

Authority in a University

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55

I

Universities and colleges, like cathedrals and parliaments, are a product of the Middle Ages. The Greeks and Romans had no universities in the sense in which the word has been used for the past seven or eight centuries. They did have higher education, but the terms may not be used synonymously. Though their instruction in law, philosophy, and rhetoric would be hard to surpass, it was not organized into permanent institutions of learning. Only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did the forms and features of organized education with which we are somewhat familiar emerge. In these matters we are the heirs and successors, not of Athens and Alexandria, but of Paris and Bologna.¹

The contrast between the earliest universities and those of today is highly significant. Throughout the period of its origins, the medieval university had no libraries, laboratories, museums, endowments, or buildings of its own; it could never have met the requirements of an accrediting body. The medieval university had no board of trustees; it published no catalogue; it had no student organizations, except as far as the university itself was fundamentally an organization of students; it had no college newspaper, no football team, none of those "outside activities" which are the chief excuse for "inside inactivity" in the American university today.²

Important as these differences are, the fact remains that the universities and colleges of the last half of the twentieth century are the lineal descendants of medieval Paris and Bologna. They are "the rock whence [we] are hewn, . . . the hole of the pit whence [we] are digged." The fundamental organization is quite similar; the historical continuity is uninterrupted.

The university has always been a subject of discussion and frequently of controversy. In more recent years greater demands have been made on it by

larger and larger segments of society. Ralph McGill has written, "We cannot, anymore than past generations, see the fact of the future, but we know that written across it is the word Education."³

Universities will shape and be shaped by our national future. "The ivy walls have been breached." It is no longer possible to consider the problems of the campus apart from the problems of society in general. In the decades ahead, each college and university will be expected, as in the past, to advance and disseminate knowledge. In addition, each institution will be confronted with demands for assistance from many groups within the community. Adults will look to these institutions for opportunity to continue and improve their education. Business interests will look to these same institutions for the specialized training of employees, for technical advice in many fields, and for creative research. Government will contract for an increasing amount of research, for the training of young men approaching military service, for technical assistance in public projects at home and abroad, and for the support and augmentation of programs and institutions of higher learning in developing countries.⁴

The next few years will place unparalleled demands on the more than 2,000 American colleges and universities for adaptability, expansibility, and creativity. If these demands are to be met, as they must be, both administration and faculty must find improved ways of enlisting all members of the organization — trustees, academic and administrative officers, faculty members, professional service personnel, and students — in a dynamically improving *collaborative* enterprise. That effort must be equal to the task of repudiating inflexible practices, whether they concern the size of the institution or its classes, the traditional disciplines of knowledge, or established notions about the institution's constituency.⁵

II

There are those who are concerned that the contemporary university can neither govern nor restructure itself so as to be responsive to these rapidly changing conditions. Irving Kristal has "the gravest doubts that, out of all the current agitation for a 'restructuring' of the university, very much substance will come." The faculty controls educational functions and defines educational purposes, but "professors are a class with a vested interest in, and ideological commitment to, this status quo broadly defined. . . . Nor is the administration going to 'restructure' the university. It couldn't do it if it tried, and quite likely its efforts would be only halfhearted. University administration in the United States today combines relative powerlessness

with mere absolute mindlessness on the subject of education." And boards of trustees "represent a kind of 'stand-by' authority, ready to take over if the executive officers lead the organization into a scandalous mess."⁶

On the other hand, some believe that existing agencies and forces within the university organization do hold the potential for effective government and restructuring when necessary, if only these agencies and forces can be brought into proper alignment and relationship. People of this conviction hold that a team effort is necessary if success in meeting the needs of the future is to be attained.

Such a conclusion is based on several hypotheses. The first is that of the several forms of organizing and governing colleges and universities, the adversary form (perhaps best illustrated by the collective bargaining role of labor unions and by the union-like behavior of such organizations as the National Education Association) is diametrical to the professional concern and conduct of institutions of higher education. The unionist stand maintains that faculty are employees whose interests (essentially economic ones) are generally so at odds with those of central administration, trustees, and, indeed, the institution itself, that the essential function of faculty organizations should be to protect individual faculty members.⁷

Faculties should organize, as any other group interested in achieving a complex goal should be organized. But the purposes of organization should be to discover how best to render professional services through optimum utilization of the differing skills of the members of the institution. The union implies that presidents, deans, and department heads are not professional and are actually seeking to exploit the faculty members, who are professional. The opposite position is that the institution tries to deliver professional services through the industry of all its members — professor, librarian, or president.⁸

The second hypothesis is that the circumstances that once assigned to the college president almost complete authority to govern an institution and to use its resources as he judged best no longer obtain. The American college president's pivotal position grew out of the historical facts of frontier conditions: frequently he was the only person present at the founding of an institution; the only person available to obtain funds, construct buildings, and recruit and instruct students. He was the prototype of the single pastor who ministered to his congregation as he saw fit.

