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The Dilemma of Presidential Leadership

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Abstract

Every decade, about five thousand persons serve as college or university presidents. Over a term of office averaging less than seven years, the president is expected to serve simultaneously as the chief administrator of a large and complex bureaucracy, as the convening colleague of a professional community, as a symbolic elder in a campus culture of shared values and symbols, and (in some institutions) as a public official accountable to a public board and responsive to the demands of other governmental agencies. Balancing the conflicting expectations of these roles has always been difficult; changing demographic trends, fiscal constraints, the complexity and diversity of tasks, university dynamics, and unrealistic public expectations make it virtually impossible for most presidents to provide the leadership that is expected.

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The Dilemma of Presidential Leadership

Robert Birnbaum and Peter D. Eckel

If any man wishes to be humbled and mortified, let
him become president of Harvard College (plaintive
cry of Harvard president Edward Holyoke on his
deathbed in 1769).

—F. S. Horn

Every decade, about five thousand persons serve as college or university presidents. Over a term of office averaging less than seven years, the president is expected to serve simultaneously as the chief administrator of a large and complex bureaucracy, as the convening colleague of a professional community, as a symbolic elder in a campus culture of shared values and symbols, and (in some institutions) as a public official accountable to a public board and responsive to the demands of other governmental agencies. Balancing the conflicting expectations of these roles has always been difficult; changing demographic trends, fiscal constraints, the complexity and diversity of tasks, university dynamics, and unrealistic public expectations make it virtually impossible for most presidents to provide the leadership that is expected.

The college presidency may not be the second oldest profession in America, but the role has existed in this country from the time of the founding of Harvard in 1636, a century and half before there was a nation. From the colonial period until the Civil War, institutions were for the most part small, simply structured, and controlled by their

lay boards of trustees, leading to a weak presidency. The president's role even in those days was a demanding one and included teaching, preaching, fund raising, record keeping, and (most especially) student discipline, but in a simpler world of certain knowledge and accepted authority most presidents were able to perform effectively the tasks expected of them.

The period between the Civil War and World War I was one of expansion and transformation in higher education. New and more complex institutions were created as research and public service were added to the traditional teaching mission. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of the "great men," presidents who often wielded unchecked authority to create great institutions. Trustee boards were increasingly composed of businessmen who embraced the developing concepts of scientific management. Viewing the college as comparable to a business firm, faculty were considered to be employees hired to do as they were told, and the president, in Thorstein Veblen's caustic term, was the "Captain of Erudition," responsible for increasing enrollment, capital, and reputation, while controlling costs.[1]

The job was clearly becoming more difficult, and observers of that day could note that "the duties imposed upon the modern university president are so multifarious that it is becoming exceedingly difficult to find a man capable of filling the position in the larger institutions."[2] But although the role had become more complex, it was still one possible to fulfill; presidents had the power, and if they wished (and many did) they could administer following the precept attributed to Benjamin Jowett, the head of Balliol College, Oxford: "Never retract. Never explain. Get the thing done and let them howl!"

As institutions became more comprehensive and involved in scholarship, the faculty became more specialized, more professionalized, and less tolerant of administrative controls. Increasingly until World War II, and then with accelerating force during the 1950s and 1960s, faculty claimed for themselves the right not only to make decisions concerning the major educational activities of the institution but also to participate fully in setting institutional policy and to have a voice in its management. The growing power of the faculty, a change significant enough to justify referring to it as the "academic revolution,"[3] was one of the forces that led postwar presidents to claim that "the fundamental difficulty with the office of university president arises out of the current system of controlling modern universities. . . . He

has vast responsibilities for all phases of the life and welfare of the university, but he has no power."[4]

Presidential discretion was increasingly limited not only by forces within the academy but by those outside as well. In particular, federal and state agencies were exerting influence over matters that had previously been considered internal institutional prerogatives. The loss of effective presidential authority, related internally to changes in organizational complexity and patterns of influence and externally to increased environmental constraints, helped to transform the role from a difficult job to an impossible one.

This claim must be accompanied by a caveat. There are more than 3,500 colleges and universities, most (but not all) headed by a chief executive officer with the title of president (or, less frequently, chancellor). The composite public image of a small number of the more visible institutions tends to obscure their great diversity in size, wealth, program level, complexity, student selectivity, faculty preparation, and public or private sponsorship—all factors that affect presidential authority and therefore the extent to which presidents can be effective. The historical generalizations that have already been made, and the analyses that follow, must therefore be applied with caution. In discussing the presidential role, this chapter focuses primarily upon institutions with at least moderate enrollments, multiple missions, and comprehensive programs. Such institutions enroll most of the students in higher education, but they probably represent less than half of the total number of the nation's colleges and universities.

