

SEVEN PRACTICES OF ENLIGHTENED LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A case study by
Public Agenda with
support from
Lumina Foundation
NOVEMBER 2013

A Case Study of Austin Peay
State University



INTRODUCTION

This report reviews our findings from phone interviews and a series of focus groups conducted during a two-day site visit at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee, in April 2013.

The original goal of this project was to study the implementation of Degree Compass, an innovative course recommendation system developed at Austin Peay that is being implemented at several other institutions and is now marketed commercially. As the project progressed, however, we came to understand that the institutional backdrop against which Degree Compass was created was more important than what we learned about the system itself. What we thought was going to be an account of the adoption of a technological innovation was quickly supplanted by a story about the power of enlightened leadership and authentic engagement to drive culture change focused on student success and a healthy climate for innovation at an institution.

We have conducted dozens of focus groups with institutional stakeholders in nearly half the states in the United States, and rarely have we heard the kinds of attitudes and opinions as those expressed by administrators, faculty and staff at Austin Peay. With an uncommonly positive and collaborative tone, nearly all of the faculty and staff with whom we spoke described an environment in which a strong majority of institutional stakeholders have high levels of confidence and trust in leadership, and in which innovation on behalf of student success is embraced and supported – even in cases where it challenges people to think and act differently, often outside of their comfort zones.

In what follows, we present the change in culture and climate described to us by administrators, faculty and staff, who spoke about their responses to various innovations in policy and practice at Austin Peay. Because the tone and tenor of the conversations were so different from what we normally experience at

institutions, we concentrate on elevating the voices of participants and keep our editorializing to a minimum by relying on extensive use of direct quotes that capture the texture and nuance of the main themes. In some cases we have slightly edited remarks to improve readability without tampering with meaning. We highlight the practices behind this climate that are applicable to other contexts.

While principles of leadership are expounded in countless settings, we focus here on the key practices of leadership. Seven emerged in our conversations at Austin Peay:

1. Leading by listening
2. Demonstrating respect for the members of the campus community
3. Creating a healthy culture of evidence, inquiry and transparency
4. Rallying support for shared goals through explicit, consistent focus on student success
5. Incentivizing innovation and collaboration
6. Building on successes
7. Supporting risk-taking and allowing flops

We conducted eight focus groups with senior administrators, faculty, advisers and students at Austin Peay. We also held individual conversations with the president and provost. All in all, more than 60 members of the Austin Peay community – from both the main campus and Fort Campbell – participated in the focus groups.

It is important to note that while such qualitative research is a powerful vehicle for generating a deeper understanding of a problem, making sense of quantitative data and identifying new areas of inquiry, all conclusions drawn from small-scale, exploratory research of this kind should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive.

WHAT WE USUALLY HEAR

Public Agenda has spoken with hundreds of faculty and staff members at universities and community colleges in all regions of the country. Although each context is different, we have heard some themes with increasing frequency:

Distrust and suspicion of higher administration

As colleges have struggled with a combination of budget and staff cuts and an influx of students with increasingly uneven preparation, faculty and staff members are often discouraged and pessimistic. On many campuses we have visited, senior administrators (who are often just as frustrated with the situation as faculty and staff) are perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. We frequently hear complaints that the initiatives that come down from higher administration reflect a lack of understanding of the daily activities of faculty and staff. One department chair at a regional comprehensive university put it this way: "Whoever writes these new policies has an idea about how to make things more efficient, but that person doesn't necessarily understand the realities on the ground." Another complained that the administration was entirely focused on funding from the legislature, which had engaged the school in a constant "knee-jerk reaction to figure out what we can do to increase our funding stream."

Initiative fatigue

At the same time, we hear almost universal complaints of what we have come to describe as "initiative fatigue." Faculty and staff report being overwhelmed by new initiatives that seem to sweep through the campus on almost a monthly basis. Often, we hear that new initiatives are just as quickly dropped before they can be completed. According to a faculty member at another regional comprehensive, "We have a new program so we rush to get it out. Then it is going to change because another proposal is going into effect, but that one might change. Couldn't they wait until at least one was figured out before they get to another?" Faculty members often complain that the new initiatives have no apparent order or logic.

