

Case Study Memo:

Midwest Metropolitan University

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HIED 842: Administrative Leadership in Higher Education

Dr. Jordan Humphrey

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MEMORANDUM

To: The Office of the President, Midwest Metropolitan University

From: Rebecca Schreiber, University Leadership Consultant

Date: February 6, 2022

Subject: Lessons from the University of Alabama at Birmingham

Dear Colleagues,

There are numerous similarities between the challenges facing the President of Midwest Metropolitan University (hereafter, MMU) and the facts that were available to President Watts of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (hereafter, UAB). What remains to be seen is the degree to which the *hidden* facts of MMU's situation will mimic the outcomes experienced by Watts and UAB. After (1) a brief recapitulation of the incident at UAB, I will highlight key considerations regarding (2) governance and power structures and (3) organizational frames and models, which will provide tools through which the President of MMU can (4) learn from the missteps at UAB. Lastly, I will (5) provide action steps for MMU leadership based on a synthesized review of these considerations.

I. The Incident: A Brief Overview

The incident at UAB was enabled by key characteristics of academic organizations—namely, a climate of goal ambiguity, patterns of unclear decision-making authority, and environmental pressures which create institutional vulnerabilities (Baldrige et al., 1978). President Watts initially felt pressure to discontinue UAB's Division 1 football program (and two other smaller athletic teams) due to serious financial concerns, with his decision making also informed by the program's misalignment with UAB's mission and vision (Gardner, 2015). An initial independent report from CarrSports estimated that UAB would spend \$49 million dollars to deliver a competitive team capable of winning national titles (New,

2015). The program's projected operating deficit would reach over \$25 million by 2019 (Gardner, 2015). Watts concluded that continued support of the football program was not aligned with the institution's mission to focus on academic innovation, patient care, fostering access and inclusivity, and increasing engagement in experiential learning (UAB, 2022). His decision was backed by the University of Alabama System's Board of Trustees, but it incited immediate backlash from the Faculty Senate, students, alumni, Birmingham community members, and local lawmakers (New, 2015; Wright, 2019). President Watts eventually changed his decision and reinstated the athletic teams, but not before irreparable damage had been done to his reputation and to UAB (Marley, 2015). Through media coverage of the incident, we learn that Watts gravely miscalculated the degree to which support of a D1 football team functioned as a hidden priority of the UAB community, but that was far from his only error.

II. Governance & Power Structures

Formal power structures and shared governance played a critical role in the UAB incident, with Watts failing to appropriately navigate the bifurcated system of academic and bureaucratic power (Blau, 1973). As part of a statewide system, UAB is governed by one Board of Trustees tasked with oversight of three institutions—the universities at Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, and Huntsville—and each institution is led by its own President (Varner & Marley, 2015). Of equal importance within the university structure is the role of the Faculty Senate. As you are aware, although the President reports to the Board of Trustees, they must also prioritize collaborative leadership and embrace the democratic decision-making process upheld by the Senate (Hendrickson et al., 2013). President Watts eschewed the expectations of shared governance when he made unilateral decisions that were backed by the Board of Trustees. His top-down approach assumed a corporate structure to the locus of power at UAB, and his actions spurred a Senate vote of no confidence in his leadership (Stein, 2019). In fact, the UAB faculty may have agreed with Watts' decision if they had been offered their rightful opportunity to participate in the evaluation—some faculty anonymously supported shuttering the program (New, 2015).

III. Notes on Theories: Organizational Frames & Models

Theories on organizational models and frames provide guideposts for academic administrators who wish to approach challenges from multiple perspectives. Bolman & Deal's (1991) Four Frames provide lenses through which an administrator may view their institution: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Each of these frames helps a leader to strategically emphasize elements of their organization, and to identify the opportunities and challenges that may arise from a situation (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Utilizing all four frames is a hallmark of an effective leader (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Similarly, Birnbaum's (1988) description of four organizational models—collegial, bureaucratic, political, and anarchical—allow administrators to focus on the opportunities and challenges they may face based on the alignment of their institution.

Consideration for these theories may have been applied throughout the incident at UAB, but the outcomes Watts faced would suggest any application was approached cavalierly. President Watts seems to have weighed his support from the Board, noted his position at the top of the organizational chart, and applied only Bolman & Deal's (1991) political and structural frames to his decision-making process. He missed the significance that the Senate, staff, and students placed on the human resource frame, and the importance of symbolism and ritual to the wider Birmingham community. Similarly, President Watts may have believed his institution aligned with Birnbaum's (1988) bureaucratic model, with power centralized at the top of the organizational chart. If Watts had been more in tune with the hidden power structures at UAB, he may have noticed that the anarchical model—which features problematic goals, fluid participation, and obfuscated rules of engagement—seems to better describe the fallout that occurred after his announcement. A noted weakness of the bureaucratic model is that too much emphasis is placed on formal power structures, and insufficient attention is paid to informal power and hidden goals (Riley & Baldrige, 1977).