The Presidential Role

There is no standard definition of the presidency nor description of the expectations placed on the performance of its incumbents. Presidents traditionally have no stated term of office but serve "at the pleasure" of a public or private board of lay trustees. Institutional statutes or bylaws commonly identify the president as the chief executive and administrative officer of the board as well as the chief academic officer of the faculty, and they delegate to the president all powers necessary to perform these functions. Statements of such sweeping authority may appear to the uninitiated to offer almost unlimited control over administrative and programmatic initiatives, but the reality of presidential influence is quite different. As one president has commented,

"regardless of what may appear in the charter and bylaws, the authority of the president, his real leadership, depends on the willingness of the campus to accept him as a leader. If it will not, well there are other ways for him to earn a living."[5]

There are many ways of looking at the components of the presidential role. One typical listing identifies and describes responsibilities inside and outside the institution. Inside the institution, presidents report they spend their time planning, budgeting, making personnel decisions, addressing academic issues, and dealing with students. Outside, they find themselves raising funds, building and managing board relations, working with community groups and representing the institution to external constituents, and meeting with policy makers.[6] They spend time not only constructing buildings and recruiting and hiring the brightest faculty but also upholding and embodying core academic values.

From a more analytical perspective, presidential tasks can be seen as comprising administrative, political, and entrepreneurial components.[7] As administrator, the president carries out the policies of the trustees, supervises subordinates, allocates resources, establishes systems of accountability, and performs functions similar to those found in any complex organization. As politician, the president must be responsive to the needs of various constituencies whose support is critical to the maintenance of his or her position. The interests of groups and subgroups of faculty, students, alumni, elected officials and others whose actions may constrain presidential discretion must be considered and courted, and the president must often form coalitions and propose compromises that will permit peace with progress. As entrepreneur, the president is expected to develop and exploit markets that offer necessary resources for the institution. Fund-raising is perhaps the most visible component of this role, but communicating with legislators in the statehouse or in Washington as well as interacting with corporate leaders, facilitating technology transfer agreements, supporting research incubator projects, securing licensing agreements, patents and intellectual property rights, overseeing auxiliary services (hospitals, residence halls, athletics), and maximizing endowment returns are important and time-consuming activities.

There may be agreement on the components of the role, but there is no model of the presidency that identifies priorities between them. Presidential activities are to a great extent contingent on the characteristics of their institutions, the inexorable ebb and flow of the

academic calendar, the emerging exigencies of the environment, and their own personal interests. Some presidents spend a majority of their time in fund-raising, public representation, and related resource acquisition activities. The typical president spends little time on academic matters.

The pace, intensity, and comprehensiveness of the presidency are in many ways comparable to those of managers and executives in other settings.[8] But there is a fundamental difference. On a college campus the exercise of authority in governance is not solely an administrative prerogative but, rather, a shared responsibility and joint effort that properly involves all important campus constituencies, with particular emphasis given to the participation of the faculty. The influential "Joint Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," for example, gives to the faculty the "primary responsibility" for "curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process." In such matters, the president is expected to "concur with the faculty judgment except in rare instances and for compelling reasons which should be stated in detail." If, as it is generally agreed, the central questions that define the essential nature of a college or university are "Who should teach?" "What should be taught?" and "Who shall be taught?" the normative precepts of the joint statement reserve these matters for the direct control of the faculty and not for either the president or the trustees.

The joint statement codified what had been true for many years at academically strong campuses and what was evolving as good practice at many others. In doing so, it highlighted the basic managerial dilemma of the president; essential questions of institutional "production" or service, which would be considered matters of managerial prerogative in other settings, were in colleges and universities to be decided by the faculty, who were "employees." In a business firm, the president or CEO is solely accountable to a board of directors. In higher education, the president functions between two layers of organizational operations—the trustees and the faculty—and is accountable to both. Conflict between constituent groups is common in many organizations, but its importance and consequences for the college president may be unique. In a business firm, presidential tenure is the sole prerogative of the board of directors. Within many colleges or universities, however, faculty (and often other groups as well) assert the right to participate in presidential selection and evaluation.

And, as many presidents have discovered, a faculty vote of no confidence often has the same power to end a presidential career as does a formal vote by the trustees to whom a president legally reports.[9]

The Impossible Job

There is no educational, social, or political consensus on exactly what higher education should be doing, what constituencies it should serve, and how it should serve them. At different times and on different campuses, emphasis has been given to transmitting values, to discovering knowledge, or to improving society. Some of the manifest purposes of higher education—the education and development of individual students, transmitting the culture and advancing society in general, providing for educational justice and social mobility, supporting intellectual and artistic creativity, and evaluating society so that it can become self-renewing[10]—enjoy general support as principles but become contentious as people attempt to describe how such vague ideals should best be implemented.

In addition to these obvious aims, colleges and universities have latent purposes as well. Among other things, they serve a custodial function by removing from parents the burden of controlling the behavior of young adults; they serve as a means of certifying to employers that graduates possess diligence and at least a modicum of intelligence; they socialize students and help them develop networks that will prove useful later in life; and they perpetuate the existing social order. These latter functions often conflict with the avowed purposes of colleges and universities, and although less often discussed, they are nonetheless important.

