

Leading and Managing from the Middle

Larry D. Roper, Contributing Editor, Oregon State University¹

The editors of the *Journal of College and Character* welcome Larry Roper as contributing editor of the Ethical Issues on Campus section of *JCC*. In his continuing column, he examines ethical issues on campus and offers reflections on how such issues can be approached and resolved. Roper is Vice Provost for Student Affairs at Oregon State University, where he also teaches courses in the Community College Leadership and College Student Services Administration programs. He served as senior scholar with the American College Personnel Association and editor of the *Journal of the National Association of Student Personal Administrators*. He was previously the principal investigator and project director for a Kellogg Foundation grant for the Leadership for Institutional Change in Higher Education Initiative.

Sociologist W.E.B DuBois described the challenge of the African American experience as, “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals” (DuBois, 1961, p.17). DuBois depicts elegantly how one negotiates identity, aspirations, and ideals. This description can easily convey the challenge associated with being a successful student affairs professional during times of conflict, where we can find ourselves caught between our personal feelings and our professional responsibilities, our personal politics and our institution’s mission, or our first feeling reactions to incidents and our reflective, delayed responses. We are constantly pulled between the extremes of our ideals and our impulses.

Participating in a student affairs organization can be a demanding and opportunity-rich experience. Successful execution of a student affairs leadership role requires that we as leaders are on everybody’s side, which means during times of controversy we do not have the luxury of choosing sides. We are charged with providing effective educational experiences to all students no matter their attitudes or politics. As such, we must show the ability to navigate extremes. By not choosing sides we create the potential to be an ally to every student. At the same time the role challenges us because during times of conflict on campus, others expect us to take a stand and choose sides. But, because we are charged with responsibility for representing and supporting the growth of all students, we must learn to manage living in the middle and to straddle warring ideals, which is a difficult place to be.

The problem of being in the middle surfaces in an acute way for student affairs leaders when managing diversity conflicts or confronting controversies characterized by polarized perspectives. Specifically, in the face of the types of incidents that arise on campus, such as racial, anti-Semitic, or homophobic episodes or issues of environmental and social justice, animal rights or political disputes, we are challenged to make real the responsibility of being on everybody’s side. When confronted with such incidents, some student affairs leaders will be called upon to make assertive statements and exhibit definitive actions to illustrate our and the institution’s commitment to diversity or justice. At the same time, we may be required by virtue of our roles to sit in judgment of those responsible for behavior that has negatively affected the campus community. The difficulty of such situations is balancing our own personal reactions to a hateful activity with our responsibility to care for the community and our responsibility to

¹Larry Roper is Vice Provost for Student Affairs at Oregon State University.

respond to the issue in a way that says we also care for the offending student. As the leaders most in the middle, we need to be the ones to bring the greatest amount of balance to how the issue is viewed and resolved in our communities.

Regardless of our own personal background, we are required to develop the capacity to view and respond to difficult issues from a central and elevated position. Centrality is important because it allows us to consider the range of issues that might come from extreme positions that others will hold on a particular issue. Centrality keeps us from being pulled too strongly in any given direction on a potentially polarizing issue. Staying in the center puts us in the best place from which to be accessible to those who are interested in engaging in conversations about and working to solve the problem. The more we stray from the center the more distance we put between ourselves and some community members and the more aligned we become with those of a particular viewpoint. The key for student affairs leaders is to find a position that is easily accessible to the community, however extreme the positions presented to us and no matter how closely the positions align with our own personal views.

The center is not to be confused with neutrality. Leading from the middle is a position informed by values, the institution's guiding values. Leading from the center dictates that we use our institution's mission or core values as the guiding perspective in our resolution of conflict. In essence we elevate our community's dominant values during the times when we are most tested.

When assuming an elevated position on controversial issues it is important to be able to elevate the issue above the chaos that typically surrounds such incidents. In addition to elevating the controversial issue, leaders use conflict as an opportunity to elevate the institution's mission. Amidst community conflict, responsible leaders should pose the question to themselves, "How do I help resolve this issue in a way that honors my institution's mission?" When a polarizing event occurs on our campus, it is important that we are capable of thinking about the issue in its fullness and then elevating the issue in a way that puts questions of education, community, and mission integrity at the heart of the community discourse. If leaders are pulled too deeply into the conflict or get caught amidst the chaos and clamor, effective leadership of the situation will be made even more difficult. For this reason, it is important that we possess the demeanor and outlook to elevate the issue and our leadership above the noise so that we can function as effective leaders and community builders.

The responsibilities and expectations of student affairs professionals suggest the middle is where we need to be during times of conflict and controversy. It is in the middle that we are best positioned to use the core skills of our profession and most effectively advance our institutions' educational goals. From the middle we can appropriately facilitate needed interactions, convene important conversations, bridge relationship gulfs, hear the multiple voices of our colleagues and community members, and pursue healing. We will be the most effective leaders during the times when we can successfully "manage the middle" and elevate issues in ways that allow campus challenges to be seen and heard with greater clarity and possibility. Committed community builders must learn to live comfortably in the middle.

As leaders we must push ourselves to respond responsibly to the character-challenging events that arise on our campuses. The journey towards successful and responsible leadership begins with reflection and self-examination, asking ourselves values clarifying questions, such as: Am I capable of putting my personal values aside in order to elevate the values of my institution? Am I capable of showing support and care for students who bring hurt and pain to my community? What evidence do I have from my personal work history to demonstrate my capacity to manage the middle successfully or navigate the extremes in conflict?

Reference

DuBois, W.E.B. (1961). *The souls of Black folk*. Fawcett Publications: Greenwich, CT.
