

EPISODE 19: TAYLOR REVELEY – THE ROLE OF THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from all across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, like the CEO of a large company, today's university president focuses on a number of important areas customers, the bottom line, staff, competition, technology, media, and the list goes on. Today's university president is on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This demanding job requires considerable skill, expertise, and energy. For Taylor Reveley being the President of the College of William & Mary is a challenge he loves. Reveley's been President of the college since 2008. Prior to that, he was Dean at William & Mary's law school for a decade after practicing law. Being a president runs in the family. His father was a college president, and so was his son. He joins us on the podcast today to discuss the role of the university president, its challenges, and rewards. Here's our conversation with Taylor Reveley.

Ken White

Thank you for taking time. It's always always a pleasure to talk with you. I appreciate you taking the time to join us today on the podcast.

Taylor Reveley

Oh, it's great to talk Ken.

Ken White

So university president not only that but the President of William & Mary. What an interesting job. What is it you do?

Taylor Reveley

What do I do? Well, it's an incredibly multifaceted and complex job in all reality. Let me just mention of few that I think are absolutely crucial to getting it done. The first is you got to figure out how to work effectively with the governing bodies, particularly the Board of Visitors, who's good counsel when you couldn't get it, and consent is essential if you want to lead the university productively. And if you don't have that sort of good counsel and consent, your presidency is going to run aground briskly. Second, you've got

to be able to recruit and retain very able lieutenants. You've got to surround yourself with people of compelling ability and energy because, otherwise, your reach is very, very limited. Third, you've got to see to the finances of the place. If you can't ensure financial stability for the university and, to the extent feasible, prosperity for the university, you greatly limit what it can do and the state of morale. Fourth I think the President has a dominant voice and agenda setting for the university in figuring out where it ought to be going and how best it can get there. Now there are a lot of other people involved in that endeavor as well. And you know it starts with individuals goes to departments, schools, universities as a whole. But the presidents really got to help lead that process. Fifth, you really are a talking head for the university. You are constantly talking. Sometimes I realize as I'm talking why don't you just shut up? Let other people talk. But you do spend a lot of time communicating on behalf of the university or just making appropriate remarks in one setting or another. And that's important. If you can't do that, it really takes a bite out of your effectiveness. Sixth, one of your role is, or at least in my judgment, ought to be to cut through the inertia and the bureaucracy. Any large organization tends to accumulate over time but perhaps, particularly academic organizations. Somebody has got to cut through it and make it clear that things need to move along reasonably quickly, and the common sense ought to always be the standard that is at least consulted as one of the crucial criteria for decision and then, of course, finally part of the President's job is to really help the university seize its major opportunities and sometimes its minor opportunities and to effectively meet its crises, ideally anticipate that one's coming, and get ahead of the curve. Now there are a lot of the things you do too. But those are seven fairly meaty ones.

Ken White

Do you have a typical day?

Taylor Reveley

No. Now it all depends. I mean, at one end of the continuum is spend the day traveling. Getting particularly if your university is rooted in the colonial capital in a small burg. You got to go elsewhere to get your paws on. A lot of people, you need to get your paws on. So some days you're traveling a lot and trying to read and work while you're doing it. Other days you got, you've got just relentless meetings. You go from one meeting to the next. Some days you actually have some time to think to pull together your to-do lists and think about how they're coming and where you need to poke most next. Some days you're spending a slug of time really thinking about the next major set of remarks or, in the word of minor remarks, you've got to give because they tend to come often in clusters. I mean, we just had one week in October when I had to speak 20 times in different settings and make remarks that were appropriate to the occasion. Some long, some short, and some days when you think you're going to have a relatively placid and productive day, something comes in through the window or under the door or over the door that you just got to deal with, and it was the scheduled L but you gotta work on it.

Ken White

Right.

Taylor Reveley

And it usually falls in the crisis category as opposed to the really succulent opportunity category. So the days vary.

Ken White

The role has changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time, and you're the CEO of a large business with constituents of all types. How have you seen the role change over time?

Taylor Reveley

Well, I think one of the starkest changes in recent years has been the loss of the Mandate of Heaven by American higher education when it comes to political and media reaction to colleges and universities. For a long time, basically, the political and media reaction to universities was favorable. Now it is relentlessly critical. Often the criticism is very ill-founded as a matter of fact or policy. But a lot of political and media heat being put on colleges and universities. Much of it undeserved. Some of it clearly deserved. Second, the rise of the social media which can create a crisis out of nothing overnight. That then spreads like wildfire, and you got to spend a lot of time and energy putting the fire out when there shouldn't have been any fire, to begin with.

Ken White

Right.

Taylor Reveley

So social media arm have become a powerful force. I think the decline in funding, particularly for public higher education, is also a relatively new phenomenon. There has been a dramatic decline in the capacity and the will of state governments to put the sort of financial wherewithal in their public colleges and universities that they used to put. Next, it seems to me that society as a whole has developed an unfortunate pattern fairly recently expecting colleges and universities to solve ills that set the society as a whole which the society as a whole really hasn't been able to effectively engage such as mental illness and emotional anxiety such as sexual aggression by no means is all of the sexual aggression that goes on in American society happening on undergraduate campuses, such as race and each of these instances and many others. Colleges and universities have a very important role to play, but they're not the only actors in the game, and they can't solve it for the country all by themselves. That's relatively new. I think, though, it's only been present to some extent. Another big difference, I think, is just the pace of presidencies. They really are the jobs relentless. Don't take it if you're not prepared to put up with the pace and then longevity in the old days' presidents could serve for a

long time. Indeed the first president of William & Mary the one who talked King William and Queen Mary into creating William & Mary via a royal charter signed in London on February the 8th, 1693. The first guy lasted 50 years. Indeed he had written into the Royal Charter that he would be President for life but bad job security and the stamina of a bull elephant. He proceeded to live for 50 years and died in harness in the President's house.