Goals of access, quality, and diversity, which are in conflict and which call for quite different institutional structures and responses, appear and then wane on the public policy agenda in cycles; the essential educational missions of teaching, research, and service compete for resources; and there is no rational way to assess the legitimacy of the competing and incompatible demands of many internal and external groups. Internally, faculty and administrators may disagree on appropriate levels of workload or salary, students and faculty may be in conflict about degree requirements or the academic calendar, alumni and trustees may debate the virtues of tradition and change, and students may disagree with administrative perspectives on offer-

ing "living wages" to hourly university workers, making progress on campus diversity, or purchasing athletic apparel from "sweatshops." Externally, institutions may find themselves arguing with local governments over the costs and availability of civic services and about taxes, with environmental groups about research on genetically modified foods, with neighborhood associations over off campus housing, with local businesses overselling competing services, and with local institutions overaccepting transfer courses.

Virtually all of these demands have some merit, and few can be dismissed out of hand. Yet there is no accepted criterion presidents can employ to judge the benefits of one course of action over another, and little assurance that they could implement their preferences even if they could specify them. Presidential authority is limited, complete understanding of the scope and complexity of the enterprise exceeds human cognitive capability, and unforeseen changes in demographic, political, and economic conditions often overwhelm campus plans. Presidents fortunate enough to preside during good times may reap the benefits of a munificent environment over which they have had no control, and even the incompetent may appear heroic; presidents during times of depression or social ferment may reap a whirlwind they did not sow.

The following sections consider five of the factors that limit presidential leadership: the constraints on presidential discretion; the unique characteristics of academic organizations; the problems of assessing effectiveness; privatization, market pressures, and competition; and the limitations of the presidential role.

Constraints on Presidential Discretion

Many factors increasingly limit presidential leadership.[11] Some of these result from interactions with other organizations, others arise within the institutions themselves. Environmental constraints include, among others, more federal and state controls; involvement by the courts in academic decision making; layers of governance and oversight, particularly in institutions that are part of statewide systems; few opportunities for growth and consequently for changes accompanying growth; questions about the mission and purpose of higher education; concerns about costs; issues of accountability and quality; and a growing competitive and winner-take-all mentality throughout society. Within institutions, constraints to leadership

arise due to involvement by faculties in academic and personnel decisions; faculty collective bargaining; goal ambiguity; fractionation of the campus into interest groups, leading to a lack of consensus and community; greater involvement by trustees into campus operations; and increased bureaucracy and specialization among campus administrators.

Statewide coordinating or governing boards in almost all states exercise increasing influence over matters reserved in the past for the campus, including such critical issues as faculty personnel policies, the creation of new academic degree programs, and the review of academic programs. They monitor institutions for program duplication, cost containment and tuition pricing, admissions policies, and transfer policies.

In addition, federal and state regulation and the courts limit presidential discretion. For instance, many state governments set the tuition levels of their public institutions, limiting ways in which institutions can generate revenue. Some states are exchanging one set of constraints for another by giving institutions freedom from certain state regulations in return for more and different performance measures. They are then tying public support to institutions' abilities to deliver on these accountability measures. Public officials, not academics, are deciding the essential performance indices, thus effectively setting institutional priorities. Other state executive or legislative agencies have become involved in facility review, administrative operations, technology purchasing, budgeting, and planning. The courts are involved in decisions such as allocating student activity fees and determining admission practice, particularly in light of affirmative action. The federal government threatens to get involved with institution policies regarding teacher preparation, early admission decisions, and college costs, to name a few hot federal topics. Although these intrusions focus mostly on public institutions, they may also, directly or indirectly, affect private institutions. As the locus of influence moves from the campus to the state, public sector presidents may find themselves becoming like middle managers in public agencies rather then campus leaders.

Accreditation — both regional, which reviews institutions, and specialized, which reviews particular academic programs and schools — influences institutional behavior, policies, and priorities. It places requirements on colleges and universities in the name of quality but, as acknowledged by some observers, may also be motivated by status,

privilege, or turf. Although accreditation is voluntary, most institutions cannot choose to go without it because federal funding, prestige, and the ability of campus graduates to work in some fields are often linked to positive reviews. It is not unheard of for a single college or university to be undertaking reviews for multiple accrediting organizations concurrently or consecutively. Institutions must respond to the often narrow and frequently competing demands of each to remain in good standing. For instance, accreditation can ask institutions to hire more full-time faculty in a particular area, alter curricula, or request more resources to support a particular discipline or service. One former university president called the plethora of accreditation "a straightjacket of many colors." [12] Even the head of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the oversight organization for higher education accreditation, recognizes that college and university leaders "want accreditation to cost less, take less time, and be more useful." [13]

In addition to these constraints, presidential influence is severly limited by both the paucity of resources available and the short-term difficulties in internally reallocating those resources that exist. Some intangible campus resources, such as institutional prestige and attractiveness to students and potential donors, are tied into a network of external relationships that are virtually impossible to change in the short run and difficult to change even over long periods of time. Internally, on most campuses the personnel complement is largely fixed through tenure and contractual provisions, program change is constrained by faculty interests and structures as well as by facility limitations, and yearly planning begins with the largest share of the budget precommitted.

