

Lomotey/Adams: What Made the Difference?

Victor Kulkosky, News Editor, *The Leader-Tribune*, "Out of My Mind" column, May 20, 2009

In April 2005, the tenure of FVSU President Kofi Lomotey was looking shaky. The teacher education program was up against the ropes; relationships between Lomotey's administration, faculty and alumni were hostile. You could almost see the buzzards circling around campus. It was no surprise when Lomotey resigned. Had he tried to tough it out, it seems certain the Board of Regents would have dismissed him.

In retrospect, I wonder what the Regents were thinking. Whatever Lomotey's credentials—and they were substantial—he clearly wasn't the right man for FVSU. His urban, Afrocentric background was a bad fit for a rural HBCU and its community.

Which brings us back to Rich Whitt's book, *Behind the Hedges: Big Money and Power Politics at the University of Georgia*, (NewSouth Books, www.newsouthbooks.com). It tells the story of UGA President Michael Adams, nearing his twelfth year on the job, but who on paper appears to be failing on a grand scale. Adams has bad relationships with faculty, while many of the dedicated alumni of UGA have sworn not to give a penny until he leaves. There are many more issues with Adams, yet he's still employed.

Let's go back to the hiring process. I'm making an educated guess in Lomotey's case: Given three finalists, the Regents appeared to choose someone from a different mold, someone who might shake things up in the Valley. They got the shake up, but it didn't make things better. Likewise at UGA. As Whitt reports in *Behind the Hedges*, Adams' academic credentials were slim: a brief teaching stint, and nine years as President of a tiny liberal arts college. He has never published any research, in sharp contrast to his predecessor, Charles B. Knapp. Adams was chosen for "political skills and fundraising," Whitt reports. At least at UGA, "The old days of the bookish college president, it seemed, were over."

Okay—politics and fundraising are important skills for a college president. You have to win friends and influence people and master the art of schmoozing and talking people out of their hard-earned millions. A public university such as UGA certainly needs political supporters as it competes for limited state dollars. So maybe it would work: let Michael Adams glad-hand his fellow Republicans in this very Republican state and cajole fat checks from UGA's legions of well-heeled and influential alumni.

After 12 years, has Adams performed according to expectations? No, Whitt reports in *Behind the Hedges*. While UGA's endowment increased by \$376.6 million during the Adams years, competing institutions fared much better. Within the SEC, Tennessee's endowment grew by \$427 million, Kentucky's by \$585 million, and Florida's by \$688 million. Florida's president, by the way, is James Machen, a finalist for the UGA post before Adams was chosen.

For comparison, the Board of Regents uses a standard of "peer institutions," which are schools similar to UGA in size and programs. Out of 15 such schools, UGA is just ninth, with an endowment of \$550 million, or roughly one tenth of Michigan's \$5.6 billion. At the end of 2007, North Carolina had raked in \$2.38 billion in its fundraising campaign, compared to \$458 million for UGA. The UGA Foundation, now deprived of its status as the official fundraising arm for the school, controls assets of \$550 million, compared to \$80 million for the new, official Arch Foundation.

What about academics? Even though Adams wasn't hired for that, academics are still part of the president's portfolio. Under Knapp, UGA's academic rankings rose. Under Adams, they've been slipping. Whitt reports that in 2007, UGA dropped out of the Top 20 in U.S. News & World Report's ranking of America's Best Public Colleges after a six-year run on the list. It's back at #20 on the 2009 list, but behind rivals such as North Carolina (#5), Georgia Tech (#7) and Florida (#17). In the same paper's High School Counselor's rankings, the people who have a lot of influence over where kids go to college ranked UGA 93rd, behind UNC (20th), Tech (25th) and Florida (73rd), just to name regional, public-school rivals. Could UNC's and Florida's larger war chests have something to do with their academic reputations? You be the judge.

So, heck of a job, Mike. We haven't said much about bad relationships with faculty, but we only have so much space. So, why was Kofi Lomotey gone in four years, while Michael Adams is entrenched after 12?

Could Adams just have more powerful friends?

Find out next week.