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E. B. Bachman

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Dr. Barbara Higdon: Let It Begin With Me

E. B. Bachman, Ph.D.

Office of Graduate Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Correspondence – E. B. Bachman, Ph.D., University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 104 Seaton Hall, Lincoln, NE 685488-0619.
email ebachman1@unl.edu

Abstract

College and university leadership has been analyzed in many ways using critiques of leadership styles, reviews of issues and individual philosophies. An examination of Dr. Barbara Higdon’s career and impact as an educator and educational leader will add to the story of women educational leaders in the United States. The record of such would be incomplete without her story.

“Let It Begin With Me” was the title of Dr. Barbara Higdon’s presentation for a lecture series in the greater Kansas City area in 1993. In the presentation, she described skills needed for peacemaking. Those skills included internal attitudes, insights and feelings; sensitivity to the feelings

of others; resources of character and spirit such as sincerity and integrity. External skills of communication, analysis, strategizing, educating, and training were also identified. These skills are often listed as necessities for an effective leader (Higdon, 1994).

Kouzes & Posner (2007) developed a leadership theory based on five practices for exemplary leadership. Effective leaders are not afraid to “set the example” for the mission of the larger institution – to inspire a shared vision enlisting all for the common cause. At the same time, effective leaders must be willing to challenge, to process, to innovate, improve, and take risks. No leader can be successful without realizing that it is the team effort that is the basis for success. Enabling others to collaborate and grow while recognizing individual contributions adds to the success of, not only the team, but the leader as well. Hower (2005) proposed that “good influencers” have characteristics and behaviors that build trust, authenticity, show integrity, and show both confidence and concern. They speak up for what they believe in but also listen and allow themselves to be influenced by others. Good influencers know their facts.

A review of leadership theories must include theories and characteristics associated with Christian philosophies in order to fully look at the impact of Dr. Higdon’s life and leadership within all her communities. Most often described as “servant leadership”, characteristics have included empathy, vision, inspiration and trustworthiness (Ben-nis, 1989). Spears (2010), after review of servant leader writings, added healing, awareness, persuasion, and stewardship to the list. A focus on the growth of people and building community expanded the list even more. Servant leadership does not always remain extracted from mainstream leadership practices (Anderson & Shafer, 2005). In fact, many of the ideologies overlap. The implementation may be the difference between traditional and servant views of leadership.

Barbara Higdon emphasized all of these practices in her leadership positions. Dr. Higdon believed in the power of each person to become what he or she wanted and needed to be. As she approached the issues that faced each institution she chose to lead, or assist in leading, the values she held and led with were affirmed by the examples she set. Dr. Higdon lived her beliefs and showed others, without any premise of power, how to do likewise.

As I desired to learn more about Dr. Higdon's life and leadership style, I sought to hear the stories of people with whom she interacted, professionally and personally, in different capacities. I wanted to hear about her influence beyond what could be found in the records of her community of faith and her professional texts. In my search, I was able to identify individuals who were her former students, colleagues, and friends as well as her family members. Dr. Higdon left a legacy which guided young women and men as they pursued their passions and developed leadership styles that helped them formulate policies and practices.

Who was Barbara Higdon?

Although neither of Dr. Higdon's parents had a college degree, they both placed a high value on education. According to family, her fondness for learning was nurtured by her mother who had received her teaching certificate and served as a substitute teacher. Her mother also authored many Christian education materials for young children. The need to go to college was instilled in Barbara by her parents at an early age during a time when "girls didn't routinely go to college."

Barbara McFarlane Higdon was the oldest of four children born to Robert and Ruth (Chapple) McFarlane in Independence, Missouri. She attended public schools in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. Her secondary education culminated with her valedictorian address to her graduating classmates in Northeast High School in 1947 (Obituary).

Barbara was a young co-ed in the late 1940s and early 1950s during the time of the Korean War, the hunt for communists under the umbrella of McCarthyism, and the limitation on those who could enter the United States based on the enactment of the Immigration



Figure 1 Dr. Barbara Higdon

and Naturalization Act. During her studies for the associate's degree at Graceland College (now University), she began to mold a personality that stood up for the under-represented and populations on the fringe. She became a student leader. In the course of her education at Graceland, she protested organizations or clubs that were "by invitation only." (Obituary) Her belief was that all activities should be open to those who wished to participate.

Barbara continued her education, first at the University of Kansas, and then, after her marriage to William Higdon in 1950 (Ancestry), at the University of Missouri. She encountered individuals who struggled with the impact of the Civil Rights Act, witnessed the effect of Rosa Parks' actions, and the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. Barbara began to raise her voice for the cause of equality for women through articles in church and college publications. (Higdon, 1958; Higdon, 1969, Higdon, 1971)

Prior to completing her doctorate from the University of Missouri, her academic career led Barbara and Bill to Texas Southern University. To put this into perspective, as late as 2008 the practice of dual-career hiring in academia was considered a challenge. (Bell, 2010) Dual-career hiring policies were not codified until the late 1990s or early 2000s. This allows institutions to handle dual-career hiring on a case-by-case basis. (Bell, 2010). Barbara was hired on her own merits into the same institution as her husband.

