

Presidential Leadership:

Understanding the influence of academic disciplines

By Peggy Ann Brown



It's easy to forget, amidst the perceived ivory tower of administrative offices, that top university administrators were once students themselves. With more than three-quarters of today's presidents and chancellors holding doctorates that span the curriculum, it's no wonder that this graduate training laid the foundation on which these scholars built their administrative careers.

The question, therefore, is simple: How does a president's academic background influence his or her leadership style?

Few studies have addressed this particular issue relating to leadership. Research by Marietta Del Favero of the University of New Orleans indicates that academic deans from pure and high consensus fields reported more cognitive complexity—the ability to consider multiple frames of reference. Harvard Business School Professor Linda A. Hill has suggested that only by strategically choosing assignments that offer opportunities for development, contribution, and success, can future campus leaders convert their graduate school competencies into the necessary leadership attributes.

“If you look at ten different chancellors or presidents you can see ten different leadership styles,” says Jane T. Upshaw, chancellor of the University of South Carolina, Beaufort, “but we all have certain characteristics—a belief in shared governance, the ability to listen, the ability to build consensus. Where we differ are the approaches we use, and that's where our disciplines have influenced us.”

According to a 2005 survey, AASCU members include historians, lawyers, engineers and philosophers. Only a quarter of these presidents received degrees in education, compared to more than 40 percent in a 2006 study of all college and university presidents (see table on page 12).

Quick Thinking

Upshaw's graduate training employed the Moore Method of Teaching Theoretical Mathematics. "We didn't use textbooks, we couldn't collaborate, and I either saw my colleagues present what they had discovered or I presented what I had discovered," says Upshaw, who earned a doctorate in mathematics education. "I had to learn to think on my feet and be analytical and strategic in my approach."

Upshaw has used these skills in her business career, academic positions, and current leadership role. "The Moore technique has affected everything I do," she says. "In theoretical mathematics you look at

Data Driven Decisions

With a Ph.D. in systems ecology, University of North Alabama President William G. Cale, Jr. credits his graduate work for teaching him to think holistically.

"My graduate training never intended to turn me loose as an administrator, but looking back, there's no question it shaped how I act as a leader," says Cale, who studied how to structure mathematical models of ecosystems in order to predict how they might behave in the future.

"Systems thinkers are deeply interested in causality," says Cale. "I don't take action without

thinking about how that ripples through the whole organization. That helps me think about who I ought to talk to as we are making decisions."

Drawing on the knowledge of others is a natural part of Cale's leadership. "There was no way one person could

collect all the information necessary to put systems models together, so you learn to pay attention to others' input and that informs your decisions," he says.

Making data-driven decisions is also a trait of Robert L. Caret, president of Towson University. An organic chemist, Caret continues to use the scientific method to develop and test hypotheses, then draw conclusions from the results.

Attracted to mathematics since elementary school, Caret focused on the theoretical side of chemistry in much of his research. Today, he admits, he might take a different path as his interests have broadened.

"The philosopher David Hume makes a strong case that any of the really sublime thoughts that have occurred in the scientific world have resulted more from a broadening of the mind through the humanities and not the sciences in general," says Caret. "Science can be quite linear and it's the thought processes that come more from a humanist background that give you the ability to make strategic leaps."

Caret also speculates that his leadership style derives less from his academic background and more from personality traits, such as those measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. "Eighty to 90 percent of presidents have ENTJ-type personalities," he says (ENTJs—Extraverted Intuitive Thinking Judging

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Robert Caret, Towson University



a problem and analyze what is critical to solutions and what's not. Being a quick study has served me well as chancellor."

While the Moore Method emphasizes learning independently, Upshaw believes its techniques have helped her build consensus on campus. "It enables me to bring the important questions to the table," she says. "For everyone to see all sides of an issue and analyze its different aspects is critical for success."

types—are usually considered to be strong leaders and organization builders). Adds Caret, “The challenge for decision makers is to have both data-oriented and feeling people around making sure all the bases are covered.”

It's Concert Time

To Barbara Dixon, president of Truman State University, Myers-Briggs Type Indicators—as well as the approach taken in the bestselling book *Reframing Organizations*, which suggests that successful leadership comes from looking at issues from multiple perspectives—can help you understand your leadership style, as well as your strengths and weaknesses.

“We choose our disciplines for reasons that are not always logical,” she says. “They’re how we like to work, how we gather information, how our brains work.”

Dixon draws a correlation between the way she approaches her presidential responsibilities and her doctorate in music pedagogy and training as a classical pianist.

