THE LINKAGE OF ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP TO THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS OF HBCU COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The leadership dynamic of human interaction is one of the most studied yet least understood phenomena. More attention is currently being given to the ethics of leadership in light of recent situations involving the unethical practices of college presidents at some HBCUs. This study explored the characteristics of past or present college presidents, his or her leadership style(s), and his or her principles used in the decision making process. The participants were the six HBCUs located in the Southeast region of the United States. The states represented were Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia.

Keywords: Leadership, Ethics, HBCU.

INTRODUCTION

The power to improve schools, colleges and universities in this country lies within the authority granted to educational administrators to make decisions. The driving force in their decision-making depends often upon whom or what is demanding attention. From the beginning, higher education has held the special responsibility to promote the advancement of knowledge and uphold the highest scholarly and ethical standards as students are prepared for private and civic leadership responsibilities (De Russy & Langbert, 2005; Fong, 2002; Poff, 2004).

Higher learning by its very nature entails the crucial need for an ethical foundation to academic life. Effective academic leadership requires a high standard of ethics, and collegiate practices should reflect the moral compass of its leadership (Poff, 2004). Society has witnessed the breakdown of leadership in the last decade that included scenarios where top level executives were involved in fraud, greed, and corruption (De Russy & Langbert, 2005; Thoms, 2008). These lapses have occurred across all landscapes, including not only the entertainment and sports world, but also the corporate, political, health, and education realms.

Leaders of higher education such as Francis Wayland at Brown University were instrumental in transforming the middle class into leaders, meeting the economic and social needs of a developing nation (Cohen, 1998; Rudolph, 1990). Charles Eliot of Harvard University was known nationally for collegiate reform and the transformation of Harvard University as an institution (Cohen, 1998; Rudolph, 1990). These leaders, as well as other members of higher education, made significant contributions to the ethical reputation of the nation's colleges. Unfortunately, there are more recent examples of questionable leaders' behavior in higher education (Bowen et al., 2006; Tierney, 2005). There have been clear violations of the law,

leading to universities firing of presidents and board members (Tierney, 2005). Therefore, unethical behaviors can have severe implications on the fate of the organization and its members (Sendjaya, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Ethical violations by university leadership and members have negative repercussions for the entire institution (Caldwell et al., 2005; Kelley et al., 2006; Kelley & Chang, 2007; Knight & Auster, 1999). In some cases, universities are likely to face the threat of marginalization. Knight and Auster (1999) noted ethical violations create institutional "*suspicion and criticism*" (pp.188). The authors cited past instances where the academic profession was criticized for a variety of unethical behavior-some accusing institutions of turning a "*blind eye*" toward such behavior or even suppressing corrective action (pp.188). Americans have long held suspicion of the higher education institution (Rudolph, 1990), and recent behavior does nothing to disperse it. Kelley et al. (2006) stressed how unethical behavior can "*undermine the reputation of universities*" (pp. 206). Ethic violations such as plagiarism weaken institutional prominence and credibility (Caldwell, 2005).   The damage to reputation and credibility leads to reduced organizational legitimacy-critical to effective institutional governance (Caldwell, 2005). Failing to ensure that organizational polices and behaviors are congruent destroys trust and legitimacy (Caldwell, 2005). Even more insidious, unethical behavior can become a part of organizational culture (Caldwell, 2005), establishing poor role models and influencing poor behavior in other members.
The collegiate president is the highest ranking administrator of any institution. The position is one of power, prestige, trust and above all responsibility lending itself to both public scrutiny and self-examination. College and university leaders have serious challenges and responsibilities to provide effective, ethical leadership for their constituencies. Yet, not all leaders have overcome the challenges or accepted the responsibilities of their roles (De Russy & Langbert, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Kelley & Chang, 2007; Poff, 2004). The ethical behavior of the leader of the institution has a considerable impact on the ethical behavior of others in the institution.

Research Question

Q1: How does the interaction of college presidents at HBCUs and their work-related ethical beliefs and knowledge, perceived pressures, characteristics and institutional agents or entities influence the evolution of institutional ethics and decision making over time?

Q2: How do college presidents describe their decision-making processes during various ethical dilemmas?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Leadership

Gini (2004) declared ethics and leadership inseparable. He confirmed, although the literature acknowledged the role of moral leadership, there was a blank spot in moral leadership research. According to Begley (2007) values, ethics, and valuation processes were related to leadership. They wrote, "*Leaders should know their own values and ethical predispositions*"

(pp.399). Begley further noted that leadership was "*essentially focused on people and relationships*" (pp.401). The authors defined the study of ethics as the life-long struggles and failures to be ethical, and the inconsistencies of ethical postures during the dilemmas of everyday professional life. They further declared ethics highly relevant to school leadership. They suggested that valuation models were templates for moral action and cautioned against applying ethical postures without consideration of the consequences.

