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ABSTRACT

If our colleges and universities have not kept pace with the rapidly changing society that higher education has created, to what extent can this fact be laid at the door of trustees or ascribed to the relationships between policymaking bodies in higher education and the operating leadership in administration? It is to this question that this reprint addresses itself. Presidents should be strong in the sense that they are willing to deal with boards whose enthusiasm leads them into areas where they do not have competence. One of the most difficult problems the president has to face is the trustee who has been responsible for significant past gifts to the institution or who obviously is capable of substantial future gifts and who attempts to use the power of the purse to influence decisions. Only effective and enlightened leadership from the president and board of trustees can handle critical issues in a way to insure that the public wisdom will continue to be an ally on the side of higher education. (Author/PG)

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## Board-President Relationships: Second Thoughts

Nils Y. Wessell

Three years ago in Kansas City I addressed this Association on the subject of relations between the university president and the board of trustees.<sup>1</sup> Some two years later I was asked to give permission to a printing of my speech under the auspices of the Association. I asked for a chance to reread my remarks before responding. I did reread them and was appalled, not at the majority of positions I had taken, but at enough of them to shudder at the thought that they might now be published.

I turned down the request. Reassured by the belief that that had ended the matter and that some of my earlier indiscretions would not now come to light, I was abruptly brought back to harsh reality by a second telephone call and rejoinder which in effect said that if you have

changed your mind, let's hear what your new ideas are. Unspoken was the suggestion that maybe any new ideas I had certainly could not be anything but better than my old ones.

\* \* \*

The great bulk of what I said in 1970 I still believe and will repeat this evening, but will take care to indicate what I do not now believe, with the reasons.

Three years ago I began by saying that our colleges and universities are in deep trouble and that if these important human institutions are in deep trouble, then our country is in deep trouble. I do not retract that statement, but I now feel much less pessimistic. I think our institutions of higher education have shown

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<sup>1</sup>A small invitational meeting for presidents and trustees of public institutions, intended to be the first in a series. Subsequent meetings have not, however, been held.

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signs that they can lift themselves out of the morass they were in in 1970. Who deserves the credit I am not sure. I am least sure that trustees represent the most important reason for decreased pessimism or increased confidence. It may be that in due course their effective and positive role will be made plain. At the moment, the fairest thing is to withhold judgment.

If I had to make a choice now, in giving credit for this change, I would credit first the public wisdom. Outraged or disgusted as many people were with what was transpiring in our colleges and universities (for the point I am about to make let me say that the question is irrelevant), whether that outrage and disgust were justified, the great majority of people did not abandon their faith in what education could do to improve the human condition. The fact that an increasing percentage of college age young people were in college, and that opportunities for higher education were now more generally available than ever in the history of our country or the world, undoubtedly served to increase the percentage of adults who maintained a belief in the role education could play in permitting or insuring upward social and economic mobility. Something may have gone wrong, but properly and happily the general public was far from being in a mood to throw out the baby with the bath water.

None of us in higher education can take sole credit for this, at least

none of us who are or have been part of the contemporary scene. It is what has transpired over the decades or even the centuries, not anything anyone has done over the last few years, which accounts for this basic acceptance of the role of education on the part of the general public.

But critical issues are still unresolved, and only effective and enlightened leadership can handle them in a way to insure that the public wisdom will continue to be an ally on the side of higher education.

The increased velocity of history leaves us no alternative. And colleges and universities do not simply exist in this turbulent sea. They and their works and their graduates have produced it. This is as it should be, and a reason to commend higher education, but it is a mistake to picture the typical college or university as simply an island or a fortress which somehow must survive. As the instruments which have produced the increased velocity and the turbulence, colleges and universities obviously hold the best promise, or perhaps even the only promise, of influencing and directing this change. Colleges and universities are not *in* society. They *are* society.

It is an intriguing paradox that the institutions and the processes responsible for the increased velocity of history are themselves most resistant to change in their own

structure and procedures. The agents of change, meaning both the individuals and the institutions which make up American higher education, need to understand the importance of change within themselves as thoroughly as they understand the importance of change in society. They have nurtured a society which will pass them by if they do not change *with* society.

