

Leaders Used to Know More than Their Followers

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Since I have been working in community colleges for 55 years I am often asked how leaders today differ from leaders 40 or more years ago. I usually stutter out some kind of answer about collaboration, declining resources, multiple constituencies, activist trustees, etc. facing today's leaders compared to the leaders of 40 years ago whose primary challenge was planning and building facilities. Recently I have become more introspective about the differences in today's leaders and the leaders 40 or more years ago.

Four or five decades ago leaders simply knew more about the issues than anyone else with whom they worked. The flow of information was quite limited, and presidents and other leaders could control and manage information to their advantage. Knowledge is power, and in the community college that knowledge came from a few journals and newspapers. Presidents subscribed to these inside track resources using institutional funds, and they often employed staff to summarize some of the most pertinent information or to clip key articles so they would always be more informed than their constituents. In addition, presidents and other key leaders belonged to key national organizations and networks such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) which was primarily an organization for presidents in its early years.

In the 1950s and 1960s there were no faculty unions; there were very few faculty organizations or specialized journals or newspapers; few faculty attended the AACC convention. The League for Innovation and NISOD did not exist as major gathering places for faculty. While there were emerging organizations for student personnel workers, financial aid officers, information technology specialists, instructional specialists, etc. very few community college educators held membership in these organizations. In 1966 I completed a national survey for AACC to determine the status and interest in 35 national student personnel organizations regarding extending membership to community college student personnel workers. (Organizations for Student Personnel Workers, *Junior College Journal* 37;1 September 1966) Very few of these organizations included a visible community college constituency, and fewer still had an outreach program to recruit community college educators. As a result of the survey, and the contacts made with the leaders of these organizations, I was invited to work with a number of them to open the doors to the community college student personnel world. I wrote a statement for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) titled *NASPA and the Community College*. I worked with the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the national associations for registrars, student activities directors, and others to help them build bridges to the community college. Community colleges became very active in many of these associations, and in recent years a number of community college educators have served as presidents of these national organizations.

National organizations for community college faculty did not develop as extensively as they did for student personnel staff, but as AACC evolved its leaders became more inclusive and created

special councils now representing 31 different constituencies with more faculty and administrators than presidents as members of the various councils. In earlier times AACC sponsored only a small number of commissions whose members only included presidents.

So, 40 or so years ago presidents had more access to and control of information than did their faculty, administrators, trustees, citizens, and students; to the extent knowledge is power these early leaders used that power to create cultures and manage the cultures to reflect their personal values and priorities. Many of them operated as benevolent authoritarians and along the way built one of the most democratic and inclusive systems of education in the world.

The Information Age: But then the world began to change again. Leaders adjusted to the Agricultural Revolution and to the Industrial Revolution, but the Digital Revolution turned their world upside down, and it is still evolving at an increasing rate of change. For example, in the late 1980s less than 1% of the world's technologically stored information was in digital format; by 2014 more than 99% of the world's technologically stored information was in digital format. There is no need to document these changes in the availability of information; there are very few human beings living today anywhere in the world who are not familiar with cell phones, computers, and television. Information is now ubiquitous to anyone who wants to access the latest. There are no longer any surprises based on information. An eleven-year old girl may know as much as a community college president or could if such information was important to her. Even when presidents rely on information technology specialists on their staff to keep them up to date there is no longer any guarantee they will be more knowledgeable than the president of the faculty union, the director of financial aid, the chair of the board, or that quiet student who sits on the back row in board meetings. Even if presidents and other leaders could figure out a way to access and control information to give them a knowledge advantage hackers, as we have recently learned, can access their private cache of information.

In a very mundane way I have personally experienced the loss of knowledge power in the last 55 years of my work in education. In my career I have consulted at over 1,000 community colleges, universities, and organizations. In the early days I was a so-called "expert" in student personnel work; later in staff development, innovation, and the Learning College; now in student success and completion. I kept up with the literature in each of these areas and wrote 15 books and over 200 articles on these topics and others. I networked with a number of key leaders, organizations, and projects; I knew my stuff. When I spoke at colleges I brought new knowledge and new perspectives. And I was well paid for that knowledge. In the last decade or so I have become less and less an expert; in colleges I now visit the majority of faculty in the audience know more than I do about my topic. The faculty and staff have more access to information than I do because they are more technologically gifted. Now they write articles and blogs and network with resources totally unknown to me. Everyone knows everything these days or can with a stroke of the finger. Knowledge is no longer power when everyone has equal access to it. I may have consulted at my last college on September 24, 2016 when I spoke on the topic "Student Success Is Everyone's Business" at Aims Community College in Colorado.

So, What's a Leader to Do These Days? One thing is certain—leaders can no longer rely on superior knowledge for their credibility and their authority as many did decades ago. The

only alternative is for the leader to become more inclusive and collaborative. I must become We and Us as a core value for all stakeholders. Governance and decision-making structures must be designed and implemented to accommodate all the members of an institution. Trust and respect must underscore all interactions. Transparency is a foundational requirement. The long-range plan, the budget, the president's benefit package, the evaluation process, etc. is everyone's business. Fortunately, the very forces that brought about this change in power and alliances make it possible to implement the new order of things.

The *Internet of all Things* is the silver bullet for the leader who will make inclusiveness and collaboration a priority. The rail lines are already in place; the wires are already strung; everyone has an access key in the palm of his or her hand. The switch can be pulled, the button pressed, the cord plugged in to launch at little or no cost the new order of things that will connect us all as citizen-participants—around the world or in the district served by our college.