Through the years, institutions have become so complex that one person cannot possibly even oversee necessary activities, much less perform or control them. More significantly, numbers of competent, responsible faculty

members have become involved in the operation of the institution, with a distinct professional interest in how well it succeeds.

III

Frontier conditions required a president-centered organization. Contemporary conditions require an organization in which responsibilities are shared. In the search for appropriate organizational patterns to meet immediate and future problems, some direction may be obtained through "an examination of some of the failures or malfunctionings of the approaches used historically, or currently in vogue."⁹

Where faculties have gained full control over an institution, without the balancing force of a strong central administration, the institution has tended to stand still and to become more concerned with the welfare and prerogatives of faculty members than with the needs of students, parents, or the larger society.

One type of such malfunctioning is illustrated by the experience of a Midwest college whose president was on leave of absence in Washington, D. C., for nearly ten years. Meanwhile the governing body refused to appoint even an acting president. During that decade a carefully established, smooth-functioning program of general education was allowed to fall into disuse because authority to initiate curricular change reverted by default to faculty committees whose members found preoccupation with their own subjects and affairs more comfortable than making the effort to adapt courses to changing student needs. Without a president to weigh faculty interests against other criteria, departments tended to recruit and accord tenure to those who placed disciplinary and departmental loyalty above all else.

When the long "temporary" arrangement ended, the next president lasted less than two years. In trying to restore balance between administrative leadership and faculty control, he made enemies and thus lost the effectiveness necessary to achieve the results he might have had from a longer creative effort. Any president who follows a period of rampant growth of faculty hegemony is liable to have a short and violent regime, unless, of course, he tolerates continued faculty control — in which case the institution may well atrophy and die.¹⁰

A second type of failure or malfunctioning involves not a weak or absent president but a strong president preoccupied with limited interests. Such a president — for the sake of increasing the endowment, overseeing the physical plant, or maintaining advantageous trustee relationships — lets the

individual faculty members pursue individual activities as long as they do not disturb administrative tranquility. Columbia University is a good illustration of such a situation. From the days of Nicholas Murray Butler, Columbia had inherited a tradition of executive responsibility reflected in autocratic decisions made only after consultation with trustees, important alumni, donors, or, occasionally, important city officials. Faculty members were left free for scholarship and such instruction as they chose to provide; but they were not encouraged to involve themselves in institutional affairs.

As a result, strong local autonomy developed in schools and departments and was allowed to operate unchecked as long as there was no attempt to influence institution-wide policies or activities. There was no formal senate or other faculty organization that could consider the university as a whole, and an assembly of all the faculties was too large to do other than ceremonial university business. This sharp division of responsibility created a wide, unbridged gulf between the faculty and the administration. The faculty became more and more removed from the problems of student life, and this unconcern became all too evident to the students themselves. The central administration, to the extent that it was even aware of the problems, was unwilling to create a staff large enough to maintain even a semblance of institutional character or coherence.¹¹

A third type of malfunctioning characterized San Francisco State College. In that situation, authority and prerogatives necessary for the effective functioning of central campus administration were allowed to filter downward to departments on the one hand and to be drawn upward to the office of the chancellor for the state college system on the other hand. Robert Smith presents the following analysis:

The business-as-usual pattern of student, faculty, and administrative government was not adequate to the pressures for change and could not be quickly superseded by sufficiently mobile decision-making process in a climate of continuing tension marked by checkmating activities at several levels. The traditional dispersal of responsibility prerogatives and power within the academic community (power lodged in the departments) became an albatross in a multiple conflict situation. This, coupled with centralized control of the system of colleges at the chancellor-trustee level, seriously hampered the executive functions at the campus level.¹²

Undue concentration of authority in the hands of central administration can also be lethal, as the experience of Parsons College suggests. Parsons was the extended shadow of its president. He combined the "instincts of the jungle of the corporate world, the platform appeal of an evangelist, and an enormous capacity for work and food, and a facile charm" into a leadership role that allowed little room for middle ground response.

