Leading the University in the Twenty-first Century

By Joanne E. Cooper

Leading the modern university in the twenty-first century is a nearly impossible task. Larry Summers, for example, recently tried to reform Harvard's undergraduate curriculum in order to ensure that its graduates knew more, especially about science. As Harvard's then president, Summers believed the institution was badly in need of change and Harvard's former president, Derek Bok, seemed to concur, having just published a book entitled *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2005). Summers, however, was unable to accomplish his goal because he ran directly into Harvard's faculty, a group whose focus on research allows for less investment in the design and teaching undergraduate courses. Required to focus on research and publications in order to gain tenure and promotions in their respective fields, faculties at elite and large public research institutions more often derive their sense of community through national and international disciplinary connections.

Summers is now gone, replaced temporarily by former President Bok, who is no more optimistic than was Summers about the future of higher education. What is the problem? Lemann (2006), dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, claims that today's large research universities serve "an array of constituencies that want—and get—profoundly different things from them" (p. 64) so that it is nearly impossible to generate agreement about the university's central purpose. This leaves university presidents struggling to create institutions that cohere both intellectually and educationally.

Part of the problem is the pull of market values and the impact of relentless commercialization on the university's central purpose. In *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line*, David Kirp (2003) explores what happens when the pursuit of truth becomes entwined with the pursuit of money. Today's university presidents, states Kirp (2003, p. 263), are consumed with what he calls "the Sisyphean burdens of fund-raising and the placating of multiple constituencies." What then are the central functions of leaders in higher education? To raise money? To reform the curriculum? To support research? To meet the demands of accrediting bodies that call for more accountability to the public? With these disparate purposes, today's universities have lost their way. They are being pulled apart and their leaders are being dismembered with them.

According to Parker Palmer (2006)[1], the answer for all of us, university presidents and faculty alike, lies not in looking outward at these competing demands, but in facing inward. Palmer would agree that new leadership is needed for new times, "but it will not come from finding more wily ways to manipulate the external world. It will come as we who serve and teach and lead find the courage to take an inner journey toward both our shadows and our light—a journey that, faithfully pursued, will take us beyond ourselves to become healers of a wounded world."

Palmer calls not just on leaders at the top, but all members of the organization, to take this inner journey. Some scholars have described this type of leadership as constructivist (Lambert et al, 2002), leadership that is manifest throughout communities of learners, which include administrators, faculty, students, even the maintenance staff. What is needed are conversations across these constituencies that guide the organization toward a common purpose. These conversations are essential to engaging all members of the organization in the work of creating community.

Palmer's essential suggestion is that we turn our gaze from often competing external demands toward our interior lives, searching for meaning within ourselves in order to deal more effectively with the external environment. Faculty, for example, must take an honest look at how their professional and pedagogical practices impact students, responding not to the external pressures of the market, but to the need for this inward journey and the honesty it requires. Palmer (1998) asserts that the journey inward strengthens our identity and integrity, providing us with the ability to deal with the complex forces at work in the public arena, where "we can easily lose our way" (p. 179). He describes one government agricultural official who was worried about his boss's demands. After time spent on this inward journey, this official realized that, ultimately he did not report to his boss, but to the land. Likewise, members of the higher education community ultimately report to the students and their future. It is the examination of these higher purposes that will assist both presidents and faculty to unravel the Gordian Knot of competing responsibilities and demands at work in the universities of the twenty-first century.

[1] See the Center for Courage and Renewal website: Palmer, P. J. (2006). The Center for Courage and Renewal. http://www.teacherformation.org/

To prepare future leaders for their roles in higher education we must focus on more than budgets and politics. Members of the organization at all levels ought to take this inward journey and leaders at the top would be more effective if they learned how to encourage this kind of reflection. While the answers about what must be accomplished in order to best craft the future of higher education are complex, the issues become clearer in the face of Palmer's mandate that we look within, rather than out toward the wily world. Although we may be "tested against the great diversity of values and visions at work in the public arena" (Palmer, 1998, p. 179), as Harvard's President Summers was, we must stay close to our own integrity in order to find our way.

References:

Bok, Derek (2005). *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and why they should be learning more*.

Kirp, D. L. (2003). *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the bottom line: The marketing of higher education*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.

Lambert, L., Walker D., Zimmerman, D., Cooper, J., Lambert, M., Gardner, M. & Szabo, M., (2002) (2nd Ed.) *The Constructivist Leader.* New York: Teachers' College Press.

Lemann, N. (March 6, 2006). What Harvard taught Larry Summers. Time Magazine.

Palmer, P. J. (2006). The Center for Courage and Renewal. http://www.teacherformation.org/

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The Courage to Teach.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Joanne E. Cooper is Professor of Educational Administration at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, USA.