

Ethical Leadership and Tradition in Higher Education

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Leadership can be challenging when dealing with issues that affect a multitude of different stakeholders. Mihaela Grad (2015) found that higher education institutions operate in a complex universe of stakeholders including state legislatures, parents, students, faculty and staff. Additionally, the communities in which colleges and universities are located are also often directly affected by the decisions and actions made by the leaders of these institutions.

Even though Johnson (2018) believed applying several approaches to a problem provides a deeper understanding of the issue, the purpose of this paper is to use the ethical perspective of pragmatism to analyze two different higher education case studies involving the response of leadership to school traditions associated with alcohol consumption. We begin with providing the relevant information of two case studies: "Homecoming Drama" illustrates the challenges faced when a once family-friendly homecoming parade devolves into an annual drinking event, and "The Fourth-Year Fifth" presents a situation where a long-standing annual binge drinking game has become a tradition that administrators have failed to seriously address.

In addition to applying the ethical perspective of pragmatism (Johnson, 2018) to these case studies, we will use other relevant research to analyze the key themes of each situation. Furthermore, we will provide recommendations on how to solve the problems that are highlighted in each case. By utilizing Johnson's servant leadership theory, we will explain how decision-making involving school traditions must aspire to act ethically and take stewardship responsibilities seriously when student safety and community relationships are threatened.

Case Study #1: Homecoming Drama

Atlantic University (AU) is a university which prides itself in tradition. One tradition which AU has continued is its annual homecoming celebrations in the community of Atwater. Historically, the homecoming parade was a chance for both the university and the local community to come together in celebration. Unfortunately, the parade along with associated activities by students and recent alumni, both before and after the parade, have devolved into a

scene of drunken behavior which AU administrators have been seemingly unable to curtail. The activity of the inebriated students has led to the decline of most local participants. Additionally, many local participants with children who chose to participate felt compelled to witness the parade from several blocks away to avoid the drunken behavior of the students.

The conduct of these students has placed the rich tradition of homecoming and the associated parade in jeopardy as university administration must consider the overall implications to the students' health and safety, possible university legal exposure and the relationship with the local community. Additionally, AU President Petersen received complaints from alumni and faculty who were concerned with the parade and the student conduct which was observed. To this end, President Petersen has tasked myself, as the Dean of Students, and my staff with developing an immediate plan of action to address the parade specifically and the overall drinking culture which exists within the university.

The central problem for AU is a culture which has tolerated and accepted the abuse of alcohol over the years. The alcohol problem appears to have been highlighted and brought to the forefront after the most recent homecoming parade. Although this year's parade was described as having improved from previous years since no students were hospitalized or arrested, the binge drinking did not appear to have subsided. The university and police department's historical position of indifference likely contributed to the fact that no arrests or citations were written for students. Our university appears to have been beholden to a viewpoint in which universities were powerless to address the conduct of their students. This era in higher education was known as the bystander era according to Lake (2013) and was characterized by many institutions simply accepting the conduct of their students as adults making free choices.

Higher education has generally moved away from the bystander era and now embraces a theory which focuses on the whole student and acknowledges a shared responsibility between students and institutions (Lake, 2013). Lake referred to this era as one of reasonable care and in this theory shifts responsibilities to universities to take reasonable actions to prevent

foreseeable harm. It is within this shared environment that a pragmatic approach may be helpful in identifying and addressing possible solutions to the alcohol problem on AU.

I, as Dean of Students, recommend a multi-pronged solution which addresses various factors believed to contribute directly and indirectly to the alcohol problem on AU. A variety of strategies was recommended to be most effective by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) (2020). Additionally, I applied an alternate framing of the problem and utilized a pragmatic approach to viewing and understanding the scope of the problem. My team consisted of key personnel within the university and included those I felt could add value and provide perspective. To assist with the problems within the AU community I invited the Director of Student Activities, Kristie Kelliton, Director of Greek Life, Bill Johnson and Vice-President of Safety & Chief of Police, Kevin Ferguson. I additionally invited Caffrey Daniel, Director of External and Community Relations to provide perspective and opinions on how the greater Atwater community could assist. Together, we pragmatically examined the problem at AU through inquiry and exercised *dramatic rehearsal* to capture anticipated reactions to implemented policy. Through these processes of inquiry and mental imagination we identified and developed good ethical choices which we believe will positively address the alcohol related issues facing AU (Johnson, 2018).

The first issue we dealt with was the recognized need to identify and evaluate the scope of the problem as recognized in Kidder's Ethical Checkpoints (Johnson, 2018). The use and abuse of alcohol on this campus needs to be studied to better understand the extent of the problem. The two instances of complaints received by the Alumni Relations Office should be viewed holistically and with proper perspective taken considering the thousands of people who participated and observed the homecoming parade and associated activities.

