The Moral Dimension of University Leadership: Who is it Good to be?

Andy Dirksen

Michael Hahn
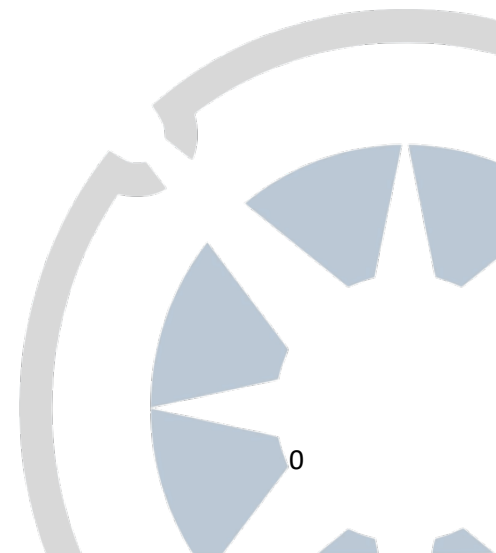
The Moral Dimension of University Leadership: Who is it Good to be?

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Andy Dirksen
Michael Hahn, Ph.D.
Saint Mary's University of Minnesota

Introduction

The recent congressional hearing in the United States with three presidents of prominent American universities reveals once again the importance of university leadership. In spite of the hostile questioning and aspects of political theater, many who viewed the hearing found the answers of the presidents to be inadequate. Following the hearing, significant public debate ensued. One article pointedly questions what qualifications are necessary for university presidents (Sorkin, A.R., et. al., 2003, December 11). The authors consider whether individuals with business or political savvy are better prepared to lead universities, which have become large, complex organizations, than traditional academics. Unfortunately, this tack continues to over-emphasize credentials and professional experience rather than give due attention to the moral dimension of university leadership. The latter demands attention to a person's character in addition to their professional competence.

The moral dimension of university leadership is a vital question because universities are intended to be moral places. In the first place, the stated purpose of many universities is to foster the moral formation of students (Jubilee Centre, 2020, p. 1-2). The mission of our university, for example, includes awakening, nurturing, and empowering learners to ethical lives of service and leadership (Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, 2023). It stands to reason that fulfilling this mission requires the moral example of university leadership. Furthermore, the responsibility of leading the complex organizations that universities have become requires moral formation, in addition to the required professional competence, because "school and college leaders face ethical dilemmas every day" (Ethical Leadership Commission, 2019, p. 7). The recent ethical dilemma facing the three university presidents–indeed, the various ethical dilemmas facing university leaders–involves adjudicating conflicts between competing virtues and applying virtues to particular contexts. For this reason, we argue in favor of a virtue-based approach to

hiring, forming, and evaluating university leadership. A virtue-based approach foregrounds personal moral formation, asking the question "who is it good to be?"

Our paper begins with the premise that universities require moral leaders because they are intended to be places of moral formation. Contemporary universities, however, struggle with a host of moral and ethical challenges. We contend that these moral and ethical challenges are the result, at least to some degree, of a lack of attention paid to the personal moral formation of university leaders. Professional credentials and experience are not the only, nor even always the best, indicators of good leadership. Put positively, the collective flourishing of university communities requires the moral example of university leadership. Indeed, it is essential to emphasize at the outset that "in leadership, character matters" (Bass, B. and Steidlmeier, P., 1999, p. 193). Indeed, far more influential than any particular character program or intervention is the personal character of the leaders. In the words of the Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics* (2023), universities require leaders who understand professional practice to include moral practice. To further support the need for personal moral formation, we then present data collected from a series of interviews with university presidents. How the participants describe the most important aspects of their leadership can be understood by the umbrella term "sensemaking," a *phronetic* task that includes the ability to create meaning from complex and ambiguous situations (Kezar and Eckel, 2002). We conclude by offering some suggestions of how universities can support leaders align personal commitments for moral development and human flourishing to professional judgements through initial hiring and ongoing formation.

The Need for University Ethics

Our opening example of the three presidents is but one recent example of the need for greater attention to be paid to universities as moral places. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising to discover how little universities consider virtuous leadership and character in professional practice in the context of university life itself. As the leading American moral theologian James Keenan, S.J. observes, "The university is where faculty teach and students learn ethics. The one place that those teaching ethics normally do not engage is precisely the place where they work" (2015, p. 201). At universities all across the United States, faculty regularly teach ethics courses in the fields of education, law, business, and medicine in addition to the burgeoning fields of artificial intelligence and digital currency. But what about university ethics? According to

Keenan, universities seem to operate with the assumption that if they can teach ethics, they do not need to learn it.