Unique Organizational Factors

The administration of colleges and universities presents "a unique dualism in organizational structure," [14] with two structures existing in parallel. One is the conventional bureaucratic hierarchy responsive to the will of the trustees; the other is the structure through which faculty make decisions regarding those aspects of the institution over which they have professional jurisdiction. Trustees, who hold all legal authority, are primarily business executives who are more likely than the faculty to see the organization as comparable to a business firm

in its structure and authority pattern and to support top-down management. The president, viewed as their CEO, is expected to carry out their wishes and to be accountable for faculty performance. The faculty, on the other hand, expect to exercise primary authority over educational processes, and trustee or presidential intrusion into academic affairs is likely to be viewed as illegitimate.

The problems caused by dual control are exacerbated by the conflicting nature of administrative and professional authority. In most organizations, major goals and activities are subject to the bureaucratic authority of administrators, which arises from their position within the hierarchy and their legal right to give directives. The professional authority of faculty members, on the other hand, comes from their expertise and training.[15] Administrative and professional authority are not only different but also mutually inconsistent, driven by incompatible systems of authority. The president is imbedded in both authority systems, and therefore is continually subject to incompatible demands and behavioral expectations.[16] As the leader of a bureaucracy, the president is expected to establish goals, decide how they are to be achieved, scientifically organize the work of subordinates, plan, and monitor organizational functioning. As the head of a professional and collegial body, the president is expected to be the first among equals and to move the group toward consensus by listening, proposing, mediating, persuading, and influencing through information sharing and appeals to reason. The use of legal authority or status differentials, which is an important means of gaining influence in one system, is illegitimate and unacceptable in the other.

This dual system of authority is even further confused in larger and more complex institutions as schools or departments, and sometimes even certain within-department or cross-department research institutes and centers become the locus of decision making. These units may have little or no managerial culture[17] or, for the most part, any interest in university management. Thus, presidential influence over their activities decreases still further. The institution may become an academic holding company for a federation of quasi-autonomous subunits. Unable to influence the larger institution, faculty may retreat into the small subunit for which they feel affinity and from which they can defend their influence and status, and presidential influence over their activities decreases still further.

Problems of Assessing Effectiveness

The particular organizational complexities of colleges and universities, exacerbated by the conflicting demands of their environments and the difficulty of understanding exactly how they function, has led to their identification as "organized anarchies."[18] An organized anarchy exhibits three characteristics: problematic goals, an unclear technology, and fluid participation in decision-making processes.

The concept of organized anarchy suggests that colleges and universities often make choices through a process of "garbage-can decision making."[19] Problems, solutions, and participants form steady streams, flowing through the organization as if they were poured into a large can. When one participant tries to make a decision, others in the can may become attached to it because they are contemporaneous, even though they may not appear to be logically connected. For example, a presidential decision to build a faculty parking lot on some unused campus land would appear to be easily made if there were enough data on parking needs and available resources to perform a cost/benefit analysis. But such apparently simple decisions become incredibly complex as elements seen by the decision maker as extraneous (that is, "garbage") become attached to it. The biology department may argue that the lot will destroy adjacent trees and use the incident to press its continuing proposal for an institutional environmental master plan; a candidate for student government office may use the lot as a symbol of administration indifference to student needs and ask for student membership on the board of trustees; and a faculty member may link the cost to recent cuts in library budgets and use the incident as a forum for discussing educational priorities. Since "garbage" is in the eye of the beholder, it is possible for almost any two issues to be seen by someone on campus as connected and for any problem to become coupled to any decision. Making a decision on the parking lot may be impossible unless some way can be found of severing its connection to environmental plans, student trustees, and educational priorities.

Institutional outcomes may be a result of only modestly interdependent activities and are often neither planned nor predictable. For example, a campus may receive a federal research grant because a president gave additional resources to a department, because a grant proposal by chance was assigned to one reviewer rather than another, or because the granting agency was obliged to seek a geographic dis-

tribution in its awards. People in different parts of the organization may have access to information making any of these or other explanations plausible. Such ambiguity inhibits the making of valid inferences about cause and effect, and presidential learning becomes exceptionally difficult. Presidents may spend more time in sense making[20] and in engaging in activities that verify or enhance their status, than in decision making. The decoupling of choices and outcomes makes symbolic behavior particularly important.

The ambiguities of institutional life are intensified by the absence in colleges and universities of accepted and valid indicators of effectiveness. There are different definitions of effectiveness, all of which are difficult to measure; different audiences use different criteria to make the assessment; and achievement of effectiveness in one area of institutional functioning may inhibit or prevent it in another.[21] Without measures of organizational effectiveness, it becomes difficult for presidents—or others—to objectively assess presidential effectiveness. As a consequence, institutional outcomes in general, and perceptions of presidential success or failure in particular, may be "largely a matter of luck. . . . The president is always in a war, and whether he wins or loses bears only a marginal relation to his foresight, his wisdom, his charm, his blood pressure."[22] In the final analysis, "the effects that presidents can have on their campuses are confounded by the actions of other institutional leaders, changes in the environment, and internal organizational processes such as culture and history that are difficult to change. Presidents are major participants in institutional events that have important organizational consequences . . . but in many ways they follow common scripts and play roles that are independent of their own personal characteristics."[23]

