purpose of debt are critical elements, and discipline is necessary.

We have a set of ratios we use to compare ourselves to more highly rated institutions. We aspire to raise our rating and were upgraded to "A" by S & P, a rating confirmed again, which cited our planning, execution, and controls. We want to maintain and upgrade our rating as a measure of fiscal soundness.

Credit also involves maintaining good communications and relationships with banks and other lending institutions, agencies at the state and federal levels, and, often, local officials. Good credit has given our board confidence in our position of strength and allowed us to act quickly when strategic opportunities were presented.

It is better to be restrained routinely than to have to shrink suddenly, as abrupt and unanticipated course corrections often undermine confidence. Think 3 C's --communication, cash, credit.

When asked about my philosophy of leadership, I often respond by reference to the 5 senses. We must be confident at speaking and writing; seeing and being seen; touching, that is, the tactile experience of participation in campus events --and I say participation, not just attendance. There is one sense which is underplayed, but I think is the most important, to listen. Often I hear people answer a question in a way that is off the mark because they did not listen carefully to the question asked. We must not only listen carefully, but also should ask for clarification, showing that we want to understand the question before we answer. This is not to suggest a delay by engaging in "paralysis by analysis." It means that we want to make sure we understand what the person is asking and find the real question so often hidden by answers.

The campus leader must put him or herself in a position to listen: to walk around campus, attend events, invite people in for formal and informal conversations, asking, what is going well? What do you wish we had changed last week?

I will sometimes invite faculty in for a conversation about a topic which I know is of importance to them, even if I want to discuss something else. For example, I invited in several faculty in the same discipline because I heard there were problems of leadership in the unit, but didn't think it was appropriate to ask directly. By asking the faculty members about their particular interests, I engaged them in a broader conversation and asked, "How are things going?"

Once, when interviewing senior faculty from the same unit in this way, each started with the same response, "Fire the dean." I said, you have business experience, don't you. Each replied "yes." So I then said, when one makes a decision such as the one you recommend, he must have the second, third, and fourth steps in mind. When asked what I meant, I said, well, if we fire the dean, we have to know who will be put in the dean's place, who will be the associate dean, and when we would start a search for a permanent dean. This led to very helpful suggestions from faculty in a unit that was in turmoil and which quickly regained its stability under the new dean I appointed. Each of the faculty I interviewed suggested the same person as dean and the same person to become associate dean – and each was my choice as well.

On another occasion, I wanted particular advice from my vice presidents, so at a meeting I gave each a piece of paper and said: "Imagine a new president is coming in this July. What are the top three actions you would recommend the new person take in the first 3-6 months of the first year?" Each had the same number one recommendation, so I said, why wait for the new president and we took action.

On yet another occasion, I lived in a residence hall to learn what it was like. In my first semester at Adelphi, I enrolled in a freshman seminar class. I told the faculty member not to make a fuss about me, that I would sit in the back, and engage with the students. During one small group discussion, I asked a young lady where she "hung her hat" during the day. She replied "My Volvo." I didn't understand at first, and she explained that she used her car as her lounge and the trunk as her closet.

After class, I called the vice president responsible for facilities and asked how many lockers we had for the 5400 commuter students enrolled at the time. We quickly set about surveying various buildings and creating lounges and spaces for lockers so that commuter students could feel comfortable on campus away from the parking lot. We also developed plans for student involvement on campus so that each could have a complete collegiate experience no matter where his or her pillow is located.

Many times, a new president is encouraged to think of a vision to lead the campus in a new direction. Unless the president understands and respects the heritage of the institution, he or she is likely to encounter problems when advocating such change. Change is often needed; innovation is almost always required; but departing from core values and disrespecting the heritage of an institution can make the change and innovation more difficult to accomplish. Process is important. Ignoring process can make it the topic of discussion instead of the change required.

A similar set of values relates to gaining trust. There should be no surprises. Whether a campus has unions or not, the leadership should never so surprise the campus community that it loses trust in the decisions makers. In a similar vein, it is important to share information. Provide a deep rationale for actions; pose alternatives as value propositions with evidence of the need for change. Often, this relates to financial matters. Share the information.