Disconnect between leadership and faculty

One community college student life professional compared listening to the administration to watching the movie *The Matrix*: "I have watched it a few times, and I still don't get what is going on."

All of this leads to less than enthusiastic endorsement for and implementation of new initiatives, as well as low morale and burnout among the staff.

AUSTIN PEAY: A SURPRISINGLY DIFFERENT STORY

Compared to what we usually find, Austin Peay State University is an outlier – no other campus we have encountered has a similar climate.

The people we spoke with have enormous pride in the institution and, specifically, in their working relationship with the administration. One faculty member captured the sentiment we heard from many of those with whom we spoke:

I am an associate professor. I have no fancy other titles. What am I most proud of about Austin Peay? ... I am proud to be in an environment where I respect and trust the administration including the president, the provost, my chair, our dean. I feel like we are working together instead of having separate agendas that are pulling us in different directions. I feel like that enables me to do my job better, because I don't need to worry about bizarre toxic political struggles.

In other focus groups we heard such adjectives as “magical.” Speaking about faculty and seeing the impact of technology use, one person said, “There are converts; we've had a lot of religious experiences.”

The faculty and staff were equally clear about what is different about their institution. They attributed the climate to the work of the top administrators, especially the president, Timothy Hall, and the provost, Tristan Denley. Specifically, they referred to their leadership style. As one person noted:

There are always going to be communication issues but for the most part the silos have really broken down here. We do not operate in those unconnected silos. Many, probably most other institutions do not experience that. They are still very territorial. I think it absolutely starts with the president and his or her expectations and his or her modeling behavior. I really feel we have the right people in place, that we all feel the same way. It's just a perfect good storm.

Another summarized what she saw in just a few words: President Hall, she said, “is a leader, not a manager.” Even those with the most vocal complaints about a state or national climate they perceive as hostile to higher education see the president and the provost as bulwarks against those trends, rather than being complicit with them.

Many stressed the new climate of openness, and especially the creation of a context of “shared governance” that involved “getting everyone to the table to talk about what goes on at this university.” One faculty member attributed the difference to a lack of fear:

I'm not afraid to talk to an administrator. Prior to President Hall coming on this campus, we were cautious. We were guarded. We were circumspect. We said, “Be careful what you say.” Faculty were characterized as lazy, but when I hear that from an administrator I don't want to talk to you. Then automatically, there's a hostility that builds up. When you're hostile and you're tight, you don't become a good adviser; you become a worse teacher; you're more angry; your morale's shattered for a while; your sense of worth and self-being is at risk. All of that has been changed by the culture of openness, shared governance, of “Come into my office; speak to me; give me ideas.”

In fact, the greatest concern we heard expressed was that the top administrators are so successful they could be headhunted away to another institution. According to one faculty leader, “One of my greatest fears is that all of this is going to get out to the wider world, and we are going to lose both of our leaders.” Faculty and staff were especially concerned that both leaders would leave together. Said one administrator, “They are a team so when one of them makes the decision to leave, I think then it will definitely open up the door for the other.” These comments were made in April 2013, and at present writing Provost Tristan Denley has, in fact, accepted a position at the system level and left Austin Peay.

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

As we probed to find the source of the strikingly positive attitudes at Austin Peay, seven practices were frequently mentioned, all of which bolstered trust: leading by listening; demonstrating respect for the members of the campus community; creating a healthy culture of evidence and transparency; rallying support for shared goals through explicit, consistent focus on student success; incentivizing innovation and collaboration; building on early successes; and supporting risk-taking and allowing flops.

One administrator described the leadership in terms of classic leadership theory:

It is a textbook case of some of the transformational leadership approaches. It is not all that complicated when you really think about it, but I think many people do not think about it. Many individuals who reach that level of educational administration are not willing or comfortable giving up any power for the greater good, because they feel like they are giving something away, rather than building capacity.

Practice 1: Lead by listening

President Hall's inaugural address stressed the importance of listening to members of the community:

It seemed important to me that a president's first activities incline more heavily toward listening than to speaking, and so I spent a large part of the last eight months talking with you, taking stock of where we are and paying close attention to each vision of what we might be in the future. Your voices are a part of the architecture of this address.