Privatization, Market Pressures, and Competition

Trends in the privatization of higher education and the pull of the competitive marketplace add new challenges and exacerbate ongoing dilemmas for university presidents. Privatization, resulting from a shift in relying heavily on public or governmental funds to a greater dependence on private sources, is characterized in academe by the shift of academic research to marketable knowledge, growth of entrepreneurial goals for institutions, the outsourcing of services, and an increase in the students' burden to pay for more of their education through loans than grants. The result is a close relationship with a

marketplace that favors and encourages, as well as rewards, activities and research in certain market-sensitive fields, such as engineering, applied natural science, and agricultural science over other programs, such as humanities disciplines. It also promotes activities that have a market value resulting in more students — particularly those that can afford to pay the high tuition prices — new contracts and partnership agreements and enhanced research programs.[24]

Administrators may have little option except to respond to the marketplace, for if their institution does not react effectively others — both traditional universities as well as nontraditional providers — are poised to do so. As a result of privatization and market pressures, the ability to compete — for students, resources, faculty, and prestige — in turn, becomes a strong priority. Institutions unable to be competitive may face increasingly difficult circumstances as public support does not keep pace with institutional need, students become more educated consumers, and technology and new entrants into higher education widen the field of competitors. Colleges and universities may pursue certain revenue-generating strategies over other types of activities. The downside of pursuing market goals without appropriately balancing the public good is that institutions face the threat of losing their privileged place in American society as they come to resemble other organizations. Birnbaum notes, "Our narratives once told of education for democracy, for social justice, for the whole person, for the perpetuation of civilization. That is what people came to believe colleges and universities did, and that is why we enjoyed such support and admiration. Our narratives now increasingly talk about being engines of the economy. We are, of course, but I don't believe that a utilitarian narrative alone excites the imagination of the public, or commits faculty, staff or administrators to their institutions and its success, or connects the university to our deepest human needs."[25] Privatization and the rise of the market also have the potential to change internal institutional dynamics. Power may shift even further away from the administrative center to departments, centers, and units able to generate revenue. Because of their newfound economic clout, these units in turn may demand greater autonomy from central oversight, decide to contribute less to university-wide activities and priorities, and even relocate themselves physically in their own new buildings or a separate campus. Look at the behavior of some business schools for examples.

Limitations of the Presidential Role

Much of the literature on the presidential role comes from presidents themselves. There is a tendency by some to celebrate their own accomplishments, but there is often a strong undercurrent of despair or anger along with resignation to the fact that, in the long run, their success or failure may be due more to the vagaries of luck and history than to their own dedication and skill. Presidents are subject to role overload and role ambiguity, as they respond both to their own personal interpretations of their roles and to the legitimate demands of many groups.

One consequence of multiple and conflicting roles is that any actions by a president are likely to be criticized by someone. For former University of Michigan James Duderstadt, the ongoing attacks conjured images of the ruthlessness of the Wild West: "The president is expected to be the defender of the faith, both of the institution itself and the academic values so important to the university. I sometimes thought of this latter role as roughly akin to that of a tired, old sheriff in a frontier western town. Every day I would have to drag my bruised, wounded carcass out of bed, strap on my guns, and go out into the main street to face whatever gunslingers had riden in to shoot up the town that day. Sometimes these were politicians; other times the media; still other times various special interest groups on campus; even occasionally other university leaders such as deans or regents."[26] The pace, the unrelenting pressure, and the marginal membership of presidents in conflicting groups affect their health, both physical and mental. Every decision will have its personal costs. And private time for family or recreation will be scarce.

The popular view of the role may identify the president as a larger-than-life, heroic leader, whose wise decisions and forceful administration solve problems and advance the institution's fortunes. But in fact, presidential decisions may have little effect on disparate organizational subsystems; changes in the environment may often overpower any internal changes; and administrative structures and processes of organization and control are relatively weak vis-à-vis the autonomy of professional participants. A president can attend to only a small number of matters, but there is no way of knowing beforehand (or often even afterward, for that matter) whether these are the most important matters. These problems led Michael Cohen and James March to call the presidency an illusion: "Important aspects

of the role seem to disappear on close examination. Compared to the heroic expectations he and others might have, the president has modest control over the events of college life. The contributions he makes can easily be swamped by outside events or the diffuse quality of university decision making."[27] These limits on influence and the ambiguities of purpose, power, experience, and success make it difficult for presidents to learn what works.

If the institution has ambiguous and multiple purposes and lacks a sense of shared direction, how can presidents justify their actions or know if they have been successful? If influence is dispersed throughout the institution and decentralized, how can presidents know how much power they have or what they can or cannot do? If what happens on a campus depends as much on the actions of others and on environmental pressures as it does on presidential behavior, what can presidents accurately learn from their experiences? And if presidents have confirmed their success earlier in their careers because they have been promoted, how can they assess their present success when promotion is no longer possible?