At the same time, the need for ethics in university life could not be more clear. Reports of scandals at American universities involving athletics, cheating, binge drinking, and sexual assault–to cite only some of the most notorious issues–are altogether too frequent. The "Varsity Blues" scandal in 2019 resulted in federal criminal charges. In addition to these high profile scandals, university life requires countless decisions each day, decisions about budgets, human resources, and academic offerings, that are no less ethically charged. The moral weight of these decisions are carried especially by university leaders, for "school and college leaders face ethical dilemmas every day" (Ethical Leadership Commission, 2019, p. 7). While more recently we have seen positive attempts to apply a virtue-based approach to professional ethics to the particular context of university life (Curren, 2008), there remains a gap in the literature. Peruse the stacks in most university libraries, Keenan suggests, and note how few books on university ethics there are in comparison to the hundreds of books on ethics in other professions (2015, p. 18).

In response to ethical lapses, particularly after a scandal has become public, many American universities have responded with new policies, updated codes of conduct, and impassioned discourse about the need for ethics. All these approaches aim at "doing the right thing." However necessary, these responses alone are insufficient to form a culture of ethics at universities. Moreover, professional codes of conduct are ineffective and ultimately become meaningless if they are not also grounded in a culture of ethics that reinforces the stated expectations. A virtue-based approach to professional ethics, on the other hand, prioritizes the type of character traits that are necessary for personal and collective flourishing. It foregrounds personal moral formation, first asking the question "who is it good to be?" before "doing the right thing." Central to this approach is *phronesis* or practical moral wisdom as an integrative, guiding virtue.

Promoting a culture of ethics by emphasizing virtuous leadership is essential for the university to function and fulfill its mission. As Keenan rightly argues, "Promoting the issue of professional ethics does not and will not inhibit or compromise the work of the university. Rather, ethics is constitutive of human flourishing, an insight that Aristotle and Paul tried to teach time and again" (2015, p. 14). Indeed, a virtue-based approach to professional ethics with

its focus on the cultivation of *phronesis* is most aligned with university culture that prioritizes moral and intellectual virtues such as honesty, fairness, and critical thinking.

A Virtue-Based Approach to University Leadership

Ancient in its origin, Aristotelian virtue ethics has experienced a resurgence in recent years (Annas, 2011). Aristotelian virtue ethics is the moral backbone of the Jubilee Centre's well-known *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics* (2023), *Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2022), and *Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing* (2020). Aristotelian virtue ethics is distinct from other moral theories in at least two important respects. First, in contrast to deontological ethics associated with Immanuel Kant, Aristotelian virtue ethics is person-centered rather than rule-based. For Aristotle, the character questions are most important: Who am I? Who ought I to become? Who is it good to be? The life of the moral agent is at the center of virtue ethics (Keenan, 1995, p. 710). A virtue-based approach requires personal moral formation because "the main moral challenge for teachers is to develop a balanced set of virtues as well as a capacity to draw upon their own practical wisdom (or phronesis) in professional practice, rather than looking to an external set of rules or principles" (Arthur, J., et al, 2015, p. 10).

Second, while Aristotelian virtue ethics is focused on the *telos* of human flourishing, it is not an utilitarian moral theory. As Alasdair MacIntyre succinctly explains: "Aristotelian virtue ethics is teleological but not consequentialist (2007, p. 150). While university leaders might be tempted to do what is best for the greatest number of their constituents, a virtue-based approach calls educational leaders to a higher standard, namely, to "identify the salient features of any given situation and determine, through an application of their own good judgment, the right thing to do, in the right way, for the right reasons" (Arthur, J., et al, 2015, p. 10).

Critical to Aristotelian virtue ethics and what sets it apart from other moral theories is Aristotle's emphasis on the intellectual meta-virtue of *phronesis* (Aristotle, 1926, pp. 349-350). *Phronesis*, or what we may simply refer to as "practical moral wisdom," is the good sense to know what is right in any given situation. There are several functions of *phronesis* (Jubilee Centre, 2023, p. 12), but–most importantly–Aristotle describes *phronesis* as the conductor, enabler, and unifier of all the other virtues. MacIntyre helpfully explains the essential function of *phronesis*: "It comes to mean more generally someone who knows how to exercise judgment in particular cases" (2007, p. 154). For example, *phronesis* is required to adjudicate conflicts

between competing virtues such as justice and compassion. *Phronesis* is also necessary to apply the moral virtues in particular contexts. What does honesty require of me in this case? Or, how do I avoid both cowardice and rash judgment in order to be truly courageous? By first considering "who is it good to be?" the moral agent can align their actions toward their conception of self.

