

Balance Wheel

Presidents Should Use Their Moral Authority to Protect Academe

STEPHEN J. NELSON

The American college and university presidency is bone-wearying, if not bone-crushing, in its demands. It is not only the focal point of individual campus leadership, but indeed the shaper of higher education in America.

Maybe today's college presidents are more, as former Emory University President Jim Laney puts it, *primus inter pares*, than the "no equal in the world" of Charles Eliot's day. But even if only "first among equals" (and arguably they are more than that) today's presidents are leaders who know the buck does stop with them (though some may try to shirk that responsibility), who gain their high office in all but a few isolated instances by rigorous assessments of proven capabilities and fulfilled expectations, and who possess important bully pulpits in the eyes of both campus and society.

For all the comparisons with corporate CEOs, some on the mark, some off, the job of president in the academy is vastly more complex, demanding and relentlessly pressured from an almost unending stream of physical, financial and human resource dilemmas, from diverse constituencies with competing interests, from small and large debates—and from the expectation that the president consult, adhere to democratic process and commit to rational discourse.

Carleton College President Rob Oden tells the story of a counterpart of his who hailed from the corporate sector commenting that the difference between the corporate world and the academy was that "We make snap decisions in business, and then mop up the agony for six months. In the academy, you have a process that seems agonizing for six months, and then the decision is reached." Oden rightfully concludes that "it's a lot of process anyway," and that is itself a marked difference and a different reality for leadership.

George Washington University President Stephen Trachtenberg describes his role as "constantly searching for equilibrium," perceiving himself "as a balance wheel in an institution which has strong passions, made up of individuals who wish to steer it in any one of various worthwhile and even noble directions." That's certainly not a description of the average corporate CEO. In a

similar vein, he notes "my passion is to allow all those passions to play out in the name of a healthier academic community, but also in a healthier society in general."

But the most distinct aspect of the college presidency and one on which many observers tend to focus is the perception that presidents possess—and should use—their bully pulpits. *How* they use their perches—and the degree to which they exercise moral voice from them—trips alarm bells in and out of the academy.

At least two major dangers can prevent presidents from speaking out on issues of the day. The first, and most obvious, is the relentless fundraising pressure on presidents—the era of the seemingly continuous capital "campaign"—and the degree to which fear of losing major donors makes presidents reticent about what they say and how they might be quoted, especially on "hot button" issues. Most presidents acknowledge the practical reality that they will err on the side of caution and nuance what they have to say, wisely avoiding utterances that might offend major donors and prospects.

This pressure may be more myth than reality, but it still makes presidents wary. No less visible an academic leader than former Brown University President Vartan Gregorian, commenting about the "tact and diplomacy" required of presidents, quotes Lord Chesterfield that "wisdom is like carrying a watch. Unless asked, you don't have to tell everybody what time it is."

Moreover, there are occasional reported episodes of colleges refusing gifts because of an overt or implied quid pro quo.

Johnnetta Cole, the former president of Spelman College who came out of "retirement" to lead the struggling Bennett College, acknowledges that to maintain a campus environment open to divergent views, a president "must temper, set boundaries ... as to what you say." Despite this caution, Cole is constantly outspoken inside and outside the gates of the campuses she has served. Likewise, Nan Keohane, the recently retired president of Duke, maintained a vigorous bully pulpit, speaking out on national issues such as intercollegiate athletics and the role of sweatshops in manufacturing university wear. Keohane involved herself and Duke in a regional farm workers' rights controversy, all the while conducting a highly successful billion-dollar plus

campaign. Former Harvard President Neil Rudenstine made it a practice to get out in front of controversial issues, especially in talks with alumni. As president, he intentionally opened discussion on issues he knew his audience might be thinking or intending to bring up. And he did this throughout the time he was securing enormous gifts from Harvard alumni. So, there may be a fair bit of talk about how fundraising pressure constrains the moral utterances of presidents, but this by itself, does not prevent presidents from speaking out publicly.

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But a second danger lurks. The ideological battleground of political correctness is an invidious problem for presidential moral voice, and even more significantly, for the university itself.

Presidents, seeking rightly to defend the turf of the university from the likes of Bill Bennett, David Horowitz, Alan Bloom and so many others (generally on the Right), become instant allies of the numerous “progressive” academics (generally on the Left) who would use the university to accomplish overt and covert social and political goals. In so doing, they ironically confirm the critiques that the Right trumpets in the public square about the diminished objectivity and compromised seeking of truth in academia. At the same time, faculty set on pushing political agendas unintentionally undermine the principles of free and open inquiry, search for truth, debate and dialogue—the very hallmarks of the university that presidents should be willing to protect regardless of whom they cross in the process.

New York University President John Sexton addressed these dangers in a talk, entitled, “The University as Sanctuary,” which he delivered at Fordham earlier this year. Sexton enters the heart of the political correctness debate, decrying the “powerful evidence that the quality of dialogue in much of our society increasingly is

impoverished—that, just when there is a need for more nuanced reflection and discussion, civil discourse seems ever less able to deliver it.”

Sexton concludes that “it is ironic that at the time when sustaining the university as sanctuary is so important to society at large, society itself has unleashed forces which threaten the vitality if not the existence of that sacred space. Simply put, the polarization and oversimplification of civic discourse have been accompanied by a simultaneous attempt to capture the space inside the university for the external battle. This trend does not arise from one political side or another, but from a tendency to enlist the university not for its wisdom but for its symbolic value as a vehicle to ratify a received vision.”

What can and should presidents do in the face of this threat? One reasonable conclusion is that they must steer a middle course in the ideological battleground. Some might find such an approach too tentative, further comprising the presidents’ bully pulpits. But Trachtenberg’s “balance wheel” is actually a crucial location of the moral courage of presidents. It is where their moral authority is most needed, especially in times that are substantively different from those of the always-talked-about “giants” of previous and bygone eras with whom they are at times fairly, but in this case unfairly, compared. It is a task no less important than preventing the muzzling of the true voices of the academy and thereby the academy itself. They need to be voices ensuring that the university not be turned into something used “for its symbolic value as a vehicle to ratify a received vision.” In short, presidents are called upon to do nothing less than use their voices and their pulpits to let the university be the university.

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The Making of the College President

Average years in office: 7

Gender: 79% male, 21% female

Race/ethnicity: 87% white, 6% African-American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian-American, 1% American Indian

Percentage who have held full-time faculty positions: 70%

Percentage whose most recent previous job was in private business: 2%

Percentage whose most recent previous job was in government: 2%

Source: *The American College President*, 2002 Edition, American Council on Education