There are beginning signs of such a restive society. Demands for programs of independent study, universities without walls, and lifetime learning opportunities all contain a message. That message is that society will find American higher education outmoded if the structure and functions of our colleges and universities do not keep pace. The offspring will have no need of its parent.

If our colleges and universities have not kept pace with rapidly changing society which higher education has created, to what extent can this fact be laid at the door of trustees or ascribed to the relationships between policy-making bodies in higher education (if that's what boards of trustees are), and the operating leadership in administration (which presidents presumably are).

### The Active Board

On this subject I would modify or possibly even retract something I said three years ago. I said then,

"Individually and collectively as boards they have been far too

aloof with respect to students, faculty, and alumni, although in a descending order of aloofness as one goes from students to alumni. I will grant that sometimes the aloofness has been the unfortunate result of a well-intentioned effort by trustees to stay out of 'operations and management' as distinct from 'policy.' Trustees were afraid that getting acquainted with students and faculty would create suspicion in the mind of the president that they were outflanking him or employing channels of communication that didn't lead through the president's office. Presidents that insecure or that autocratic may have been able to meet the needs of past decades but they will certainly not meet the needs of the 1970's.

"I am not suggesting that there are not some reasonable and defensible distinctions between operations and management on the one hand and policy making on the other; but both trustees and presidents need to recognize a large grey area and need to overcome sensitivity regarding transgressions. Much better a few transgressions than an aloof inaccessibility on the part of trustees. And if there is so little confidence and trust between a president and his board that he must forever be on his guard lest his authority be undermined, then either he should resign or the trustees who have lost confidence and trust should resign."

Today such aloofness has been substantially reduced. Perhaps it is simply that other members of the constituencies in colleges and universities finally realized that trustees are also human beings who collect pay checks, pay grocery bills, and make mistakes of judgment even when there is no question regarding their good intentions. I think also the effort to have younger people represented on boards of trustees or involved in the work of such boards (whether students or recent graduates) has had a salutary effect. It is not that the views of these young people have exerted so marked an influence on board decision-making. It is more that they have been able to communicate back to their contemporaries both the complexities of operating colleges and universities and the essentially honest commitment and concern of board members.

It also appears that boards have been less reluctant to look into matters which in past years were left to the administration with any inquiry from the board being *ipso facto* evidence of lack of confidence. Some mistakes undoubtedly have been made and will continue to be made on the part of board members in this regard, in the sense of their getting entangled in operations where they do not belong. But I would say again, better a few transgressions than an aloofness which limits the board to the role of a rubber stamp.

## The Strong President

I look forward too to an age of strong or stronger presidents, strong in the sense that they are willing to deal with boards whose enthusiasms and feelings of self-confidence lead them into areas where they do not have competence. The increased velocity of history I have referred to demands strong boards and strong presidents and the two are not antithetical.

I am not coming out for an adversary relationship between the board and its president. The road to the kind of consensus which I think must find its way back into the administration of higher education is one to be built by individuals of persuasion and conviction -- not by a willingness to compromise on any issue for the sake of tranquillity. Consensus produces tranquillity but is not necessarily reached by tranquillity.

In my prior speech I went on to comment about aloofness as follows:

"I suspect that there are many university presidents who, if hearing me refer to aloof trustees, might quietly pray for a return to the day when trustee aloofness was the norm. In many cases such a prayer deserves some sympathy, for the opposite of aloofness is unwarranted interference in matters not properly the prerogative of the trustee. Even though the board of trustees may well and

properly possess the ultimate authority for all the activities of the institution, it has been a sign of wisdom that this unlimited and final authority has customarily been delegated to the administration and to the faculty in matters in which the competence of the latter far outweigh the competence to be found in any board. It is not that in some matters faculties and administrators make no mistakes. It is only that they make fewer mistakes and less outrageous ones in certain areas than boards of trustees, given the same responsibilities."

