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Stephen J. Nelson

Bridgewater State College, s4nelson@bridgew.edu

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Faculty in Print

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Balance Wheels: College Presidents in the Crucible of the 1960s and the Contests of Today

Stephen J. Nelson

No times are easy times for college presidents. The responsibilities and duty expected of those who mount the pulpit of the presidency create unending, seemingly infinite challenges. College presidents are supposed to lead in the grandest, most magnificent fashion. Their conduct is measured by superhuman standards. However, all times are not equal. Many eras have confronted presidents with greater, at times overwhelming trials. In such periods, roadblocks to even the most minimal, marginal successes are profoundly daunting, sometimes almost impossible to overcome.

Such was the decade of the 1960s and early 1970s. Many college presidents already in office found themselves thrust willy-nilly into the controversial and contentious public eye of the times. Events often wheeled out of control. Even when events were not fully out of control, what unfolded readily appeared and felt that way. No matter how much they wished otherwise, few presidential leaders had the ability or the luxury to find places to hide.

Many of the seminal issues born in the 1960s and 1970s have not only refused to go away but linger in more insidious guises. Grand aspirations that intransigent problems could be solved have not

materialized. Not least, this has been the result because there is little or no unanimity about what the problems are. Issues and concerns bearing on principles essential to the well-being of the academy were either kicked down the road to presidents of the later twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, or simply proved to be too large, much too engrained, to be readily “solved.”

We know the litany: equal opportunity and affirmative action (including what will eventually be its endgame) and what to do about socioeconomic factors that limit access, equity, and equality; the never-ending struggle of stewardship and funding of colleges and universities, difficult in even the best economic and financial times and simply tougher in

times like the recession of the early 1970s, the post-September 11 recession, and the 2008 Great Recession of the decade just ended; ideological battles and critics demanding the curricula of their dreams, professors with the correct, politic pedigrees, and ethical and political positions, which, if in place, would run counter to the freedom of inquiry and research that must be the foundation of the university.

College presidents have always been protean figures. This stature was a terribly needed quality in the 1960s and 70s. Presidents who survived and those who not only survived but actually thrived in those tumultuous times were the most versatile, the ones with the most moxie among their colleagues. In many cases presidential colleagues looked to the true pathfinders—Robben Fleming at Wisconsin (1964–68) and Michigan (1968–78), Father Theodore Hesburgh at Notre Dame (1952–87), John Kemeny at Dartmouth (1970–81), Richard Lyman at Stanford (1970–80), and Grayson Kirk at Columbia (1953–68)—to lead the way, to serve the greater good, even if unintentionally by providing cover and being the public targets that distracted attention and opinionated criticism away from others.

In any foreseeable future the men and women (the breaking of the gender barrier to college presidencies is a major breakthrough of the last fifty years) who ascend to the office of the presidency will have to be equally protean when compared to their 1960s predecessors, if not more so. Again, the more things change, the more they stay the same. This prospect is no different from that of Charles William Eliot’s classic characterization in 1909. Upon his retirement from forty years in office at Harvard, Eliot, comparing leaders in other professions to college presidents, concluded simply that there “is no equal in the world.”

The complexities of the college presidency and of the expectations that its multifaceted and competing constituencies bear are bottomless. This is as it ever has been. The presidents who got through the 1960s and 70s most successfully were those who managed to steer a middle course. These presidents were the ones able to moderate, to modulate, and to serve as interlocutors in the center of warring and protesting parties operating from polarized silos, their nativist cruxes well outside the mainstream of what the academy demands.

Presidents who honor most fully their esteemed office understand that the pathway of their individual institution, as well as the more important duty of stewardship for the future of the academy, is not about them. They recognize that while their leadership is critical, the presidency demands transcendent points of view. Presidents always stand on the

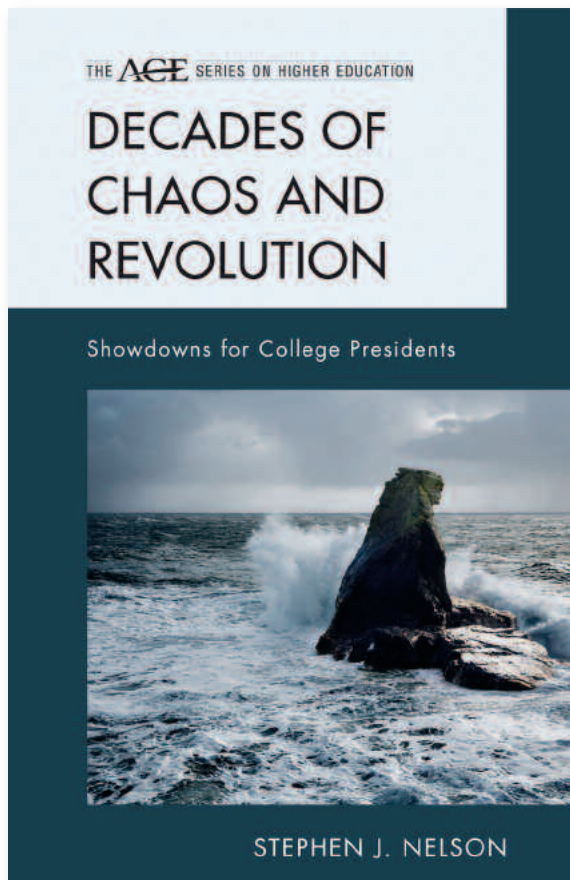
shoulders of others. They must embrace a fundamental duty to the legacy of their institution, and foster the greater good of the academy. Presidents in the 1960s who fulfilled these duties did so by maintaining a compass for themselves and by convincing even the most disagreeable parties around them of the necessity of an unwavering commitment to the commonweal. What is required of presidents is to embody what Richard Hofstadter characterized in 1968 as a university “best minister[ing] to society’s needs not alone through its mundane services but through the far more important office of becoming an *intellectual and spiritual balance wheel*.”

