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## **The Challenges of Developing Future Leaders of Community Colleges**

**By: Steve Lambert**

Ensuring there are sufficiently skilled and experienced individuals to become leaders within various departments of community colleges is vital in order to secure the future of education in these institutions. In contemplating this point it, is important to stipulate that educational leadership has changed significantly over the past 20 years, reflecting shifts in policy and ideology (Ball, 2009). Specifically within the United Kingdom, these systematic changes include a larger influence on a market driven ideology, increases in state led quality control inspection systems, and nationally imposed accountability systems in curricula and assessment.

In response to these transformational influences, a new type of leader is needed (Randle & Brandy, 1997), a leader, who, I agree, must embody managerial values that differ from previous paradigms associated with instructional student-focused leadership. Elliot (1996) called this leadership dichotomy a clash between the “student centred pedagogic culture” and the “managerialism culture” (p. 8). This clash of cultures is supported by Wilkinson (2007) who argued that the introduction of managerial practices and ideologies has eroded the influences and power of the educational profession. It is, however, this contrasting and often competing requirement of the academic-versus-business aspects of educational leadership that has driven a need for a new type of educational leader.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) suggested that, due to the increasingly complex nature of college leadership, changing student expectations, and increased financial constraint, there is a void of individuals who want to be leaders within community colleges. Frearson (2003) suggested that this void has been made worse by an aging population, while Davies and Davies (2011) stated that the desire for a better work-life balance is also contributing to the lack of individuals seeking senior leadership.

In order to mitigate the aforementioned challenges, current leaders have a moral responsibility to support and develop the leadership experiences and skills of their staff, a key component of succession planning. If community colleges want a secure future, leadership needs to be cultivated from within the organization, focusing on those individuals in first-line leadership position, such as program or course managers who have a responsibility that includes leading and managing people. It is these individuals who will likely face the choice whether to pursue senior leadership positions. However, stepping into leadership positions within the organizational hierarchy is always challenging. Not only are neophyte leaders experiencing unfamiliar situations, such as undertaking managerial functions including appraisals and performance reviews, department-wide curriculum planning, and budgeting, when promoted from within, they are often challenged by the loyalties to their former team colleagues.

Davies and Davies (2011) argued that increasingly the *talent* that an educational institution has is a critical factor in its overall success and sustainability. Having stated such, Davies and Davies also believed that organizations need to look further than simple succession planning strategies in order to fill the future hierarchical leadership vacancies. Institutions need to consider how they are going to identify and develop future leaders to ensure that there are sufficient individuals with the skills and experiences necessary to lead tomorrow's colleges.

Before an institution can consider implementing any form of leadership training, they need to determine the needs of future educational leaders. Herein lies a challenge. One cannot be certain about the future educational landscape and how politics, the economy, and technology, for example, might shape it. What is clear is that there needs to be a reconceptualization of educational leadership. At the least, training leaders today to be open to leading an educational system that is vastly different from what is witnessed today is a step

toward supporting leaders of tomorrow. Indeed, one of the key challenges when looking at the development of future leaders of education is determining what the end product looks like. For example, are current notions of leadership, which traditionally combine a range of instructional skills and behavioural competencies as a hierarchical leader still relevant?

Thorne and Pellant (2007) argued that when recruiting, individuals should be recruited for attitude and trained for anything. Davies and Davies (2011) believed that key dimensions of quality leadership are based on affable personal qualities, the ability to promote issues of social justice, the ability to work with others, and the ability to promote strategic goals. While this conceptual framework is helpful, it provides little detail as to what these affable personal qualities might be within each of the dimensions.

Prior to offering any suggestions as to what future leadership development programs should look like, institutions might consider the attributes they want from future leaders and the level of ability in these areas. Only by identifying the desirable attributes of future leaders can assurances be sought that institutions are developing individuals who are able to meet the leadership challenges with which they are likely to be presented.

There is, however, a moral dilemma that current leaders need to face. It is the extent to which institutions develop those individuals who are currently in first line-management positions. Should individuals occupying those posts be expected to participate in a structured program of development aimed at moving them through the organizational hierarchy, therein ensuring that there are sufficiently skilled and experienced individuals to fill future leadership vacancies? One positive consequence of this approach is the building of leadership capacity from within and across the breadth of the organization, contributing to a more sustainable approach to leadership (Davies, 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Lambert, 2011).

An alternative idea would be to identify early leadership potential. This practice could be achieved through assessment of attributes such as emotional intelligence recognition

or critical thinking, if these attributes have been identified as key for an organization's future. Otherwise or in addition, current performance could be used; however, this point is role specific, because current performance may not necessarily be a good indication of future leadership potential. Moreover, the performance of a team or department could provide some indication of future potential of their own people. There also needs to be a recognition that relying on one method of trait identification is likely to yield little in terms of reliable data. If organizations adopt a selective approach of identifying leadership potential and then focus development activities on these selected individuals, there needs to be robustness and transparency of the methods used. Individuals need to be given full and detailed feedback and be assured that they will not be precluded from future opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, there needs to be a culture shift in developing future leaders from an approach, which is predicated simply on succession planning to one that includes ongoing talent identification and development. Culture is a powerful social architect within education and, as such, shapes leadership behaviors within colleges. As Davies and Davies (2011) highlighted, current leaders need to model the behaviors they wish to see in others. In doing so, success in the present can be assured, and future success will be secured. While this point may be true, institutions cannot rely on this approach alone and need to be proactive in developing future leaders.

In this paper, I have argued that developing future leaders should not be left to chance or simple succession planning strategies, rather organizations need to be proactive in seeking out leadership potential and cultivating it from deep within the organization. The benefits of this process includes the creation of a pool of individuals who have the skills and attributes necessary to take on the future challenges of leading educational institutions. At the same time, there will be the building of leadership capacity directly and indirectly happening

within the organization, better equipping it to deal with challenges as they arise. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are moral and cultural implications when focusing on talent identification and development. These features need to be clearly thought through and addressed by individual organisations, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing future leaders. However, what is common to all institutions is the need to secure the future of educational leadership in light of a constantly changing and increasingly complex educational landscape.

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