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Success and Failure in the College Presidency

Emerging profile supplants notion of presidents as executive leaders with the idea they should be intellectual forces

Stephen J. Nelson, assistant professor of Educational Leadership at Bridgewater State College and senior scholar, Leadership Alliance at Brown University, recently released his third book on the college presidency: *Leaders in the Crossroads: Success and Failure in the College Presidency*. Following are some of Nelson's observations on the state of the presidency:

On which presidents have succeeded and which have failed ...

Highly successful presidents have included: Rob Oden of Carleton (and formerly Kenyon) College; John Sexton of New York University; Judith Rodin, recently retired from the University of Pennsylvania; and David Skorton at Cornell. To these leading figures, one could easily add: Amy Gutmann, Rodin's successor at Penn; Ruth Simmons at Brown; and Nan Keohane, now retired from two highly successful presidencies at Duke and Wellesley.

On the other hand, Richard Brodhead was at the least a failure in his presidency at Duke, primarily for his handling of the lacrosse team fiasco that consumed more than half of his first three years. Though he survived, Brodhead severely marred his tenure and Duke's reputation. Larry Summers is also considered a failure by most observers for his short-lived presidency at Harvard. Still, I suggest a more balanced view of the Summers presidency than is often assigned to him based on his confrontation with professor Cornel West and his remarks, taken out of context, about women in the sciences. Summers was shown the door at Harvard and his relatively short time there created immense turmoil. But he forcefully asserted the basic tenets of the university, the need to embrace debate and argument (more frequently and aggressively than might have been wise), and the role of the bully pulpit, which he generally used well.

On the demands of the college presidency ...

The job of the college president is as demanding as that of the CEO of a corporate giant or entrepreneurial venture. Presidents have to manage highly politicized environments populated by tremendously bright people including faculty, but also trustees, alumni, friends and, not least, students. They handle massive physical plants and the financial wherewithal and fundraising that keeps the enterprise going. They must be leaders and shapers

of communities, speak eloquently, and in the case of public university and college presidents, manage the slings, arrows, disasters and fortunes of government and the taxpaying populace.

Some presidents suffer overwhelming cases of "beware what you wish for," often having to find other lines of work, in some cases, returning as professors or lower-level administrators. Some presidents get hedged in by circumstances that, if handled differently, might have been controlled or minimized. In some cases, presidents are too slow on the uptake of a gathering storm and are roundly criticized for not having seen disaster coming. Elizabeth Hoffman at the University of Colorado comes to mind, because she permitted charges leveled at a high-profile football coach to go unanswered and unaddressed until a building head of steam led to calls for her ouster. Other presidents have been abject failures due to malfeasance mostly around financial shenanigans and in some cases plagiarism of speeches and public writings.

On the presumed importance of fundraising ...

College presidents must raise money and conduct major capital campaigns. But when fundraising is the only focus, presidents fail on other essential responsibilities for which they must be held accountable. The presidential voice in the public square must not fall by the wayside simply because so much time is invested in the hunt for dollars. Even worse, the capacity of a president to speak publicly and engage ideas on and off campus should never be muzzled by a donor forcing silence as a *quid pro quo* for financial support. This is a form of blackmail, and no president should sit idly by and let that stand.

I subscribe to an earlier model that *development* and *fundraising* should be delegated primarily to pros in those areas, while presidents use their office to engage the larger development enterprise that underscores the value and importance of the school, what it is doing, why it should exist and what difference it is making. This is the "case" that draws supporters forward with their dollars and contributions.

On college presidents of the future ...

There has been a presumption for decades of presidents climbing the ladder—moving early on from faculty positions and working in academic (and other administrative) positions to provostships, deans of major schools or colleges and the like—in order to be perceived as

“ready” for a presidency. By contrast, appointments such as Amy Gutmann at Penn (after a brief couple of years as provost at Princeton but more as a faculty member) and Drew Faust at Harvard (again following a brief time as dean of what was at the time Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study) indicate that colleges are seeking presidents who are intellectual and academic forces. In some cases these presidents come to office at younger ages. After all, we have a U.S. president in his late 40s who is surrounding himself with many advisors of his age cohort. Other college presidents of the scholar-intellectual type include: David Skorton at Cornell, who, though he had previously been president at Iowa, maintains his research and teaching and some of his practice as a physician; John Sexton at NYU who was dean of its law school for a few years before becoming its president; and Michael Roth at Wesleyan University, who was “only” an institute director at Scripps College before being launched into the presidency. This “trend” of public intellectual and scholar presidents has been with us since the early 20th century. Indeed, this emerging presidential profile supplants the misguided notion that presidents must carry themselves as executive leaders with the idea that they can and should be intellectual, academic forces and voices.

On where colleges will find new presidents ...

We are going to see more colleges and universities find their future presidents in faculty members, including those who have been in dean or other upper-level administrative positions, even for relatively short tenures. Presidents need to be able to be true leaders of faculty colleagues, to be seen as dedicated to the world of the professoriate and able to embrace and convey to many publics the educational, academic, scholarly, intellectual, inquiry and research foundations at the heart of the academy. Along those lines, presidents need to make broad contributions to the fundamental foundations, beliefs and values of the university writ large. That is, the university stands for something in society. Presidents must not be exclusively riveted on the business side of the university. More and more presidents will try to continue teaching even if only one course per year. President Lee Bollinger teaches a first-year seminar at Columbia. John Sexton teaches somewhere between a course per term and a full load of five or six courses per year (recently commuting weekly to teach a seminar at NYU’s campus in Abu Dhabi). One major test of presidential success or failure is whether they secure and build up through their leadership these foundation stones of the university, or wittingly or not erode that foundation—one that presidents have an incumbent responsibility to uphold.

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