Conferences such as this one helpfully contribute to the growing conversation around the need for professional ethics at American universities (Keenan 2015; Brant, Brooks, and Lamb 2022). We are concerned, however, with the tendency in higher education to hire leaders primarily, if not exclusively, on the basis of credentials, professional experience, technical skills, and instrumental values, even at universities that claim to foster the moral development of students and the flourishing of their university communities. Indeed, such environments require leaders who possess a certain type of moral character in addition to professional competence. In the words of the Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics* (2023), universities require leaders who understand professional practice to include moral practice.

While there is merit for a greater integration between Aristotelian virtue ethics and various organizational leadership models, we are equally concerned with the increasing popularity of various organizational leadership models that are vague about the purpose of leadership and untethered to the moral virtues. Organizational leadership models, social-emotional skills, self-management techniques, and professional expertise, however necessary for effective leadership, are often morally neutral and not intrinsically oriented toward the good. Relying on these types of models and skills alone, especially during the hiring process and ongoing professional development, is insufficient for organizations such as universities that seek to foster moral development. It is worth emphasizing again that "in leadership, character matters" (Bass, B. and Steidlmeier, P., 1999, p. 193).

At the same time, while ethical codes of conduct recognize the ethical nature of university leadership, they are not enough to create and sustain a climate of moral responsibility. The tendency to focus on ethical decision-making rather than how we ought to live our lives more broadly puts the cart before the horse. Before jumping into ethical dilemmas, it seems necessary that we should first spend time on the "who" that is making these decisions. Likewise, it is more difficult to answer "what is the right thing to do?" unless sufficient attention has been given to the more fundamental question "who is it good to be?" It is impossible to accomplish

personal moral formation if we remain at the level of professional and organizational leadership. We bring our whole human selves into our organizations. Before a person can be a moral university leader, they must first be a moral person. Who we are matters.

Summary of Research

Two primary assumptions undergird this paper: universities are important places of moral formation and accomplishing this mission requires the moral example of university leaders. In an effort to support this two-part thesis, we share some of the data collected from a recent research study of university presidents. A qualitative process was used through semi-structured interviews of current or recently retired presidents of colleges and universities in the United States. The presidents were selected by convenience sample based on the longevity of presidential leadership, recommendations made by higher education experts, professionals, and references. Nine interviews have been conducted at the time of this paper. While the research is ongoing, we share the preliminary results of this study here.

The data affirmed that the president of a university is the most influential figure in shaping its vision and future, exerting a significant impact on the institution's decisions, focus, and culture. In collaboration with senior leadership, the president formulates a strategic vision to address impending challenges and reinforce the university's dedication to fostering moral virtue. While shared governance, collaboration, and teamwork are essential for the success of colleges and universities in the American context, it remains important to recognize the impact of key stakeholders in determining the direction of moral virtue formation. It was evident in the interviews that the complex interplay between governance, leadership, and management approaches in higher education presents challenges in understanding the roles of stakeholders in shaping the future of moral virtues. The contributions of employees, faculty, staff, and administrators are crucial in embodying and promoting moral virtues and ultimately aligning with the university's direction, but the impact of these efforts depends on the direction set by the president.

A significant theme in the research was that participants understood their presidential leadership as "more than a job." Some described their leadership as a "vocation" or "calling." Many participants spoke about serving the mission of their institution and how the mission guides strategic decisions and employee formation. As one research participant with fifteen years of presidential leadership states:

Something that I feel very strongly about, is that there is by and large, relatively little and there is definitely an insufficient emphasis on vocation as a dimension of the [...] presidency. It is, at best, unspoken and assumed, and, at worst, it is not reflected on. So, I do think there's a case to be made for your topic [vocation] as something that needs to become more central, both in the way that [universities] nationally think about [...] higher ed leadership, and certainly in the way that trustees [(governors)] think about the question of the kind of person they hire for the presidency.

Clearly, understanding the idea of presidential leadership as a vocation may help universities shape their commitment to and foster moral virtue formation, as there is a sense by presidents that a vocational lens to their leadership matters greatly.

