

CAMPUS VOICES - FROM THE PAST



Connie Book
President of Elon
University
@elonconniebook

IN HER OWN WORDS:

IN 2002, CONNIE BOOK WAS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS. SHE PENNED THE FOLLOWING COLUMNS REFLECTING HER VIEWS ON LEADERSHIP.

Embarking on a leadership experience leads to self reflection

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Is there such a thing as a natural-born leader? Perhaps, but I'm certainly not one.

Even so, I am attempting my first year of real "grown-up" leadership as an elected school-board president within the Catholic Diocese of Charlotte, which actually extends across Guilford County. I'll be bringing you along on this journey with periodic columns.

So, if leaders are not naturally born, can good leadership be taught? Is effective leadership rooted in a leader's behavior, something that they do? Or is effective leadership something less tangible, what some call charisma. When I watch leaders at work, I've always been more impressed by the moments when they choose to do nothing, believing that the decision to be silent was as important as the decision to speak.

Not speaking, as well as speaking up, out and directly will all be challenges for me. When I was 19, one of my undergraduate professors was describing how powerful the imagination was and pointed out that the best-looking guy in class, was only really, really good looking until he started to speak. That astute observation virtually shut me up for four years in an effort to preserve what little good looks my classmates might imagine me to have.

As a native of Louisiana and a reporter for several years, I worked around exciting leaders, such as the state's former governor, Edwin Edwards. Edwards had an energy that made you want to follow him. There was something about him — a strong voice, good looks and earnestness. He led and thousands followed. Edwards' success may hint at the elusive and deceptive nature of good leadership. He is now in federal prison.

Other leaders have offered a more positive view. I've been in the room with colleagues who have taken on roles as committee chairpersons,

and I watched and learned as they bridled discourse. From commencement speakers to presidents and provosts, I've listened to leaders who told me to embrace the unexpected in my life, to keep the good of the whole community paramount and to make sure that whatever I chose to do, that I did it well. One commencement speaker quoted Eleanor Roosevelt as having said, "Satisfaction is not something that comes from having nothing to do, but having much to do and doing it." That quote led me to read dozens of others by Roosevelt. I now carry her insight and wisdom with me.

Perhaps the hundreds of library books that unfold stories of leadership have been equally influential. I was seven when I read of Charlotte's daring rescue of Wilbur and 11 when I met Judy Blume's Margaret and her discoveries of womanhood. I was 26 when I read Fannie Flagg's "Fried Green Tomatoes." Towanda!

This summer, I walked the plains of early civilization with Ayla, a fictional clan woman who was able to

sustain herself because of an uncompromising willingness to learn. Ayla was a leader wherever she traveled because she was a dedicated listener and observer.

Perhaps age is the key ingredient to leadership. You can't run for president until you turn 35. This summer I knew I had aged; I realized it had been years since I considered someone's good looks when meeting him. Instead, it is the lilt in a voice and the comfort in a rhythmic speech pattern that I find immeasurably more attractive and appealing.

So what do you have when the good looks of others and yourself don't matter anymore? With that energy/distraction out of the mix, do you become more capable of leading?

Perhaps all these lessons will be enough to sustain me through a year of leadership. Have these life experiences stamped my tabula rasa with "leader?"

A sea change is defined as a life experience so profound that it changes all other life experiences. Am I embarking on a sea change?

Leaders are forced to lead group in decision-making

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Budgets. Every leader has to make decisions regarding fiscal issues and unfortunately, people are funny about money.

My experience has been that for some, money is just not that important. While everyone needs enough money to live comfortably, employment is more about a social calling. The money they earn for that employment is secondary. For others, the calling is money.

The bottom line, as they say in the financial world, is that money makes things happen and in this adult world, financial issues cannot be ignored.

Early in my term as school board president, it was time to get serious about money.

During my first school board meeting, a discussion about a \$54,000 surplus in the overall budget for the last calendar year was the topic of a heated conversation.

In a tuition-driven environment, surplus can be interpreted as being "overcharged" for education. In this case, the surplus was the result of two faculty leaving mid-year and being replaced with less expensive substitutes.

For a frame of reference, this \$54,000 represents about 2 percent of our operating budget.

Board members raised two questions about the budget surplus: What

do we do with the surplus, and should we communicate the surplus to our stakeholders?

Because I'm one of those people where the social calling is greater than the money, I thought these two questions had simple answers; but, as I'm learning, very little about money is simple.

Last December, teachers in the school system were asked to create a "wish list" of classroom materials and supplies.

In my mind, that "wish" list was a working document of immediate classroom needs. I pulled it out at the meeting and began to consider what \$54,000 might buy (this seemed like the obvious solution to our budget surplus; I was going shopping).

The treasurer, who was sitting to my right, put his hand over the paper and said, "Before we consider spending options, let's consider what's ahead this year."

If I had been paying attention last year, I would have remembered that our budget was set by full-time enrollment and we had planned for 470 students. And, if I had really been paying attention during the principals' reports, I would have heard we currently only have 446.

All details are often overlooked when the social calling is more important than money.

I was beginning to squirm. I did not want to be the person at the helm during a fiscal crisis.

So I drew upon what experience I could. When teaching communications

classes at Elon, I frequently ask students to pay attention to the way media arrives at the home.

We've taken field trips to broadcast towers and considered how FM signals make their way across America to satellite dish farms where cable companies collect programming and redistribute it via a single wire to our living rooms and to print shop warehouses where massive rolls of paper are fork-lifted into position for the daily printing of the paper.

Communications majors can no longer afford the luxury of simply being consumers of the media. They have to understand the infrastructure and ultimately, the economics of the communications profession.

In the same way, I no longer have the luxury of simply being a parent whose child is enrolled at the school. As the school board president, I was now required to understand, maintain and hopefully enhance, the infrastructure.

In anticipation of this year's shortfall, I moved that the 2 percent surplus be rolled over into our reserves, to make up for fewer students than expected.

Thanks to the foresight of my predecessor, who was paying attention to the infrastructure, we had 7 percent in reserves. The motion was seconded; no one opposed.

Then we moved on to disclosure. Do we publish the budget? Do we let our stakeholders know that we had a surplus and decided to put it in reserves? If we do publish the budget, in

what forum and in what form? Again, because my social calling is greater than the money, I said, "Absolutely, we publish the budget."

I recommended we put a line item, list of expenses in the weekly newsletter.

Not so simple. A group of members were concerned that if we made our budget public, in a line item form, we would be nicked and dimed to death.

Why did you spend \$22,000 on Lacrosse equipment? Why didn't you spend more on library books? How could you ask for donations, when you had a surplus?

But we did all of these things and we are elected and should be accountable for doing so.

If a parent balks, I'll listen and encourage them to get involved and make sure their needs are heard during our publicly held meetings.

Tensions mounted among board members, and so I moved that the publication of the budget be tabled until our next meeting. That motion, because of the emotions about money, was quickly seconded.

As I left that evening, I felt tired and torn. Tired because being a leader is taxing. Torn because I empathized with just about everyone at the table and that empathy had made making a decision difficult.

How do leaders do it — make decisions to move forward with an agenda, when they know that there are valid concerns that speak to them doing otherwise?