When I speak of strong presidents, I definitely do not have in mind the description found in the introduction to a book on *The American College President* by Michael D. Cohen and James A. March, a publication of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education scheduled to appear soon.<sup>2</sup> This description, based on a study of 42 institutions, large, medium and small, poor and rich states,

"The American college presidency is a reactive job. Presidents define the role as a responsive one. They worry about the concerns of trustees, community leaders, students, faculty members, law enforcement officials. They see themselves as trying to reconcile the conflicting pressures on the college through their attention to them. They allocate

their time by a process that is largely controlled by the desires of others. Though they are, for the most part, individuals of considerable energy, they often become tired."

I realize, as I am sure you do, that this is an effort to describe the situation as it is, not the ideal. This becomes more clear in the following two paragraphs which I have excerpted from this same introduction.

"The presidency is conventional. The president comes to his job through a series of filters that are socially conservative vis-à-vis his major constituents. He sees his job in the standard terms reported in the academic and management literature. He allocates his time in response to a series of conventional expectations. . . . The president cannot effectively argue with conventional claims on him; nor does he really wish to do so. . . .

"The presidency is an illusion. Important aspects of the role seem to disappear on close examination. In particular, decision-making in the university seems to result extensively from a process that decouples problems and choices and makes the president's role more commonly sporadic and symbolic than significant. Compared to the heroic expectations he and others might have, the president has modest control

<sup>2</sup>Scheduled for publication in January 1974 by the McGraw-Hill Book Co., 304 pp., \$10.00.

ever the events of college life. The contributions he makes can easily be swamped by outside events or the diffuse qualities of university decision-making."

### The Trustee as Donor

The most difficult cross the president has to bear and the most serious threat to a strong presidency is the trustee who has been responsible for significant past gifts to the institution or who obviously is capable of substantial future gifts and who arrogantly attempts to use the power of the purse to influence decisions properly made without regard to such past or promised largesse. As a foundation president I know all too well that close proximity to large sums of money does not guarantee wisdom. A trustee of the kind I have described is more likely to be found in the private institution than in the public one, but he has his counterpart on the boards of state universities in the form of trustees who attempt to use political power in the same way, particularly when that political power can significantly affect legislative appropriations to the university.

### The Stickler

I trust I need not balance this statement at great length by detailed accounting of generous benefactors to colleges and universities who made no such efforts at improper and misguided influence. American free enterprise at its best is represented by such men and women

who helped create great institutions or helped great institutions remain great by commitments and support which they did not attempt to translate into influence in areas in which they had no competence. I suspect that some such individuals are in this very room. Certainly many of you can add to any roster I would attempt.

But let me return to the subject of menaces on boards of trustees. Another example is the trustee who believes he is the only one who knows the true and proper purposes of the institution or the true intent of the founder, and measures every proposal for change not on the basis of its merit or promise but by whether it meets or fails to meet this rigid yardstick. Fortunately, such trustees are commonly in the minority, are more a nuisance than the source of unnecessary harassment, and often can be isolated or encapsulated.

This brings me to a broader issue on which I know there exist wide differences of opinion. But this fact does not deter me from expressing my own strong conviction. It has to do with publicizing divisions within boards of trustees, especially in the case of public institutions. I would maintain that differences should be thoroughly discussed and debated within the board of trustees, but once a consensus or a resolution is reached, then the decision should have the support of the full board.

## Differences of View

To me one of the chief sources of disenchantment with our colleges and universities is the publicity given to such *differences of opinion* within boards. A university, even a public one, in my view is not and should not be a political institution but is bound to become such when the board of trustees does not close ranks and support a decision once it has been made. The only just course for the outvoted trustee, if his convictions are strong enough and the importance of the matter under discussion great enough, is to resign.

This is what I said word for word on this subject three years ago. If anything, I hold the same view even more strongly. I do not object to a trustee saying "Well, I was outvoted on that one. I believe the reasons for my position are still valid, but I abide by the majority decision of the board" if he lets it go at that. But if he then proceeds to heap abuse on those with whom he disagreed, and I know of instances of such, then in my view he is no longer fit to be a member of that particular board.

