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Michigan Higher Education in the Wake of Proposal 2 of 2006:

Analysis of a Critical Leadership Issue

Melissa Mattingly

Professor MaryLee Davis

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As the sun rose on the morning of Wednesday, November 8, 2006, a new day had dawned in the state of Michigan. The previous day, the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, known on the ballot as Proposal 2, had passed with fifty-eight percent of the vote (Jaschik, 2006). By December 2006, the constitutional ban “on certain forms of affirmative action on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, color, or national origin in public education, public employment and government contracting” had taken effect (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 1). What would this mean to higher education? As an emergent leader, how would I react? In this paper, I will provide a brief overview of Proposal 2 and then take a position on the issues and defend my decision in light of the leadership philosophy I have developed throughout this course.

Before I undertake this analysis, I believe it is important to note some of my reflections on this assignment. When I began this assignment, I thought that taking a position on an issue and defending my decision in light of my leadership philosophy was an action that would violate the tenants of my leadership philosophy. The act of one individual reflecting on an issue and taking a position seemed antithetical to my idea that good leadership does not come from one person making decisions by herself. I believe that the best leadership comes from those that involve others in decision-making. After beginning this assignment, I realized I could state that I would include others in my leadership process.

The story of Proposal 2 is long and complicated. I will focus on the parts of the story that hold particular relevance for higher education. In 2003, the Supreme Court upheld the usage of affirmative action by higher education institutions nationwide based on two legal cases involving the University of Michigan (Jaschik, 2006). With the Supreme Court’s decision, Ward Connerly’s agenda shifted to Michigan (Jaschik, 2006). As a regent of the University of California system, Ward Connerly led that system and then the State of California to ban

affirmative action in 1996 (Jaschik, 2006). Once the battle over affirmative action came to Michigan, it proved contentious, including disputed petitions and accusations of voter fraud (Jaschik, 2006). While many notable people, organizations and corporations came out on both sides of the issue, higher education leaders were against the ban on affirmative action, believing it was essential for maintaining the diversity their institutions valued so highly (Jaschik, 2006). Michigan higher education leaders knew detrimental effects were imminent on their institutions, were the ban to be passed, based on evidence from the results of California's ban (Kaufmann, 2006). These negative effects included "the elimination of services such as college preparation programs for students of color, summer science programs for girls" and "decreases in the percentages of African Americans and Native Americans enrolled in the University of California system and apparently to similar decreases in the California State University system" (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 1).

After Proposal 2 was passed, a number of legal challenges were brought, but none were successful in overturning the ban on affirmative action (Martin, 2008). Since November 8, 2006, higher education leaders have had to deal with a changed legal climate. In this next section of the paper, I will focus on how I, as an emergent higher education leader, would react to Proposal 2. I will address this issue as though I was in a position of leadership at Michigan State University. I will leave the exact position of leadership vague so as to allow me to think about the issue from multiple viewpoints, but I will not consider my emergent position of leadership the presidency of the university. My interest in this topic comes from my position as Honors College Admissions Counselor at Michigan State University. Accordingly, I will focus my attention on the effects of the affirmative action ban on recruiting, admitting, and yielding students.

As an administrator at Michigan State University, I would begin reacting to the passage of Proposal 2 by sitting down with other leaders on campus to reflect on the mission of the institution. In all reality, much of this may have been done before the actual vote took place. Taking this action reflects many of the principles of my leadership philosophy. First, I would work hard to ensure that decisions were not made by me alone. From Kotter and Heskett's formulation of transformational leadership, I would "[include] followers' needs in the vision", by consulting with different campus units on their thoughts and needs (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, 182). Second, serious reflection on institutional mission would be critical in reacting to the passage of Proposal 2. "Communicating the vision" is another essential element of transformational leadership (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, 182). In this case, communicating the vision does not simply mean getting the message of the mission out to everyone on campus and in the community, but rather understanding the vision as a campus and community. The Michigan State University Mission Statement proclaims, "[we] are an inclusive, academic community" (Board of Trustees, 2008). What does this mission of inclusiveness mean to us? It has historically meant admitting a wide-range of students, including those to whom higher education was historically restricted, including women, people of color, and those with few financial resources (Kuhn, 1955). Additionally, as an emergent leader at Michigan State University, I would look to the President of the university for guidance on the mission. President Lou Anna K. Simon says inclusiveness is one of three core values of the institution (Simon, n.d.). Simon (n.d.) goes on to say