The participants also cited a strong sense that obtaining a leadership position involved a discernment process through formative mechanisms and experiences. As one research participant explains, there is a false assumption made by some presidential leaders about their preparedness. The participant explains: *Just because you stayed at a Holiday Inn five times, that doesn't make you qualified to run the hotel.* In a university's presidential leadership, the person has to have more than a depth of work experience; there has to be *a lot of intentionality* about a sense of deep formation and explicit discernment, for: *discernment is more than just figuring out what you are going to do next. Moreover, formation is more than just a form of career development. The discernment of information must be more intentional*.

Participants spoke about the challenges of leading change and understanding community dynamics. They also emphasized the complexity and ambiguity of large organizations, especially when it involves leading employee formation around a university mission. For example, a participant describes:

One job of the president is to capture the ethos of the place as it was and as it is and what it's going to be. So a president has a really big responsibility there. And that one matters, right? It matters because it's so nuanced, right? And that's true in a lot of sectors. But that's obviously because it has a public-facing role that often comes back to haunt us. I've seen it in other places where the person speaking often publicly doesn't understand what's going on inside. So, there's a disconnect there. So, I spent a lot of time with people trying to explore and help and support. If there's a deeper aspect to it [discernment and formation] in a place like this at a university, higher education is different.

Another challenge that participants describe is that presidents must navigate both their own identity and personal commitments as well as the culture and ethos of the university. There needs to be an internal motivation and inspiration to commit to moral virtue formation, for as a president with twenty-five years says:

> *You want someone who can motivate and inspire, so what kind of human being is he [(or she)]? I want to know about that inner person. And how does he treat people? Does he have a personality? And how does he know himself or herself okay? What can they tell me about? What's been key in their lives? And why do they want the job? I like to always ask that question.*

One of the key features that participants describe is the need to be their authentic selves and to practice *authentic* leadership. For example, a president with five years of experience emphasizes:

> *Authenticity is that umbrella word because you can't have integrity unless you're completely authentic. And people are afraid to show because it makes you vulnerable.*

Perhaps surprisingly, the research shows the personal nature of presidential leadership. More than expertise in strategic planning, budgeting forecasts, enrollment plans, and benefactor engagement, participants emphasized the personal and dispositional traits necessary to lead their universities.

Sensemaking and Moral Meaning-Making

A preliminary finding, the result of deductive coding, is the importance of "sensemaking" as an essential function of university leadership. According to Kezar and Eckel (2002), "sensemaking" refers to meaning construction or reconstruction, which is reciprocal and allows a person to seek information, assign meaning, and act upon the meaning, especially in uncertain or ambiguous organizational situations. The process of "sensemaking" involves creating reasonable explanations for actions within a social setting, which begins with *literally* making sense of a situation and includes continuing to gather information, and impose order in complex, chaotic, and ambitious situations. In higher education, the capacity for "sensemaking" enables presidents and senior leaders to make meaning of the institution's mission, culture, and traditions and synthesize various stakeholder perspectives. Since these tasks often involve adjudicating between different virtues and applying virtues in specific contexts, we believe "sensemaking" is a *phronetic* task. Indeed, "sensemaking" is the ability of university leaders to discern what is

critical in a particular situation and employ their best judgment about what is right and how to accomplish it. Furthermore, unlike other organizational and leadership theories, "sensemaking" is oriented toward a particular vision. The vision guides leaders as they navigate uncertain or ambiguous organizational situations. The vision also serves as the final touchstone for setting organizational, cultural, or strategic priorities and adjudicating differences.

Building upon the work of Karl E. Weick's *Sensemaking in Organizations,* Kezar and Eckel's research on the importance of "sensemaking" emphasizes staff development. Staff development is a type of formation, which can include moral formation, to bring about institutional change at colleges and universities (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Moral formation may be considered a particular style of "sensemaking" for presidents to bring about and be attentive to the need and importance of transformational change for higher education institutions and to better support the claims of fostering the moral development of students and institutions to flourish. The real work of being a change agent or president at a college or university is "sensemaking" in order to "change mindsets, which in turn alters behaviors, priorities, values, and commitments" (Kezar, 2018, p. 87). The emphasis is on the value of reflection, making meaning, discerning what is happening, and being formed by the experiences of relationships with other human beings.

