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A Case Study Framework for Community College Leaders

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This article examines a case study framework designed to aid in the preparation of emerging community college leaders. The framework is multidimensional and fluid in nature, taking into account the multiplicity of factors affecting leadership in community colleges. The steps in the framework consist of (a) assuming the role of the leader; (b) examining relevant information; (c) identifying underlying problem(s); (d) analyzing the case through multiple lenses (e.g., leadership approaches, ethical frameworks); and (e) identifying a resolution. The authors recommend this case framework as a tool for aiding leaders in connecting research and theory to practice as well as facilitating the achievement of American Association of Community Colleges' leadership competencies.

Community college leadership positions are becoming more complex as the multiple missions (i.e., open access, comprehensive educational programming, lifelong learning, student success, etc.) and pressures (e.g., budget constraints, public scrutiny) facing community colleges continue to evolve (Eddy, 2010). This diverse mission and key *pressure-points* serve as important areas for community college to be more critical of their leadership efficiency. In this current climate, the only constant that community college leaders should count on is change (e.g., social, political, economic, cultural). Change brings with it multiple opportunities as well as challenges (Bailey, 2002). One such challenge is the increasing number of students served by community colleges. This growth is taking place in light of limited resources, which are becoming even sparser, with many colleges being forced to make hard decisions by eliminating human and financial capital (e.g., cutting adjunct faculty, programs, part-time staff) to concentrate resources in the areas of greatest need. In fact, many community colleges are serving more students than ever before, trying to provide opportunities for greater numbers of students with fewer resources. Further, the current era of accountability has required all public educational institutions to

illustrate that they are indeed facilitating student success. Primarily, this is measured through assessment planning and execution, which is integrated in all conceivable areas of operation (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS

For community college leaders to be successful in overcoming these challenges, they must be trained to confront the current problems facing their institutions while maintaining the forethought needed to understand the trajectory of emerging trends. To account for numerous considerations during decision-making processes, leaders are in need of training that can aid them in recognizing the complex forces affecting leadership. To do so, requires that leaders become increasingly competent in multiple areas (Nevarez, Wood, & Penrose, in press). In 2005, the American Association of Community Colleges released a framework that identified six core competencies needed by community college leaders: organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, advocacy, and professionalism. The framework document suggests that these competencies be integrated into curricular guidelines to better train the next generation of community college leaders to “meet changing human and institutional needs” (p. 2).

We suggest the *Nevarez-Wood Leadership Case Study Framework* (2010) as a tool to support community college leadership development programs (e.g., master’s programs, doctoral programs, leadership institutes, Grow Your Own Leadership programs) in training and honing the critical/analytical skills imbedded within AACC’s leadership competencies. The framework is designed to be used in tandem with case studies. Case study analysis continues to gain momentum in facilitating leadership development. It has a long tradition of usage in increasing the knowledge and skill set of education professionals (Hanson, 2005; Kowalski, 2008; Snowden & Gorton, 2002). Although, there remains a need to develop case study models frameworks focused on issues impacting higher education institutions, particularly community colleges. Case studies are problem-posing scenarios that present dilemmas (e.g., fictionalized and/or real-life) encountered by community college leaders. Case studies provide a platform for readers to (a) consider a problem (often in light of research and theory); (b) examine the information and multiple considerations presented; (c) contemplate possible outcomes; and (d) use the information provided to make a determination. The case study framework we present, while applicable to leaders in all organizational contexts (e.g., business, nonprofit, government, preK–12 education), was developed with community college leaders in mind. One key feature of the framework is that it requires leaders to consider a multiplicity of leadership approaches and ethical paradigms during decision-making. Given the multiple missions, evolving service population, and unique structure of community colleges, we believe this framework accounts for these complexities while providing community college leaders a road map for guiding sound decision processes.

The model is typified by five steps, which are nonlinear, codependent, and multidimensional in nature. Imbedded within each step are two core assumptions. First, it is assumed that those using this framework have a good understanding of the diverse community college mission. Vaughan (2006) articulated five mission components: “serving all segments of society through an *open-access* admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students; providing a *comprehensive educational program*; *servicing the community* as a community-based institution

of higher education; *teaching and learning*; fostering *lifelong learning*” (p. 3, italics added for emphasis). In 2010, Nevarez and Wood denoted another component, *student success* (referring to the community colleges’ role in aiding students in attaining their academic and career goals).

The second assumption is that leaders integrate reflective practice into each stage in the model. Reflective practice refers to the incorporation of reflection within each respective step. In the applied context, reflective practice is imbedded within assessment and evaluative processes; however, in the confined settings in which most case studies are presented, it connotes that critical contemplation of decisions made and actions taken when arriving at and rendering resolutions to case studies (problem-based scenarios). Interrelated with this notion of reflective practice is the importance of intuition. An individual’s initial thoughts and emotions about issues, people, and organizational direction are informed by their reflection on previous life and professional experiences. Leaders should consider their intuition to be a starting point (an initial point of reference) for sound decision-making. Reflection is imperative to successful leadership. Leaders must take the time to consider multiple perspectives, seek advice for others, contemplate alternative courses of action, and simply allow for time to process what is occurring. By doing so, they will be able to make more informed decisions that better account for the multiplicity of actors involved in a dilemma. What follows is an articulation of each stage in the framework as well as some context relevant to each step.

