

WALTER

Raleigh's Life & Soul

A Leader Is... Four college presidents on lessons learned, and taught

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photographs

by Robert Willett

When Walter decided to explore the theme of leadership this month, we knew we had an unusual opportunity. What other city is home to four small independent colleges and universities led by four remarkable women?

Dianne Boardley Suber, president of St. Augustine's University; Jo Allen, president of Meredith College; Dorothy Yancy, president of Shaw University; and Debra Townsley, president of William Peace University, all agreed to come together for a rare group meeting to talk about leadership.

In a Walter-led roundtable conversation, they tackled the subject. How do they each teach leadership, and how did they learn it? What role does Raleigh play in the creation of tomorrow's leaders? Their conversation is wide-open, funny, honest, and frank. With

perspective only in-the-trenches leaders can provide, and a look at Raleigh through an educator's eyes, they tell it like it is with four very individual perspectives.

Edited for brevity and clarity, the following is a transcript of that free-ranging conversation.

What makes a good leader today?

Debra Townsley: What makes a good leader today is being transformational. We talk to students about the amount of change they'll experience. We think we've seen a lot – I started at IBM when we sold Selectric typewriters – and I don't think I'm that old!

And part of being a good leader is being a good follower. You really have to do both. Teaching students to work in groups and understand the different roles, and how to communicate their positions, both as leaders and followers, is really important. Because those will be interchangeable in their lives.

Jo Allen: I think probably at no time has leadership been more dependent ...on data and information. Our students need to learn to sort through what's good information, what's bad information, what's clean information, and what's not. I think that's a really key piece of leadership, how you...qualify information to make decisions.

And the other side of that is the emotional side of leadership, which I think is increasingly important as we bring great change and see great change unfolding in front of us. It really requires that people be empathetic, that they be very aware of their emotions, and the impact on other people.

And we know that leadership itself is changing. The women in this room are a really great example. Not only have we had opportunities to lead that weren't open necessarily to our mothers and grandmothers, but that we lead very differently from how men tend to lead. We're far more collaborative. We care a great deal about the impact on other people.



Shaw University president Dorothy Yancy

Dorothy Yancy: I think a leader is someone who is flexible and nimble and can adjust to change and can communicate a vision to the people that they are working with.

I think the person has to have people skills, they have to have clarity in the approach, and there has to be a collaboration. Because no one leads alone. But they also have to have some substance they're communicating. They can't just lead about nothing.

Dianne Boardley Suber: I embrace the concept of situational leadership. I think leaders evolve, ebb and flow, based on what the circumstances are. There are so many different

ways of how you get to be labeled as an effective leader. Ultimately, what I try to get my students to understand, is that they're going out in to a world that oftentimes is not going to value their culture, or their image, or their presence. And that in order to succeed, there are some basic skills that they've got to have. They've got to be knowledgeable, they've got to have an image, and they've got to have a network. So my responsibility to them – with the premise that my goal is to make them all situational leaders – is to make sure that they've got the skill set that they need to be able to do that.

In what way does being in Raleigh help you train your students to become leaders? Does the city play a part?



William Peace University president Debra Townsley

Townsley: It's all about location. I tell the students all the time...there's no better place to go to school right now. I think Raleigh is an example of a city that has worked to change and continues to change, and it's (due to) the interaction of public, private, and nonprofit (institutions). The opportunities are endless.

Yancy: I think that Raleigh offers almost a smorgasboard of opportunities for students. You don't often get the chance to go to college where the capital is located and you see the daily operations of the state government. Or you're in a position to do research with an internship. You are able to enjoy the development that's been going on in downtown Raleigh.

Students also, now, with the economy, have to have jobs. They have to work and go to school. There are opportunities (in Raleigh) that kids at my institution can't get coming from Eastern North Carolina. They come here, they can get a part-time job, and they can go to school, and they can be exposed to all of the other things that you can find in an urban environment.

Suber: I think Raleigh is all of that. But I also think that the advantage of being in Raleigh now is that it is evolving to become (what you have described). This isn't a plug for Walter, but I think Walter represents the evolving Raleigh. There has been a definitive effort (in the magazine) to reflect the diversity, the desired diversity of this community.

