

Leading in the Mainstream: Ethical Realism and Continuing Education

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The primary role of continuing education (CE) is to connect the university and the community. Sitting on the doorstep of the university, it looks out to uncover community needs and inwardly to identify university interests and expertise that can address them. When it finds a match, it organizes academic resources and support services to deliver the resulting program or service. In this sense, continuing education professionals are more than program delivery specialists; they are also diplomats and translators, negotiating among the diverse cultures on campus and between the campus and the external community. This is a sometimes precarious but exciting role that demands a unique set of leadership skills.

Historically, many CE units have looked to the business world for guidance. As changes in society increase the range and diversity of links between the university and the community, continuing education leaders are working increasingly within the mainstream of their institutions. While most continuing education units operate as cost centers and are expected to generate new revenue, business thinking is necessary—but not sufficient—to guide leadership in a more mainstreamed environment. The challenge of leading continuing education within the mainstream requires a new way of thinking about leadership.

Higher education is best seen not as a traditional business in which financial gain is an end in itself but as a social enterprise that must be business-

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like, using its resources to achieve institutional objectives most effectively. Its task is made more difficult because there are multiple points of formal authority and informal influence that often lead to competing views about how to accomplish the institution's social mission. Universities encompass diverse academic cultures, each with its own standards, values, and goals. The challenges facing university leaders in times of great change are very similar to the challenges facing international leaders. This paper will explore how one approach to leadership—the “realism” philosophy that guided US international relations for more than a generation—provides a set of principles that reflect core CE values and that should underlie continuing education leadership in the changing environment.

WHAT IS REALISM?

The term “realism” applies to the strategy by which the United States conducted its international affairs after World War II. Its principles were articulated by public intellectuals like theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, historian and philosopher Hans Morgenthau, and statesman George Kennan. In the political realm, Hans Morgenthau (1978) noted, “political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” (p. 4). Realism is driven by a combination of idealism and objective experience operating in a complex political and social environment. It distinguishes between desirable outcomes and practical circumstances in order to achieve sustainable ends.

In 2007, Anatole Lieven and John Hulsman summarized the values and principles of this approach to international affairs in *Ethical Realism*. The book put Morgenthau's “political realism” in the context of today's international picture, attempting to return public thinking “to the everyday world where Americans and others do their best to lead ethical lives while facing all the hard choices and ambiguous problems that are the common stuff of our daily existence” (p. 53).

Ethical realism argues that international leadership should be based on six principles or values that guide action: prudence, patriotism (better stated, perhaps, for our purposes as “institutional loyalty”), responsibility, study, humility, and a decent respect of the views and interests of others (p. 53). These are the values that allow a leader in a complex social organization to set a vision-based strategy for the future and can be related to the core values of continuing education.

Prudence

As Lieven and Hulsman use the term, “prudence” is about the underlying moral duty of leadership—the virtue of shaping goals and making decisions that will result in sustainable decency. They note that prudence is especially important when launching radical and dangerous new ventures. It involves ensuring that leaders consider the consequences of their actions on the community and that they have a Plan B, in case things don’t turn out according to Plan A (p. 67). Morgenthau also notes in this context that good intentions are not sufficient as a basis for action. What is important, he notes, “is not primarily the motives of a statesman, but his intellectual ability to comprehend the essential of foreign policy, as well as his political ability to translate what he has comprehended into successful political action” (p.8)

Prudence requires that we act not only with idealism but also with practicality (and conversely that practical decisions be made within the context of an ideal vision) and that when we act, we not be wedded to one particular mechanism but to the goal and to a workable and institutionally reasonable path toward the goal. As Morgenthau described it in the political realm, “Political realism does not require, not does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible—between what is desirable everywhere and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place” (p. 6).

Prudence speaks to a core value of continuing education, whose leaders work in a variety of program delivery settings (on campus, online) and at varied times (evenings, weekends, summers) with multiple constituencies (younger students, adults, retirees) having different goals (personal enrichment, professional advancement, credentialing). The value is in making the most effective match between academic resources and the community’s need. Flexibility—maintaining the ability to tailor a program to make the most effective match and expanding that ability where needed—is critical to long-term success. This is increasingly vital as CE leaders are asked to innovate in areas that have potentially dramatic impact on other parts of the university community.

Humility

This is a key value in working in an environment—whether the world of diplomacy or a academe—where control is widely distributed. One aspect

of humility, as Lieven and Hulsman noted, is that "...humility leads to an ability to see one's own nation as others see it—a capacity that in everyday human morality and interaction is generally seen as positive and attractive, while its opposite is seen not merely as unattractive but also somewhat ridiculous" (p. 72).

This principle speaks to a unique tension common to many continuing education leaders and to the core value of collaboration on which many ventures are based. On one hand, CE leaders are expected to innovate, to take risks, and to change how the university interacts with the community; in the process, many are also required to generate revenue. On the other hand, many aspects of the university lie outside the leader's formal authority and in many cases, beyond informal influence. The principle of humility encourages the leader to recognize the need to work with others and to create—and to invite into decision making others who have the power to change those things that are beyond the reach of continuing education but that may be essential to success.

