

The Changing Demands of Presidential Leadership

BY STANLEY O. IKENBERRY

TAKEAWAYS

- 1 The digital revolution, financial recession, globalization, and other forces have changed the way a president must lead in 2010, compared to 15 years ago. Boards must help their campus leader meet the new demands.
- 2 Two key aspects of presidential leadership are, first to help the institution define and embrace its vision and, second, to be a bridge to the outside world.
- 3 Harmonizing institutional aspirations with the new environment in which the college or university operates is the biggest challenge for presidents.

WITH ALL THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS, THE job of a university president is one of the most rewarding I know. As a colleague of mine used to say, “Whatever it is, it isn’t boring!” Yet, like every other aspect of society, the academic presidency has changed over the last several decades.

A surprise turn of events gave me an opportunity to reflect on the “then and now” question. Having served as president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995, I returned—albeit briefly—to the very same office 15 years later. Many things seemed unchanged; others were startlingly new.

In fundamental respects, the job of the university president remains the same. Three decades later, a president must still have a strategic vision and shape priorities; be able to make the difficult, sometimes painful decisions; communicate and build confidence and consensus among the board, faculty, staff, students, and alumni; build bridges to the public, the news media, business and civic leaders, and policy makers; serve as spokesperson and living logo; balance the budget; exercise power judiciously; and work in concert with the governing board to oversee the operation of a large and complex operation.

Still, the presidency *has* changed. I’ll share some of those changes as I experienced them and explore the implications for governing boards.

The Electronic Age and the Presidency

In my case, the most startling difference was the unrelenting tsunami of electronic communication that floods the president’s office and personal life. In 1995, the end of my first term, email and the Internet were alive and well but, at least in my case, had not yet reached the president’s desk. Each day I was greeted by three folders—one red, usually slim, with urgent, high-priority items that needed immediate attention and action; a somewhat larger green folder of correspondence and action items, collated by topic, often with a draft response attached; and a bulky third folder holding publications, junk mail, and other less time-sensitive material.

Together it was a formidable stack, often packed into my briefcase and lugged home for evening reading or consumed during travel. I tried to turn it around in three days or fewer, and certainly no more than a week.

Voila! Today the flow of presidential communication is virtual and instantaneous. The flood is unrelenting, too often random and unfiltered, and it has added a whole new dimension to the presidency. Given the ease and speed of communication, issues and decisions move quickly. A day is an eternity. Unless presidents stay connected, they can clog up the system and—in desperation—the decision train may leave without them.

Technology has also expanded the range of people who are informed and involved in the decision-making process. Because communication is so cheap, it spreads far and wide, sometimes to the news media in a leak or in response to a Freedom of Information Act request. Access to the president is wide open—including not only the board and president's administrative staff and faculty colleagues, but parents, students, concerned alumni, and the public.

Public reaction is also faster and more powerful in the electronic age. A decision that might have generated a trickle of written complaints in an earlier time today unleashes an avalanche of emails overnight. Ubiquitous blogs and other forms of electronic communication present new challenges and vulnerabilities for presidents, boards, and institutions.

One such challenge for presidents as well as boards, for example, is the question of what, actually, is being said about the institution, its image, and reputation. It is one thing to monitor traditional print media and another to track all of cyberspace!

At the same time, it is much easier for institutions to reach students, faculty members, the public, and other specific audiences that matter most—like alumni and donors. Recently I received a *State of the University* report from Graham Spanier, the president of the Pennsylvania State University, where I am an honorary alum. The report arrived electronically, as a video. A powerful communication tool, it illustrated the fact that opportunities for presidents and institutions to communicate are limited only by imagination.

For the most part, this flood of lightning-fast, ubiquitous communication is not only a good thing, it is indispensable. If you need a document, bingo, you have it. If you must catch the president before she goes into the next meeting, just text with last-minute advice. If there is late-breaking news, you have it, often before it hits the airwaves or a newsstand.

Yet the sheer volume of communication demands increased presidential time and attention. Often that comes out of the president's hide, early in the morning, late at night, on weekends, during holidays, 24/7. A cascade of issues reaches the president in random order, jumping from one to another and back again. While it is easier for presidents to be well informed, it is also easier for presidents

to waste time and confuse priorities, too often drawn into conversations and issues that don't merit their personal involvement.