Where I think there is a shortfall is that Raleigh has been slow in addressing that issue, given that it is the capital. Because there is an absence of visibility of both minorities and women in this community. I have seen a change over 13 years. But the fact of the matter is that for a good part of its growth, that piece has not been reflected.

But this magazine and other entities seem to reflect that Raleigh is embracing that concept: that more diversity really is better. That's what we say to our kids. You've got an opportunity

to make it better. You've got an opportunity to leave it better than you found it. I think Raleigh has the potential. I think it's right here, and now it's beginning to kind of open up.

Yancy: I don't think it's right here. If you dropped down from Mars into Raleigh, and you took a picture of the events taking place, there are certain groups of people you will not see. And I dropped down from Mars into Raleigh, coming out of Atlanta, and out of Charlotte, this is a totally different environment. Totally different. And I learned that you have to look at every city for what it brings to the table. Raleigh is conservative. There are very few if any minorities in any position of power in this city.



Dianne Boardley Suber, president of St. Augustine's College

Suber: You're right. But a budding piece is that there is a more conscious level, I think, of trying to make that happen.

Allen: Speaking as someone who...grew up in North Carolina, I can tell you Raleigh's changed a great deal. It is certainly not perfect. It certainly has a long way to go in many ways. But I am encouraged by Raleigh. I do think that there are a lot of things happening here that have allowed Raleigh to both cherish its history, and to recognize what it could do far better than it has done...

As educators, I would say that there are so many lessons to learn here in Raleigh – and that to me is the exciting thing. We can look at social issues, we can look at political and economic issues, educational issues. Our students need to be part of that conversation, and they need the good guidance and wisdom of faculty from across the spectrum who can talk about the impact of some of these decisions that are being made. What's the impact on women, what's the impact on children? What's the impact on the elderly and minorities? Are we still making progress, as small as it may be? What can we do to enhance that progress and make it happen faster?

So I'm very encouraged by Raleigh, I think it's a lovely old city, and very new and vibrant in a lot of ways, but we've got an opportunity to learn a whole lot and contribute here.

Do your students feel – whether they are women or minorities – as though what's not perfect holds them back? Or do they feel as though the door is cracked, whatever door that may be, and that they can get through it, and they can make a difference, and make it a better place?

Allen: I think my students believe they can change it all. That's part of the exuberance of youth. This is what they talk about in their classes, this is what they talk about in internships and service learning projects, is what needs to change and how can we be part of the change?

Yancy: Large numbers of Shaw graduates stay here and work because they like this community. There's something that they find vibrant in this community. As four institutions, we have a tremendous impact on the economic development of Raleigh. The economic impact that we bring to the table is never talked about, is never given proper credence, is never given a real discussion. Our students come from everywhere, they spend their good money right here in Raleigh, and then they stay in professional positions. We should be thanked. Daily. For what we do. You don't hear a lot of talk about the economic impact of education on the Raleigh community.

Do you all agree that that's something you contribute that isn't recognized?

Yancy: It needs to be elevated. We hear all about what SAS does, and everybody else. We don't hear anything about the economic impact that we have, and we've been here 150 years. That's a big difference. Maybe it's like an old shoe, you just get used to wearing it.



Meredith College president Jo Allen

Allen: Another thing that's important in what she's saying, too. There are so many cities that have great colleges and universities, and then (the students) leave. And it's a huge problem, what they call brain drain, and Raleigh's really not like that.

So it's not just a temporary economic impact that we make, while we have a particular group of students here. It tends to be life long. We raise our children here. We raise our grandchildren here. That's a really important piece about what higher education brings.

Suber: I think the students do see the advantage to going to school and graduating in this community from a number of different aspects.

I took a group of kids to a town meeting where some of the community people were opposing the building of the stadium on our property, and clearly, their dialogue was racist. They referred to us as "those people," and "that school," and all of the clichés that go along with racial bias. And I ended up with a group of students who were devastated and undone, because they had never been in a situation where they were discriminated against because of their race.

And so in that one moment we had the opportunity to see both sides of life, to understand that there were also people in that neighborhood who were very much proponents. For bringing their own children to the games, and the events. But there is this segment of the population that is out there. And this segment is a segment that you're going to have to be strategic about moving around.

Yancy: A teachable moment.

