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## College Presidents and the Road to Success and Failure: Getting What We Want and Need

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# College Presidents and the Road to Success and Failure:

## Getting What We Want and Need

Stephen J. Nelson



In May 2003, the Supreme Court rendered its decision in the two University of Michigan affirmative action cases. On the evening of the decision, PBS's "Lehrer News Hour" featured not just one, but four college and university presidents. They were there not simply for quick sound bites. For more than half the broadcast, the four probed the short- and long-term impacts of the Court's findings. The presidents pointed to a variety of implications the Court's decision might have for the future of higher education. The two cases, *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Gutter v. Bollinger*, which named Dr. Lee Bollinger because he was the sitting president at Michigan when the suits were filed took the university to task for its quota systems and separate criteria for minorities in both undergraduate and law school admissions. The presidents argued viewpoints that were not in absolute harmony, but they agreed that the consequences indeed mattered. While the nature of their remarks was noteworthy, more poignant was the fact that they were there in the first place in such a highly visible public forum.

Such public prominence among college presidents is by no means frequent. However, this instance serves to counter a broad impression that Americans have had in recent decades, that the views of college presidents have become passé, receded into the tall grass; their voices no longer resonant in the public forum. Some have come to see college presidents are passive, too willing to hide out when clouds of controversy gather, and indict these leaders with heavy criticism for failure to assert themselves as pertinent "players" outside the gates of the academy.

On closer observation, however, the opposite is quite often true. College and university presidents comment regularly on all manner of social, political, educational concerns and on difficult public policy decisions. Many contribute op-ed pieces for major newspapers. Others maintain the longstanding tradition of serving on public commissions and as advisors to political figures. Many use their bully pulpits to weigh in persuasively on a variety of social concerns. They do not hide out in the tall grass. They are not figures outside the limelight. They are not so consumed with maintaining a pleasing

and non-threatening stature and politically acceptable bearing that all their energy and attention is invested solely in sustaining their presidencies and surviving in office. Presidents have to be regularly engaged in a range of problems and issues. Even if they wished otherwise, the realities of life inside the gates of their colleges and universities confront them as leaders with highly politicized, often divisive issues and "zero sum" decisions. In addition, public pressure outside the gates of the academy relentlessly forces college leaders to respond to the wider world.

For more than a decade and a half, I have had the opportunity to think and write about college presidency. Friends and family would probably describe me as addicted to my subjects and the tensions and challenges of the presidential office and its myriad duties. I have dedicated a fair bit of time to considerations about what the presidency is. Who are these individuals who aspire to or hold the presidential office? What traits and qualities must they have to have if they are to succeed in the high-stakes world of college and university leadership?

There is an often-told joke that says that the first quality that college presidents must possess is simple: the ability to walk on water. The reality may not be far off. If we are to value and honor [understand?] the office of college president, we must know as much as possible about the post. Though not exhaustive, a basic list of presidential duties and responsibilities reflects the fact that the presidents must have a diversity of talents and a mastery of the big picture. All college presidents perform these duties:

- manage the academic bureaucracy (that is, *lead* the faculty and its affairs).
- administer the operational, day-to-day affairs of the campus, this is a major responsibility, even with today's delegation to provosts, chief financial and business affairs executives and other senior administrators.
- define purpose and instill meaning into the lives of campus communities, and, especially, students.

- cater to alumni and their concerns.
- act as a CEO with trustee and governing board members.
- guarantee sound and fiscally responsible annual finances and operating budget.
- be *the* leader (and almost all presidents including those of community colleges, have to do this in one way or another) of annual fund drives, including soliciting contributions from key stakeholders and supporters, and of the now nearly constant rolling capital campaigns.
- present the college's or university's public face, including "town-gown" demands, and to diverse constituents in and outside the gates. At public colleges and universities this includes catering to citizens of states and local communities, and of course to governmental and political players and agencies.

The expectation is that all these duties will be done collaboratively, transparently and democratically, with great élan and without ruffling anyone's feathers. Walking on water, indeed.

Presidents continue to be high-profile figures capable of great and lasting impact. There are numerous examples of presidents who retreat from the limelight intent on avoiding controversies. Many presidents put their finger to the wind, readily acceding to the practical notions of others about how they should do their jobs. These are presidents who too readily permit the expectations placed on them and their office by others to go unchallenged. They take a path-of-least-resistance approach, concluding that the best path to success is simply to keep their noses to the grindstone and shoulders to the wheel. Some presidents become publicly visible because they appear successful and consistently on the winning side of issues and circumstances. Other presidents become noteworthy as lightning rods for criticism, often because they do not demonstrate the ability to control the circumstances they face. Without much serious argument, fairly or not, some presidents are judged clearly as "successes" and others clearly as "failures." For many the judgement is mixed; only closer scrutiny and the passage of time can alter views of them and their performance as presidents.

