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John Hannah Leadership Profile

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### *Introduction*

A six-year-old boy assumes responsibility for his family's flock, drops out of the University of Michigan's Law School and receives a bachelors degree from a college of agriculture (Hannah, 1980). Nineteen years later, this man of humble beginnings becomes the eleventh president of Michigan State College (Thomas, 2008). How did John Hannah emerge from such common roots and rise to prominence so quickly? An exploration of Hannah's accomplishments, leadership style and philosophy, leadership impact, situational factors, and career influences will answer these important questions.

### *Purpose and Scope*

Throughout my nine years at Michigan State University as an undergraduate student, staff member of the university (Honors College Admissions Counselor), and now graduate student, I have repeatedly heard of President Hannah. People tend to speak of him as a legend that transformed the university into the place it is today. I am deeply interested in learning about this important figure in the history of the university that has meant so much to me. This Leadership Profile assignment provides the perfect opportunity to research President Hannah and utilize the leadership concepts I have learned in EAD 801 thus far. Additionally, President Hannah played a critical role in the founding of the Honors College (Dressel 1987). The Honors College was what drew me to Michigan State University ten year ago, is my current employer, and what keeps me here at MSU.

John Hannah was more than an important leader at Michigan State University. Before, during and after his presidency, he served the State of Michigan and the United States as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower & Personnel, Chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, and Administrator for the Agency for International Development (Niehoff 1989).

A twenty page Leadership Profile could be written about these leadership roles alone, but the brief nature of this paper will not allow for me to delve into all of these positions. Instead, I will focus on Hannah's significant time spent as President of Michigan State College and later, Michigan State University. Hannah spent forty-seven years in East Lansing. He transformed many facets of the institution, more than can be covered in this profile. I will highlight particularly important achievements as they provide a lens on Hannah's leadership.

### *Background*

John Hannah was born in 1902 in Grand Rapids, Michigan to an agriculturally minded and respected father and a college-educated mother (Thomas 2008). The family valued education and John was a strong student and excelled and was a leader in the local and statewide agriculture community (Hannah 1980). After high school, John went off to the local junior college and then proceeded to the University of Michigan Law School (Hannah 1980). After one year of study, he was offered an opportunity to go to Michigan Agricultural College for a bachelors degree in agriculture and a well paying job as an extension agent (Hannah 1980). After consultation with important authority figures he respected, John accepted (Hannah 1980). Hannah had set his path and would remain in East Lansing for the next forty-seven years.

### *The Early Years in East Lansing*

After receiving his bachelor's degree after one year at Michigan Agricultural College, Hannah quickly became a well-respected leader in the Michigan farming community (Thomas 2008). After ten years, Hannah was offered a high paying job in a private agricultural firm (Hannah 1980). Robert Shaw, the current president of Michigan State College counter offered with the position of Secretary of the Board of Agriculture (Hannah 1980). In his memoir, Hannah says,

I had already concluded that there were things more important to me than making money and I had about made up my mind that I would rather return to a university – particularly Michigan State College – than do anything else. It seemed to me that when a person gets old and looks back over his life, what is important in it is not prestige or the amount of money in the bank, but rather whether or not he feels that his life has been useful. If he has been able to contribute, even in some small way, to making it possible for people to live lives that are more satisfying to them than they might otherwise have been, that, it seems to me, is probably the most meaningful of all of life's satisfactions. (1980, p. 21)

And thus, John Hannah committed his life to Michigan State College.