In 1956, Southern University was the only Texas state institution where African-Americans could receive a college education (Morain, 1995). Students in her classrooms and on campus were affected by the continued effects of the civil rights movement in the Jim Crow South. She was one of a few female white professors at the college. Meeting the challenges she faced head on, Barbara viewed this as a particularly rewarding time in her life as she began to help young adults see their potential and navigate the social constraints present (Obituary).

In 1963, she and Bill moved back to Lamoni, Iowa to teach at their first alma mater, Graceland College. It was to be the first of three occasions when she would be involved in the Graceland campus community as an educator and leader. As can be the case, particularly in small colleges, instructors are involved in their students' lives. Such was the case with Barbara.

Students were her passion. This was evident in the interviews conducted with her former students. She sought to be the best educator she could be. From the students' freshman first semesters to their senior honors courses, she genuinely took an interest in those who entered her classroom. Barbara set the example for students and faculty. Described as being an integral part of students' lives, she provided a role model for both the young men and young women she encountered and taught. One of those young women indicated Barbara was the first younger woman that she knew who had a family *and* a Ph.D. Barbara acknowledged the importance of role models of women in leadership for young women in an article about her inauguration as president of Graceland. (Howard, 1985). One of her male students explained that her role model included seeing the potential in each student and calling them out if "they weren't living up to it." Admiration of her impact in her role modeling and interest in individual students were prominent descriptions. Many of the instructor-student interactions eventually developed into lifelong friendships.

Historic Leadership

In the Christian text, the book of Micah, Chapter 6, verse 8 states that we are required to "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly" (NIV, 2011). The principles were "part and parcel" of who she was, according to former students and colleagues. Women leaders want their work to be purposeful, meaningful and such that others will be inspired to achieve (Llopis, 2014). She never sought a leadership position, but, she answered "the call" when she saw a need, especially for Graceland College. She cared for Graceland deeply, even if it meant breaking the mold.

"Breaking the mold" was something Barbara was "humbly good" at, based on her life and work. She was the first female faculty member at Graceland. Her colleagues and students remembered her as quietly changing the expectations for professional attire for female faculty on campus from a dress to a pantsuit! She negotiated the unprecedented contract that allowed her to continue to teach after her husband became president of Graceland. Her expectation was to be allowed to continue using her gifts and desire to teach as well as be involved with campus life.

In 1975, Dr. Higdon became the Dean of the School for Education at Park College (now University) and was soon asked to be the Vice President of Academic Affairs (Saints Herald, 1975). She was the first woman to hold this position in the small, liberal arts college located just a few miles north of Kansas City in Parkville, Missouri. Park was also known for its strong presence on military bases across the United States. The school was in a time of transition and needed to find a focus to strengthen its enrollment and programs. She helped mold the focus of the college while molding the lives of the students – especially the women students.

As the mid-1980s approached, she was asked to become the President of Graceland College (Saints Herald, 1984; Wade, 1984). This was another milestone for her as well as Graceland, since she was the first female president of the college in a non-acting role. It was not until 2018 that Graceland appointed their second woman to serve in this capacity. Like Park, Graceland is a small, liberal arts college. Graceland's primary campus, however, is nestled in rural southwest Iowa. Graceland also has a successful School of Nursing program housed in the Greater Kansas City area. Both Park and Graceland had similar on-campus student body sizes (around 800); the curricula was similar; and, for a while, the affiliated sponsoring church was the same. Like Park College, Graceland College was in transition in 1984. Graceland was a private college supported by church funds and tuition dollars. It was also in the



Figure 2 Higdon Hall, Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa

heart of farm country. The United States was experiencing a farm crisis that affected institution and family budgets across the country. Many farmers were facing financial ruin (Iowa PBS). Enrollments throughout the U.S. were low. Graceland was no exception. She continued to lead as president of

Graceland through the crisis, assisting faculty and students to see their future in spite of the challenges. Barbara chose to retire and pass the leadership to others in December of 1991 (Saints Herald, 1991).

In 2000, after transitioning to University status, Graceland again called her. This time it was to serve as Provost. The following year, her faith community asked her to lead in the establishment of a theological seminary. She helped develop its curriculum. Graceland's final request of her was to return to campus in 2006 to serve on the Board of Directors.