Suber: We had a teachable moment...these were athletes, and they were in tears. And they said to me, Dr. Suber, they don't want us here because we're black. I said yeah, that's exactly right. So we had an opportunity to say this is what you're going to deal with in the real world. This is why you must always defy the stereotype. Because at the end of the day, these are real people that will be multiplied exponentially in the real world. I think regardless of where a student is, if the higher education institution capitalizes on all of the positives and negatives of an environment, that it does what it's supposed to do.

Townsley: What gives me some hope when you are talking about those situations is that when you look at the diversity of our campuses, and ours is very diverse, you see this generation of students not recognize (race as an issue) as much as (others might) in the larger world.

It's hope for the future. I look at our students and I'm so proud of how they interact with diversity of gender and race and ethnicity.

Changing tack a bit. You all have gotten to the positions you hold now through varied paths. What have you learned along the way as a leader, and how has your leadership style changed as you have grown into the role you have today?

Suber: I didn't come looking for this and just happened to be in the right place at the right time. The most significant piece I have learned about leadership is that it's not always about being right. That this whole process of effective leadership is about understanding how to be political and strategic. And that's not necessarily my strength.

The process of being an effective leader is dependent on the person that you are and the environment that you're in....probably the most important piece is networking. Almost everything happens to you because of who opens the doors. I take that whole issue of mentoring very seriously.

I am strictly a risk-taker. I collect turtles, because my first mentor said to me: The turtle is willing to stick its neck out, and put its tail on the line. And the question I've asked myself for the last 40-odd year is: What's the worst-case scenario? And if I can live with the outcome, then I do it.

Townsley: When Dianne says "worst case scenario," I always run through that. But when I'm leading, I always look at it slightly differently, and I say: Can I look at myself in the mirror with the decisions I'm making, and live with myself? And if I can, and believe I did what I thought was the right decision for the students and the institution and the employees, then I can move on. I don't make a final decision until I feel I can do that.

I've learned it is lonely at the top. They aren't kidding when they say that. I think that institutions need everybody, and so we need to be respectful of everybody. We may need to make tough decisions, and it does affect people's lives. But we have to do what we think is right for the majority. Is it right for the institution, the alumni majority, the majority of the students and of course for the employees?

You have to be able to believe in your heart you did what you thought was the right thing to do. That comes with integrity. Leaders really need to have a high level of integrity...

And laugh. Laugh a lot. That's my way to lead.

Yancy: I came to this position somewhat differently. I was, have been, and still remain in my mind, a college professor. My staff say I'm always pulling people aside and teaching them. I love to teach.

I ran across a mentor, who was president of Georgia Tech, Joseph Mayo Pettit, and I asked him, what was he doing, and why. And he explained to me that his job was – and I see it as my job today –was to provide the environment and resources for your faculty and staff to carry out the mission of your institution, which is to educate students for the world that they live in and the world that they will create. And to me, that sums it up.

I am a professor, and I am a labor arbitrator. You have to know how to get along with people, all kinds of people... when it gets down to it, this job requires people skills. And if you don't have any, you will fail.

And I had the good sense to surround myself with mentors who had been successful.

Allen: I would start my experience as a student at Meredith College. I had great faculty members who valued me and who taught me and reconfirmed for me that I was bright, and that I had great options and possibilities. It's similar to what we do now: We help talented students develop their strengths to achieve their goals.

One of the things we know about how girls grow up, is we know our weaknesses. We're told them, we assume them. So to have someone in this mentoring relationship come in and say, listen, you're really good at this...to me, that's where it all begins. I'm happy to be a product of that, and to have the opportunity to go back and lead at Meredith.

The biggest thing about being a president is: You're a problem-solver. And when they get up to your level, they're usually pretty thorny problems.

And I agree that having good mentors is important. I think we've all been blessed by being able to sit back and watch lessons of people who get it wrong. We laugh and say, if you're three steps ahead, you're a leader. If you're 10 steps ahead, you're a target. We are paid to think big things and have big dreams for our institutions, and if we get out too far ahead...(laughter).

Townsley: I'm first-generation college, and my parents didn't actually think I needed college. I started out as a secretary, and I realized the only difference between the man who had the job and me was that I didn't have a college degree. ... So I went back and embraced higher education. I had gone a semester and dropped out right out of high school because I was paying for it myself, and was burning through the little investment savings I had from my babysitting days...I worked for all sorts of scholarships, went to a community college, graduated from American University and then went into industry and worked for IBM and Booz Allen. (Then) I got into higher education, which is what I knew I wanted to do someday.