Other examples could be cited. Over-bureaucratized faculty authority, coupled with confused domains of faculty and administrative responsibility, results in malfunctioning. Direct trustee authority in purely academic matters is another route to malfunction. Examples of presidential failure to expand the administrative structure to keep pace with increased enrollment, physical plant, and budget are innumerable. There is governance through secrecy and the prevalent administrative attitude that what central administration does is not the proper concern of faculty members. The display of almost capricious departmental power comes about when the institution offers too much simply to recruit a research-oriented faculty.¹³

IV

60

From among the many possible models of university governance, two of them — the extremes of power concentration and of dispersion — have been discussed briefly. Systematic group participation is a third form worth discussing, and it may very likely be the answer for the immediate future. The idea of *shared responsibility*, which has been discussed in the literature of higher education for many years, has appeal. But though this approach has often been suggested, practical applications have not been achieved frequently — partly because the nature of the various factors of the campus equation has not been understood, and partly because the relationships among those factors have not been spelled out.

The idea of shared responsibility assumes that, with respect to educational and institutional matters, faculties are by nature conservative. Seldom has major educational innovation come from the faculty. Faculty members are reluctant to change; new ideas are not readily accepted. This is understandable. Faculty members tend to be solitary individuals, sometimes drawn into college teaching because that role allows them to study and cultivate a subject they find interesting. The departmental system, with its powerful and unique defenses for protecting individual interest, provides the citadel within which to cultivate one's own concern.¹⁴

It should not be suggested that this attitude is necessarily all bad. Such balance is needed to counter the effects of an overly aggressive central administration, which in the American tradition has been the single most important force on the campus. (In fact, if the more thoughtful of the militant students sincerely seeking university reform could realize it, their natural adversary is the faculty, and their natural ally is the administration.) In most instances it is the central administration that sees the broader purposes of an institution and seeks to move toward them. It is the central

administration that seeks innovation; that encourages self studies to create a climate favorable to reform and change; and that suggests new ideas and encourages their growth.

Actually, under ideal conditions these two forces, the administration and the faculty, are complementary. Institutions with an overly powerful, dynamic administration that is not checked by an effective faculty exercising the instruments of restraint cannot long remain in balance. Conversely, institutions atrophy and lose viability if the faculty gains enough power to thwart the efforts of a weak, ineffectual administration. Universities should be organized so as to bring the forces of faculty conservatism and administrative progressivism into "creative tension." But such an undertaking requires courage, skill, and energy.

61

Faculties should be delegated considerable authority over those matters for which their collective wisdom and expertise are most pertinent. While it is true that trustees ultimately must mediate between the supporting constituency and the institution, and therefore should always retain the right to act in a sovereign corporate capacity (except for situations that involve institutional survival), certain powers should be delegated to the faculty members through departments, committees, senates, and finally the corporate faculty itself.¹⁵

Faculties should have a large measure of authority over the various curriculums. They should have some influence, shared with administration, over their own membership, with the right to decide whether or not a person has the scholarly arts and skills needed in the department and will make an effective, representative colleague. Faculties should have considerable jurisdiction over student admissions and over graduation requirements, subject to general conditions imposed by the trustees. Last, faculties should have broad policy-making authority over the conditions of student life on campus, because the general conditions of the learning environment affect the student's responses to instruction and his assumption of responsibility for his own inquiry and learning.

Such faculty authority is significant, and many contend, in view of the conservatism of faculties, that granting this power may result in institutional stagnation. This danger can be minimized, however, by assigning counterauthority to administration. To presidents, deans, directors, and department heads should go participation in budget preparation and control. No president responsible for the financial liability of the institution can yield ultimate authority in this matter; however, he can exercise it both

directly and, more importantly, indirectly by holding administrative subordinates responsible and accountable.

Administration also has the power of appointing administrative subordinate officers. Through the appointment of a dean a president influences the tone and direction of a professional school; through the appointment of a department head a dean influences departmental activity. Supportive of these two prerogatives are the execution of policy, the possession of information, the generation of data, the right to propose agenda items, certain specified veto powers, and the traditional authority and status inherent in high administrative posts.¹⁶

Increasingly important is the role of the student in university governance. A current opinion holds that students ought to be voting members of committees, senates, departments, and even of boards of trustees.