For at least some presidents, the new technology can provide a convenient escape, a cocoon that limits human contact, giving them a feeling of being incredibly in touch and at the same time supremely isolated. As powerful as it is, electronic communication cannot match and certainly cannot replace the depth and richness of communication and analysis that presidents deliver face to face. Today's president also needs to work to maximize the personal encounters—walking across the quad, down the hall, picking up the phone, and pulling key people together in the inevitable string of meetings. A presidency that combines sophisticated communications technology with a powerful human presence can be an unbeatable combination.

A More Constrained Environment

Another obvious change in the presidency is the environment in which American higher education functions. In 1979, I began my presidential career during an era of growth and expansion—an increase in access, the expansion of diversity, a transformation of the physical landscape of the campus, and the growth of exciting programs of research and scholarship. Truth to tell, as we struggled in those years to gain resources and advance, it seemed hard, often frustrating. We wanted to move even faster and often failed to grasp the welcoming environment in which we found ourselves.

The environment in which presidents now function in 2010 is more daunting, more ambiguous, more threatening than any I have seen in my lifetime. And the implications for the academic presidency and governing boards are profound.

The premium on higher learning has never been higher. What people know and can do—their ability to analyze complex issues, communicate effectively, and contribute to the welfare of society—has never been more consequential, nor has it ever been in higher demand. The need for higher education continues to grow. There is broad agreement that access to higher education in the United States must expand even further, and that the academic quality of offerings, and the performance and success rates of students, must improve. The health of communities, the vitality and competitiveness of the economy, and the survival of the American Dream depend on vibrant, vital, high-performing colleges and universities.

Meeting those expectations in today's environment, however, presents presidents and boards with formidable challenges. Our higher-education system became one of the most admired in the world in part because a post-war America had the resources and the will to invest. A half-century later, the current economic and social environment has changed, and that comparative advantage is diminished.

Most of the world, including the United States, now finds itself in the grips of the deepest and most prolonged eco-

conomic downturn since the Great Depression. Endowments have suffered, in some cases dramatically. From California to Illinois to New York and in virtually every state, public universities are facing major cuts in state support. Even many high-prestige independent institutions are experiencing financial stress. Tuition at both public and independent campuses continues to escalate, rising far faster than family incomes and inflation, both of which, at this writing, are stagnant. Many families are frightened, and much of the public mood is angry.

Given such forces, ambiguity and uncertainty best describe the environment in which most presidents function. Recessions come and go, but how swift and robust will the recovery be? How quickly and fully will employment rebound? How effectively will governments—both state and federal—cope with deficits that have been mounting for some time? What priorities and values will be controlling? How will the global economy evolve and what are the implications?

These are the imponderable questions that give rise to the ambiguous environment in which presidents now lead. Building the confidence and trust and achieving the solidarity to weather these difficult times places a premium on presidential leadership that goes well beyond the challenges of an earlier era. No question: The presidency in 2010 is more difficult and demanding.

Misery may love company, and if so, today's presidents have it in abundance. Having departed my Illinois travails, I traveled to Scotland only to open the *Glasgow Herald* and read that Glasgow University was facing cuts of up to 25 percent in government support. Its "principal" (read president) warned the institution would run out of money by 2013 unless action is taken. The University of California's Mark Yudof could not have said it better!

Beyond the economic environment, however, the tenor of the public square has changed. Traditional journalism in most of its forms is dying. Some publications are gone; others are diminished. And in the fight for survival, few remain untouched. The *Chicago Tribune*, once a venerable paper, is now in bankruptcy, its future uncertain, its tone harsher as it screams for attention and survival.

To the extent one considers government part of the public square, the character of policy making has changed as well. The tone is less civil and the focus on policy blurred. Presidents of an earlier era were welcomed and often honored in state capitals and Washington. That still happens, but the level of civility, the ability to work across party and ideological lines, the quality of analysis that supports decisions of policy makers—all have seen a general deterioration in recent decades, and the changes touch presidents constantly. In this diminished public square, governing boards can play a special role and have an impact well beyond the campus by modeling civility and good governance, even in a time of unprecedented stress.