*The Middle Years in East Lansing*

While Hannah's time at MSU has been well documented by himself and multiple biographers, I found it interesting that there is no information describing why President Shaw offered Hannah the Secretary position. This seems to be a gap in the literature. Nonetheless, Hannah quickly went to work and transformed the Secretary position:

Previous board secretaries had remained silent in the monthly faculty meetings; but even at Hannah's first ones [...], he reported on legislative prospects, the budget, building plans, and the campaign to attract more freshmen. Soon he was sharing in every major decision in the president's office. (Dressel, 1987, p. 5)

President Shaw immediately gave Hannah much responsibility through many important projects (Hannah, 1980). Using Northouse's vocabulary and conceptualizations, as Secretary, Hannah had "assigned leadership", but also developed that position and displayed "emergent leadership" (2007). Not only did the position Hannah held carry authority, but Hannah took on more responsibility and proved himself to be a greater leader, capable of more than the Secretary role. At the age of thirty-eight, after only six years as Secretary, President Shaw retired and with almost no consultation, John Hannah was appointed the eleventh president of Michigan State College (Hannah 1980).

*The Presidential Years in East Lansing: Transformational Leadership*

Once again, Hannah had assigned leadership, but he went beyond holding power inherent in his position and became what Sashkin and Sashkin would describe as a transformational leader (2003). When Hannah reflected on his leadership style for his memoir, he said he believed that all the advances that were made for the university came about because of cooperation and support from the entire university community (Hannah, 1980). Hannah did not see himself as the center of the university, just a part of it (Hannah, 1980). Hannah makes this point abundantly clear in his memoir:

[From] the first day of my presidency, my objective was to try and get the whole university pulling together. I was convinced that the president or chief executive of any sizable organization could not be effective unless he could get most of the people in it traveling down the same road, in the same direction, at the same time. If the work of any large organization is to be limited to what its head can do himself, it is not going to accomplish very much. (1980, p.39)

From the outset, President Hannah realized the importance of one of Kouzes and Posner's exemplary leadership practices: inspiring a shared vision (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003).

Another element of President Hannah's transformational leadership skill set was effective communication. Sashkin and Sashkin believe that "what's unique to transformational behavior is the skill of focusing attention and making complex ideas clear by using metaphors" (2003, p.43). Moreover, President Hannah communication strategies were in line with Kouzes and Posner's exemplary leadership practices by "enabling others to act" through "fostering collaboration" and "supporting followers in their own personal development" and "encouraging the heart" through "recognizing followers' contributions" (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, p. 43). In his life as a agricultural extension agent, Hannah "had the uncanny ability to appraise the knowledgeability of his audience and to accordingly set a pattern of presentation that was understood" (Thomas, 2008, p. 11). Communication was a major focus for President Hannah.

He made it a priority, both “vertically and horizontally” (Hannah, 1980, p. 41). “There is nothing more discouraging to morale than for staff members to learn for the first time, from reading a newspaper or from meeting somebody far away, what is happening at his own institution. We tried to avoid that.” (Hannah, 1980, p. 41). The centennial of Michigan State University occurred during Hannah’s tenure and “Hannah had planned for the Centennial celebration ‘from the day he accepted the presidency’” (Thomas, 2008, p. 261). He involved faculty, staff, students, alumni, state residents and legislators, and even President Eisenhower in the celebration (Thomas, 2008). Hannah realized the importance of celebrating achievements as a team. Finally, Hannah modeled Kouzes and Posner’s exemplary leadership practice of “modeling the way” by “setting and example by one’s own behavior” (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, p. 41). “Hannah would rise early in the morning, stroll through the awakening campus” (Thomas, 2008, p. 119). Hannah was a dedicated public servant who worked very long hours, never asking more of his followers than what he himself gave (Hannah, 1980).

### *Conclusion*

John Hannah is a legend at Michigan State University and throughout the higher education community. I believe that this leadership profile shows that this legend status is rightly deserved. Hannah transformed Michigan State from an agricultural college to a great university through his transformational leadership. He did so with heart and vision for what education should truly be. In 1945, Hannah conducted a set of weekly radio addresses to the Michigan State community. Twice he closed with a poem from Edwin Markham. I believe this poem puts the life work of John Hannah to verse. From Hannah, 1945, vol. 39, no. 26, p. 16:

*“We are blind until we see  
That in the human plan  
Nothing is worth the making  
If it does not make the man*

*Why build these states glorious  
If man unbuilded goes?  
In vain we build the nation  
Unless the builder also grows.”*

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