Dr. Higdon's leadership style came into the forefront in her professional life. Again, she was a role model as a colleague, administrator, and influencer on campus. Her colleagues described her as a **good listener** who knew how to tell those she spoke with "the truth" in a way they would hear it. She found ways to help others become a part of the solution for an issue. Barbara was a strong person who understood that in order to be a good leader, you also needed to have compassion. From the classroom to the board room, she would always consider both sides of the argument or decision so that there was a fair balance in the actions taken. Her belief in the worth of all persons provided the foundation for this leadership asset.

A former student described her as an **ethical** leader who would not ask anyone to violate something they believed in. Her primary guiding principle in **absolute intellectual honesty and integrity** provided an *authentic* style of leadership. In the times when she had to voice her expectations for behavior for a student or provide an unpopular decision to the campus, everyone knew she had done so from a factual perspective. Barbara valued open and free communication. She had the ability to make the students or faculty with whom she was having a dialogue with feel good, even when she did not agree with what the person said. She **respected the integrity of others** and showed how to engage in civil discourse with respect. The caveat was the expectation that they "knew their stuff."

They also knew that she included **compassion** with her authority. A former student stated that one of her principles was trying to find the good, truth, or positive aspects of something and beginning with that. Her consideration of all sides assisted people to feel they had been heard; and, their position had been acknowledged. Another student stated that she was an "affirmational person" who in her interactions

Chronology of Major Positions

<i>Position</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Dates</i>
Professor	Texas Southern University	1956-1963
Professor	Graceland College	1963-1975
Vice President, Academic Affairs & Dean of Faculty	Park College	1974-1984
President	Graceland College	1984-1991
Director	RLDS Temple Peace Center	1992-1996
Provost	Graceland University	2000
Curriculum Developer	Community of Christ Seminary	2001
Board Member & Academic Affairs Committee	Graceland University Board	2006-2011

with others would help them recognize their own gifts as she “opened the world” to them. Another student, involved in student activities, discussed how a “gap” between the student body and her office did not exist. Colleagues echoed these sentiments, adding that she not only had the “head but the heart” in whatever she did.

Barbara had a **strong work ethic** and recognized those who worked hard. A former colleague described how she recognized those around her who were willing to do so for her and the college by frequently sending notes of encouragement or appreciation. This was done at times when criticisms may have been extremely personal. Barbara was never deterred from any job being completed that she believed was necessary. Students and colleagues both stated that she was committed to helping everyone be successful. When that happens, the institution is successful. In her own words, “Education should not merely confer competence but also offer an obligation of service to society” (Higdon, 1985).

Even though students were her first passion, she gave intellectual AND emotional support as well as professional support to many who crossed paths with her in whatever course that took. She strengthened Graceland through a time of critical need enabling others through her selfless compassion.

Expanding influence

Barbara's influence was not restricted to Graceland. Throughout her professional life, she also served on foundations and boards across Iowa. Organizations that valued or promoted education and the rights of individuals were high priority. These foundations and organizations included the Iowa Board for Public Programs in the Humanities and the First in the Nation Foundation (FINE). They valued education, aligning with her foundational belief that everyone should have the opportunity to be a lifelong learner (Saints Herald, 1970, 1971; Saints Herald, 1988).

During the interviews, all those who added their voices to her story, noted that the subject of peace and Barbara's passion for the topic were woven into the threads of the tapestry of her life. She worked for peace through educating about and focusing on the root causes of disharmony and inequality. Her belief was that, through education, the problems of mistrust, discrimination, and poverty could be addressed. She helped establish many peace oriented organizations or efforts for peace education within organizations.

She became chair of the Iowa Peace Institute Board of Directors in 1981 (Saints Herald, 1981). Her efforts for peace education included a term as Director, Temple Peace Center (now the Peace and Justice Ministries) for the Community of Christ and the establishment of an annual Peace Colloquy. She was also instrumental in the creation of programs such as Outreach International, a global nonprofit that supports local leaders and community led groups who develop lasting solutions to poverty-related issues. (Outreach, 2021)

She left a legacy of examples of how to lead and live peacefully in the world. Her embodiment provided an example to her students and colleagues of how to be torchbearers for peace, justice, and equality; to be the humble difference maker in the world. Barbara embodied effective leadership which was respected in all circles in which she walked.

Summary

Often it is believed that when a person passes from their physical life on earth, their influence will fade. Barbara enriched the lives of everyone

she encountered. Her influence was a quiet one gradually manifesting itself in other's actions. Like a domino effect, it continues as those who knew her go through their lives and interact with others, family, and friends. For former students turned educators, she continues to be an influencer on how they treat their own students today.

One of her female students stated, "I don't know if I would have believed enough, because of what it takes to get a Ph.D., in my vulnerability, to manage all of that if Barbara hadn't been in my life. She gave an example of the idea what life was possible."

It began with her. She stepped humbly, yet boldly, forward to be a role model, interacting with and for students, staff and faculty. It continues through the legacy she left in everyone's lives.

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