Higher Ground: Ethics and Leadership in the Modern University

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With this book, Nannerl Keohane has shown why her name is synonymous with all that is ethical and reflective in the college presidency. The book is a collection of essays, speeches, and thoughts representing twenty years of writing by this former president of Wellesley College and Duke University.

Her work addresses the state of American higher education and the role of the president as an organizational and ethical leader with responsibility for establishing the moral compass of our contemporary colleges and universities. In the introduction, Keohane acknowledges that many individuals assisted her in the editing and update of her work, but it is clear that the core is her own.

Keohane introduces the book with an extensive overview of the themes to be addressed. In the introduction she presents herself as a “practical political theorist,” a term used interchangeably with “political scientist,” “historian of ideas,” and “political philosopher.” Her perspective, nevertheless, is that of a scholar trained and knowledgeable in the process of viewing human beings in history and how they interact with social and political situations. In this case, the situation is leadership of higher education institutions.

The introduction serves as a synopsis of the entire book and could stand on its own. After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts. The first includes papers as well as speeches given to organizations such as the American Council on Education, special lectures, and presentations at campuses other than Duke University. The second part consists of speeches given by Keohane at Duke, starting with her first opening convocation address and ending with her final Founder’s Day Address.

Her message is that higher education leadership must take responsibility for addressing the ethical challenges facing the colleges and universities of today. Within this message, she emphasizes that the purpose of the university has remained the same through history even though the players and situations have changed.

One might expect the point of view presented in Keohane’s writing given her background. As a practicing political theorist, a scholar with a distinct perspective on the foundations of our institutions as well as an almost uncanny view of the future, she presents a vision that can be achieved only by a reflective practitioner—a president with heart, conscience, strength, and a keen sense of observation. She notes that her favorite philosopher is Alexis de Tocqueville, whom she called a “gifted observer.” That term could apply to Keohane as well.

I found _Higher Ground_ refreshing and insightful, even though it seemed repetitive at times. In the introduction, Keohane states that her editors tried to eliminate repetition; but since her view remains the same throughout the book, the re-statement of major themes is to be expected. From beginning to end, the ethical issues for higher education are consistent—use of technology, access to higher education, diversity, the value of a liberal arts education, the role of women in the academy, internationalization, and accountability.

While Keohane develops common themes in the volume, her remarks are tailored skillfully to the audience. When she addresses faculty, it is clear that faculty concerns are taken into consideration. In her speech to new students, she uses their language. Of course, what is directed to presidents is clearly the voice of a peer—part advice, part instruction.

The impact of this book could be quite significant in addressing one of the major challenges facing presidents of colleges and universities: when to use the power of the presidency to take a controversial stand. Keohane refers to this challenge in her chapter on using the “bully pulpit.” Here she concludes that presidents should speak out when an issue can affect colleges and universities as an obligation to all those who value higher education. The dilemma of presidential advocacy remains, however, if presidents do not view societal events as having direct impact on their own institutions.

Repeatedly, Keohane acknowledges the importance of community on college campuses. She presents the campus as one that is built and maintained by everyone—students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni. According to Keohane, the “sense of place” is critical for students and the entire campus community. She shows herself to be a strong advocate of residential education—even while acknowledging the importance of distance learning.

The last chapter is impressive because it could serve as an outcomes assessment of Keohane’s presidency at Duke and, in a larger sense, her leadership in higher education in the twenty years covered by this volume. In her final speech, she brings full circle her presidency and her role as a “skilled observer” of higher education leadership. In this address, it is clear that she treasures the foundations for education. She is straightforward in acknowledging the outcomes of her presidency at Duke—both celebrations and regrets—and hopeful about the future of higher education.

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**REVIEWED BY V. BARBARA BUSH, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, HIGHER EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS**
Higher Ground could serve as a primer for those who are considering a leadership position in a modern university and as a reflective piece for current leaders. In outlining the ethical challenges faced by higher education leadership, Keohane asks these individuals to question their readiness for the responsibility. The book is important also for those who study higher education and struggle with the question: Is leadership willing to address the most critical ethical issues of our society?

It was a wise choice for the Duke University Press to preserve the words and wisdom of Nannerl Keohane in a book. In my reading of literature on the college presidency, rarely have I experienced such a philosophical, reflective, and direct presentation of the ethical and moral obligations inherent in higher education leadership.


REVIEWED BY DAVID DI RAMO, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP, AND TECHNOLOGY (FLT) DEPARTMENT, AUBURN UNIVERSITY

There is a growing consensus that transformation is needed in higher education so that America can stay competitive in the global system. For many stakeholders, undergraduate curriculum reform is a logical place to start. This edited volume by Ronald J. Henry and associates offers a detailed account of the Quality in Undergraduate Education (QUE) project. QUE (1997–2004) was a multi-institutional endeavor that focused on standards and outcomes to improve instruction.

Like the carefully conceived and well-managed project itself, the book presents information concisely, using a straightforward writing style that avoids hyperbole and long-winded explanations. Crisply written chapters are devoted to the overall project’s purpose and scope, the conceptual framework, and thorough accounts of each of the discipline-specific faculty groups charged with the arduous task of retooling undergraduate curriculum in chemistry, biology, mathematics, history, and English.

Anyone who has been involved in revising curriculum will tell you it can be a messy business. For example, some readers of this book might be put off at first by the QUE approach because it is rooted in a standards-based methodology familiar in primary and secondary school reform. Skepticism about both the “K12-ification” of higher education and standardization via “no college student left behind” may arise as faculty members bristle at the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to postsecondary curriculum improvement.

The authors address this concern early in the book by pointing out that QUE did not require total unanimity of learning outcomes by the faculty participants or the partner institutions they represented. The word “standard” is craftily exchanged for “outcome” to diffuse any pejorative jargon, and the whole issue is dismissed as unnecessarily diverting attention from the task at hand.

For readers who remain unconvinced about styling collegiate reform efforts on a public school system model that many consider “broken,” alternative approaches exist in the literature, including the ELMO project (Hersek, Gross, Mason, & Bansil, 2006), use of learning communities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004), and other interdisciplinary approaches (Jones, 2002). In the interest of institutional diversity, different methods for revising the curriculum are most welcome, including the QUE project chronicled in this compilation.

A bright spot in the book concerned cooperation between two- and four-year institutions for coordinating curriculum. The teamwork described extends well beyond the traditional articulation agreement between schools to include the subtleties of transfer patterns, remediation issues, and administrative collaboration. Faculty leaders and administrators searching for an exemplar of possible healthy relationships between community colleges and public universities may want to read this book, particularly the section on the Georgia system.

Moreover, for those specifically interested in undergraduate curriculum reform in one of the featured academic disciplines—chemistry, biology, mathematics, history, and English—this book is a must-read, complete with examples of learning outcomes and subject-specific rubric samples. The appendix of resources is lengthy and valuable, even for those who do not embrace a standards-based schema for reform.

While the words “faculty development” get top billing in the book’s title, detailed discussion about faculty development is absent. In a process that can be best described as osmosis through page turning, readers will sense that faculty members were indeed “developing” in various ways as they struggled through committee work, consensus building, and curriculum improvement with their colleagues, but few if any references to the emerging body of scholarly literature on faculty development exist within this work. Although this book would likely come up in a library search query, I would not recommend it for a dissertation compiling a literature review of core readings about faculty development.