IV. Four Lessons from the University of Alabama – Birmingham

Lesson 1: Understanding hidden power structures and motives is imperative.

President Watts relied too heavily upon a corporate-influenced understanding of his own power at UAB. Part of his belief in his authority was likely derived from the support his decision received from the UA System Board of Trustees, and Watts miscalculated their intentions. The Board of fourteen is comprised primarily of members from a powerful Alabaman banking family, with only one representative tied to UAB. They repeatedly made decisions that complicated UAB's efforts to improve their programs and sports teams (Varner & Marley, 2015). Their actions demonstrated allegiance to the Tuscaloosa campus, and Watts should not have assumed that the Board's support of his plan to shutter several athletic teams was prioritizing UAB's best interests. The error points to Watts' ignorance of the disparity between the Board's stated and hidden goals (Scott & Davis, 2007).

Lesson 2: Administrators must consider external spheres of influence.

Another of Watts' missteps occurred in his seeming fixation on a rational organizational perspective—in other words, he believed that the entire story of UAB's power and mission were told within its organizational charts and publicized strategic plan (Scott & Davis, 2007). This myopic view caused him to ignore Scott & Davis' (2015) open perspective, which accounts for the influence the external environment has in shaping organizational behaviors and values. Instead, President Watts experienced backlash from constituencies he likely viewed as “outside” the institution—though, clearly, individuals with identities ranging from UAB alumnus to local elected representative considered themselves to be “inside” of the institution to the extent that football was concerned (Talty, 2019; Wright, 2019). President Watts evidently misunderstood these boundary dynamics at UAB (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Lesson 3: Unilateral decision making threatens organizational effectiveness.

President Watts' autonomous decision to discontinue several athletic teams was not only a subversion of the expectations of shared governance, it was likely also perceived as a threat to the faculty's power and professional authority. It is possible that the Senate's vote to censure Watts was more closely related to Watts' subversion of power than to the content of his decision.

Lesson 4: Institutional leaders should identify and honor community values.

Watts' comments to several reporters intimated that he had reason to believe the UAB football team wasn't particularly important to the institution or the community; after all, game attendance was consistently low, and there was little donor support for the team (New, 2015; Gardner, 2015). However, a simple review of the reports around this incident will reveal that the student body, the Birmingham community, local lawmakers, and perhaps even the majority of Alabama's citizenry is obsessed with football (Stein, 2019; Talty, 2019; Garnder, 2015). His decision, therefore, affected more than just UAB's budget lines. Indeed, the sudden announcement of the end of UAB football inspired a wave of anger from every conceivable constituency, except perhaps the Board of Trustees (New, 2015). The resulting loss of goodwill with these constituencies was only part of the holistic damages, with concerns about effects on future enrollment and economic losses for city of Birmingham both registering as serious potential harms (New, 2015). If Watts had respected the perceived importance of the football program and taken steps to ensure that many constituencies' voices were heard in the program review process, he may have avoided some degree of the extreme public backlash.

V. Three Action Steps for Midwest Metropolitan University

Action Step 1: Find middle ground.

The leadership at MMU should prioritize the identification of middle ground. UAB's report from CarrSports Consulting provided advice around making a team nationally competitive—what if a lesser threshold of success been considered, as it was in later reports (Varner & Marley, 2019; New, 2015)?

Would a reclassification of UAB's athletic Division (from 1 to 2, for example) for all teams have alleviated financial pressures enough to allow for maintenance of all teams (NCAA, 2022)? Through attention to open systems theory, could the athletic boosters and alumni have been rallied earlier in the decision-making process to establish sustainable giving, instead of short-term reactionary donations (Gardner, 2015; Talty, 2019; Scott & Davis, 2007)? MMU leaders should creatively re-imagine athletic programs, potentially engaging several independent consultants to maximize innovative moderate solutions.

Action Step 2: Consider multiple frames and models.

It would be prudent for MMU to approach similar challenges with more intentional application of Bolman & Deal's (1991) and Birnbaum's (1988) theories, as careful consideration of multiple models and frames will likely result in successful outcomes. Regardless of the organizational model identified at MMU, ideally, you will be able to work toward a collegial model in which shared governance is valued and community priorities are upheld through a democratic, collaborative process. Similarly, applying all four of Bolman & Deal's (1991) frames will help you identify paths and pitfalls you will miss with only one conceptual frame.

Action Step 3: Embrace shared governance.

MMU's President must participate in the academic tradition of shared governance to avoid catastrophic repercussions. Maintain awareness of hidden goals among faculty and the Board of Trustees but lean into the expected decision-making process. If other constituencies take issue with the outcome, you will be buffered by the collective process through which the decision was reached.

I sincerely wish Midwest Metropolitan University's leadership the best as you face this difficult decision. I trust the lessons detailed and suggestions outlined herein will encourage you to navigate a challenging, long path *before* attempting a shortcut.

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