Begley (2007) examined the role of moral leadership and the effects of positively influencing a leader's moral development through its nurturing of moral development. Begley suggested that moral leadership is not a natural outcome, but sustained that people wanted leaders who acted morally. Begley defined acting morally as producing no harm to others and behaving in ways that showed interest in the wellbeing of others, rather than self-interest, as the driving motivation behind their leadership. He suggested that leaders had no formal exposure to moral decision-making and initiated what he determined to be an effective method for nurturing a leader's moral consciousness leading to moral development.

Theoretical Framework

The framework surrounding this study includes social-ethical constructs and Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT). This provides "*a lens that shapes what is looked at and the questions asked*" (Creswell, 2003, pp.119). Social-ethical constructs provide an ethical foundation for leaders' interaction; complexity leadership theory places leadership within a collective context, involving a multi-level and across subunit network organization of many agents-congruent with that which exists in a higher education. This methodological approach best represents movement "*toward exploration of a form of leadership as emergent and dynamic, and generated in multi-level interactions among leaders operating in the context of larger social systems*" (Lichtenstein, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, pp.3).

Morality is embedded within the leadership process (Burns, 1978:2003; Ciulla, 2003). Sendjaya (2005) believed that "*good leadership is impossible without the presence of morality*" (pp.84). From this perspective, leadership and ethics cannot be separated (Burns, 2003; Northouse, 2004; Sendjaya, 2005). Sendjaya (2005) refutes those who attempt to separate leadership from ethics. This internal system of moral values in every individual necessitates the inclusion of morality in any leadership concepts that presuppose a dyadic relation between leader and follower. Therefore, to say that inserting morality into the concept of leadership is unacceptable is a denial of this universal fact of human nature. As a matter of fact, there is no leadership apart from morality since all forms of leadership are value-laden (Gini, 2004).

Bawden (2000:2003) explained "*that because interaction influences humans and nature directly and indirectly, it inherently has ethical implications*" (pp.175). With influence among each other and with students, college presidents hold important ethical responsibilities. As leaders, they have varying roles such as establishing an ethical work climate and resolving conflicting values for both students and peers (Burns, 2003; Northouse, 2004). Marrella (2001) states that motivating ethical behavior in others as a central leadership challenge, noting that "*character development is part of education*" (pp.24). These are only some of the roles that leaders hold in guiding the behavior of both students and institutional members.

Burns (2003) described this pursuit as manifested by linking intrinsic values, correlating with the group members. In this context he states that leaders are moral agents who "…*represent*

the values and motivations-the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations-of both leaders *and followers*" (pp.381). This is a process of mutual interaction and effort to achieve a common outcome; it implies shared values are necessary to achieve optimal, collective correlation. While Burn's (2003) theory embraces the ethical construct of leadership and organizational behavior, it stops short of including the informal dynamics of temporal leaders, and the interaction among levels and across subunits.

METHODS

This study utilized the survey research method along with face to face interviews to explore the characteristics, demographics, ethics, leadership styles, moral values and principles used by the college president(s) at HBCUs in the Southeast; to determine what variables influence their thought processes when making ethical decision(s) for their particular institution.

Site Selection

This research study included the six HBCUs from the Southeast region. Historically Black Colleges and Universities include Alcorn State University, Mississippi Valley State University, Jackson State University, Tougaloo College, Morris Brown College, and Gambling State University.

Sample Selection

The data in this study was collected from the six Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the Southeast. In Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the United States Congress classified HBCUs as educational institutions established prior to 1964 primarily to educate African Americans and other minority students. The first three HBCUs were Cheyney University in Pennsylvania founded in 1837, Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856 and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania established in 1854. Most HBCUs are located in the southern part of the United States of America. Participants for this study are the Presidents of the HBCUs in the Southeast region. The names and contact information will be obtained from the universities' websites.

Rationale for Data Collection

In this research study, data were collected from the six Historically Black Colleges and Universities current or former presidents. The diverse geographical nature of the participating universities and the number of participants warrant the choice of an online survey as a data collecting instrument. The essence of online survey research method lies in the fact that it is cost-and-time effective and can be administered effortlessly by the researcher (Bell, 1996). Additionally, the survey online tool data can be managed effectively by the researcher.