These illustrations of individual and collective board behavior serve to make plain that any institution needs a strong board *and* a strong president. In a board that is generally weak the president is left without critically important allies in dealing with the kinds of menaces I have described. If other members of

the board simply defer to the individual of past or promised large benefactions solely because of his financial role, then the president's task is complicated almost beyond *endurance or capability*.

Confrontation with the misguided and self-important types I have described usually serves only to precipitate a crisis. The choices open to a president are well described in metaphor by Cohen and March from whose new book I quoted earlier. "If you put a man in a boat and tell him to plot a course, he can take one of three views of his task. He can float with the currents and winds, letting them take him wherever they wish; he can select a destination and try to use full power to go directly to it regardless of the current or winds; or he can select a destination and use his rudder and sails to let the currents and wind eventually take him where *he* wants to go. On the whole, we think conscious university leadership is properly seen in the third light".

Let me turn to something I said three years ago with which I now strongly disagree: the role of consensus. I said then, "There is also the president who looks upon himself only as mediator or compromiser, sometimes timidly so, as he seeks the safe consensus of opinion among his board. This is the sure route to standing still or stagnation. There is no standing still. Either the institution moves forward or loses ground. Compromise and consensus,



when they affect matters of fundamental academic principle, are not the marks of leadership and do not constitute a productive response to the needs of the institution or of the society it serves. I do not quarrel with compromise and consensus seeking with respect to secondary or unimportant matters, but their application to central issues is the sure road to institutional sterility".

I am still opposed to presidential timidity and to mediation as the primary function of the president. But I believe now that I then gave the concept of consensus a perverse twist. The effecting of consensus can be an important part of the skill of the strong president. In fact, I believe that in our society generally and in education particularly we have seen the unhappy development of the adversary relationship as the usual route to decision-making. My present concept of consensus seeking is not one based on a willingness to retreat. The verb I would use with the noun is "hammer". Consensus must frequently be hammered out. It can often be a difficult process consuming much energy.

### The Doicot

Higher education particularly has a chance to lead the way in demonstrating to other important man-made institutions that to heal our society we will have to turn again to the processes and attitudes represented by consensus.

I have coined a name for another trustee type I would inveigh against:

"doicot" (it rhymes with boycott). The letters in "doicot" stand for "dotter of i's and crosser of t's." It is not my intention to single out lawyers on university boards of trustees for flagellation but I must go so far as to add that most doicots I know are lawyers. They love nothing more than to discover in a footnote to a report presented for the board's perusal that a comma has been incorrectly used in place of the proper semi-colon. Often doicots seem to be motivated by a desire to demonstrate that they have read every word of the document they are correcting. Such careful reading is to be encouraged but it should have as its primary objective grasping the substance and the content, not the form, of the document.

### A Balance of Strength

Just as a strong board can do much to insure a strong presidency, so can a strong president do much to develop a strong board. First, he must decide how much his trustees need to know to function effectively and then how to insure that what information they are given they in fact read and understand. He must decide also how important personal advanced briefing is of individual trustees and how much of his time and energy properly should be devoted to the process. He must beware of the dangers of "information overload," providing trustees with so much information and material that they cannot possibly digest it. Most trustees understandably react

to information overload by ineffective skimming of the material provided or a reluctance to look at any of it at all. Inadequate information or partial disclosure is to be avoided also.

The president should also be prepared for discouragement, no matter what he tries with respect to some members of his board. At one extreme there will be the nit-pickers who will find their nits whether the information provided is scanty or overdone. At the other extreme will be the confident dogmatists who obviously haven't even scanned their homework, regardless of its extent. The latter are the first to give themselves away, although this does not lighten the president's burden in dealing with them.

A related and equally important question is how to get trustees who are not on key committees involved in the affairs of the institution. The simple answer is to put every trustee on a key committee, but, depending on the size of the total board, this can make committee work cumbersome rather than efficient. There is also such a thing as having an over-organized board of trustees in the sense that the committee structure and channels of referral are such that any single issue gets presented, discussed and decided at so many levels that by the time of final action by the full board most members feel they have spent two to three times the energy and the attention the issue deserves.