“As a pianist, you practice and practice, and there’s never enough time to be satisfied,” says Dixon. “Sometimes you have a concert date and realize, ‘I’m not going to be ready’ and put it off. I relate that to gathering data and more data and consulting and consulting.”

“If I say, ‘it’s concert time,’ we’re done talking and need to get things rolling and make a decision.”

Recognizing the human element that enters into performances, Dixon has come to accept that there is no such thing as perfection, on stage or off. “No two performances are alike,” she says. “Especially when you are sight reading you learn to grab what you can, leave out what you can’t, and still get a good result. I don’t have to have everything perfect all the time.”

Disciplinary Insights

Richard L. Pattenaude’s doctorate in political science has given him an appreciation of the political process. Says the chancellor of the University of Maine System, “I have a greater patience with the process and a greater sensitivity to the challenges that governors and the state legislature face.”

Pattenaude applies his knowledge of modern democracy to higher education. “This gives me a great deal of tolerance for the right to free speech

To Be a Scholar

Acknowledging that the demands of their office often preclude time for teaching and research, presidents seek ways to continue their disciplinary affiliations.

“I do occasional guest lectures and keep up with general readings in chemistry, but gave up teaching when I was missing too many lectures,” says Caret. “I like to say that I am still a chemist in the fact that I can cook a great frittata and make a good martini.”

Says Dixon, who no longer gives concerts but plays for student and alumni groups, “I satisfy my teaching urges with leadership mentoring.” Similarly, Cale reads professional journals but primarily makes presentations on academic, rather than scientific, topics.

With the help of an excellent scheduler, Pattenaude has been able to teach an introductory American government course that meets one night a week. “It’s wonderful therapy because it reminds you of why you got into this business,” he says. “Administrators can mythologize the classroom and forget the pressures of getting grades in on time and what it’s like to have a wide range of students.”

Wright, who shares his research in university-wide lectures, conducts primary research during breaks and over the summer. “I love being president of Prairie View but I am a historian, and I will be back in the classroom someday,” he says.

and the importance of due process,” says Pattenaude, who likens campuses to small cities, and the modern president to a strong mayor.

“The president has a fair amount of authority and responsibility but has to continually work on consensus building and communication in order to create and move forward a shared vision,” he says. “Being a political scientist I appreciate how political decisions are made and that gives me the advantage of being able to work within that system.”

Remembering the insights gained during her graduate training in social work and public policy is important to Karen Haynes, president of California State University San Marcos. “Part of my hesitancy in moving up in administration was that I did not want to lose the values, perspectives and style that were social work,” says Haynes, who has been able to transfer these skills to her presidential responsibilities.

“Social work values self-determination, reducing discrimination, and objective assessment. This

Comparison of AASCU Presidents' Academic Backgrounds with *Chronicle of Higher Education* Profile of College Presidents, 2006¹

Field of Study	AASCU Membership Survey, 2005	ACE Profile of College Presidents, 2006
Education or Higher Education	25.5 %	43.9 %
Social Sciences ²	31.0 %	13.8 %
Humanities/Fine arts ³	12.6 %	13.7 %
Religion/Theology	0.4 %	7.0 %
Business	5.0 %	4.9 %
Law	4.5 %	4.7 %
Physical Sciences/Natural Sciences/ Engineering ⁴	9.3 %	5.1 %
Biological Sciences	7.3 %	2.5 %
Health Professions	---	2.2 %
Medicine	---	1.6 %
Mathematics	4.0 %	1.0 %
Agricultural/Natural Resources	---	0.7 %
Computer Science	0.8 %	---

¹ "Field of study for highest degree earned," A Profile of College Presidents, 2006. Original source: "The American College President: 2007 Edition," American Council on Education. Published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education 2007-8 Almanac*, vol. 54, issue 1, p. 27.