Prior to administering surveys, a consent form and a letter requesting permission to conduct the study was sent to Institutional Review Boards of the participating universities. All information collected from this study was treated confidentially and participant's privacy will be a high priority. Information generated from this research will enable the university presidents to have a sound insight of their leadership styles and the variables linked to their ethical decision

making process. It further enabled the leaders to know if and how their leadership characteristics' promote success on their particular campuses.

Data Analysis Procedure

The interview data, when transcribed, produced several pages of text. Initially, each transcript was read through without making any notations in order to gain an introductory feel for the participants' perspectives. Then, each interview transcript was searched by hand for meaningful segments of data. These meaningful segments were labeled with descriptive terms (i.e., codes), and then summarized and organized according to the major categories, or themes, that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2012). This in-depth analysis of the transcripts identified 30 codes. Subsequent analyses eliminated redundancies and reduced the list to 15 codes that described the recurring patterns or relationships that cut across the data (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then grouped under four major themes arising out of the data.

FINDINGS

RQ1: How does the interaction of college presidents at HBCUs and their work-related ethical beliefs and knowledge, perceived pressures, characteristics and institutional agents or entities influence the evolution of institutional ethics and decision making over time?

All of the six participants said they were familiar with the structure and the expectations of the office of the president. Correct and fair decision making is a critical factor. In order to make the best decision for the university and to ensure that decisions are made correctly and fairly, one must be prepared to reflect on whether the decision is good for the university and that the necessary team support is evident and the team skills are available to get the best possible result.

Leadership at this level must be guided by a strong set of principles. Some of these principles involve always including the faculty in the decision making process and involving group discussion on issues, being open to use small groups to discuss ideals and fact gathering to review as many facts as possible. Build confidence by involving regular communication with the team to educate them on why and how decision(s) are/were made to help ensure you do not lose the confidence and support of your team.

In response to the interviewer's question about what values did they as an administrator used to influence their decisions, they provided some insight into their personal lives and their religious orientation. Personal religious beliefs and faith in God, the trust I have in my team, my inner person and the love and care I have for people. It is/was God that influenced my decisions. Life experiences, family morals and values, and God are the values I used when making decisions.

RQ2: How do college presidents describe their decision-making processes during various ethical dilemmas?

Prioritizing, communication, cooperation, and collaboration are key functions of the decision-making process. One president indicated that, as the acting president of GSU, the first thing I needed to do was to find and hire a Vice President of Finance. Very shortly after him being hired, he was given the task to assess the university budget and put a plan in place to help

balance it. Three months into his new position, my new VP of Finance advised me the only and most effective way to do so, was to let one-hundred and twelve people go. Now I had two major dilemmas to face with in just a few months in office. I reached out to a few co-hearts for assistance and intervention. It was the advice of my colleagues that helped me decide to reach out to neighboring university presidents for assistance. With the help of neighboring universities many employees were transferred to neighboring universities, some retired and others moved in another direction. After coming up with this plan, it was decided that I would hold several meetings with small groups at a time to inform every one of the changes and the plan to move the university forward. Not all, but most people were very helpful and happy with moving the university forward but hurt not to be employed at GSU anymore. Having a plan to present to employees made the transition smooth.

Participant 2: I was faced with the decision to fight for my university or let the state government board continue to let the three state HBCUs (Alcorn State, Jackson State and Mississippi Valley State) presidents feel different and unaccepted. I spoked with both of my colleagues who were seniors to me, but had informed me "*this was the way it has always been.*" The HBCU presidents were not asked to enter the room during board meeting but instead were asked to wait in the hall. As president of JSU I knew I had to make a stand for my university so I entered the room and had a seat at the round table just as the other university presidents.

Participant 3: Representing your constituency is crucial. As acting president for only 18 months I was not really faced with making any major ethical decisions. I did make the decision to vote against the majority during the time the university was face with repairing the natural gas liner that ran from Fayette, Mississippi to the campus. The decision of who the vendor would be to complete such a major task was already made by most. When time came to vote, I voted "*NO*" because my vote represented the university's students, faculty, staff, alumina and community.

Participant 5: The art of compromise is also viewed as a key trait for a successful university administrator. While working at a majority white institution, at the beginning of my higher educational career. The African American students raised the concern of being treated unfairly and unequal. Their concerns drew media attention and the administration had to make a public appearance. Being the Assistant VP of Student Affairs not only to add the only black administrator at the time, my superiors wanted me to represent the institution. I personally agreed with the students concerns but my superiors made sure I understood I had a responsibility to represent the institution first. I was asked basically to make it appear that all students were being treated equally but in reality I knew the truth and so did they.