62

In opposition are those who believe as follows: (1) Students are immature and lacking in experience appropriate to the responsibility of substantial participation in policy formulation, are impressionable at best, and at worst are often intellectually irresponsible. (2) Because of a short-term connection with the university, students have correspondingly limited loyalty, lack a sense of history or tradition, and bear no legal responsibility for the institution. (3) Students would be bored and impatient with what takes place during most faculty committee meetings and have nothing positive to contribute to the meetings. Probably they should be thankful they are not obliged to attend. (4) Finally, if students can do a better job than the faculty, they ought to be doing the teaching.¹⁷

These are the two extreme positions. The implication of the opposition opinion is that there would be no objection to greater student involvement if students could measure up to the standards of educated adults. In response it might be said that students *do* measure up well enough to make important contributions to the fellowship of learning. Further, students of college age today have many of the responsibilities of the adult world and are as mature as the general adult population. They can act as intelligently as adults when given meaningful responsibilities. Therefore, if they are denied participation, it is not because of their inadequacies but because faculty and administrators do not want procedures disturbed that now work for their own convenience and advantage.

The contributions students could make to institutional governance are worth considering. The university is the center of learning; consequently, what is learned in class is as important as what is taught. And who could be a better authority on what is learned than students? Since no method of

evaluating the classroom effectiveness of instructors has been widely accepted, there would seem to be merit in at least giving the learners, along with those who teach, the opportunity to seek for and influence change.¹⁸

It is merely to say the obvious to suggest that students have limited experience, that they lack legal obligation for the university, and that loyalty is circumscribed by personal interests. Is the situation much different with the faculty? Students may identify with a university as alumni in a way the faculty never will. As for administrators, when one considers that the average tenure of university presidents is about four years (hardly longer than the period spent by students likely to participate in the institution's governance), one must conclude that continuity cannot be the sole basis for involvement in policy formation.

63

The frequent fear that students intend to take over teaching responsibilities in the classroom is, of course, ludicrous and unfair. There is no evidence that more than a very few students want to take over the university, in the classroom or elsewhere. Students in increasing numbers, however, observe that the academic community, which they had reason to believe was composed of faculty, administrators, and students, actually does not include students in governance. They see in most universities, or at least in those with the greatest influence, that the "community" means faculty as the ruling class, administrators as second-class citizens — a necessary evil — and students as a necessary anvil. "But students have contributions to make, and the conviction grows that if students are required to act as anvil, they should also have a hand on the hammer."¹⁹

V

Any system of shared responsibility can succeed only if several conditions are present and functional.

First, as is obvious but often difficult to achieve, there must be a desire on the part of the faculty and the administration for shared responsibility — responsibility shared *among* administration, faculty, and students. Much of the current campus strife is the result of rampant elitism, which is the opposite of sharing.

Second, there must be a willingness on the part of trustees to make definite, formal grants of power and to realize that their role as protectors of constituent interests can be served best if they remain uninvolved with the details of administration (a professional undertaking). Similarly, administration and faculty must be willing to allow the other element discretion in its own sphere.

Third, there must be written constitutions, bylaws, statements of policy, and specified procedures to ensure due process. In the past, universities have operated on commonly accepted norms of behavior and conduct, because slowly growing educational institutions were not unlike primitive societies regulated by unrefined conventional wisdom. But a complex, rapidly expanding culture requires greater bureaucracy and specification of appropriate behavior.

Fourth, there must be greater openness on the campus, a willingness to share information and intelligence. Progress is being made, but it must be made more rapidly if the ideal of shared responsibility is to be realized. For instance, a president aware of impending budget imbalance cannot secure the benefit of faculty wisdom and faculty and student cooperation unless he is willing to distribute copies of real, not make-believe, budgets.²⁰

"The great tradition of the universities stresses the value of community, of mutual respect, and concertive effort to achieve the humane life. These can be realized only through some version of shared — shared by all — responsibility for a professional undertaking."²¹

The shibboleth for higher education in a time of accelerating change is a line written in old age by the Athenian businessman-statesman-poet Solon: "'As I grow old, I keep on teaching myself many new things.' Solon was writing from experience: for Solon's country, Attica, had been passing through changes in his lifetime which, in their magnitude and their speed, are comparable to those which we are having to try to adapt ourselves in our day."²²

In the fairy tale, it took a child to call attention to the fact that the emperor was naked. Let us not leave to children the task facing us.²³

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