Initial indicators show the problem may be isolated to certain population groups on the campus. If our study concludes the problem is isolated and concentrated within certain areas and groups then alternate remedies may exist which better target the problem. This approach

acknowledges the problem may not be pervasive across the college community. Rather, the problem may be concentrated in the fraternity and sorority communities as anecdotal evidence indicates. Harvard found binge drinking to exist at higher rates within universities that have active and popular fraternities as well as those institutions which view drinking as part of the university's historical traditions (Kiewra, 2009). To this end, additional pressure and responsibilities, including the possibility of sanctions or removal from campus, should be placed on the fraternities and sororities at the local level along with additional engagement with the national organization's representatives.

The second issue addressed which may aid in the resolution of the alcohol abuse problem was to further engage the university police department through VP Ferguson and the city of Atwater's compliance and regulatory agency through Director Daniel in a comprehensive effort toward reducing alcohol abuse through the enforcement of laws and regulations. A perception had existed of a disengaged police department which had abdicated its responsibilities in enforcing the laws relating to public intoxication and underage drinking. The NIAAA (2020) cited inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking laws by police as a contributing factor to alcohol abuse on college campuses. Additionally, Harvard found one of the key contributors to alcohol abuse was the availability of alcohol and recommended greater penalties to those purveyors of alcohol who contribute to the problem (Kiewra, 2009).

The final issue which was recommended was the development and inclusion of health and safety campaign. This campaign would seek to provide students, faculty, staff, purveyors of alcohol and parents with vital information about negative consequences of alcohol consumption. The facts provided in this campaign would show the affect alcohol can have on students' academic and social lives and include the possibilities of death, assault, sexual assault, increased suicide attempts, unsafe sex and involvement with law enforcement (NIAAA, 2020).

It appears as though there is congruence between AU's institutional interests and ensuring the well-being and development of students. The interests of AU are complex and

varied and include protecting the reputation of the university and its associated standing in the community and with alumni along with respecting the history and traditions of the university. AU must balance these interests with its core mission of educating and developing students while limiting its legal liability and exposure through the development and enforcement of sound policies and regulations.

Case Study #2: The Fourth-Year Fifth

“The Fourth-Year Fifth” involves a drinking tradition at the University of Virginia (UVa) that dates back to the mid-1980s where seniors attempt to consume a fifth of liquor on the day of the last home football game. As the case study points out, this tradition is not dissimilar to other dangerous drinking activities that take place at colleges and universities nationwide. The case study revealed that one student died in 1997 from attempting this drinking challenge. Even though studies conducted over the past 10 years show that a minority of only 20% of all fourth-year students at UVa participate in the tradition, one student in the case study is quoted as wondering, “What kind of UVa student would you be if you messed with tradition?” As an administrator, one of the leadership challenges in this case is how to prevent a serious safety risk that is cloaked in the guise of “tradition.”

This case study illustrates how traditions that previously may have not garnered much attention can eventually turn into cause for concern when student safety is put at risk. There was a time in the bystander era of higher education several decades ago when alcohol usage was attributed to personal responsibility, but modern prevention science recognizes that alcohol risk is the result of a complex interplay of individual choices and the environments in which the choices are made (Lake, 2013). Therefore, while individual responsibility still needs to be taken, higher education administrators have a greater responsibility than ever before to treat alcohol consumption on and off campus as a safety risk that demands a well-thought-out leadership approach.

Since problem-solving is a key aspect of leadership, the ability to recognize the best approach to take when attempting to address a complex problem is critically important. Pragmatism focuses on the process of moral decision making and using our *moral imaginations* to consider various courses of action, likely outcomes, and how others will respond (Johnson, 2018). Therefore, for a case such as “The Fourth-Year Fifth” which involves a tradition of behavior that has existed for decades, *moral imagination* may be the most necessary course of action to take in order to develop a practical approach to address a longstanding problem.

Even though it would be difficult to treat this case study as a scientific experiment, pragmatism believes that the scientific method can be applied in an order to solve human dilemmas (Johnson, 2018). A key element of the case study that we wish to highlight is the opinion of the UVa student that argued that traditions involving alcohol should not be “messed with” even though studies have shown only 20% of all fourth-year students participate in “The Fourth-Year Fifth” challenge. It is reasonable to assume that the opinion of this particular student is based on anecdotal evidence from her own personal experience and her own personal knowledge of alcohol consumption and campus tradition. Though 20% is a relatively low number, UVa is a large institution with over 15,000 undergraduate students which makes it likely that a large number of other individuals may share similar sentiments.¹ In their experiments on probability, Hoeken and Hustinx (2009) however found that statistical evidence always proved to be more persuasive than anecdotal evidence. A pragmatic approach would therefore seek to gather statistical information in order to address the issue and develop potential solutions that would have a high probability of success.

In our experience, there can be a lot of misinformation surrounding alcohol consumption on college campuses. According to the NIAAA (2020), drinking remains an activity at institutions of higher learning that many college students consider to be a part of the higher education experience, even though adverse consequences include vandalism, personal injury, health and academic problems, sexual assault, and death. Yet, some may be surprised to learn that there

is also compelling evidence to suggest that binge drinking has decreased and abstention from alcohol consumption has increased substantially among adolescents in the United States over the last 15 years (Goings et al., 2019). The benefit of using the pragmatic approach (Johnson, 2018) is that it involves actively immersing oneself in the details of the situation to gain a better understanding of the challenges that one faces. This method could involve utilizing current adolescent alcohol data and trends to educate the campus community about the not only the dangers of adolescent drinking, but also the possibility that a majority of stakeholders, most notably students, may have a vested interest in ending questionable traditions such as “The Fourth-Year Fifth.”