Participant 1: Learning to adapt and adopt strategies to address ongoing and emerging challenges. At one time, GSU was in jeopardy of losing our accreditation which was very heart breaking for me because not only was I acting president of GSU, but GSU was my alumni. As president, many decisions were made but I can't recall making a decision unethically or because someone acted unethical. I do believe it was because I have always kept this motto as my driving force when making decision, "*you can't treat people any kind of way,*" the decisions made were understood by most students, faculty/staff, alumni, and the State of Louisiana higher education governing board.

Participant 3: Ensuring effective student development for all students is a major challenge of a university president at an HBCU. I would have to say it started during the time I served as vice president of academic affairs and spilled into the time I served as acting president. It was one of my personal goals to ensure we have the ideal student developmental program. Many were against the ideal and felt that students that did not meet the minimum to be

acceptable. They felt these students should not be granted the same right or opportunity as other students. We made the decision to offer students an ultimate route and ensure we prepare them to move forward in their career education.

Participant 4: Being available to the university family in times of crises and personal loss and need is also a valuable attribute of a university president. As I administrator one issue we never want to be faced with is losing a student. How you deal with it is important and must be done right. I'm sure many would disagree this is not a good example, but to me. About three years ago we had several federal visitors visiting the campus. At the time, I was giving them a tour of the campus and I got the news that some of my students had been involved in a serious accident. As important as ensuring our guest felt special it was equally important to me that my students and parents knew they are not just a number but they are family. I apologized to my guest, turned to one of my VPs that was touring with us and asked him to continue the tour and I headed to the accident to support my students. By the time I made it, several other students had already arrived and the news that one of the students had expired began to spread. Students began to grow upset but my presence helped students stay calm.

Participant 5: Displaying integrity in enrollment management, financial planning and budgetary oversight are important characteristics. As enrollment manager at a HBCU, we were faced with financial challenges and had come with a plan to get more funding to keep from being force to close for good. The administration had come up with a plan to apply for a loan. In order to receive the loan, we had to show an increase in enrollment numbers. As the enrollment manager, I knew the numbers back and forward, and I knew the numbers they wanted me to report were totally unrealistic. Most of my colleagues were in agreement and wanted me to be a part of this dishonest act. Because I just could not force myself to do this, I was asked to resign which I understood, but was willing to do so because I felt I had to stand by my decision.

Participant 6: Upholding the highest ethical standards is an important characteristic to sustain. My most difficult and challenging ethical decision I ever made as an administrator was to let one of my most dear and well trusted friends go from acting unethical. This person was one I held to high standards. It was brought to my attention that outside companies were contacting the college to reorder supplies from their companies. The key word here is reorder which meant they had ordered and receive supplies from the college before. After much research, it was determined that this person was ordering things with college monies and reselling them to other vendors. Because of the trust I had in this person, it was painful to do, but, as the leader and representative of the college, students, faculty, staff, alumni and community I had to act.

In response to the question about the values you as an administrator used to influence your decisions, the administrators believed that decisions must be in the best interest of the university and its constituents.

When asked by the interviewer what were the top three agencies or group that influenced ethical decisions, the presidents again recognized the influence of the key stakeholders.

Participant 1: The students first, then the faculty, and finally the alumni. The students first because as an administrator even decision made must be done so with the students in mind. Second faculty, faculty are the tools of the university. They are the ones to ensure most decisions are carried out. Their support is very much needed, and your alumni. Most alumni think their job is to run the university, but their main job is to support the university. You will receive their support but the key to that is you must keep them informed and abreast of changes and decisions before the outside media does it for you.

Participant 2: I would call this my Framework: the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff and the students. I made sure I made myself approachable to students. Many days I would go to the dining hall to have lunch and/or dinner with them. Walk down the campus to greet and speak with the student body. I met with students at least once a month to hear their concerns.

Participant 3: As an administrator my top three groups I keep in the front of my mind when making decisions and this is not in a pacific order would be the board of trustees, faculty and students which I would group together and the entire group meaning my presidential cabin.

Participant 5: As an administrator my top three groups in this order influence my ethical decisions: the students-because we work to educate and prepare our students for the real world, the IHL board- because it is a must we follow the procedures and policies we have been given to stay in good standing with the State and National boards; the faculty and staff- as a leader it is a must to do right by your team and finally the alumni and community.