NEVAREZ-WOOD LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY FRAMEWORK (SEE FIGURE 1)

Step 1: Assume the Role of Leader, Administrator, or Both

Leaders are in formal and informal positions of power, influence, and authority. This grants them the ability to pursue and drive agendas in a desired direction. In addressing the case study provided, assume that you are in a formal position within a community college. Your task is to envision yourself as the leader or administrator identified in the case while considering relevant information that will lead to case study resolution.

Though often used interchangeably, leadership and administration are differing concepts. Leadership refers to the act of “influencing and inspiring others beyond desired outcomes” (Nevarez & Wood, 2010, p. 57). In contrast, administration connotes the top-down autocratic notions that characterize managerial processes, rules, policies, and protocols. While leadership is typified by values of collaboration, vision, and transformation, administration tends to be more controlling, task-oriented, and directive. While they are distinct roles, taken together, leadership and administration enable college leaders to incorporate holistic considerations in organizational leadership.

Step 2: Examine Relevant Information

Read the case in its entirety. As you read, list information that provides context to the core elements of the case. This information should include (at minimum) the following: (a) Setting—In what locale does the case occur? What are the characteristics of this setting? What are the cultural values? Who are the stakeholders? (b) Key characters/groups—Who are the primary characters or group involved? What is their relationship to one another? What are the power

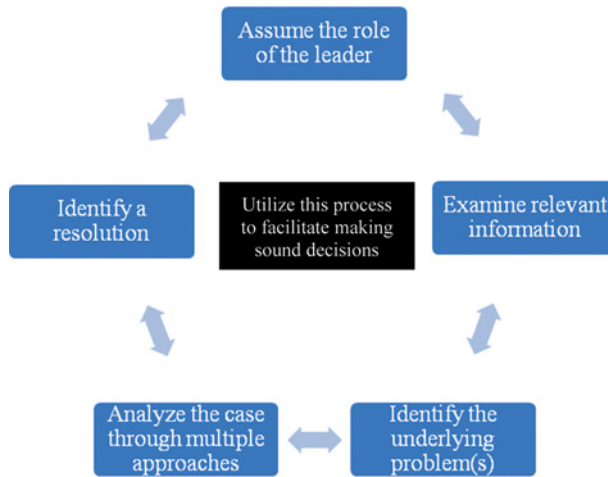


FIGURE 1 Nevarez–Wood Leadership Case Study Framework. (Note: Printed with permission from communitycollegeleadership.net). (Color figure available online.)

dynamics? What are the motivations of each group? What key players aren't involved that should be? (c) Special circumstances—What special circumstances or considerations are involved? What considerations other than those specific to the setting or characters/groups need to be taken into account?

Oftentimes, decisions do not need to be made immediately. Learning to reflect on relevant information and gathering more information on an issue before moving forward with decision-making will better enable leaders to enact positive resolutions. Leaders must understand the context (e.g., key players, characters/groups, special circumstances) from which problems arise.

Step 3: Identify Underlying Problem(s) Clearly and Concisely

After all the relevant information has been noted (refer to Steps 1 and 2), leaders should then identify the problem(s) at hand. If multiple problems are evident, list the problems in order of concern, with the most fundamental problems identified first. In many circumstances, there are multiple problems in effect. There is the root problem that has created multiple ancillary problems. When distracted with ancillary issues, leaders enact resolutions that are, in essence, treating the symptoms and not the cause. With this in mind, leaders should articulate the root problem of an issue, and then they should identify how this core issue has led to other problems. In some cases, the leader only needs to address the root cause; in other circumstances, both the root and its ancillary issues must be addressed.

Step 4: Analyze the Case through Multiple Approaches

After data has been collected and problems have been identified (see Steps 1–3), the leader must consider alternative courses of action. We suggest that leaders envision actions based upon

leadership approaches, ethical paradigms, and evident data. To evaluate these courses of action, leaders should view a given action through each lens, considering the positive and negative outcomes associated with each approach. As leaders become more efficient at this step, they can begin considering the integration of multiple approaches and courses of action simultaneously.