In themselves, these remarks do not seem atypical of what we hear from presidents. What is remarkable about what we heard at Austin Peay is the degree to which President Hall made the community understand he was not just listening to their words, but actually hearing and understanding their concerns. When he first arrived, he not only spent a great deal of time listening to various constituencies, but was also proactive in following up and making clear that he had heard what was said:

His personality was different, and he truly used meetings as listening meetings. Probably, he talked 10 percent to 20 percent of the time and listened 80 percent to 90 percent of the time, and he was very, very big on follow-up and communicating back to people. If it was something that crossed departmental lines and we could bridge that communication gap, that was one of the things that we tried to do.

President Hall was also careful to listen before developing initiatives and to make clear how he based his actions on what he had heard:

One of the coolest things he did his first year here was that he set up listening meetings with every department, every kind of group – staff, students, and all types of groups. He listened and listened and listened his first year. He did not come in with an agenda to push. He heard everybody multiple times before he analyzed problems and situations and created programs. That was just something that was very impressive.

This habit and practice of listening were modeled by President Hall and formalized by Provost Denley. When asked, Denley explained his channels of communication within the institution this way:

We had a campus-wide convening, and that really brought home that ... we'd been talking about student success and completion issues with the president's cabinet, in leadership meetings all across campus for years, but to really do the work of trying to get these ideas around student success to seep right down into the fabric of the institution, you have to talk more broadly and more deeply ... Now I have a pretty broad set of conversations each month formalized with all these groups, from administrators, to students, to faculty who are leaders on the ground. I also meet with the faculty senate. There are clearly a lot more conversations that need to be had, but it's my hope that the people I meet with each month then go back and talk to other people they work with.

Practice 2: Demonstrating respect for the members of the campus community

President Hall and Provost Denley also got high marks for the respect they show in their dealings with members of the Austin Peay community. At one level, this respect is demonstrated by the way they speak about people. One community member declared:

I can honestly say this, I don't think I have ever heard President Hall or Tristan Denley say a negative word about any person on this campus. They may think it, they may feel it, but they don't say it. What comes out of their mouth is that you're fabulous and you're doing a great job, and we need to promote and praise Austin Peay every day.

But in speaking of the level of respect Hall and Denley display, people were referring to more than just their saying nice things about individuals. Based on the listening they have done, the president and provost also seek to understand the perspectives of the people with whom they interact, rather than being impatient and insensitive to their points of view:

I think President Hall showed respect for faculty and said, "Here's the things we have to try to do. I'm not going to tell you how to do them, but let's figure out how to do it – I want you to tell me how we can do this." And he was also patient in knowing that you can't just say, "Well, logically this is the way it needs to be done, we just need to do it, don't be stupid." He gives everybody time to think about it and develop a strategy. It does take time.

One of the most appreciated forms of respect displayed by the leaders is a willingness to respect people's time, rather than dumping new projects on them without thinking about how they could be accomplished. Specifically, they try to be sensitive to the impact of policy changes and innovations on people's daily work lives:

One of the other things that the administration here has really focused on is we've looked at different things to do; if we do this, how will that impact other stakeholders? If we're talking about changing a reporting requirement so that we can identify students who are at risk earlier, how will the way that we choose to ask for that information impact faculty? Is this going to create a lot of work for them, and is there a way we can make it logical and relatively easy for them to do it? Also, how will we let them know the outcome of their participation?

Hall and Denley have also been proactive in shifting faculty workloads to create more time for projects that seemed important:

President Hall was very much about enabling everybody, particularly faculty and, of course, administration, to have more time to do high-value work, and not to spend so much time on low-value work. So there's two ways of doing that – one is technology, which has been very much pushed on the campus, but the other one is eliminating all this meaningless work that ends up being there. He's very good about trying to eliminate that low-level work, and getting everybody the time necessary to do that high-value work.

Practice 3: Creating a healthy culture of evidence, inquiry and transparency

Also important to the climate at Austin Peay are a sharp focus on collecting and collaboratively analyzing data and a willingness to share those data with anyone who needs to see them. Rather than using data to punish and shame faculty and staff, leaders at Austin Peay use data as a tool to help inspire creativity and keep people focused on shared priorities. According to Provost Denley,

The work is philosophically about getting people to look at what they've always been doing but with fresh eyes and then ask themselves, "So, if we were doing this with student success in mind, is this how we'd do it?" and so often the answer is, "Well, no, we'd do it differently."