Humility also allows continuing educators to see their organizations as others in the university community see it, with its flaws and limitations as well as its strengths, so that they can improve those things that must be changed. In *The Art of the Long View* (1991), Peter Schwartz observed that, to operate in an uncertain world, people needed to be able to re-perceive—to question their assumptions about the way the world works, so that they could see the changing world more clearly (p. 9). This cannot be achieved from one corner of the institution; it requires collaboration, communication, and, ultimately, a shared vision of what must be conserved and what must be changed. This is a core professional value of continuing education that deserves to be articulated sharply.

Study

One side effect of prudence is that it forces us to recognize that we may not fully understand the environment in which we are trying to lead. Leuven and Hulsman, paraphrasing Morgenthau, note that "reason is like a lamp that cannot move anywhere by its own power, but is carried around on the back of our prejudices" (p. 74). This mandates that CE leaders not only collect information but also learn from it, not taking information at face value.

Continuing educators are in a rare situation. They work directly with external constituents and across all academic units on programs and ser-

vices that are at the heart of the university's three-fold mission of teaching, research, and service. To be effective leaders of change, they must be knowledgeable of the communities they serve and of the higher education environment in which they work. Because their programs and services must mirror and anticipate community needs, they CE leaders must keep up with societal trends as well as the best practices of their field. While continuing educators are prone to action, they must also be willing to reflect, so that they can act on clear knowledge rather than on prejudice, habit, or hubris.

As a practical value, study is closely linked to humility; it is essential that leaders respect and listen to opposing views and that they build plans on the real facts, not the common wisdom, understanding that innovation takes place in the "white space" where we have little experience.

Responsibility

Lieven and Hulsman describe the "ethic of responsibility" as being opposed to an "ethic of convictions." It is, they assert, the difference between "a morality of results and a morality of intentions" (p. 77). It is not enough to be right or to act on good intentions. Instead, actions must be geared to what is truly necessary to reach the goal. George Kennan (1993) argued that responsibility requires attention to both parochial concerns and global concerns, with priority given to the former. As Kennan wrote, "It is because no country can hope to be, over the long run, much more to others than it is to itself that we have a moral duty to put our own house in order, if we are to take our proper part in the affairs of the rest of the world" (p. 182). This applies equally to continuing education. If CE units are to help their institutions adapt to new challenges, continuing education must be transparently effective in its work so that it can attract the confidence of faculty and other administrative units.

The principle of responsibility also speaks more broadly to the core value of practicality. Often, the CE professional's role is to help idealistic academic units find the pragmatic way forward. One critical responsibility of continuing educators as change leaders is to anticipate and minimize, to the extent possible, the negative impact of unintended consequences, the reminders of limited understanding that occur in any innovation of consequence.

Loyalty

Lieven and Hulsman, writing within the context of international affairs, called this value “patriotism.” However, what applies to a nation also applies to an institution. Loyalty, they note, “is attached to the interests, the values, and the honor” of the organization (p. 80). Loyalty to the organization means appreciating the institution, its culture, history, process, and community of members “as they actually exist, warts and all” (p. 81). It “fuses with the other virtues of ethical realism to produce the flexibility, calm, and perspective necessary” (p. 82) for long-term success.

For continuing education, loyalty goes beyond creating financially successful programs. It means a constant awareness of the larger institutional context, recognizing and aligning with the values of the university, including the university’s definition of success, whether defined in terms of innovation, civic presence, academic quality, or financial viability.

Respect for Others

More than any other campus unit, continuing education must respect others. As the representative of the university within a community, continuing education has to acknowledge and consider the community’s views and interests for its programs to succeed and its services to be relevant. It often assumes primary responsibility for breaking down the town-gown divide and as technology extends its reach, it can break down cultural and national barriers.

Within its own institution, continuing education must also respect multiple campus cultures and interests, particularly when its innovations or ventures have implications for other parts of the university as in the case of collaborations with other universities or organizations in other countries.

CONCLUSION

The university is a unique institution in Western culture. Its decentralized structure, its amalgam of disparate and often competing cultures, and its tripartite mission of research, teaching, and service make it different from businesses and from many nonprofit organizations. Within this unique environment, continuing education plays a role that is also unique: connecting the university to the needs of the diverse communities that the university serves. The principles of “realism” that guided the United States in the incredibly diverse global community of nations and competing cultures

have much to give continuing education leaders as this important function becomes strategically more important to the total university.

Leuven and Hulsman write, "The conduct of international affairs in an ethical realist spirit therefore requires leaders with a combination of open minds, profound moral convictions, and strong nerve" (p. 57). This is good advice for continuing education leaders as they help their universities adapt to new societal challenges. 🌐

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