



THE PRESIDENCY AT MASSART

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PREFACE

During my first year at MassArt I spent considerable time learning about the institution, learning what it does well - and not so well, learning how the institution functions, learning how decisions are made, learning about our leaders and how they work, and considering how we could lead the school to enact its mission with integrity in the years to come. As things go in one's first year, there was a lot of me getting to know various people and them getting to know me. One fascinating aspect of my first year was watching how various leaders lead and also understanding their expectations for their new president. I expected that we would have more robustly engaged in sense-making and consensus-building as a way of transparent decision-making in the college. They expected I would be clear about how I wanted things done.

In early August 2017, just over a year into my tenure, I held a retreat with the vice presidents. This was my second retreat with this group, and it was planned to focus on three topics: an assessment of important goals we had set for the previous year and the clarification of our priorities for the next academic year, the design of our upcoming strategic planning process, and some important matters related to leadership and organizational development, including a re-visioning of the composition and purpose of our Cabinet and Administrative Council.

A backdrop to the retreat included some things that had become apparent to me as my first year at the college progressed. First, many across the college expressed a desire for clearer communication and more ability to participate in decision-making processes. Second, at the same time, many expressed a desire for leaders to feel empowered to make decisions on behalf of the school. These are not contradictory desires, of course; they are complementary. Good decision-making, in my view, includes transparent processes, clear communication, and the exercise of authority for the good of the institution. Third, our school deserves the identification of transparent decision-making processes (I say processes, because different kinds of decisions are made different ways) that are clearly understood and consistently practiced.

Finally, it became clear that I was operating from a leadership model that was not clearly understood by all and was not even familiar to some. This manifested itself in different ways. Sometimes I found decisions coming to the Office of the President that simply belong elsewhere, while some decisions that should involve the president didn't. Sometimes I would surprise people by, when they asked me to make a decision, asking them to tell me what decision should be made. And sometimes people were frustrated when a decision needed to be made and I put things on hold because I wasn't satisfied that the right people were being involved in the decision-making process. In such instances, we were lessening our ability to make sense of things and we were certainly lacking the development of consensus.

In light of this lack of clarity about my philosophy of leadership, I determined to begin our retreat with a description of the idea of “the presidency,” a description of the work of the presidency, as I see it, and the shared values I believe are important for leadership in higher education. I note that I laid out these ideas of the presidency as *our* shared vision, *our* work, and *our* values. Yet, these were most decidedly my ideas and my values. Lest one think I am taking an approach inconsistent with the very model I am proposing, I want to say that I propose these ideas as *my* ideas in a community that I *believe* shares and values such ideas. As I have said in subsequent presentations of these ideas among *our* college community, I hope they are more than just ideas; I hope they are practices that we will embrace and enact in the years to come.

PRESIDENCY AS INTERRELATIONSHIP

Ed Penson, formerly of Massachusetts’ own Salem State University, describes the presidency as “a set of relationships; complex, sometimes fragile, sometimes indestructible, always dynamic and changing.”¹ Drawing on this notion of presidential leadership as “a set of relationships,” John Moore, president emeritus of Indiana State University, refers to the presidency as a tapestry, woven of the president (the public person who holds the office as well the human being, the private person who is the president), the board, the president’s personal relationships (with spouse, family, special friends and partners), the senior administrative team, the faculty, and major stakeholders.

I applaud Penson’s recognition that the presidency is a “set of relationships.” I appreciate the notion of a tapestry and the threads of relationships Moore describes. I like to describe the presidency as facets of a jewel, a complex yet cohering whole which gains its particular character from how the facets reflect light in and through one another. The presidency is this kind of interrelationship of many persons and constituencies, those named above as well as - to be explicit in identifying a university’s major stakeholders - students and alumni.

This is a complex view of the presidency to be sure. Not least among its complexities is the manner in which these various relationships function in a coherent and effective fashion. To some, I am sure, the model I am suggesting here is a recipe for confusion and ineffectiveness. Certainly, a strict CEO model is less complex. But I believe such a model is less efficacious, especially for an institution of higher learning whose mission cannot be simplified to a “bottom line.” I choose, rather, to embrace the complexity and to pursue the ideal of shared governance and shared responsibility in a manner that is most consistent with the identity and mission of our school.

¹ Penson, after serving as president of Salem State University, became Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. In 2014 the Association of State Colleges and Universities created the AASCU-Penson Center for Professional Development “to support institutional leaders in managing the broad range of strategic and organizational challenges of American higher education.”