Current topics deserving attention include the importance of scholarship in relation to teaching and the role of online education in fulfilling the institution's mission. Both require attention; the priority should not be a surprise.

With unions, and especially with faculty unions, some leaders believe it is difficult to have trust and to share information. I disagree. The leader must respect the office if not the person. The president or executive director of the union might be someone who is difficult to like as a person, but he or she represents an office which represents a membership. Showing disrespect to the office creates a problem of "process," which always trumps substance.

This matter of respect and trust applies equally to faculty, staff, students, trustees, alumni, neighbors, and officials. The leader must make a promise and keep it. The promise can be simple, such as restoring integrity, or it may be a matter of financial or facility priorities. It is essential to make the promise, keep it, and communicate with people about the progress made. In this way, we can establish and develop productive relationships and mutual support.

I have eight "lessons for leadership." The first is to listen. There are many occasions when we are with faculty or high potential prospects and are asked questions. We should, of course, provide all necessary information, but it is equally important to listen so that we can learn about the person's interests and priorities. And never say "no" for other people; let them say what they want; listen or read before responding. The danger is we might say no before knowing the actual question being asked.

The second lesson is that we should never start with money. Believe it or not, leadership is about enhancing the environment for teaching and learning, about faculty and prospects becoming partners as investors in quality, affordability, and fulfilling aspirations.

Third, not every conversation with a potential or actual donor is about an investment of money. Every gift is the result of four steps whose pace can vary from minutes to months. All donors must find their way through these phases: becoming informed, becoming interested, becoming involved, and becoming invested. Becoming "involved" can include membership on an advisory committee or talking with students about life after graduation.

These steps cannot be rushed; each must be honored. The pace can be quickened, but the steps cannot be skipped. I have experienced the four stages taking 45 minutes and 45 months.

The fourth lesson is to say "thank you", whether in response to an award, a special effort, a gift, a call or an e-mail. We must be responsive --quickly. It is amazing how the simple act of returning a phone call or e-mail can be viewed as nearly revolutionary, given the fact that many people fail to do so. I have some great anecdotes about how simply saying thank you for one action or gift led to significant increases in future efforts.

In the same vein, we must respond quickly to a complaint, even if it is only to say we will examine the complaint and write back. Too many people wait for the examination before responding, and by then a second complaint is lodged about the lack of response.

The fifth lesson is to know your students, faculty, alumni and the university's "story." Foundations, rating agencies, faculty and donor prospects want to know that we are intimately involved in the mission of the university, which, of course, is teaching and learning. I find that such audiences respond well to stories of particular individuals who have flourished in our environment. These stories of student, faculty, and alumni life and development help give life to what makes the institution or organization distinctive.

The sixth lesson, then, is to understand and be able to articulate the vision of where we want to go and the principles on which that future progress will be built. Academic program, or athletic, visions must be put in context.

The seventh lesson is simply to show up -early. I am often surprised at how simply being at a funeral home, a memorial service or other gathering and spending time with someone who is a friend or future friend can solidify relationships. We must do so sincerely, or course, but the results can be significant. Also, showing up early can gain additional time for the task at hand, whether it is on or off-campus.

The eighth lesson is to focus on priorities. Whenever someone asks about priorities, it is important to be able to detail them. Then, we can try to incorporate into what we want to do the interests and priorities of the questioner which we have learned by listening.

There are times, of course, when someone's interests do not coincide with our priorities and we must make a judgment about whether the idea will be desirable for the university. There are proposals that would require us to divert resources of energy, time and money that could be better spent in other ways. Linking priorities to the vision is an essential step. A request for $2,500 can take as long as one for $250,000. We must think about the use of hours and energy as well as the University's future.

These are basic ideas for executive leadership as well as for fundraising. A campus presidency is a covenant. It requires an ethical commitment to a culture of conscience; compelling compliance rarely works. It is more than a contract; it is a commitment to advance the institution with the optimal matching of talent, resources and ideas, through people, in fulfillment of the campus mission.