

Collaborating Across Boundaries 101: The Peripatetic President

[Excerpted from *Consequential Strangers*, Chapter 2, "The View from Above"]

Almost every year during orientation week at Pennsylvania State University (or at least this is how the story goes), an eighteen-year-old calls home to report that "some weird old guy" is sleeping in a room down the hall. The alarmed parents are relieved, not to mention surprised, when they learn that the interloper padding around in his pajamas is none other than the university's president, 59-year-old Graham Spanier, one of the savviest and most respected leaders in higher education. Spanier routinely spends the first week of school living in a freshman dorm. Talk about collaborating across boundaries!¹

"There are books written about how you have to preserve the royalty of the presidency," says Spanier, who manages some 38,200 employees on 24 campuses. "That's not my style." Rather than ruling from the top, he positions himself at the center—an approach that not only allows, but gives an edge to, an administrator who dares to step down from the ivory tower. Although he is at the head of a huge institution, Spanier runs the university as if it's his personal convoy, and he's forever adding new consequential strangers to his entourage.

Meeting Spanier, a strapping fellow with a wide smile, it's clear that he's not in it for the "edge." He's having fun; he says he'd find it "boring" to sit behind a desk all day. Which is why in May, you'll find him on a magical mystery tour through Pennsylvania with new faculty members, not merely to visit other Penn State campuses, but also to see the Harley Davidson and Hershey factories and historic sites like Independence Hall. "We stay in residence halls," he explains, "and between stops we get to know each other." On any given day during the school year, you also might catch Spanier's magic show in the student union. At the gym, you're likely to find him playing racquetball with a student or a member of his staff. He and his wife, an English professor on campus, are defending champions of the intramural league. At football games, he sometimes dons the Nittany Lion costume and marches in the half-time show. On Saturday nights, he's downtown playing the washboard with the Deacons of Dixieland. He also answers his own email. "It's a way of connecting with people and breaking down some of the barriers that exist with my position."

Little in Spanier's background foretold his non-traditional approach to administration and education. The eldest of three children, he grew up in a neighborhood of working-class immigrants on the south side of Chicago. His mother was a receptionist and secretary, and his father loaded and unloaded trucks, ran a dry cleaning store for a time, and finally became a postmaster. His dad was "modestly involved in the community" in ways that so many fathers of Baby Boomers were: he was a scout master, a precinct committeeman for the Democratic Party

in 1960 during the Kennedy campaign, and a member of the Rotary Club.

Watching his parents struggle, Spanier knew early on that he had to forge his own connections. He “worked continuously” from the time he was nine, baby sitting, mowing lawns, working as a pizza chef. “I developed this style of leadership in high school and college. I was involved in just about everything. I had the inclination early on to soak up everything and everyone around me and to then choose the best of what I saw.” He excelled in sports, music, and academics, was the first in his family to go to college, and held jobs as a radio announcer and bank teller. “But I never felt like I was a big shot. I thought you had to work hard and prove yourself. If anything, because I didn’t have the privileges that other people started with, I never took anything for granted. I think people are looking for connections—intimate and less significant ones. Anything that leaders can do to break down those barriers more makes them more effective.”

Spanier’s “style” and the relationships he maintains cut a wide swath across the usual boundaries of place, interests, age, and class. He has his lieutenants and other high level administrators in his inner circle. But it is his ability to keep in touch with an even wider range of consequential strangers—and to see how they live and listen to their ideas and passions—that makes him a superior leader. Of course, in the vernacular of social scientists, an institution like Penn State would be considered a “bounded” network, a granfalloon defined by its specific membership—its employees and its students. But by connecting with acquaintances outside the university as well, Spanier not only gains a unique perspective on the institution he oversees, he has a view and resources that goes well beyond its ivied walls...

©2009 Melinda Blau and Karen L. Fingerman. All rights reserved

1. Graham Spanier, interview with Blau, July 12, 2006, and subsequent emails