So, the presidency is a set of relationships. The presidency is the set of relationships, involving the persons and constituencies previously named, by which our college is led. The presidency is not the president. The president is the leader of the presidency, but is not the presidency itself.

WHAT WE DO

None of us “own” the college, though we rightly refer to it as “ours.” It is ours because we share a stewardship of it and because we embrace the mission of the school. The college’s administrators serve its mission and its people.

The concept of administration, from the Latin to minister or attend to, is literally the act of serving. The presidency is an administrative concept, drawn from the verb “to preside.” To preside is, in our setting, to lead and manage by means of service and stewardship. Administrators are stewards of the relationships and resources of the institution. An effective presidency allows for a vital living and learning environment in which faculty and students thrive with the support of professional staff who enable their work.

As there are various facets to the presidency - and to those people who comprise the “presidency” - so there are various facets to the service of the presidency:

Preservation and Enactment of the Mission

Many schools drift from their mission, and often this undermines the integrity of an institution. Therefore a primary responsibility of a president, along with a board of trustees and vice presidents, is to preserve and enact the institution’s mission. The role of faculty, deans, and other administrators in carrying out the mission cannot be overstated. Our identity depends on it. In our recent reaccreditation process, the visiting teams from NEASC and NASAD commended us for our understanding and embrace of the MassArt mission, but this is an ongoing effort. It is our responsibility together to preserve and enact the mission as a leading art and design college in the 21st century.

Education

We are an institution of higher learning, a college by name, a university by designation of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The academic enterprise is the center of all we do, and to be true to our mission, we will always be committed to the good of our students. This is a fundamental concern of the presidency.

Development of People

As much as we talk about programs and budgets and buildings, we are not primarily here to build any of those things. We exist to develop people. The presidency must ensure that students are growing and learning, that staff are able to do their work in an environment that is rewarding and accommodates

growth, and that faculty are able to develop and flourish in their teaching, research and creative activity, and service.

Executive Leadership

The presidency is guided by a president and vice presidents, along with other administrators and faculty and staff leadership, who provide various levels of oversight of the institution. The president serves as the senior officer of the institution and reports to the board of trustees, who are accountable to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Financial Oversight

The presidency includes securing resources from state appropriations, tuition and fees, room and board revenues, and auxiliary revenues to support the work of the college, the administration of annual budgets, and the assurance that resources are used with integrity.

Fundraising

The presidency is involved in the securing of resources from foundations, corporations, private donors, and other grant-making entities to support the work of the college and to build an endowment and create alternate revenue streams to secure the school for the future.

Civic Leadership

The college is necessarily a civic institution, because it exists in and for the people of our commonwealth, ours all the more so because we are a public institution. The presidency enacts our role as a leading cultural institution in Boston, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and in the United States. We practice civic leadership through the preparation of students to do their work in the world, to engage in the well-being of their society, through community engagement in many forms, and through thought leadership.

Strategic Planning and Implementation

The college should always operate with a strategic plan that is formed with community involvement, that is both visionary and tactical, and that includes assessment and accountability. An important facet of the presidency is oversight of the accomplishment and renewal of a strategic plan.

Manage Resources for the Good of the Mission

Beyond financial stewardship, the presidency manages other critical resources for the college. Buildings must be maintained. Relationships with key partners must be developed. The development of people, human resources, are most vital to the ongoing success of the institution.

Effect Change

Institutions constantly change. Sometimes change is organic and incremental. Sometimes change must be instituted when the organization is in dysfunction. Always, change should be managed responsibly, consistent with our mission and our values.

Build Trust and Shared Vision

An institution without trust is inevitably dysfunctional. Distrust is often bred because the work of creating a shared vision is ignored. It is the work of the presidency to continually foster a shared vision and to cultivate trust in the college.

Preside

A president presides. Those in the presidency preside in various ways. Faculty preside over classrooms, student leaders preside over student government, union leaders preside over their members, vice presidents preside over their divisions. Presiding is not dictating; it is not an act of hegemony. It is often an act of consensus-building, and it is always leading with the good of the whole in mind. The president and all those who have a part in the presidency lead and manage primarily by means of service and stewardship.

WHAT WE VALUE

I admit that “value” can be a loaded term. By “value” I mean deeply held beliefs that guide our actions. Here I refer to those matters of importance, even principles, that are significant to our identity as MassArt. And I hope to lay out what I believe are shared values in our community as I have come to know it in my time here. As I see it, if we do not uphold these shared principles, we will become less than we should be, and if neglected, the absence of such values would render us a different community. Nevertheless, I admit these are values I consider of import for the leadership model I prefer. These are, in my estimation, crucial values for an effective presidency.

