

The Hersh Resignation-
Dropped Out or Kicked Out?:
The Opinions of Students, Faculty, and
the Mass Media

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Education 400

Background

- **Richard Hersh's Background**

- Held a range of positions at various institutions

- President Hobart and William Smith Colleges (Geneva, NY) 1991-1999

- **Hersh Presidency at Trinity**

- Selected by search committee of trustees, faculty, students and staff as "the ideal candidate to lead Trinity College" (Trinity Press Release, 2002)

- April 1, 2002- Assumed office as 19th president of Trinity College

- Agenda: focus on internal problems (curriculum review, alcohol abuse, and diversity issues)

Fifteen Months Later...

- **Resignation**
 - June 26, 2003
- **Importance of Research:**
 - Other recent resignations
 - Historians look at facts, I looked at opinions of people affected
- **Research Question:**
 - According to President Hersh, why did he resign from Trinity College?
 - Do students, faculty, and the mass media explain the cause of his resignation in the same way?

Thesis: A Range of Opinions

- **President Hersh**
 - Conflicts with students and faculty over issues became more of a focus than his agenda for the school
- **Student, Faculty & Mass Media Explanations:**
 - **Initially:** divergence between groups
 - Students: Policy related issues led to resignation
 - Faculty: Political process led to resignation
 - Mass Media: Cultural misfit
 - **When prompted:** convergence of opinions to 3 main causes
 - Leadership style and approach to issues didn't fit Trinity's culture
 - All knowing from the beginning, didn't get to know Trinity
 - Lost support of students, parents, faculty, administration, & trustees

Hersh's Own Opinion

- Success in terms of:
 - campus introspection, application numbers, increased fundraising, reduction of budgets, faculty retreat, progress with issues of racism, strengthening urban program
- “But, not all has gone well”
 - “A significant number of faculty and students have experienced [his] leadership style in a way that has resulted in [his] becoming too much the focus of attention”

What about everyone else?

- **Random Selection of student and faculty interviews**
 - 7 students from Sophomore, Junior, & Senior classes
 - 7 faculty members
- **Interview Questions:**
 - Why did President Hersh resign?
 - Prompted by topics of leadership style, alcohol policies, campus racism, finances, curricular review and specific actions
- **Mass Media:**
 - Trinity Tripod
 - Journal of Higher Education
 - Hartford Courant

Students

- Initial Response:
 - Policy related issues
 - “people didn’t like his policies, people didn’t like what he was doing for the campus”
- When prompted:
 - Leadership style- 100% responded yes
 - Style: “disagreeable”, “didn’t listen”, “opinionated”, “arrogant”
 - Alcohol policies- 86% responded yes
 - Approach to dealing with problems- forced policies
 - Played a significant role in shutting down a fraternity & arresting 40 students from a local bar

Students continued...

- Other Topics: majority said no or didn't know
- Actions:
 - "he came in here too quickly and made too large [of] decisions"
 - Result of snowballing of actions starting from the beginning along with a personality and style that clashed with Trinity

Faculty

- **Initial Response:**
 - Political process led to resignation
 - Lost support of students, faculty, trustees
 - “virtually everyone pulled off”
- **When Prompted:**
 - **Leadership style-** 100% responded yes
 - Leadership Style: described in negative terms
 - “leadership style didn’t jive with the position that he held of president”

Faculty continued...

- **Alcohol policies**- 71% responded yes
 - The way he handled the policies antagonized student body
 - "...he said that he was willing to empower students to take control of their party life and their alcohol consumption. But if they couldn't handle it, he would step in..."
- **Actions:**
 - Mishandled evaluation of the Dean of Faculty
 - Voiced strong opinions in articles in Courant and Tripod
 - Result of snowballing of actions starting from the beginning which were expressed in final meetings

Mass Media

- **Trinity Tripod**- "The Beginning of the End"
 - Editorial by Editor-in-Chief (Abigail Thomas)- initiated discussions on and off campus of problems that had existed all along
 - "Failure as our president":
 - 3 articles in Courant with "dismissive and disparaging comments about the Trinity community"
 - Accused Trinity parents of "not fulfilling their duties" of setting clear rules for their children
 - Exaggerated racial issues
 - Leadership style: "moralistic", "paternalistic", "belittling" of students and faculty
 - Never took the time to understand Trinity

Mass Media- A Cultural Misfit?

- **Leadership style:**
 - Described in negative terms
 - “style that doesn’t historically fly in collegiate, collaborative halls of higher learning” (HC)
- **Policy Issues:**
 - focused on alcohol abuse, campus racism, fraternity behavior (J of HE)
- **Political Process:**
 - relationship with students and faculty was falling apart

Other Research

- Rita Bornstein (Journal of Higher Education: Nov. 2003)
- 6 threats to success of presidents:
 1. Cultural misfit- mismatch between president's style and the culture of the institution
 2. Grandiosity- experience causes feelings of expertise
 3. Erosion of social capital- loss of support by individuals at institution
 4. Managerial incompetence
 5. Inattentiveness
 6. Misconduct

Conclusions

- **President Hersh**- Conflicts with students and faculty over issues became more of a focus than his agenda for the school
- **Comparison**- when given time for introspection and prompted with certain topics and questions:
 - Agreement with Hersh- **Cultural misfit**- style and approach to issues didn't fit Trinity's culture
 - New Ideas:
 - **Grandiosity**- All knowing from the beginning, didn't get to know Trinity
 - **Erosion of social capital**- lost support of students, parents, faculty, administration, & trustees