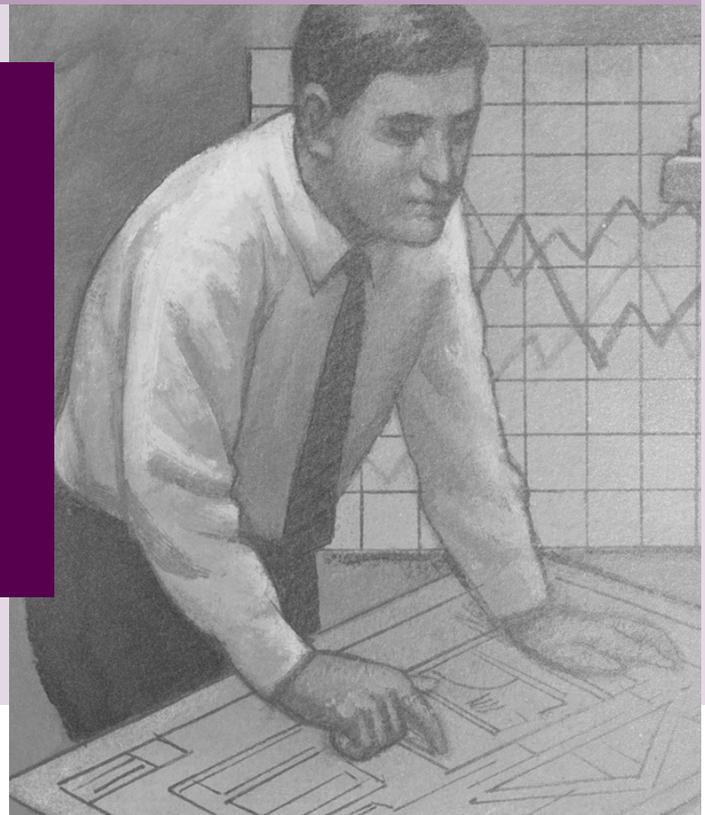
² AASCU survey categories of Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, History, Communications, Library Science, Social Work and Economics

³ AASCU survey categories of Literature, Philosophy, Theater/Music and Art/Architecture

⁴ The *Chronicle* survey separates Physical Sciences/Natural Sciences (3.0%) and Engineering (2.1%). The AASCU survey included Physical Sciences/Engineering together (6.1%) and Geology/Geography/Anthropology together (3.2%)

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William G. Cale, Jr., University of North Alabama



campus has a strong focus on helping educationally at-risk populations,” says Haynes. Her understanding of these groups recently aided negotiations with county officials to enable foster youth to attend the university.

“I know how to bring sets of people to the table and create collaborative strategies,” she says. “Skills in mediation, communication and conflict resolution come from my grounding in social work. Data informs my decisions but so does how people perceive and react to the data.”

In the March 7, 2008 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Clemson University President James F. Barker promotes architecture as “the ideal background” for the university president. Calling architecture “one of the last Renaissance educations,” Barker sees direct application of his skills as he builds the campus and envisions its future. Barker says, “... it [architecture] strikes just the right balance between art and science, the creative and the pragmatic. I often tell people I learned everything from plumbing to poetry in architecture school, and I use every bit of that knowledge as president of Clemson University.”

Historical Perspectives

For George C. Wright Jr., president of Prairie View A&M University, every day offers the opportunity to use his professorial skills and doctorate in history. “I tell people, ‘I am a historian masquerading as an administrator,’” says Wright. “My role in the classroom was to challenge students about what they knew about American history. I brought in perspectives of people who had not been heard—women, blacks, Native Americans.

“As an administrator, I still challenge people. I love to exchange ideas. I understand people criticizing my work as a historian, just like I understand people disagreeing with me now.”

Wright wants to know what others are thinking. “But as a historian,” he says, “if you tell me something, I’m going to ask, ‘what is your evidence?’ I constantly want people to document things. If students say, ‘the food in the cafeteria is bad,’ then I want examples of what food is bad.”

Wright brings his research on race relations and personal experience as one of the first African American students at the University of Kentucky to campus discussions on cultural diversity. “When people say ‘Hispanics don’t belong here,’ I am perfectly suited to argue on behalf of other groups having the right to attend Prairie View,” says Wright.

Transcending Disciplines

“Graduate school is a powerful force in structuring your mind, what facts you legitimize, and how you interpret things,” says Pattenaude. “You have to force yourself out of that comfort zone. I have to make sure not to see the whole world as a political process.”

As president of the University of Southern Maine, Pattenaude gained insights into different disciplines by inviting the faculty, in groups of 10, to lunch each

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Barbara Dixon, Truman State University



summer. “I’d say, ‘tell me about your research and challenges,’” says Pattenaude.

Northern Alabama’s Cale agrees that while graduate education shapes perceptions, there is much he and other college presidents have learned apart from this training. “Having been a successful educator and scholar gives us credibility,” says Cale. “There is no question that my experiences as a scientist help me be a better decision maker.

“But there is so much beyond the discipline that helps us do our jobs well—studying management techniques, going to meetings such as AASCU’s, and keeping up-to-date and talking about the issues. I still use the present voice when I say, ‘I am an ecologist,’ but I introduce myself as a university president.” **P**

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