But herein lies a great paradox of the college presidency. We expect and desire leaders who will get out front, be courageous, and push worry about public approval and the predilections

of the masses to the back burner. We don’t applaud leading in the middle. We fail to appreciate what it takes for leaders to locate and hold the center. We want our college and university presidents, more so than leaders in politics, the social and cultural arena, and the corporate and business world to be aggressive leaders, to be powerful amid competing interests and warring parties, and to stand on principles over parochial interests. But can we have it both ways?

Max Weber provides a label for the poles of the leadership conundrum college presidents confront. In “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), Weber concocts two countervailing ideals that leaders embrace: the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of ultimate ends. He distinguishes leaders, as well as citizens, who “act from a sense of practical consequence and those who act from higher conviction, regardless of consequences.” Even though these two are opposed, the “true calling of politics,” clearly including politics as played out by presidents and in college and university communities, “requires a union of the two.” The problem with either pole, absent a dose of the other, is that “on its own, the ethic of responsibility can become a devotion to technically correct procedure, while the ethic of ultimate ends can become fanaticism.” Neither side can be said to possess what Weber calls a “leader’s personality.” That is, “responsibility without conviction is weak, but it is sane. Conviction without responsibility” can in some cases become “raving mad.”

Presidents who were distinguished in the tumultuous times of the 1960s and 70s and their successors, who have successfully addressed the legacies left to them from that era, are those who merge an ethic of responsibility with





Columbia University Presidents Grayson Kirk and Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 1953; Courtesy of University Archives, Columbia University in the City of New York.

a concern for “ultimate ends.” The judicious balance of responsibility and conviction is the prescription to pave a middle road and to hack out a center that can hold. In the face of threats from warring parties, this is the perfect platform from which to contend with the ideological forces that hammer away from within and without the gates of the university.

Place under the microscope any president you wish from the days of the 1960s and 70s and any time since, and judge them by the criteria of whether and to what degree they juggled responsibility and conviction. The result will speak volumes about their stature and contributions. Whatever the talents and background prior to assuming the presidency, more than anything else we need college presidents who can lead from responsibility and conviction. Among other things, this fiber is a decisive antidote for the ever-present seductions of fads and shibboleths.

The eras of the university when the stakes have been most high are also the times when the risks and rewards, coupled with failures and successes, are greatest for presidents. The stage is grand, the klieg lights are on. But any pratfalls are there for all to see. The 1960s and early 70s were a profoundly difficult time for presidents, and colleges and universities. The convictions, the tactics designed to make the university a proxy in cultural and political wars, and the outsized rhetoric of university critics were at all-time highs. Presidents could not simply argue from the standpoint of responsibility. They could no longer effectively resort to traditional arguments based on simple authority urging constituents, supporters, and critics alike to be responsible in actions, be civil in protests, and be accountable as citizens of the community. Presidents had to show their beliefs, tote out the convictions of their office, and be utterly determined to establish their duty to the office and to the foundation of the university.

The 1960s and early 1970s was an era when fighting fire with fire was frequently the only and best possible presidential course of action. But even in such moments the best presidents did so with an august blend of responsibility and conviction that the opposition lacked. Viewed optimistically, the actions of these presidents—giants of their era—in those battles, firmly etched belief in critical matters under significant siege: liberal education, the place of democratic principles in the academy and the nation, and a university able to be the university even in the face of previously unimagined threats. That does not mean that all problems and all threats were permanently cast aside. It does mean that the realistic risk of erosion on all those fronts—liberal education and imagination, freedom in a democracy, and the core beliefs of the academy—was slowed if not halted.

Presidents in those days of the 1960s to the mid-1970s had no choice but to confront the demands of chaotic and revolutionary battles inside and outside the gates. Their successors, and we, inherit the legacy they created out of the crucibles of triumph and disaster that marked the era. We cannot know the arc of history that will mark the future of the college presidency and the academy. But throughout history, college presidents have fought for the survival of their colleges and universities. They have solidified the office of president as a persistently revered platform and pulpit and their work will indisputably determine the soul of the university.



*Stephen J. Nelson is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Bridgewater State and Senior Scholar with the Leadership Alliance at Brown University. He is author of *Leaders in the Crossroads: Success and Failure in the College Presidency* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).*