Clearly, "sensemaking" is a relational task that involves the wholeness of issues, concerns, and ideas beyond organizational and technical skills. "Sensemaking" emphasizes "social interactions" to bring about change and facilitate conversations, leading to new perspectives (Kezar, 2018). "Sensemaking" refers to changing mindsets, which means leading presidents and senior leaders to flourish in their work to bring about change and understand culture, colleges, and universities through social, economic, and political challenges to foster the moral development of virtues. "Sensemaking" depends on the leader's understanding of the community and, simultaneously, helps to form the community. All of this is essential for fostering a culture of ethics at universities, for as Wayne Meeks emphasizes, "Making morals means making community" (1993, p. 5).

Initial Recommendations and Conclusion

As we consider virtuous leadership and character, our conversation during this conference will hopefully contribute to the growing conversation around the need for professional ethics at American universities. This is vital if universities are to be communities

that promote human flourishing in addition to intellectual formation. The research study revealed several important findings about the nature of university leadership. In addition to presenting these findings, we offer some initial recommendations about how universities might proceed if they intend to recognize the moral dimension of university leadership by giving due attention to a leader's character in addition to their professional competence.

University leaders understand the weight of their responsibilities and the scope of their influence. Presidents readily acknowledge the challenges that come with their positions as well as their significant influence over the culture and future of their university. The decisions that they make, how they set priorities, what they say, and what they do not say–all of this is observed and scrutinized by the university community. There is no doubt that presidents set an example within their organization, whether they intend to or not. The question is what type of example will they set and whether it will reinforce the university's stated mission, culture, and ethos or work against it. Here is the most clear case that presidents have enormous influence over the culture of ethics on their campuses. Since there is no "off switch" for the example they set, this can be an especially burdensome aspect of leadership. On the other hand, presidents have a significant opportunity to shape a culture of ethics by simply giving a moral example.

University leaders see their position as "more than a job." This finding is yet another important entry point for universities to select leaders who are able to set a moral example and contribute to the moral formation of the university community. Presidents understand the need to be technically prepared for the position, as evinced through their credentials and professional experience. Interestingly, current presidents do not describe these technical aspects as the most critical once they are in the position. Universities can contribute to the discernment process by emphasizing the personal qualities, character traits, and other dispositions that are critical for a president to contribute to the mission of the university. In other words, what type of person does the university need to advance its mission? Technical and interpersonal skills, professional experience, and academic credentials are all important for university leadership, yet current university leaders recognize the foundational importance of personal dispositions, and universities ought to foreground this in their hiring and onboarding processes.

University leaders emphasize the challenges of their responsibilities, particularly the level of complexity and ambiguity in large organizations. The participants emphasized that presidents do not lead universities; they lead people. They describe a significant relational

dimension to their roles, particularly their responsibility to form senior leadership and set the direction for all employee formation. Presidents are also routinely called upon to navigate complex community dynamics and make judgements in ambiguous situations. We suggest that the *phronetic*-type task of "sensemaking" is a helpful way to understand this role of university leaders. At its most basic, the work of "sensemaking" is understanding *what is* and what *ought to be*, that is, presidents are responsible for helping to lead the university community through complex and ambiguous situations toward a predetermined mission. The more clearly that presidents can articulate the mission to the university community and gain their support of it, the more that it can serve as a *telos* to help adjudicate differences, set priorities, and keep focus.

University leaders stress the importance of authenticity as they navigate their own identity and commitments as well as the culture and ethos of the university. Before university presidents are presidents, they are people with their own identity, history, and set of commitments. Presidents describe the challenge of aligning their own identity and personal commitments with the culture and ethos of the university. To be effective, presidents describe the need for them to be authentic, to be themselves. For this reason, it is critical that universities understand who the person is during their application and selection process. This requires starting at the level of the leader as a whole human self (including their broader moral identity) before moving to their professional and organizational self. In some cases, the person might not fit the culture and ethos of the university. In all cases, having an understanding of who the person is will help the university anticipate what type of leader they will be.

A core finding of the research study is that a leader's decisions reveal who they are and not only their decision on discrete topics. Simply put, university leaders cannot hide their virtue (and vices) from the university community, especially over time. What the university leader decides about hiring, budgeting, academic programming, and strategic priorities, for example, reveals how just, honest, compassionate, prudent, and courageous they are. No university knows completely what will be their most significant challenge in the future (think of university leaders hired prior to the Covid-19 pandemic), but if universities select presidents for personal dispositions and character traits, they can have some conscience that the decisions of the leader will be just, honest, compassionate, prudent, and courageous.

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