We relate to others with honesty and integrity.

We are truthful with one another, and we are careful to truthfully represent one another, even when our individual perspectives differ.

We respect every person's dignity.

Respect is something we can give to another. Dignity is the value intrinsic to each person, possessed by them because they exist. We don't simply offer respect to one another, because we could give someone our attention and politely listen to them and then deny their dignity. Instead, we respect the dignity of every person.

We embrace difference and diversity.

We do not believe there is only one way of seeing things, so we welcome difference in perspective and different ways of being in the world. Because we appreciate the wonder of diversity in the world, we welcome and value diverse people from diverse backgrounds with diverse ideas in our community. We believe our differences make us better.

We are responsive, and we get things done.

We acknowledge those who ask something of us or who are in need, and because we understand leadership as service and stewardship, we do what we can to respond to the needs of our community.

We welcome problems and appreciate suggested solutions.

Problems exist in every community and always will. We all make mistakes. We welcome people bringing problems to us so we can address them. We also welcome proposed solutions. And even when we cannot satisfactorily solve a problem, we will always address it.

We celebrate successes and acknowledge our failures.

MassArt is a place of excellence. Achievements abound, and we celebrate them. In our best efforts we are also bound to fail at points. When we fail, we admit our failures and learn from them. When others fail, we are understanding and generous toward them.

We practice transparency in decision-making.

We are a community, so we believe it is important for decisions to be made in such a way that the community can see how and why a decision is made. We recognize that certain matters must balance privacy with transparency, especially personnel issues, and therefore afford less transparency to the community than other decisions. But when transparency is not precluded, it is always preferred.

We understand that trust is essential.

We recognize that organizations that lack trust are generally unhealthy. Thus, we practice honesty, integrity, and transparency in order to cultivate trust in our community.

We listen to understand; we speak to be understood.

We don't just hear one another, we practice active listening, seeking to truly understand what someone is trying to say, even if we disagree. We try to speak in such a way that we can be understood clearly. We avoid dissembling and, especially in important matters, we take the time to carefully plan what we say so the community can understand us.

We are empathetic, vulnerable, and reflective.

Empathy occurs when one person feels with another, when one tries to enter in to what the other is feeling. Vulnerability is one's openness to be seen and understood by another, even when that may be frightening. Reflection is one's willingness to think and ponder a matter. Note that empathy and vulnerability occur in relationship one with another. Reflection, while it may be done with another, is something we do in relation to self. Empathy, vulnerability, and reflection each require openness, to other people and other ideas and other ways of seeing.

We embrace collaboration.

To collaborate is to co-labor, to work together. We know that in many instances we can do more together than we can do apart. This does not preclude the obvious need or preference for some of our work to be done in isolation or solitude, but some things are best done together. And we know that some things must be done together or they will not be done at all.

We are curious, creative, and adaptive.

We are curious because we know the limits of our current condition, we are creative because we are human, and we are adaptive because change is inevitable.

We understand the wisdom of determining which is more costly, action or inaction.

Sometimes something must be done, and we should do it. Sometimes doing something is worse than doing nothing, and we should refrain from action.

We identify and develop talent.

We rely on skilled people who care about the MassArt mission and do quality work. Good leaders can identify such people, then provide them resources, and entrust them to do their work.

We know when to say 'No'.

Not everything we might do is consistent with the MassArt mission. And we do not have the capacity to do everything, even if it is consistent with our mission. Therefore, we determine what we will not do in order to do what is most important.

We are willing to take a risk.

As with art, so with leadership, sometimes we simply must take a risk.

We want to do work that matters and that brings joy.

Most people want to work with purpose. Likewise, most people want to do work that truly brings joy, to them and to others. The MassArt mission is about meaningful work, because it is about preparing students for meaningful lives. We want to pursue that work in such a way that we not only get the job done, but in a way that brings joy to those who labor.

We reward what we value.

If we truly value something, then we should reward it. There are different kinds of reward, and we should reward consistently.

CONCLUDING CHARGE

The success of this presidency depends on us all embracing the complexities of our relationships and responsibilities for the good of students, for the good of our community, and for the good of our society. We will measure our progress not just by numbers but by trust and joy, by personal achievements and shared triumphs. If we are all in, I believe the risk of all the complexities will be well worth the successes we enjoy.