

## The perils of leadership in higher education

Written by Irma McClaurin

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For the last few months, we have been inundated by scandals at universities that range from allegations of child abuse and molestation to deadly hazing rituals. In each case, the president of the institution has come under tremendous criticism and fire for failing to act, even when it's not clear that they were aware of the incidents. In two instances, the president has been terminated (Penn State) or asked to resign or "step aside" (FAMU). And while it is true that the buck literally stops with the president of a college or university, the circumstances are not nearly as black and white as they are sometimes portrayed.

As the former president of a university, I would like to suggest a little "presidential compassion" in the face of these erupting scandals for those who are leading institutions that can range in size from several hundred students to several thousand, and who are responsible for staffs of a few hundred up to over a thousand.

In such organizational giants, a university president relies upon competent staff to be responsible for their units and keep them informed. However, if you don't get to choose those staffs, you're stuck with the "X" factor or unknown quantities—and too often when we take these leadership positions, there are individuals with whom we are saddled that come with what I call

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a “Board of Trustee immunity card;” we are not permitted to terminate them—regardless of their competencies or the professional chemistry between these individuals and the sitting CEO.

Presidents also rely upon members of its Board of Trustees to keep them fully informed, and to disclose any information (preferably before the contract is signed) that may pose potential harm to the institution or embarrassment to the new president. Yet, too often, some BOT members are gatekeepers of significant information and dirty details that remain hidden from the president, or in which they are complicit, and so fail to disclose to protect themselves. In addition to conflict-of-interest forms, BOT members should be asked to complete a “significant information disclosure” form, in which they attest that they are not hiding secrets that could harm the institution or jeopardize the president’s leadership. Failure to disclose would mean their immediate removal with no possibility of every serving on the Board again—I wish.

As someone who has negotiated athletic contracts and observed the uncomfortably close relationship between Board members and coaching staff, it is difficult for me to believe that members of Penn State’s or Syracuse’s Board of Trustees had no knowledge of the allegations of sexual abuse. Yet they are not being held accountable in the same way that the presidents’ are; I’ve seen no evidence of any Board member resigning or coming under scrutiny—nor are they being asked the challenging question of “what did they know and when did they know it?”

Collegiate sports are the bane of every university president’s existence. We are held accountable for every infraction and rely upon our Athletic Directors, Coaches and Compliance Officers to speak the truth to us. Too often, for the sake of the sports, coupled with alumni and BOT pressure, or because the Athletic staff—who thinks they are “special”—mistakenly believe they can “handle” any situation, presidents may be the last to know about these incidents until they are media fodder. But in the end, it is the president who must take the heat and accept responsibility for any actions that occur at the institution on their watch.

In the short time that I was president, I learned that institutions of higher education often are broken or (in counseling nomenclature) “dysfunctional” systems. By that, I mean they are all too frequently committed to maintaining the status quo—even if it doesn’t work, and resistant to change. Operations don’t occur with any level of consistency, if at all, because too many people are invested in protecting their small piece of turf or saving themselves from any accountability, and so they perform dances of “mischievous obedience” to the vision and will of the current leader, while simultaneously covering up problems, scandals and issues that eventually explode in the president’s face. As a new president, you don’t know what you don’t know until it sideswipes you off the road.

During my tenure, I encountered staff, similar to the film character Dr. Strangelove, invested with so much power to approve or disapprove purchases that they had everyone terrorized. People were fearful that if they complained, their needs would go to the bottom of the pit and stay there. I even found as president that one person actually had the authority to approve or disapprove my expenditures—though theoretically, my approval should have superseded anyone else’s. I learned the hard way that dysfunctional systems have built in numerous ways to undermine presidential power and authority.

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Along these same lines, Boards of Trustees can also contribute to this undermining. I am convinced that an intense ethnographic study of BOTs would produce some interesting and revealing insights. Far too often, BOTs of colleges and universities are laden with alumni who have very bad cases of nostalgia (when I was a student.....), are acting out their frustrations as wannabe presidents or are simply power-hungry tyrants who use the Board to manipulate their own interests. In the end, BOTs can be more of a hindrance than as a help, and when institutions have serious leadership turn over, someone needs to scrutinize the Board. Nonetheless, the president must press on trying to lead the institution with hands sometimes tied or with over-intrusive Trustees who want to have the final say in how the institution is to be run on a daily basis—though that is NOT their job.

Traveling the conference circuits designed to acclimate new presidents to the culture of leadership in higher education, the stories I encountered were too numerous and reoccurring of Boards that interfere, don't understand the need for separation between the President's/CEO's role to oversee day-to-day operations and personnel with all the authority that such requires and the BOT's role as policy makers. It is the rare president who is blessed with a supportive Board of Trustees. And I am not suggesting they don't exist, but that they are far too rare. Ongoing training for Boards is the obvious solution, but it's rather difficult to convince someone who thinks they know everything to submit to training. And the longer they have been on the Board, the less likely they are to understand the need for a refresher course in Board behavior.

And when it comes to athletics, let's just say that this tends to be many Board members' blindside. They are living out fantasies of being a coach, and too often facilitate a culture in which athletic coaches come to think they are special (and thus immune from reprimands or reprisals by the president) because the BOT gives them direct access, and too often interferes in contract negotiations by making promises, which presidents' must find a way to fund, or treating coaches like privileged prima dons.

This is not to excuse presidents. When we sign on for such a large leadership role, we are accepting the whole shebang (known or unknown), which too often includes skeletons from the past, the current issues that no one wanted to worry us about until they erupt like a volcano (such as allegations of child abuse, sexual harassment, etc.) and financial problems that have been buried for far too long.

In my case, I used to comment too often that I felt as if "I have skeletons in the closet, dust balls in the corners, and ghosts of Presidents' past all around me." It was a challenge to operate strategically and creatively in an environment filled with that much hidden baggage. And of course, staffs that have been around a long time are in classic denial while newer ones simply announce that everything occurred before they came on board. Thus, it is up to the president to begin an excavation early on for the archaeological remains of possible scandals and hold everyone accountable for the truth.

Being a college or university president is not always a pleasant job, but someone has to do it. And the belief that you can actually make a difference, create a better organizational structure, bring order to financial chaos, support the production of new knowledge, foster innovation and creativity, contribute to the public good and change students' lives as a result is an elixir that is

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difficult to resist.

In the end, sometimes we and the public forget that colleges and universities are not big businesses—though too frequently we adopt that language to describe them and sometimes put in place a poor imitation of the bureaucratic structures and automated thinking that we think accompany corporate structures—which, by the way, successful corporations abandoned decades ago; that’s the memo higher education didn’t get.

Too often, as presidents we are mired in surviving financial problems or trying to solicit the “big gift” that will enshrine us in the institutional hall of fame. Like the Kenyan proverb says “when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers,” we forget that colleges and universities are supposed to be *nurturing* environments where we have a social contract (and a moral responsibility as *In loco parentis*) to educate our students to become civic leaders, responsible citizens, good and knowledgeable parents, exceptional artists and scientists and just a good neighbor and friend. The president is the enforcer of that social contract and must remind the community of their moral responsibility.

Sometimes the educational mission (and the social and moral contract) gets lost in the skeletons, scandals and terminations that comprise the perils facing today’s leaders in higher education. More scrutiny is certainly needed to ensure the safety of the students and other youth who associate with our institutions. But a small cup of sympathy, I’m sure, would be welcomed right about now.

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