Leadership Approaches

While there are numerous leadership approaches that can be taken (e.g., path-goal, transformational, leader-member exchange), these approaches can be grouped into three primary groups of approaches: bureaucratic, democratic, and political. A brief synopsis of each approach follows:

- **Bureaucratic Approach:** This perspective affirms the importance of organizational hierarchy, clear delineations of responsibility, and efficiency. Bureaucratic leaders assume the organizational efficiency is achieved through the articulation of strong policies, processes, and procedures. In cases where policies are not present or clear, managers enact new policies to guide future behaviors and actions.
- **Democratic Approach:** Democratic relations adhere to a human relations approach to leadership that values the importance of collaboration, open-lines of communication, and shared-authority in decision-making. Democratic leaders believe that organizational goals are best achieved through input; they view employees' experiential knowledge, skills, and learned expertise as an asset. As such, these leaders provide and support opportunities for the professional and personal development of staff.
- **Political Approach:** Political leaders avoid the use of one leadership style, approach, or theory over another. Instead, they believe one should use whichever approach seems most likely to benefit them and their subunit. In this perspective, politics, regulations, and structures are viewed as tools to achieve desired outcomes. These leaders place an emphasis on understanding the motivations, mores, and values of others and using this information to predict actions in advance.

Ethical Courses of Action

Ethics is an integral component to effective organizational leadership. A leader must develop a strong moral compass that guides his or her actions and behaviors. To do so, we suggest that leaders understand the following ethical frames:

- **Ethic of Justice:** Similar to a bureaucratic approach, the Ethic of Justice affirms the importance of policies, regulations, laws, and codes. These standards are never to be violated, regardless of outcomes. As such, this perspective sees the upholding of these standards, in and of itself, as a moral imperative. When rules exist that the leader does not believe are proper, equitable, or useful, then these rules are changed through the proper channels. Until the time that they are changed, they are upheld.
- **Ethic of Critique:** The Ethic of Critique counters an Ethic of Justice, suggesting the rules, codes, and laws are used to enact and sustain hegemonic practices. Ethic of Critique leaders are less concerned with the rules in place, and more so with the outcomes of

rules. In particular, attention is paid to those who are disadvantaged, underserved, or disproportionately affected by rules, processes, and structures. Leaders employing an Ethic of Critique work arduously to advocate for social justice and universal equality.

- Ethic of Care: The ethic of care places compassion, otherness, and caring at the center of decision making. Leaders using this frame consider how individuals and groups will feel about or perceive the outcomes of actions. These leaders place a high emphasis on building community and on the personal and professional development of employees.
- Ethic of Profession; The Ethic of Profession suggests that the values, mores, and codes of a respective profession serve as the guidepost for leadership. Leaders using this framework are attuned to universally approved standards of conduct within a given profession. They are also aware of the Codes of Ethic in their profession and use these codes as a framework to guide their leadership.
- Ethic of Local Community: As community-based organizations, community colleges serve the economic, political, and social needs of their local communities through academic programming. As such, leaders employing an Ethic of Local Community consider how decisions and actions will impact the local community (service region) of each respective community college. This viewpoint perceives the vitality and success of the local community as the chief value in decision-making processes. It suggests that the community college's primary objective is to serve the community and its needs.

Data Driven Decision Making

Leaders can enhance decision making by using data to guide their actions. In a case study scenario, leaders are limited by the available data. However, in practice, leaders can engage in data collection to learn more about the factors at play in a given situation. In either case, leaders must determine the most important factors relevant to a case. They should also consider what additional data would better enable them to achieve a positive resolution.

Step 5: Identify a Resolution

The last step in a case study is to identify a resolution. The word resolution is used here specifically (as opposed to solution) because in many circumstances the perfect solution to eradicate a problem is not evident. Rather, leaders must make the best decision with the imperfect facts and circumstances they are given (see Shapiro & Gross, 2008). To resolve the case, refer to the previous steps in the case study framework. After carefully considering alternative courses of actions, select one (or more if needed) option and explain your selection. Options for consideration include the following: Solve (an action that will perfectly eliminate the problem in totality without compromise); Resolve (a resolution that addresses the problem in good faith, recognizing that the outcome is not ideal); Postpone (deferring making a decision, this occurs to allow for an issue to mature or for the collection of more data); Redirect (passing the resolution of the problem to a specific person, entity, or groups); and No Action (allowing time to resolve the problem on its own).

CONCLUSION

As described, the aforementioned *Nevarez-Wood Leadership Case Study Framework* is suggested as a tool for training leaders to consider a multiplicity of factors (e.g., leadership approaches, ethical frames, data-driven considerations) in decision making. Realizing the changing landscape of community colleges, its multiple missions, and the challenges facing these institutions, this framework can empower leaders with the abilities, skills, and knowledge base necessary to effectively lead their institutions.

In particular, graduate programs in education and leadership institutes can use this framework to build a leadership disposition congruent to competencies imbedded with AACC's framework. Specifically, this model will aid leaders in (a) connecting research and theory to practice; (b) developing critical/analytical problem-solving skills; (c) enhancing the conceptualization of contextual factors relevant to making sound decisions; (d) understanding the complexity of issues facing community colleges; (e) predicting the actions and behaviors of others while aligning resources towards beneficial outcomes; and (e) guiding leaders in logical steps needed to resolve dilemmas.

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