Education is something you earn that no one can ever take away from you. And that's what education means to me. I earned it, our students are earning it, and no matter what happens, you own it, it's yours. It's very personal. Only 30 to 35 percent in a given year in the U.S. population has a bachelor's degree. And this is special. Learning is special. The opportunity to go to college is special....when you pay for it yourself, it does make a difference.

Suber: You have to become comfortable with the idea that learning from mistakes is part of the journey. And so you have to expect to make mistakes, be OK with that, and find the process of how you then learn from it, pick yourself up, and move on. And the other piece is that it's OK to ask for help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

Have you made mistakes that you thought that were particularly educational?

Suber: One of them that I'll acknowledge is that I came from an environment where the process was external-in. The process, the outreach, and all of that, was to go out and bring it to the campus. I came with that model to Raleigh, which is a very closed community, and where the operational expectation is from the inside-out.

I was probably eight or nine months into the job before I realized that was the model. ... It took me some time to backpedal, to work my way back to a point where the credibility as a leader and of the institution were not in question. That's where both personality and absence of information created a mistake that I then had to try to clean up, because it put the institution at risk.

Yancy: I think that the way you grow up has something to do with the way you act later. Like I disagree with you (gestures to Jo Allen) about women knowing their weaknesses...I never knew mine. I grew up with boys. Boys don't grow up with weaknesses.

Allen: And that is my point, yes.

Yancy: I grew up with boys, I grew up playing marbles, I grew up shooting cans off the thing, I grew up shooting the basketball. I didn't know that people held grudges. You lose, you take your big pea shooter home, and you come back and beat the hell out of them the next day.

I didn't grow up thinking I couldn't do things. I grew up in a household where my father was a ninth-grade dropout, and my mother was a seventh-grade dropout, and they were very successful. I knew education was important, I knew that all my sisters...had to go to college because my parents said that's what we had to do.

I think the way you walk in to any position, whether it's your classroom, or whether it's any other kind of leadership position, the cultural baggage you bring to the table shapes the way you act and what you do. The first day I was at Johnson C. Smith (University in Charlotte), and I had to meet with Ed Crutchfield, the head of First Union Bank, I was in no way intimidated by him, and we got to be very good friends. I figured I could do my job as good as he could run the bank.

Allen: I would like to clarify something. What I was saying was really generalities about when girls grow up, many of them who – we talk about the gap in science and math learning, for instance – that's the kind of thing you will hear girls at a certain age saying (they can't do). We have body image issues that come about at the same age, and that's what I'm talking about.

I fortunately grew up in the same kind of family, where I was told I could do anything, and I very much agree that the culture you grow up in and the family you grow up in and that kind of self-confidence that it breeds is very important, but I'm looking at it a bigger picture.

Suber: I grew up in an environment where I thought everyone went to college. I grew up on a college campus, I am fourth-generation college educated. It was a way of life.

A lot of it comes back to what Dot said earlier. Your leadership style and your vision for wherever you are really is stamped by your experiences and your background. And your journey is influenced by the kind of influence you had growing up. I grew up in an all African-American environment. There was never any discussion about being as good as anybody else. We were raised and socialized every day of our lives to believe we were the very best. And there was always a support system there to catch you if you fell, to pick you up and move you along.

And as I think back on it, some of this arrogance that I'm credited with, and some of this devil-may-care persona has a lot to do with the fact that the people around us said, that's OK, we've got your back. And if you look at the personalities of our campuses and the lessons we impart to our students, you'll find a lot of us (there).

Townsley: What Dianne and Dot have said about situational leadership (resonates). You have to match the situation, the circumstance and the follower. I think that you can learn some skills, you can study it, but I also think there are just some innate things that you bring to the table that have to match the situation and the followers at the time.

Yancy: Situational leadership requires you to be flexible and nimble, not be straight down the middle and set on a particular path. You have to adjust to the environment, and the people, and the needs of the institution that you are leading.

Townsley: Leadership focused on mission is so important. You have to live, eat, and breathe the mission.

Suber: You got to see what other people don't see. You got to see down the road.

Yancy: If you can't see down the road, you can't lead anybody.

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