On Austin Peay's campus Provost Denley has been likened to a wizard for his ability to extract and analyze data:

Tristan has a Ph.D. in mathematics, but the big shocker to us in what we do is that he also has an extensive, extensive background as a web programmer. He was coming up with all this stuff, and we thought, "Provosts never do this. We never interacted with provosts this way in years past." That also goes back to how this place is now different. He has that ability and knowledge and has brought that to the table in a way that I don't know that any other provost especially would be able to do.

Before Provost Denley's arrival, there was a sense that it was hard to extract data from the university's information management systems, one of which is a program called Banner. Denley used his expertise and ability to work with the IT department to find creative ways to get information. As one person said, "Tristan understood the technology well enough to write code with the IT folks and to be able to call their bluffs." His work helped change the culture around information retrieval:

We used to hear that Banner was the reason we couldn't do things. The technology was the weapon and the tech office was the secret society that held the key. Before he came, you would say to our technology people or the registrar's office, "Can we do this?" and the answer was "No." Now especially we are always figuring out how to extract and use data.

In addition to finding novel ways to retrieve and analyze existing data to support student success efforts, the administration has also sought to make information much more available and transparent than it was before:

In the past we were never given access to the budget. When President Hall got here he called a budget committee in and said let's get started, and we didn't know what we were getting started on, but we were actually looking at the budget for the first time.

President Hall and Provost Denley also break down the data into understandable units to increase utility and examine what impact they may have on faculty, staff and other university members:

I think when you ask about the way the data is shared and the way that it's used, I think that both Dr. Denley and President Hall are very capable and frequently break it down to where it makes sense ... They use concrete examples to help paint the picture and take it from just a spreadsheet to, how does that impact the grounds staff? How does that impact people in Enrollment Management, who are already juggling balls, and they wonder, how am I going to do more?

Finally, sharing information, along with the other practices, has helped build and sustain trust, which is often difficult to do when certain priorities and goals need to be chosen over others. When asked if decisions have always been in their favor, participants acknowledged they have not, but said they trust that decisions are made with student success in mind. One participant noted,

I think that sharing information helped people understand it's not that what you want is unimportant or insignificant or being ignored. It's just a matter of ongoing establishment of priorities and figuring out where the available dollars can go.

Practice 4: Rallying support for shared goals through explicit, consistent focus on student success

Today administrators of every higher education institution talk about student success, but in many of the contexts we have studied, faculty and staff regard such talk as code for chasing state dollars. At Austin Peay, however, the focus on student success, combined with a climate of respectful listening and attention to evidence, has enabled leadership to gather support from faculty and staff for shared goals. As one administrator commented,

I think the constant reminder by your top administrator that student success is critical to our success as an institution is one thing I've found very helpful in terms of us being able to look internally to our departments to see what it is that we're doing that presents barriers to students.

The leaders' commitment to all students and consistent follow-through bolsters support from faculty and staff:

What I think I'm proud of at the university, is that we're hitting on students' success across the spectrum of students; we're not leaving out the high-end students, we're not leaving out the bottom-end students.

One example of how Austin Peay has been able to raise student success is by changing the institution's approach to developmental education. Provost Denley described the process:

Ever since the president and I came here, we set about to create a climate here on campus that is truly focused on student success and completion. We were really trying to understand the real, actual barriers to students trying to move through a degree program and then finding ways that we can affect change in those areas. When we looked at our gateway classes, we looked at the way remediation was structured. It didn't work ... because what we found is that only one in 10 succeeded under that traditional model and that simply wasn't acceptable. So we changed the structure so that students now enter a credit-bearing class directly, and then we provide supplementary instruction that twins up with that to support them as they move through their credit-bearing class. And we've had remarkable success with it – now it's more like seven in 10 passing in that first semester.

This approach started with mathematics and, not surprisingly, met some initial resistance, after which it eventually gathered support. As one professor told us,

Six years ago when it was first implemented it really created some serious issues. What's really exciting now is everybody's on board, and not only are we doing it with those developmental study-type things, we're now talking about doing it with introductory physics, introductory chemistry, introductory biology.