What makes for success and failure in a college or university presidency? How can we fairly assess presidents and their performance? Are there qualities that distinguish the capable from the inept, the excellent from the poor performers among college and university presidents? And can past and present examples of success and failure in that office help us select and appoint better presidents in the future?

First, it is essential that presidents—in times of crisis or tranquility—lead with their eyes on where their college

or university has been. They need to know how their institution has come to its present state and how this heritage shapes the future. Regardless of what presidents inherit, their success or failure is greatly determined by how they deal with the realities in front of them. Presidents must deftly juggle their aspirations for the future with where the institution's momentum and commitments logically lead.

Sound presidential leadership requires blending the enduring institutional "vision" with the specific proposals a president brings to the table. The necessity of a presidential "vision" for leaders has become a subject of recent controversy and debate, one fuelled by United States President George H.W. Bush who admitted that he wasn't particularly adept at the "vision thing." The reality for college presidents is that an early and consistent vision is as central to a successful presidency as a thoroughgoing knowledge of the institution's past. Good presidents integrate their vision with the long-standing institutional mission and the aspirations, hopes and dreams of the college.

Arrogant leaders do not "get" this. Boards of trustees who want to hire presidents to bring high impact lead-



DONALD KENNEDY, PRESIDENT,  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY, 1980–1992

*At the opening of the 1980s today's Stanford University was a modest regional university. Donald Kennedy walked onto this stage as Stanford's new president from the provost post. Kennedy possesses a delightful self-deprecating sense of irony*

*and humor, traits that served him well in a tenure not without challenges and controversies. He comes across as an everyday guy, inhabiting now a modestly adorned office as he continues to teach and write. Reflecting about current presidents, including Larry Summers, at the time the besieged president of Harvard, Kennedy interestingly commented that we need "edgy people" in the college presidency. Kennedy's warning—not easy, but important advice: Avoid a cookie-cutter approach to who should be presidents and how they should lead.*

ership and vision to a college without making sure there is a “fit” with its historical mission set up their presidents for failure. The foundations of a college are strong and reliable for a reason. Institutional underpinnings that have served well in the past will repeatedly be turned to for navigating the way forward. Wise presidents fully embrace the historical identities of their colleges and the legacies of their predecessors.

A second critical feature that determines success or failure for college presidents is their use, and sometimes, abuse of the bully pulpit. The bully pulpit is the weightiest possession of the college president. It is the coin of the realm. It is the platform from which presidents can make known in unambiguous ways their positions and beliefs on a variety of issues within and outside the academy. The bully pulpit must be used wisely and with considered judgment. Presidents use the pulpit to promote higher education and to define the meaning and value of the university. They also must use the pulpit selectively to address broader issues of social concern. Whenever presidents climb into the pulpit they must do so not with the intent to please (though from time to time they may use it to make peace), but to edify, persuade, judge, and admonish.

The bully pulpit has been seen to shape presidential authority, reflect discretion, and build reputation in positive and negative ways. The use of the bully pulpit connects directly to a third critical consideration that determines presidential success or failure: the ability to act as a public intellectual. The role of public intellectual is crucial for numerous reasons, but perhaps most important among these involves prominence. Astute presidents—like those discussing the affirmative action cases on PBS in 2003—can use their public appearances—in op-ed pieces, on television, on the internet—to temper scholarly controversy or to combat those who seek to regulate the university in ways that compromise its autonomy, independence or integrity.

