Book Review

Leading a small college or university: A conversation that never ends

Harry L. Peterson

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Harry L. Peterson, a former university president with 35 years of experience in higher education, provides a fresh and unique look into the life of a college or university president in his book *Leading a Small College or University* (Peterson, 2008). Drawing upon his own experiences, and that of other college presidents, he addresses the importance of understanding broad theories of presidential leadership, while artfully incorporating detailed descriptions of presidential duties, leaving little to the reader's imagination. Throughout the book, he outlines the responsibilities and challenges of the presidency with the hope of preparing a greater number of successful leaders for higher education institutions.

Peterson opens his book with a focus on broad topics including understanding the organization one works for. He emphatically states that the president needs to focus on knowing the organization's culture, stories, identity and decision-making processes, which all contribute to the atmosphere on campus.

Peterson makes an excellent point by emphasizing the need to talk, meet and work with different constituencies of the institution because a president who can recognize the organization's culture increases their influence and effectiveness in leading (Bolman and Deal, 2003).

Peterson, thereafter, focuses his commentary on understanding the institution as a two-way street – the president influencing the institution and the institution affecting the president. Though he highlights a president's high visibility as a challenge when leading a small institution, Peterson's argument would be stronger with more in-depth exploration into the challenges faced by a president when dealing with institutional culture. Peterson moves on from broader topics to layout the experiences a president will have in the first year. In dealing with constituents along with foreseeing and overcoming challenges, he illustrates the skills one has to master in his or her first year in order to continue successfully as president – communicate, listen and

learn. Characteristics often overlooked, Peterson does a particularly good job in explaining why those three qualities are important and the ripple effect they will have on other areas of the presidency. Continuing, he delves into the importance of a president understanding the qualities one should possess to establish greater effectiveness and confidence when developing and leading their own team (Daft, 2008). Needing not to detail a list, he does well in touching on the important points.

Peterson's book also devotes chapters to faculty, students and other external constituencies with whom an institution's president has a great deal of interactions. Making a point to note some differences in opinions and backgrounds among those groups, he encourages, once again, interaction and communication, whether dealing with governing boards or individuals. While providing such examples, he works in real-world solutions that easily support his arguments and illustrates the benefits of being in tune with such constituencies. More importantly, Peterson specifically addresses the integral nature of a student body that is content, as their existence is the reason faculty and administrators are employed. He adds that employees at an institution must keep the question of what is best for the students at the forefront of all decisions. Noticeable in this chapter is Peterson's passion for working at a college or university and the pride he takes in connecting with students.

Peterson, himself a former university president, effectively articulates the roles and responsibilities of a president in today's twenty-first century world of higher education. This is not a book laden with rules to abide by, but is

a book directed toward guiding future, current and former presidents and anyone who wants to understand the position. What Peterson does masterfully throughout this book is address the uniqueness of small colleges and universities, a point critical to those at smaller institutions. His analysis of the distinctive nature of the presidential position at a small institution – personal interaction, relationships, the visibility of the president, the reduction in social distance between administrators and students and all other aspects particular to small institutions – provides a rare look into targeted challenges and differentiated qualities needed in a leader. He never claims to know all the answers, but through the right blend of suggestions and ideas for success, he provides a base from which others can build. This foundation is built in an engaging manner via anecdotes, and through his own and other's stories and experiences. As such, *Leading a Small College or University* paves the way and provides guidance on what Peterson self-admittedly describes as a difficult and uncertain undertaking.

REFERENCES

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