Practice 5: Incentivizing innovation and collaboration

Many faculty members talked about President Hall's decision to limit the growth of administrative positions and apply savings to small stipends for faculty interested in innovating with scalable student success strategies:

These little grants are small, but they're just competitive enough that you want to bring your "A" game. When another one is announced, I find myself waking up in the morning thinking about how I can try something cool.

Others talked about the ways in which collaboration across departments and disciplines is encouraged through the innovation grants, and how this helps build a culture of collaboration and shared vision:

I saw someone doing something cool in another department, and I wondered if something similar could work in my department because we face similar problems even though it's a different subject. So I went in for one of the little grants and I hope I get it, because I think it's a real chance to explore if solutions that some people have found to problems might make sense in other departments. I've never been at an institution where this kind of thing was possible.

Practice 6: Building on successes

The improvements in student success illustrate another principle implicitly followed by top leadership: they work hard to bring in some visible successes that help build support and gather momentum for innovations. One example is an effort to address major organizational problems:

I think one very important change that was made at the very beginning of President Hall's term that helped the culture a lot was, after the listening, he reorganized our organizational structure as colleges and schools, and he worked out some severe faculty position problems. He resolved those issues right away, and they were very toxic. That really sent a message out to the campus that they care, that our current administration cares.

Another substantive example is the approach the leadership team took to performance-based funding. In our studies elsewhere around the country, we often find a great deal of faculty resistance to performance-based funding because of a general concern that many factors that affect retention are outside the institution's control. Here again, the leadership team took a more creative approach and helped the community see that performance-based funding, if properly understood, could advance the goals important to the institution. One person contrasted this approach to what he had seen at other institutions: "Instead of fighting performance-based funding as other administrations did, they decided that we want to make it work, and they said it is a good thing overall and then got faculty buy-in." According to another person, "Performance-based funding is about progression, retention and completion, and those are the three things we are interested in as well." The administrators helped institute new performance measures, and funding for the institution has increased. Furthermore, they got high marks from the university community for their efforts. As one observer said, "They worked the system to our advantage. I don't think the state realized how savvy they were." Leadership rallied for performance metrics that reflected the university's mission, goals and student body, and worked on systems to extract the data to make them usable.

Practice 7: Supporting risk-taking and allowing flops

Central to the adoption of innovations are the perceived levels of risk and support. People at Austin Peay acknowledge that the results of change and innovation aren't always successful but feel encouraged to innovate on behalf of advancing student success:

There is always encouragement to try new things, to be better, to not stand still. If we're doing the same thing, we're not moving forward, but there's no penalty for failure. You can have a big old flop.

CONCLUSION

Amid the positive and frankly inspiring stories we heard from faculty, staff, students and administrators at Austin Peay, we also detected an undercurrent of worry that the healthy culture might not survive a leadership change.

Concerns about the durability of culture change under new leadership seem to exist just beneath the surface, and they present a set of questions for those interested both in the nature of leadership and in the conditions for lasting change. The following quote is representative of what we heard from many faculty and staff:

My big concern is that if Tristan leaves or President Hall leaves that this institution will go back to the way it was before. They've made amazing changes, and we're operating in a very different environment now, but I'm not sure how strong it is and if it could survive another kind of leader ... one who is more traditional, more top-down. It probably only takes a few bad decisions on the part of new leadership to send us back to a place of suspicion and hostility.

Shortly after our visit to campus, Tristan Denley accepted a position at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and left Austin Peay. At present writing, the Provost position has not been filled and according to a senior administrator many are worried about what comes next. While this report focused on the lessons of enlightened leadership, another story is unfolding now. It will either be a story about successful leadership transition and the protection of gains made, or it will be a story of the fragility of enlightened leadership. Time will tell.

We hope those reading this report will take to heart the stories it contains and think about ways in which transformational leadership of the kind exercised at Austin Peay can be spread, scaled and sustained.

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate complex, divisive issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on higher education affordability, achievement gaps, community college completion, use of technology and innovation, and other higher education issues.

Find Public Agenda online at publicagenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).



About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

For more information, log on to www.luminafoundation.org.