Behavioral and Cognitive Strategies

Survival requires the development of coping mechanisms that help the organization and the people within it make sense of the ambiguities of their daily lives. Colleges and universities have evolved ways of responding to the difficulties caused by their complex environmental relationships, inchoate influence patterns, and inability to rationalize their technology. For example, institutions meet the conflicting demands of interest groups by decentralizing and permitting subunits to operate in a quasi-autonomous fashion. Subunits can then meet specific needs, but the cost is high: presidential authority is diminished, it becomes almost impossible to coordinate activities, and maintaining a sense of coherence and common purpose is extremely difficult.

Institutions may attempt to cope with the difficulty of assessing effectiveness by publicly focusing attention on inputs (such as percentage of faculty with doctorates) and activities (such as the number of students studying aboard) rather than outputs (how much a student has learned). Even with calls for public accountability, increased rigor of accreditation reviews, and the assessment movement, insti-

tutions, for the most part, discourage inspection. Instead they rely on institutional reputation and tradition or, when pressed, use measures that portray them most positively rather than offer objective evaluation. Within this organizational ambiguity, with conflicting authority structures, multiple social systems, and contested goals, presidents are expected to provide leadership, direction, coherence, and progress in an organization.

Many suggestions have been offered to make the presidential job more doable. One common proposal is to strenghten the presidency through selecting better presidents. It assumes (although without supporting data) that today's presidents do not have the same characteristics of courage and decisiveness as presidents of the past. For instance, the title of a report from the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) of Colleges and Universities' Commission on the Academic Presidency boldly calls for "stronger leadership for tougher times."[28] The inference is that institutions need strong presidential leaders. This wish, however, can be a slippery slope as expectations for leaders reach new heights to which few can attain. Management scholar Henry Mintzberg wrote: "We seem to be moving beyond leaders who merely lead; today heroes save. Soon heroes will only save; then gods will redeem. We keep upping the ante. . . ."[29] The obvious solution is for presidential search committees to seek stronger and more decisive candidates. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the presidency could be strengthened by increasing the legal authority of the position as well as curtailing the influence of other stakeholders and clarifying and delimiting their roles in shared governance. If one of the causes of presidential weakness is the anarchical nature of the organization, then a possible solution is to increase the use of rational processes—rather than political or symbolic processes—in institutional decision making. But the many attempts to do so through imposing management systems, budgeting and planning processes, restructuring and re-engineering initiatives, and performance measures have by and large not had the desired and expected effects.[30] In many cases, the processes set up to respond to the problems have only exacerbated them.

It has also been suggested that presidential effectiveness might be improved if trustee boards provided more support to their presidents, giving them leadership positions on the board, encouraging faculty support for them, resisting attempts to involve boards in administration, and using presidents as their sole conduit into the ad-

ministrative structure.[31] The frantic pace of presidential life has also been identified as a major constraint upon presidential effectiveness, and it has been suggested that providing presidents with more personal assistance would free their time for contemplation and long-term planning. This suggestion almost always overlooks the likelihood that presidents do not become busy people but rather that busy people become presidents. Presidents complain about lack of time for contemplation, but there is no reason to believe that if they had more free time they would use it for that purpose.

There is no dearth of advice about how to be a successful president. Some authorities suggest that presidents remain distant, others that they be intimately involved with constituents; that they focus on resource acquisition or that they focus on academic matters; that they stress accountability or that they foster creativity; that they set goals or that they help others achieve their own goals. The proposals are inconsistent, and their behavioral implications are unclear. Nevertheless, the following section suggests some presidential administrative strategies that might increase their effectiveness and improve their institutions.[32] It also examines some of the cognitive and symbolic strategies that permit presidents and institutions to cope with the discrepancies between authority and responsibility, expectations and achievement. Finally, it considers the possibility that, because of certain characteristics of colleges and universities, a weak presidency may have an important organizational function.

Successful Administrative Strategies

Successful presidents are likely to be realists rather than idealists. They accept a decentralized structure, conflicting authority systems, and loose coupling as inherent organizational characteristics and try to work within these constraints. They know that essential institutional functions are likely to continue to operate, even in the absence of presidential direction, because of ongoing administrative systems and the largely autonomous activities of professional faculties. In many ways, the organization works as a cybernetic system in which negative feedback serves to activate processes that maintain the institution's current level of functioning.[33] Presidents appreciate that some of their energy will be occupied with the day-to-day activities of monitoring these processes and with identifying and attending to institutional weaknesses and problems.

However, presidents also recognize that they can have an impact on the institution if they focus on a few limited objectives or programs and devote extraordinary energy to them. Presidents can be effective even in areas such as curriculum in which administrative influence is traditionally weak if they are willing to accept the inevitable cost of other opportunities forgone. Presidents understand that all change is not their personal responsibility as many new efforts and modifications will occur because of the leadership and initiative of faculty and staff throughout the institution, often through ongoing processes. Presidents who try to do too many things, either on their own initiative or in response to perceived environmental demands, mostly end up accomplishing none of them.