Participant 1: As the acting president of GSU the first thing I needed to do was to find and hire a Vice President of Finance. Very shortly after him being hired, he was given the task to assess the university budget and put a plan in place to help balance it. Three months into his new position my new VP of Finance advised me the only and most effective way to do so, was to let one-hundred and twelve people go. Now I had two major dilemmas to face with in just a few months in office. I reached out to a few co-hearts for assistance and intervention. It was the advice of my colleagues that helped me decide to reach out to neighboring university presidents for assistance. With the help of neighboring universities many employees were transferred to neighboring universities, some retired and others moved in another direction. After coming up with this plan it was decided that I would hold several meetings with small groups at a time to inform every one of the changes and the plan to move the university forward. Not all but most people were very helpful and happy with moving the university forward but hurt not to be employed at GSU anymore. Having a plan to present to employees made the transition smooth.

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Participant 4: I was once faced with the issue of a student who had not completed all pre-required courses before moving into his core courses. The student expressed his concerns about taking substitution courses to avoid taking a certain instructor with another instructor. The decision to do so was brought to my attention. As the lead administrator it was very important to me I acted fairly to all parties involved. I did review the student's handbook and knew right away what must be done. Support and enforce the policy. That student had to take those courses. NO substitutions were allowed.

Participant 5: While working at a majority white institution, at the beginning of my higher educational career. The black American students raised the concern of being treated unfairly and unequal. Their concerns drew media attention and the administration had to make a public appearance. Being the Assistant VP of Student Affairs not only to add the only black administrator at the time, my superiors wanted me to represent the institution. I personally agreed with the students concerns but my superiors made sure I understood I had a responsibility to represent the institution first. I was asked basically to make it appear that all students were being treated equally but in reality I knew the truth and so did they.

Emergent Themes

Theme 1: Correct and fair decision making

From the beginning, higher education has held the special responsibility to promote the advancement of knowledge and uphold the highest scholarly and ethical standards as students are prepared for private and civic leadership responsibilities. According to de Russy & Langbert (2005), Fong (2002), and Poff (2004), the power to improve schools, colleges, and universities lies within the authority granted to educational administrators to make decisions. The driving force in their decision-making depends often upon their willingness and ability to make correct and fair decisions. All of the presidents in this study indicated that they had strong expectations of collegiality and shared decision-making. As they advanced in their role as president, they had to discover where the center of decision-making was in order for sound institutional strategy and efficient decision-making to be possible.

Theme 2: Personal religious beliefs and faith in god

Ciulla (2003) described leadership as a social construction shaped by the moral values and the cultural practices and beliefs of a society. The presidents expressed the feeling that when making ethical decisions, presidents sometimes are impelled to go beyond their social and cultural world. Certain situations demand decisions based on adopted and adapted moral criteria that may be based on religious beliefs and religious affiliation.

Theme 3: Organizational support

Organizational support is bolstered by receiving and providing information to the Framework that includes the presidential cabinet and the key stakeholders. Burns (2003) described this as a process of mutual interaction and effort to achieve a common outcome that implies shared values that are necessary to achieve optimal, collective correlation.

Theme 4: Compromise

The art of compromise is also viewed as a key trait for a successful university administrator**.** According to Bennis (2004), **s**uccessful leadership is not about being tough or soft, sensitive or assertive, but about a set of attributes. It is important to develop the character that enables one to be able to compromise, while displaying integrity in enrollment management, financial planning and budgetary oversight are important characteristics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The HBCU communities, like all societies expect strong ethical leadership in colleges (Wong, 1998). And like Wong (1998), the presidents interviewed for this study all suggest that values-based leadership has a great impact on the culture of the university and will be instrumental in effecting lasting change. We live in an era when ethical lapses in judgment continue to undermine the public trust in the colleges and universities and in the leaders of the institutions (Kelley & Chang, 2007). Improving ethical behavior in higher education is essential to the survival of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Presidents at HBCUs must remain vigilant about the responsibilities of their office. According to Sendjaya (2005) it is very difficult for unethical leaders to be successful and effective. The position of college president is highly esteemed with power, prestige, and trust. These presidents must have the capacity to provide effective, ethical leadership for their constituencies.

Recommendations

Today, HBCUs are experiencing a very steady turnover rate. There are a number of factors that make it difficult for them to lead effectively. Successful tenure for HBCU leaders now hinge upon their ability to be charismatic and adept at bringing new funds into their institutions, while at the same time satisfying their internal and external stakeholders. This is a time when overall support for HBCUs is at an all-time low, and state governments are exploring ways of effecting closures citing funding shortfalls and because of their failure to see the need for continuing support of these institutions. Many state leaders have also expressed their failure to see the relevance of the HBCUs in today's society. Modern day HBCU presidents are now challenged to instill in their communities the pride, traditions, and legacy of HBCUs as a way to motivate and stimulate student body interest and growth. In order to stem the negative views, HBCU presidents must be willing to work independent of the governing board to stimulate interest and support from its communities and its stakeholders.

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