Ironically, how often does a board get invited to discuss its methods of operation, and to raise questions of information, to have adequate background briefing? New members are reluctant to question practices from the hoary past. Older members may be resigned to the practices that are being followed. I know a few boards on whose behalf it would be a healthy thing to make provisions for a thorough discussion of these matters, but innovation and experiment must extend far beyond board practices and procedures and the relation of the president to such practices and procedures.

### Concern for the Whole

It is, of course, unrealistic if not pointless to talk of trustee-president relations unrelated to the other constituencies in the academic community. Students, faculties, and alumni are demanding, and deserve a role different from that which they have filled in the past. Each group is a vested interest, hardly unselfish and unbiased in its own views. Boards of trustees must be above vested interest, difficult though it may be for the ordinary mortal who is a trustee to achieve such an Olympian view. I cannot condemn too strongly the trustee who looks upon his responsibility as that of representing and protecting a department, division, or constituency of the university or of society, although I must admit to a long string of failures in my own career attempting to persuade fellow trustees of the rightness of my

point of view. The good trustee is the one who has concern for the whole institution and for all of the society in which it operates.

Let me turn again to something I said three years ago to which I now take exception. I spoke of the grave doubts I had concerning the wisdom of student and faculty representation on boards of trustees. My view was that one mark of the good university president is his ability to learn and understand the views of students and faculty and communicate them to the board of trustees. My present view is that while the president should still possess this kind of skill as a communicator, one of the chief values of student and faculty representation comes from the fact that student and faculty board representatives learn to their pleasant surprise that most trustees are able and committed to the best interests of the institution, are human, and possess both strengths and frailties. In short, the greater importance of student and faculty representatives has been in the direction of communicating with the rest of the college or university constituency and not to the board on behalf of that constituency.

It must also be admitted that this important role can be filled simply by having official but non-voting members of the board or of its committees who are students and faculty. I would also argue that more appropriate and useful is having faculty from other institutions on the board rather than from the board's own institution.

The central concern should not be with having a vote but with having a voice. Students, faculty, and other members of the university community should be heard directly and frequently by the trustees. Making sure that everyone is heard is one of the most important responsibilities a trustee has. It needs also to be made plain that listening to all members of the academic community does not mean that the president is to be by-passed in the process of communicating to the board the views of students and faculty. The president still should retain the important responsibility of weighing and evaluating disparate views from his entire constituency, whether such views are made known directly to the board by other means or not. The president is in the best position to present a balanced and comprehensive report of individual attitudes and opinions.

The unionization of faculty is another new element affecting the relations between the president and the board of trustees. The president's role and authority and the discharge of the responsibilities of the trustees are already becoming matters subject to bargaining. The trend is almost certainly in the direction of reducing the range of freedom of action and decision by both presidents and boards. A powerful faculty union can turn the presidency into a mediator's or negotiator's job or make of the president merely a buffer between the faculty and the board. Promotion and tenure for faculty are in

danger of being determined by rigid, mechanical rules. It is quite possible that new administrations will increasingly find themselves unable to exert any influence on the fundamental course and nature of the institution, particularly when a new sense of direction seems overdue.

Curiously or interestingly or amusingly, or perhaps all of these, it is now being suggested that the only way to counter the potential power of a unionized faculty is to have a unionized student body. Meetings on a national scale are already taking place to consider the formation of student unions. And in some cases non-academic personnel, unionized long ago, are demanding that bargaining be directly with the board of trustees and not through the administration with respect to their compensation and working conditions.

I hope for this group. I need not dwell on the critical differences between running a business and running an academic institution. Let us not dismiss this consideration too lightly for already in a number of states self-appointed businessmen have formed management and cost survey teams, and while they have directed their attention to all aspects of state governmental operations, public higher education has been one of their chief concerns. Many such well-intentioned individuals need to be told diplomatically but firmly that financial analysis does have an important role to play

in the management of higher education but such analysis, useful and effective though it is in uncovering problems and issues, seldom by itself contains the answers to these problems and issues. Just as education is too important a matter to be left solely to educators, it is much too important a matter to be left solely to businessmen.