Adopting a pragmatic approach (Johnson, 2018) to something that involves tradition does however come with potential problems. First, traditions can often be very difficult to break because their existence often spans many years, as is the case with “The Fourth-Year Fifth.” Secondly, it is likely that other students such as the one quoted in the case study will share similar sentiments about any attempt to stop drinking-related UVa rituals. There may also be alumni that do not want to advocate for breaking traditions that they themselves once participated in. Lastly, other administrative leaders may reject investing the resources that would be needed to conduct the necessary research to develop sound strategies and potential solutions. “This is the way it’s always been and nothing is going to change,” is often a common response from long-term administrators who may view any attempt to require research and develop educational initiatives to end student traditions as an exercise in futility.

Recommended Actions

More than ever, leaders are expected to be change agents in their respective organizations (Noremore et al., 2017). To put an end to the dangerous decades-old drinking tradition known as “The Fourth-Year Fifth” at UVa, leadership will need to act in a manner that will bring about substantial change. One recommended action to accomplish this would be for the president of the university to establish a committee of administrators, faculty, students, and

alumni to prepare statistical evidence on binge drinking on college campuses and present the findings to the campus community. Moreover, in addition to the existing policies on alcohol consumption in the student conduct handbook, specific verbiage prohibiting the encouragement of and participation in "The Fourth-Year Fifth" should be included along with detailed consequences and ramifications.

The homecoming tradition at AU is a valued event which, when done appropriately, can serve as a valuable bridge between alumni, current students and the wider Atwater community. In order to balance the interests of all the parties, it is recommended AU take a comprehensive view of the situation wherein the interested parties each have a voice in recommending actions which will reduce alcohol abuse. In a similar manner to the recommended actions at UVa, UA should convene a committee of interested parties which focus on creating an education and engagement campaign. Specifically, this education campaign would raise awareness of the dangers of alcohol abuse to not only the students and alumni but also the parents and distributors of alcoholic products. Engagement recognizes it takes the collective effort of the community to bring about meaningful change to preexisting established practices and traditions.

Robert Greenleaf coined the term *servant leader* in the 1970s to describe a leadership model that puts the concerns of followers first (as cited in Johnson, 2018, p.250). For high-level higher education administrators, followers can be defined as students, faculty, staff, and the local community. Since higher education involves so many different stakeholders, servant leadership can be an ethical approach where responsibility is taken seriously, followers are viewed as partners, and emotional healing can hopefully be achieved (Johnson, 2018).

In both of the case studies we dealt with situations in which student safety and health were negatively impacted by traditions at their respective universities which involved alcohol abuse. The consequences related to alcohol abuse are severe not only to the consumers of alcohol but also those around them. It is imperative for servant leaders dealing with both of these cases to ensure effective and robust engagement of the impacted parties in devising and

implementing effective solutions. In both case studies, we advise the use of committees to bring together the leaders of impacted parties in an effort to ensure the concerns of the people they represent are considered and addressed.

Conclusion

“Homecoming Drama” and “The Fourth-Year Fifth” are two case studies that involve the challenges that leadership faces when long-standing traditions are steeped in excessive alcohol consumption and binge-drinking. Allowing unethical conduct to continue is the most common form of unethical leadership; if you are aware of an unethical behavior, you are responsible for it (Fugarte, 2015). Leadership therefore must resist the urge to allow activities and behaviors to continue simply because they are considered school traditions.

The AU problem with alcohol abuse had been an issue for several years. It was complex in that there were various interests which had divergent views on the topic and it was difficult to identify and define the scope of the problem. The pragmatic approach we utilized allowed for maximum flexibility and provided a mechanism for continually reevaluating the situation through inquiry and *dramatic rehearsal* to ensure the recommended corrective steps were effective (Johnson, 2018). Likewise, even though there have been prior attempts at UVA to reduce the participation in “The Fourth-Year Fifth,” using the *moral imagination* theory of a pragmatic approach will create new and hopefully effective ways to limit involvement in this dangerous activity.

Higher education administrators shoulder the responsibility of acting in the best interest of their stakeholders. With its emphasis on stewardship, obligation, partnership, emotional healing, and elevating purpose, servant leadership (Johnson, 2018) may be the leadership theory that is most relevant to higher education. Administrators at colleges and universities not only have an obligation to ensure student safety but also to prevent activities that threaten the common good.

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Footnotes

¹ The University of Virginia encompasses twelve schools in Charlottesville, as well as the College at Wise in Southwest Virginia, with an undergraduate enrollment listed as 16,777 for the 2017-2018 academic year. <https://admission.virginia.edu/admission/statistics>