College president as civic intellectual is an old model in America, but it is not one that has ever fully lost its relevance or presence in the academy, despite recent erosion in emphasis. Contrary to some critics’ claims, the public intellectual never really disappeared; that role was only obscured, perhaps, by the flurry of other concerns and duties that modern-day college presidents assume. Today, many college presidents privilege their roles as CEOs, fundraisers, and bureaucratic managers; for some, sustaining and advancing the “brick-and-mor-



AMY GUTMANN, PRESIDENT,  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA,  
2004–PRESENT

*Amy Gutmann is a “public intellectual,” scholar, researcher and writer rising to the presidency at one of America’s most prestigious and long-standing—Ben Franklin its founder—universities. Though previ-*

*ously a senior leader at Princeton, Gutmann did not take the traditional, decades-long administrative trek designed to “prove” presidential timber. Her forceful intellect and bona fides as a noted public figure were what most suited Gutmann to Penn’s pulpit. Throughout her career, she hatched forceful ideas about ideology and ideological factions in and outside the gates of the academy. Such a voice is critical in the public square of an era when political correctness inhibits full debate and inquiry on college campuses as well as in society. Gutmann pushes back against these forces. This style and leadership at Penn is a bellwether of the presidents likely to be more and more in evidence during the opening decades of the twenty-first century.*



JOHN SEXTON, PRESIDENT, NEW  
YORK UNIVERSITY, 2001–PRESENT

*In John Sexton’s presence one can only marvel at his persona as an exceedingly energetic and engaging university president. Greeting Sexton is to grasp his passion, imagination, and creativity, traits integral but often overlooked in the presi-*

*dency. He writes--no speechwriter here--essays that put his leadership on the line, risking ideas to provoke thoughts in the NYU community and in the urban and larger world that surrounds the university. His simple purpose: Spark discourse and challenge the best of critical inquiry in the academy. Two or so Saturdays each month, Sexton takes time from the relentless demands of the presidency to meet with professors hearing out their issues and aspirations. Sexton is an absolute believer in the “university as sanctuary,” a long-standing creed, now a claim ever more critical in tempering political correctness and the corrosive effect of less than civil debate and discourse. His special brand of leadership guides the fortunes of NYU and even more the university writ large.*

tar” university outweighs the need for them to be active, engaged stimulators of public discussion and debate. Still, the president as public intellectual remains a force in American political and social discourse. And the academy is at its strongest and most influential when its presidents are leaders with loud and critical voices in the public square.

One final comment captures what is most needed for college presidents to be successful: imagination. Both illusive and impractical, this quality is critical to any president’s success. John Kemeny led Dartmouth College as its president through the enormously tumultuous times from 1970 to the early 1980s. Late in his tenure, I was fortunate to be a member of Kemeny’s administration. Since that time I have found his presidency endlessly fascinating and firmly believe that Kemeny is exemplary of what a college president should be. Kemeny was a brilliant man who took over Dartmouth’s helm having “only” been chair of its Mathematics Department and a major innovator in the advent of the use of computers on college campuses. Commenting in an interview after Kemeny had left office, one of his senior administrators captured why Kemeny had been a successful president: “John had

style. He had imagination.” These few simple words convey the essence of who Kemeny was and how he led.

If we are to have the college presidents that we deserve and need, we must not allow the tail to wag the dog. If we get presidents fully able to embrace the ideals that are critical, they will always figure out ways to care for the tasks of fundraising, managerial competence and political leadership. We should seek and appoint as presidents those who will honor the traditions and legacies of their colleges and universities, embrace the marketplace of ideas, use the bully pulpit wisely and be adroit in crisis. Presidents cannot delegate these core values and responsibilities. They are leadership characteristics essential for the successful college president. And perhaps we need in our college presidents less surefooted experience and more style and imagination. This is an important but overlooked characteristic for college presidents to possess; it might also be a critical determinant of success. On these leadership traits rest the future of the college presidency and the character of higher education.

—Stephen J. Nelson is assistant professor of educational leadership at Bridgewater State College and Senior Scholar with the Leadership Alliance at Brown University. He is the author of *Leaders in the Labyrinth: College Presidents and the Battleground of Creeds and Convictions* (ACE/Praeger 2007). His next book: *Leaders in the Crossroads: Success and Failure in the College Presidency* will be released later this year.



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JOHN KEMENY, PRESIDENT,  
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, 1970–1981

*John Kemeny took the helm as Dartmouth’s president rising from his position as professor of mathematics and having established the college as a national leader in the advent of computers on campuses. Two months after Kemeny*

*assumed office that spring 1970 any honeymoon disastrously ended with shootings of students at Kent and Jackson State. Across the nation campuses were torn at the seams. Kemeny led forcefully, with intellectual heft. He demanded that campus protests be constructively turned into debate and discussion designed to inspire learning. No sooner had this passed than Kemeny turned to an even greater challenge: The admission of women to this all-male bastion of more than two hundred years. One administrative colleague noted that Kemeny succeeded because he had “style and imagination,” critical qualities of his leadership and traits arguably essential for any college president.*