Leadership to Run the World: A Mandate for Higher Education

Gregory Eastwood
Academic Leadership Journal

The world will not be run by those who possess mere information alone…. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.
- Edward O. Wilson in Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge, 1999

What kind of leaders does the world need? Apparently not those who possess "mere information alone." E.O. Wilson suggests that leaders who simply have information and know all the facts are insufficient leaders. I agree. The world should be run by synthesizers of information and ideas. But what information and ideas do leaders need to know in order “to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely”? And what kind of people should these leaders be?

“Leadership is an essentially moral act,” said A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale University, who later became Commissioner of Baseball. But consider these few news items, selected from a multitude of candidates: Eliot Spitzer, former governor of New York, resigned after his involvement with a prostitute was made public. Rod Blagojevich, former governor of Illinois, was removed from office by unanimous vote of the Illinois State Senate after conviction on federal corruption charges. Bernard Madoff, former Wall Street executive and NASDAQ chair, currently is incarcerated in federal prison after conviction for investment fraud. Rev. Jeffrey Sarkies, a popular pastor at West Seattle’s Holy Rosary Church, resigned after the Seattle Archdiocese determined that he had violated their professional ethics policy in the area of sexual misconduct and harassment. Mike Garrison, former president of West Virginia University, resigned after he was accused of compromising the university’s academic integrity in what was described as an improper granting of an executive MBA to the daughter of the governor of that state. Jim Harrick, former head basketball coach at the University of Georgia, resigned after he was accused of National Collegiate Athletic Association violations; Harrick had been fired six years previously as head basketball coach from UCLA for ethics lapses. Dr. Scott Reuben, an anesthesiologist at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, MA and prolific researcher, admitted that he fabricated much of the data for his research. And so on.

Experience tells us that there is a large disconnection between the notion that leadership is a moral act and the behavior of some leaders in government, business, academia, religion, indeed in all domains. No discipline seems untouched. Also, that the world is faced with innumerable problems and is in crisis and needs thoughtful, moral leadership everywhere, I simply accept. Res ipa loquitur.

I believe we need leaders who have a broad understanding of human knowledge, experience, and motivation and who operate within a set of moral principles. That has a clear self-evident ring to it, yet is far from fulfilled. But higher education can and must do something about it. Higher education not only has a stake in the outcome of good leadership, it also is a major determinant in the development of good leaders.

Colleges and universities are where most, not all, but most, of our future political, business, academic,
religious, athletic, and other leaders are right now. That is where the future leaders of the world have been for several generations. And college always has been the place where we prepare for life, including a life of leadership. But from the perspective of colleges and universities as well as the perspective of those who benefit from what colleges and universities have to offer, students and their families, this has been mostly implicit and assumed. We in higher education have not only an opportunity now but an explicit responsibility to intervene to develop moral, responsible, broad-thinking, synthesizing leaders. Colleges and universities need to prepare the leaders for tomorrow by explicit plans and programs to do so.

I accept that some of leadership is innate ability, but much of it also is learned. Courses in ethics and leadership are necessary but insufficient. Ethics courses are common at all levels of education and they seem particularly relevant when they appear in association with professional education, such as medicine, law, engineering, and business. All this is widely approved, if not fulfilled. However, the teaching of courses in ethics, while important, tends to segregate ethics from the mainstream. One can easily get the impression that ethics is something that we learn about, but whether and how we apply ethical behavior to our lives is situational and perhaps discretionary. So how do we get across the idea that ethical behavior is something to be integrated and part of what we become?

Imagine the power of an educational environment in which all courses, including natural sciences, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, and the arts, in the undergraduate, graduate, and professional curricula are vehicles for learning moral leadership. Suppose professors of all disciplines took the opportunities that arise naturally in their courses to teach ethical behavior and moral leadership, in addition to whatever was their primary subject. This, of course, presupposes faculty who are sympathetic with this notion and understand how every course can be used to foster ethical leadership. It requires a receptive faculty who become knowledgeable through programs that teach them the rudiments of ethics and leadership and how they are relevant to their courses.

Imagine also a time when ethical behavior is not merely a stated value in a strategic plan for a college or university but an explicit core value and adherence to ethical principles is evident in administrative leadership and decision-making and other functions of the institution.

St. Louis University, through its Ethics Across the Curriculum program, offers summer workshops “to equip non-ethics faculty to incorporate ethical reflection more knowledgeably and deliberately into a course in their home discipline.” Such a program for non-ethics faculty existed for two years at Case Western Reserve University in the mid-1990s, but was discontinued. At Bowling Green University, the BGeXperience Program focuses on first year students, encouraging them “to reflect on their own values and understand the values associated with scholarship and academic study” and to help them “make a successful transition to college.” It offers a variety of experiences for first year students including small classes in biology, history, popular culture, and art. At other institutions, programs called “Ethics Across the Curriculum” and the like seem to be umbrella organizations for coordinating ethics courses and experiences across the campus. None of these programs seems to stress learning about moral leadership.

So what else is important? I believe that the world needs leaders who, in addition to being morally grounded, can think big – and can think small – simultaneously. Leaders who think and act strategically and tactically at the same time. Leaders who are capable of understanding broad ideas and understanding their application. Leaders who use both analytical and intuitive thinking, who can fuse
their left brain and their right brain. We need leaders who are broadly educated, who understand history, the social sciences, and human behavior, who appreciate the relevance of poetry, literature, music, philosophy, mathematics, biology, genetics, physics, chemistry, engineering, and nanotechnology. Notice that I said they need to appreciate the relevance of all these disciplines (and others). I did not say they need to understand all of them. But we do need leaders who understand why all of these disciplines are important and how they are related, because everything is related. I believe then we will have leaders who can recruit from a broad knowledge and experience and “put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.”

Humankind always has had good leaders and bad leaders. What is different now is the scale of the world has shrunken and local problems quickly become global ones. The effects of bad leadership, in government, business, academia, the church, everywhere, are felt widely and to greater detriment. Also, the notion that leaders should be broadly educated is not new. The arguments for a broad education are centuries old and the liberal arts tradition sustains countless colleges and universities. I believe that a broad education always has conferred an advantage on effective leadership. The difference now is one of urgency and who benefits. The traditional argument for a broad education seems to have focused chiefly on the advantages to the individual: personal satisfaction, social grace, perspective, and perhaps some economic benefit. Now, because of the urgent need for moral leaders who have the ability to make informed decisions within a comprehensive context, the larger and thus main benefit is to society. I believe that the development of broadly educated, thoughtful, moral leaders is imperative to address the complex and critical issues that threaten humankind and that higher education has a responsibility to develop such leaders.