Leadership in a New Era

The most important element of the presidency, however, has not changed. Presidential leadership remains *the* core competency, the key ingredient, of the successful presidency. But what are the practical dimensions of presidential leadership, and what are the implications for presidents and boards?

I have found it useful to think about leadership in three broad segments. The first is the most familiar. Presidential leaders must be able to help the institution find itself, articulate and embrace its mission, and mobilize others and collaborate with them toward that vision. This is the day-to-day work of the presidency and the governing board.

The second component is familiar as well. Presidents, as leaders, are the voice and face, the eyes and ears, of the institution to the external world. The president often becomes the living logo or personification of the campus and almost always is the institution's prime voice to alumni and donors, the community, business and labor, government, the news media, prospective students, and parents. More than any other single person, the president has the opportunity to reach and touch the outside world, not just carrying a message, but also gathering information, serving as "scout-in-chief," bringing back to the campus an accurate account of life beyond it. Board members do precisely the same thing: Interpret the institution to others and connect the institution and its mission to the reality of the external environment.

These first two elements of presidential and board leadership are fun. Helping build something you care about, an institution that will make a profound difference in the life of individuals and society, is among the most rewarding opportunities one can imagine. Building bridges with the outside world is equally rewarding. Most of the external constituencies care about the university; many respect and love it.

It's the third dimension of presidential leadership that inevitably is the most demanding. The president, along with the board, has the responsibility to bring these sometimes disparate worlds together. Harmonization of the institution's aspirations and operations with the environmental constraints in which it operates is *the* challenge of the contemporary academic presidency.

The job calls on the president, with guidance and encouragement from the board, to be a leader of change on two fronts. First, the president must lead change on the campus that will help it adjust to the realities and opportunities of the environment in which it finds itself—while at the same time remaining steadfast and committed to its mission and academic values. Second, both the president and the board must work to bring about constructive change in the external environment—to influence public policy, inform public attitudes, advance alumni giving, and alter other dimensions of the environment to create a more sustainable, supportive context in which the university can survive and thrive.

The importance of leading transformation has not changed one whit in the university presidency over the last century. In infinitely variable ways, great presidential leaders

have always been able to modify and improve the external environment in which their universities function, and they have had the skill and determination to enable the institution to adapt and change. Without that core leadership capacity to bring the campus and the environment in harmony, the president fails and the institution suffers.

Today's economic environment, however, clearly presents a special set of challenges and opportunities and cries out for leadership. *U.S. News & World Report* recently made the inelegant observation that "If colleges were businesses they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with cost-cutting and painful reorganization."

Put another way, many institutions are going to have to take a fresh look at their mission and values, the academic programs they offer, and the ways in which teaching and learning, along with research and scholarship, take place. Presidential leadership will be tested and, as presidents meet the test, they and governing boards will be joined at the hip.

Implications for the Board

What are the implications for the governing board? Certainly if the stakes of presidential leadership are higher, the board's responsibility to search for, select, and nurture a president has grown as well. The governing board and the president need to think about and focus on the overriding strategic issues that will shape the institution's future.

During the last half of the 20th century, presidents and boards focused attention on influencing the external environment: shaping government policy, increasing support from alumni and friends, and expanding their campuses' physical capacity and academic programs. The roles of presidents and other academic leaders tended to shift to the outside.

Going forward, presidents, boards, and academic com-

munities generally need to rethink the president's leadership role. The external environment will continue to cry out for attention. At the same time, many of the answers to the current challenges facing American higher education will be found on the campus, from within. If that proves to be the case, the need for boards to search for and support academic leaders who can help the institution clarify its mission and vision, reaffirm its values, and mobilize the academic community to experiment with, assess, and embrace new and more-effective approaches will be at a premium.

The fundamental fiduciary issue facing boards is this: One can imagine a slow but prolonged downward spiral in which both academic quality and access to it are diminished in American higher education. Our society cannot tolerate that outcome. This generation of boards and academic leaders confronts leadership demands far beyond those faced by earlier generations. Boards have a special responsibility to develop and seek out talented leaders and to work with their presidents to steward their institutions through one of the most challenging eras in higher education's proud history. ■

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