In order to be the best, we must dedicate ourselves to inclusion. Indeed, inclusion both underpins and stems from our commitment to quality and must be at the core of the MSU experience. Inclusion is not limited to ensuring various constituencies are accounted for,

but rather is an overarching philosophy that starts with a belief in the value of varying perspectives and a promise of mutual respect. Our commitment to inclusion means we embrace opportunities for all. It means that we ensure individuals who come from ordinary backgrounds but who possess extraordinary talents, passion, and determination can find the path to success.

With this reflection on mission, and clear statement of inclusion as a core value of Michigan State University, I will move on to address other issues brought up by the passage of Proposal 2.

As an emerging leader, another step I would take to address the passage of Proposal 2 would be to consult with higher education leaders in states that have experiences similar bans on affirmative action. Higher education leaders from the California higher education system could be called upon for information on what effects were seen following their state's ban on affirmative action. Additionally, higher education leaders in Michigan could attempt to learn what kind of reactions towards the affirmative action ban worked and what kinds did not. In September 2007, I attended the National Association for College Admission Counseling's National Conference in Austin, TX. I sat in on a session called, What Can We Do, Post-Prop. 2? Higher education leaders from California were on the panel and gave advice on how Michigan higher education institutions could react to the ban on affirmative action. They seemed very willing to share information. As an emerging leader, I would contact these panelists and ask for more information, particularly regarding changes to their pre-college access programs, admissions processes, and scholarships.

The next step I would take as an emerging leader reacting to the passage of Proposal 2 would be brainstorming and outside-the-box thinking. Again, much of this may have been done before the ban on affirmative action passed, but I think it would need to continue on. I would

assemble a team of people from around campus to think about various issues, such as pre-college access programs, admissions processes, and scholarships. I would not limit the groups to thinking about these particular issues, so as to encourage them to think about even more creative solutions. While I did not include the concept of “taking sensible risks” in the initial formulation of my leadership philosophy, this exercise is helping me realize its importance (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, 181). When an institution is faced with such a strong attack on its core values (like a ban on affirmative action is to inclusion), it must react. As an emerging leader, I would encourage my colleagues to consider all possibilities and not be fearful. One sensible risk would be to challenge the affirmative action ban through legal avenues. So far, this action has been unsuccessful. Other sensible risks could include designing new programs to recruit students of color and women and creating new legal scholarships for students of color and women.

After the passage of Proposal 2, many people debated the meaning of the ban on affirmative action. Many university officials have taken the stance that “programs or services may still be targeted to women or underrepresented minorities, so long as no one is excluded on the basis of race, gender, color, ethnicity or national origin. The law also permits affirmative action efforts that are required in order to achieve or maintain eligibility for federal programs and funds” (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 1). With this in mind, many of the pre-college programs that existed pre-Proposal 2 can continue. They must accept applicants of all races and genders and not choose candidates based on race or gender, but they can target recruitment efforts at desired applicants.

Additionally, “[nothing] in Proposal 2 bars private entities from awarding designated scholarships” (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 1). With this understanding of the ban on affirmative action, higher education institutions in Michigan can encourage donations for targeted scholarships, such as the recent ten million dollar anonymous donation to MSU, designated for women and

minority students (Cassella, 2009). In this context, taking risks means thinking creatively and not being held by traditional restrictions.

Through effective understanding of the vision as a community, strong communication and sensible risk taking, I could work as a transformational emerging leader in a post-Proposal 2 age. It is important to note that the work never ends in this situation. There will never be a day when things are fixed. Emergent leaders on campuses throughout the State of Michigan must remain active in thinking critically about the ban on affirmative action and what it means for their institutions. Additionally, higher education administrators around the country may now look to Michigan for guidance on how to oppose a ban on affirmative action in their state, if such a ban would threaten their mission.

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