Ken White

Wow. That's not in your contract, a 50-year gig.

Taylor Reveley

Ah, no.

Ken White

No. Your background is interesting in terms of a college president. So many folks have come up through the faculty ranks. They were a dean, a provost, a president. Your background is law. Can you talk about that and how you made that transition?

Taylor Reveley

Well, as some of the law school professors here told me before I arrived on campus. Now, remember you're a traditional law school dean meaning you didn't come out of the womb with the academy. Rather you emerged from a big law firm. Yeah, I did come from a different background in that sense, but my father was a professor and administrator and, ultimately, college president. So I grew up very near or on college campuses and knew them well, and I was very interested in what dad did. So I heard a lot about it. I also enjoyed many aspects of school and did well at it. So I wasn't the academic experience was not alien to me. And early on I got starting in my third term in law school got interested in what's called a war powers meaning how is authority divided by the Constitution U.S. Constitution between the President and Congress over the use of American force abroad and at one point had done sufficient research and writing in the area I think to know at least as much about it as anybody else in the country and for a brief moment probably more and ended up writing a densely researched footnoted and scholarly book on the subject. So I had tasted that, and I've been on a lot of before I got here got to William & Mary a lot of school boards. I was on Princeton University's board of trustees for 14 years and Union Seminary in Virginia's Board for nine years, and St. Christopher's school, where my wife and sons went, for 12 years. So I've seen a lot of schools from the board perspective. And I had come to know a lot of presidents very well. So yeah, I came to William & Mary straight from 28 years practicing law, but I had a lot of trafficking with the academy.

Ken White

You touched on it a little bit, but what keeps you up at night? What are some of the things that you think about?

Taylor Reveley

Well, the main thing you think about when the phone rings in the middle of the night is what's gone wrong. There's a building on fire. There's a kid hurt. Somebody did. That's the main thing you think about at night though you do occasionally. At least I occasionally find myself waking up in the middle of the night and thinking about a difficult situation or difficult problem with which I've been wrestling that day. And no, barring divine intervention, will still be with me the next day or more. But on the whole, I don't think you can do this job and well or with any staying power if you spend a lot of time worrying and agonizing over things because there's just too much you can worry and agonize over. It will drive you nuts and you'll drive everybody else nuts. So if you find yourself in that situation best to get out of the kitchen let somebody else do it.

Ken White

Right. Fundraising is a big piece of your job. I'm not so sure that I think people who know higher education get that, but I'm not so sure the general public quite understands. That's a gigantic piece of what you do. How do you approach that? Do you enjoy it?

Taylor Reveley

Well, it is a huge, huge element in a president's life. And if you're not game to do it, don't take the job. And sometimes, trying to elicit the grace of liberality spur the philanthropic juices in other people is an enormous delight. And sometimes, it is just a huge pain. Fortunately, like more often, it is that sort of thing that most people don't have a natural inclination to do. Most people don't like looking other people in the eye and asking for lots of money. You just rather not do that. But you get used to it. Then after a while, it grows on you, and after a while, you become absolutely shameless at it. You will ask for lots of money right between the eyes. First guy I ever asked for a million dollars. This was a long time ago, and I was asking not for William & Mary immediately had a heart attack and died. No causative relationship, I'm sure. But it was a chilling beginning to my philanthropic career I thought well maybe I asked for too much. He didn't have it right there on the spot. Yeah. Fundraising is key because, of I said a few minutes ago. If you can't ensure the financial stability even better prosperity of your institution, you fail, and philanthropy is a key element in colleges and universities. Financial futures, whether they're public or private. So you gotta do it.

Ken White

Yeah.

Taylor Reveley

And if you don't want to do it or you're no good at it. Get out of the way.

Ken White

Right. You love this job, and the students just it's like Elvis walks in the building.

Taylor Reveley

Students have been incredibly nice to me it's just wonderful.

Ken White

That's gonna be the highlight. Or is that the highlight?

Taylor Reveley

Yeah, it's great. I mean, it just makes life so much sweeter.

Ken White

Yeah, and I just recently you had your Santa suit on, and you're out there and getting them fired up for Christmas, and there is just a gigantic group out there.

Taylor Reveley

The kids love the Grinch, and after reading it eight times, I've gotten really good at reading the Grinch.

Ken White

What is it about students? I mean I'm sure you don't get to spend nearly as much time as you'd like to with them. What is it about them that is so exciting?

Taylor Reveley

William & Mary students are smart, hardworking, involved in a zillion different things, ambitious but also seriously interested in their academic work. Which is not always the case at highly selective schools, and they tend, with rare exception, to be really nice. To be genuinely collegial people with whom you can agree or disagree. Agreeably. So just a good group of kids.

Ken White

What else do you like about the job? What makes you excited about what you do?

Taylor Reveley

I think the thing you the thing I like the most about this is William & Mary is an iconic American institution in which I can really personally believe and be committed to and want to help drive forward. I think it would be very difficult to do what you gotta do to

be an effective academic president these days if you didn't genuinely respect and love the institution. Just makes everything worthwhile. And if you can see that you're having an effect on it, you are, in fact, doing more good than harm for a great institution that itself does a lot of good. That's enormously satisfying. You don't get up in the morning and look in the mirror and say is what I'm going to do today actually going to matter. You get up, and you look, and you say am I going to do more good than harm today but not worry about well, it's going to matter. Now that's very nice. And that is not always the case even in very high-prestige, well-compensated jobs. But it is true being President of this particular, extraordinarily unusual school.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Taylor Reveley, President of the College of William & Mary, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you and your organization by designing and delivering a customized leadership program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week Taylor Reveley and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time happy holidays.