Effective presidents understand the culture of their institution and the symbolic aspects of their positions. Recognizing that their effectiveness as leaders depends upon the willingness of highly trained professionals to be followers, they avoid actions that would violate cultural and academic norms and thereby diminish their own status. Effective presidents spend a great deal of time in understanding their institutional culture. They go out of their way to walk around their campuses to see and be seen, to confer with other formal and informal campus leaders for opinions and advice, to learn institutional histories, and to understand the expectations others have of presidential behavior. They also recognize that as a symbolic leader they must consistently articulate the core values of the institution and relate them to all aspects of institutional life in order to sustain and reinvigorate the myths that create a common reality. Management skills may be a necessary, but usually not a sufficient, concomitant of presidential success. For example, Ellen Chaffee has suggested that presidents who focus on resource acquisition strategies alone to resolve fiscal crises are not as successful as those who combine them with interpretative strategies that change campus perceptions and attitudes.[34]

Since centralized control cannot be achieved in complex, nonlinear, social systems, effective presidents realize that prevention of error is not possible. They therefore emphasize the design of systems to detect error and to make institutional processes self-correcting. They support the collection, analysis, and public dissemination of data on aspects of institutional functioning, data that permit interest groups to monitor the institution. Organizational stability is increased as institutional components pay attention to different aspects of the environment and serve as controls and checks on each other's activities.

The effectiveness of a free flow of information is increased when presidents support and publicly articulate the value of open communication and a will to tolerate and encourage, rather than to punish, disagreement.

Effective presidents recognize that the inherent specialization and fractionation essential to the maintenance of quality and responsiveness must be coordinated unobtrusively in order to avoid alienation. They do this in part by establishing formal opportunities for interaction, and they emphasize forums such as senates, cabinets, retreats, and task forces that bring together persons representing different constituencies and different institutional levels. Senate presidents who sit on administrative councils, deans who attend senate meetings, and students, faculty, and administrators who serve on joint committees interact in ways that make their perceptions and interests more consistent.

Presidential effectiveness is based as much upon influence as upon authority, and influence in an academic institution depends upon mutual and reciprocal processes of social exchange. Effective presidents influence others by allowing themselves to be influenced. This requires that presidents listen carefully, which might be difficult for presidents who believe that the proper role of leaders is to tell others what to do. Academic management is not, as Mintzberg suggests, "management by barking around." [35]

Cognitive and Symbolic Strategies

Individuals typically become presidents after successful performance in a series of related positions of increasing responsibility. One reason for considering the presidency an impossible job is the extensive criticism by reputable sources directed at the presumably failing efforts of people so previously accomplished. Presidents rely upon unconscious cognitive strategies to reconcile this discrepancy between past achievement and present criticism. They see themselves as successful even as others see them as failing.

Presidents talk easily about the deficiencies of their confreres, but when asked about their own performance, self-assessments are almost uniformly positive. In one study, presidents rated the quality of their own "institutional leadership" as seventy-seven on a hundred-point scale, while they rated that of the "average president" as sixty-six and their predecessor as only fifty-two. [36] They also indicated that

the quality of their own campus had improved on each of seven dimensions since they became president, a finding contradicted by a host of recent reports critical of American higher education. Presidents build schemas of effectiveness based upon previous career success; when they encounter ambiguous situations, they are likely to anticipate, and therefore to observe, successful outcomes and to attribute these to their own efforts. When presidents were asked to identify a recent event that had positive outcomes on their campus, for example, 74 percent indicated that they had initiated it. But when asked to identify an event with a negative outcome, only 14 percent accepted responsibility. There seems to be evidence of a success bias that leads these successful people to believe that they have been responsible for successful outcomes, and that permits them to disassociate themselves from failure. In a recent study of the performance of thirty-two college presidents, all but one considered themselves successful, even though a quarter of them had lost sufficient constituent support to be identified by the researcher as having been a failure at the job.[37]

Academic presidents occupy a prestigious position in American life. They are major figures in their communities, sought after as speakers for local functions, and interviewed by the media. They are at the core of impressive academic ceremonies, they have the highest salaries and most significant perquisites a campus has to offer (certain athletic coaches excluded), and they are surrounded by respectful aides and by associates with vested interests in maintaining a successful presidency.

The Latent Organizational Functions
of Impossibility

It may be so vital for symbolic reasons for organizational members to believe that their leaders are important that both leaders and followers may cope with the reality of weak presidential influence by constructing an illusion of their power. We have developed highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership—what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have upon our lives. It amounts to what might be considered a faith in the potential if not in the actual efficacy of those individuals.[38]

In many situations, presidential leadership may not be real but, rather, a social attribution, a result of the tendency of campus con-

stituents to assign to a president the responsibility for unusual institutional outcomes because the president fills a role identified as a leader, because presidents are visible and prominent, because presidents spend a great deal of time doing leaderlike things (such as engaging in ceremonial and symbolic activities), and because we all have the need to believe in the effectiveness of individual control. Leaders are people believed by followers to have caused events. "Successful leaders," says Jeffrey Pfeffer, "are those who can separate themselves from organizational failures and associate themselves with organizational successes."[39]

In organizations with clear goals, understood technologies, and hierarchical power structures, illusionary leadership may be dysfunctional. In such institutions, increasing the authority of competent leaders would reduce the extent to which their job might be thought of as impossible and would thereby increase organizational effectiveness. But when these organizational characteristics are not present, it is highly questionable whether increasing presidential power would yield positive outcomes. It may even be that the very factors responsible for the impossibility of the presidential role are also important components of organizational effectiveness and that action taken to strengthen the one would weaken the other. Higher education may be effective not despite its arational characteristics but because of them.

