

Presidential Power and the Modern College Leader

By Mary B. Marcy

IN AN ELECTION YEAR when politics is in the air, it's important to note that an academic institution is essentially a political, not a corporate, system, and that its leader is more akin to the president of the United States than to a corporate chief executive. This is in spite of the argument, particularly when defending the compensation of college presidents, that leading an academic institution is similar to running a major corporation. Such statements may make sense at first blush, but they misread the academic organizational structure and the responsibilities and role of presidents.

Admittedly, no college president is contemplating an invasion of Iran, and the scope of responsibilities even at the most complex university is smaller. But the essential parallel is that the vast majority of academic presidents, like the U.S. president, operate within a context of shared governance. They lead constituencies that have competing goals, with the responsibility for improving the institution in ways that are often harder to measure than market returns or profit margins. Campus climate and culture, the intellectual and social maturation of students, the depth of student-faculty interaction, and the quality of core courses are all essential elements of the academic enterprise, and all are nuanced systems that are subject to debate. Like the U.S. president, the university president operates within a complex political system characterized by constant negotiations.

An enduring work of scholarship on the U.S. presidency is Richard E. Neustadt's classic text, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. His analysis is instructive when considering the leadership of an academic institution. Neustadt argues that the power of the president lies not in the Constitution—in the academic world, I would argue, it does not come from university bylaws—but in the president's ability to use the tools of the position and the

structure of the larger political organization. In short, Neustadt says, the power of the president is the power to persuade.

If political power is the power to persuade, then understanding presidential power within a political system involves understanding the president's distinct position: at the apex of the governance structure, with unique but not unilateral authority. Inherent in shared power is the existence of multiple constituencies, all of which are essential

to the creation and application of policy. It is those constituencies that the president must lead, negotiate with, and ultimately persuade.

In the presence of multiple constituencies, short-term victories achieved by authoritarian means can undermine the president's long-term ability to govern, however efficient they may seem at the moment. The ineffectiveness of purely authoritarian leadership in a negotiated political system was illustrated by Arthur Wellesley, a 19th-century British prime minister, who could easily have been describing a faculty meeting when he remarked after his first cabinet meeting: "An extraordinary affair. I gave them their orders and they wanted to stay and discuss them."

According to Neustadt, U.S. presidents have five sets of con-

stituents: officials in the executive branch, members of Congress, political partisans, citizens at large, and foreign countries. College presidents also have five sets: the faculty, the trustees, students and their families, alumni and outside donors, and governmental and other external groups. Satisfying all of those constituents on every major issue is not possible, nor is their unanimous approval always desirable. But their united opposition is fatal.

All those constituencies need the president, who shapes the agenda and is responsible for resolving major issues. But Neustadt points out that because others have their

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own constituents and interests, they do not always feel obliged to follow the president's leadership. In the academic context, faculty members' primary fidelity is often to their disciplines, colleagues, or curricular models; trustees can usually ignore personnel and governance issues and sometimes have particular personal agendas; neither students and their families nor alumni and other donors have to govern the university; and employees of the federal, state, and local governments are subject to pressures that are largely separate from the college.

Of course, the parallel with the U.S. presidency is not perfect. In American politics, the president has several tools available to gain the support of other politicians—including the offer of political help in the next election, the threat of withholding such help, and invoking the power of the political party to confer plum assignments or provide access to major donors. Neustadt argues that it should always feel difficult, if not dangerous, to cross an American president.

The presidents of academic institutions operate in a much different context. Faculty members with tenure have much greater job security than most elected officials do, even with the power of incumbency. And while college presidents may find ways to reward specific constituencies and individuals, regularly punishing others simply for disagreeing is not usually considered an acceptable exercise of presidential authority. In fact, such action is commonly seen as displaying disrespect for an academic colleague or as a failure to value academic freedom. Of course, there are exceptions, and presidents have survived after silencing or forcing out prominent opponents in spite of academic freedom and tenure. But the repetition of such actions tears at the fabric of the institution and frequently, though not inevitably, leads to the president's downfall.

College and university presidents do have at their disposal some tools that the U.S. president does not. Chief among those is broad agreement on the purpose of the enterprise. U.S. presidents can ask for support in promoting the general welfare, but that notion is so vague that invoking it often leads to arguments over what constitutes the general welfare, and what will promote it.

A college president has a different focus and can assume that most of his or her constituents are well educated, have some commitment to the college, and believe in the value

of education. To be sure, that leaves ample room for disagreement, but the context for leadership on the campus is better defined than in the country as a whole.

The contrast is greater when considering corporate leadership. A CEO works within an even clearer context. The fundamental goal of a business is straightforward: to return a profit. But the terms of academic success as well as the means of achieving it are constantly being negotiated—for instance, in setting goals for a capital campaign, determining the size of the first-year class, or making tenure decisions.

Neustadt's analysis of presidential effectiveness "beyond the Beltway" is also instructive for understanding university leadership. Neustadt argues that a president's national popularity has a measurable impact on Congressional action (or inaction), and thus contributes directly to his ability to lead. Similarly, a college president's prestige outside of the academy can be a significant factor in campus leadership. Trustees will generally tolerate considerable tension within the institution if they see that the president is effective at raising money and increasing the university's status. Faculty members and other groups on the campus rarely see such actions as conferring prestige. But, like politicians deciding whether to support the U.S. president, they will evaluate a president's external status before seriously challenging his or her authority.

Comparing the university presidency with the U.S. presidency, as analyzed by Neustadt, is an intriguing and informative exercise. A more in-depth reading of his book—one that considered the role of staff members and senior leaders, and recognized the significance of the media, for example—could yield further insights. So when we ask if it really matters whether we compare a college president to a politician instead of to a corporate CEO, the answer is yes. That is because our understanding of effective leadership depends on the context in which the leader operates. We will not choose the best president for our university, or know whether a president is doing the best possible job, unless we understand that—like whoever becomes the next president of the United States—he or she must lead with vision and collaboration, not by fiat but by negotiation.

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