At the same time academic administrators should not be too defensive with respect to such inquiries and under no circumstance should dismiss them out of hand. After all, hasn't the reverse kind of inquiry been even more usual and often in the public interest? I refer to the kind of critical investigation of business methods and operations made by college and university faculty.

### A New Approach

With respect to operating a university in businesslike fashion I do have a suggestion to make. Why not take all those aspects of university administration and management which are closely akin to business operations and turn them over to separate and completely independent organizations? The university president, his administrative colleagues, and members of the board of trustees could then devote their time to the main academic functions of the institution, in addition to the obvious operations such as dormitories, dining halls, and bookstores. A good deal of applied research, as distinct from basic research, and,

yes, intercollegiate athletics, could be handled in this fashion. Some heretics have suggested that even counselling and guidance should be provided by such an arrangement. Here I would take strong exception since I think that the educational process itself, when properly directed, is essentially counselling and guidance. But let's not take refuge in anyone's preconceptions until we have had a hard look at the pros and cons.

That last point is intended to be a serious one. New approaches to the structure and function of the university must be tried. Nothing should be turned down simply because of any arbitrary and prior assumption emanating from old-timers like me who confidently proclaim that something won't work, their wealth of experience tells them no.

I am afraid I may have wandered over too broad a terrain. Perhaps I should have talked of such things as "the essence of the trustee function," "the basic responsibilities" of the board, of how intelligently to delegate authority without abdicating responsibility, emphasizing the importance of a continuing assessment of the institution's purpose and its planned evolution. My paper would have been more scholarly and my credentials more evident. I apologize, even though half-heartedly. Somewhat selfishly I can say that if you have learned nothing, I feel much better for having bared my soul.

## The Rule of Reason

And now I turn to a final generalization which may be the most important one I will have made. It is that unless the rule of reason in our colleges and universities is stoutly defended and, unhappily, in some instances, simply restored, then nothing else we do will matter. Discussion of president-trustee relations will be an idle exercise. Granted that substantial and prompt changes in our universities seem imperative, these institutions, nevertheless, represent magnificent triumphs of the human spirit because they were founded and have existed on the basis of the rule of reason. Great diversity and great creativity are their hallmark. While diversity and creativity inevitably produce stresses and strains, it is because the rule of the university has been the rule of reason that it has reached the heights it has and played so critical a role in the molding of our present society. To maintain its integrity in the midst of these stresses and strains is the university's most important task. The most powerful force in sustaining its integrity is that represented by rational thought rationally conducted. The students' questions regarding relevance, the faculties' demand for participation in decision-making, the trustees' requirement that faculty be made accountable, and the insistence of alumni that the old values they knew are the only valid ones -- all these must submit to reason.

And why expect students to be devoted to that aim if their teachers and the institution's administrators show naught but contempt for it? We are also witnessing a resort to unreason by those who realize that they are losing the struggle when the rules are rational ones.

Nothing I have been saying about reason is intended for a moment to suggest that there is no room in life or in the university for emotion or political action or subjective opinion or other non-rational processes or activities. The point is that the university's basic academic business must not be conducted on these bases. To abjure reason is to bring the downfall of the university and with it the one institution in society dedicated first and foremost to rational thought and rational action.

This commitment of the university does not always beget understanding and tolerance in the outside world. Positions taken by faculty members or other individuals in the academic community, even though arrived at through the use of reason, may produce hostility in the alumnus or the prospective donor or the state legislator. Here the trustee's responsibility is clear: to defend and protect and to nurture the rule of reason, for the maintenance of the integrity of the university is precisely what is in the best interest of the alumnus, the donor, the politician, or the average citizen. Ignore, forget, or disagree with anything I have said, but do any of these things with respect to the rule of reason and you will have sounded the death knell of one of modern man's most magnificent achievements, the American college and university.



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