While presidents may rail against the frustrations of their job, they assumed their positions aware of the constraints they would face. Some may have had egocentric motives, but for most a natural interest in power, money, and prestige is strongly tempered by a dedication to the enduring values of education and a commitment to serve the interests of their institutions. If the presidency had greater authority than it does, it might attract to it a different kind of person, one perhaps less committed to the concept of leader as institutional servant and more to the concept of leader as institutional master. It might be that if presidents had greater authority they might enjoy it more, but in Harold Stoke's thoughtful aphorism, "those who enjoy it are not very successful, and those who are successful are not very happy. . . . Those who enjoy exercising power shouldn't have it, and those who should exercise it are not likely to enjoy it."[40]

The collegial traditions of higher education suggest that presidential vacancies are filled by faculty who are selected by their colleagues, serve them in leadership roles for limited terms, and then return to their first love—teaching and research. While this may be more a

fond fantasy than an established fact, it reflects the normative sense among many academics that, while college teaching may be a profession, high administrative office is only one of several temporary roles within it. The critical difference is between seeing the presidency as a profession and seeing it as a role. Incumbents who view the presidency as a profession are likely to see the maintenance of their position as a major objective. Such presidents "simplify their task by making only one calculation—calculating what is contributory to the welfare of the president, given the incentives to do so in the presence of job insecurity on the one hand and the impossibility of a precise definition of the institution's general welfare on the other."[41] In contrast, incumbents who see the presidency as a role can give primary attention to the needs of the institution rather than of themselves. This makes it possible for them to accept that, sometimes, the greatest service a president can perform is to leave office, because "the survival of the president is not the goal. The leader is temporary and, if necessary, expendable in service to the potential value of the institution."[42] Presidents who view their obligations as part of a role are able to enjoy the roller coaster of the presidency during its initial phases and then leave without regret. They are able to see themselves as an important but replaceable component in a large, cybernetic organization, and they are able to "cope by perceiving exit as a symbolic, political act of a pluralistic democratic organization, not as a threat to managerial competence."[43]

Some presidents never come to terms with the impossible nature of their jobs. Frustrated in their attempts to have the influence they desire, they may eventually find solace in cognitive distortions that lead them to see what they wish to see. Others may follow the route of the zealot, redoubling their efforts as they lose sight of their goals. One consequence of these behaviors is to create self-fulfilling prophesies: aggressive administrative action leads to resistance, which in turn becomes the justification for still more assertive presidential behavior. Other presidents make peace with their positions by bringing to it an understanding of the peculiar nature of their organizations and of their roles within them. Their goal is a peaceful balance of institutional interests within which they can make marginal improvements in a limited number of areas. They reconcile themselves to the possibility of future failure by acknowledging the role played by uncontrollable external sources, recognizing that some of what happens to them—both good and bad—may be a product of luck. Presi-

dential roles may be as much a product of social attributions as a set of desirable behaviors. By creating a role that we declare will provide leadership to an organization, we construct the attribution that organizational effects are due to the leader's behavior. This allows us to simplify and make sense of complex organizational processes that would otherwise be impossible to comprehend.[44] It is perhaps as sensible to say that successful organizational events cause effective presidents as it is to say that effective presidents cause successful events.

One of the reasons that colleges and universities have been so successful is that, as their environments have become more complex, they have created decentralized, flexible, and only moderately interdependent structures, which have been effective in responding to environmental change. This may make coordination by the president exceptionally difficult, but the same forces that limit presidential authority may also make these organizations exceptionally adaptable and stable. The paradox of an institution that gives precedence to professional, rather than administrative, authority is that management weakness may be a significant source of organizational strength.

Calls for strengthening the presidency abound, but they are commonly grounded in a view of presidential power based more on hope than on experience. The report of a comprehensive five-year study of academic leadership reached a conclusion about the importance of presidents that, if less heroic than the views of many, may be more realistic:

> Presidents may be important in some situations, but the performance of colleges may usually be less dependent upon presidential leadership than most of us care to believe. Most college presidents do the right things, and do things right most of the time. It is possible that college leaders can become marginally more effective. But those who seek major changes in the ways presidents behave, or believe that such changes will make major differences on our campuses, are likely to be disappointed. . . . Good presidents come to their positions with useful competencies, integrity, faith in their colleagues, and a firm belief that by listening carefully and working together they can all do well. In a turbulent and uncertain world, what happens after that is as much in the laps of the gods as in the hands of the president.[45]

NOTES

This chapter is a revised version of Robert Birnbaum, "Responsibility without Authority: The Impossible Job of the College President," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research,* ed. John C. Smart, vol. 5 (New York: Agathon, 1989).

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