

University Presidents

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Quick quiz: Name the current presidents of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton universities.

Not to worry if you can't, for neither can I, though I do recall that the president of Harvard is a woman, or was a woman until recently. Sixty years ago, when I was an undergraduate, I could have told you that Robert Goheen was president of Princeton, Whitney Griswold was president of Yale, and Nathan Pusey, following upon the more famous James Conant, was president of Harvard. I could have done so because these men, and a number of other university presidents of the time, were educational leaders. An educational leader, in that distant day, was someone who had firm ideas about the principles required to run a university and the ultimate rewards of higher education. They weighed in on these ideas when called upon to do so, and sometimes without waiting to be called upon. The reason you are unlikely to know the names of the presidents of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton is that the university president as an educational leader is today as quaint as the set-shot, the hoola-hoop, or the intrauterine device. You can't find one anywhere.

I have not myself studied or worked in a university run by a great president, though, as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I was the recipient of the intellectual endowment of such a figure. Robert Hutchins had left the presidency of the University of Chicago in 1950, six years before I arrived there, but so strong was his impress on its undergraduate education that my classmates and I were among its beneficiaries. What Hutchins had done, without

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so far as I know asking the permission of anyone else, was revamp the undergraduate curriculum in favor of great books over text books, protect the academic freedom of his faculty during a time when it was endangered by congressional committees and witch-hunting right-wingers, internationalize the tone of the school by bringing in foreign scholars (Enrico Fermi, Leo Straus, and others) on the run from European fascism, invent interdisciplinary study through forming the Committee on Social Thought, and remove the university from Big Ten football competition. “Football has the same relation to education,” Hutchins said, “that bullfighting has to agriculture.”

Unlike the majority of current-day university presidents, Robert Hutchins had little interest in public relations. He said what he thought, and what he thought generally went flush up against the educational platitudes of the time. Although a successful fundraiser, he never fawned over the wealthy, or even took them altogether seriously. What the rich had in common, he once claimed, was a short attention span. He kept in his desk a sign, brought out only in the presence of trusted colleagues, that read, “Dirty Money Laundered Here.” Robert Hutchins had wit, integrity of a kind that could not be trifled with, and more than a touch of grandeur.

Historically, Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, were men who represented the university president as educational innovator, guardian of the mission of higher education, standard bearer, and they became famous as such. Today a university president is more likely to become known—never famous—for finding the money to build vast athletic facilities, having a highly ranked (by the fourth-rate *US News and World Report*) MBA program, or bringing diversity to and protecting political correctness within his institution. How did this come about? How did the role of university president become so diminished in our time?

Through means many and various, but in my view by two chiefly: by democratization where democracy really has no place; and, the second connected to the first, by a radically altered vision of the nature of the institution of the university itself.

When I say that democracy has no place in the university, I mean that the university is, or at any rate was and ought still to be, a hierarchical institution, as befits an elite enterprise. The hierarchy is based upon scholarly and scientific accomplishment. The accomplishment makes for authority. The implied assumption was that intellectual achievement would give one an understanding of the true mission of the university that no amount of administrative skill or experience could hope to replace. That mission, with which current-day university presidents have no connection, is the pursuit and

promulgation of truth. The limerick about Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, from 1872 through 1880, captures the point:

My name is Benjamin Jowett.
 There's no knowledge but I know it.
 I am Master of this College,
 What I don't know isn't knowledge.

The hierarchical character of the modern university based on scholarly achievement broke down, as did much else in university life, during the years of the student protest movement. During those years establishments of all kinds were under attack. Many caved in, but the educational establishment caved in most completely. As a result, students henceforth were asked to evaluate their teachers and in some cases were called in to serve on committees to hire university administrators, including university presidents. At the departmental level, where formerly a department chairman was the most distinguished man or woman in the department, now the chairmanship became a rotating position, given with the new goal of diversity more than intellectual distinction in mind and time off or a reduced course load as a reward for those agreeing to serve in the post.

The effect of all this was the breakdown in authority in universities. Without authority, standards quickly fell. Imagine a young English department assistant professor coming to his department chairman to announce he planned to teach a course in novels about the Vietnam War. That chairman, if he or she were anything like the chairmen of old, would likely tell the young professor that, sorry, but the subject fell beneath the department standard. Students passionate about Vietnam could surely read those novels on their own, he is likely to have said, and, besides, we have these students for a severely limited period of time, and so perhaps the young professor would do best to return to teaching his course on John Milton. In that earlier time, the young professor would, no doubt sulkily, have left the chairman's office and returned to his own office to dust off his Milton. Today, more likely, he would claim a breach of his academic freedom and insist the decision be made by the entire department, where he would probably win out. How could he not, when his colleagues in the department were teaching courses (as they will be next quarter at the English Department at Northwestern University) with such titles as: "Queer Modernisms," "Asian-American Fiction as Counter-Archive," "Confederate Monuments and Union Memory," and "Postcolonial Postmodernism?" Would a Charles Eliot, a Nicholas Murray Butler, a Daniel Coit Gilmore, a Robert

Hutchins have allowed such obviously tendentious, parochial, blatantly political courses in universities under their leadership? The question, I believe, answers itself.

Yet if a contemporary university president were to attempt to quash such courses, a major scandal would surely result. The furies of protest would be aroused. Howls of dire infringement of academic freedom would rend the air, and, just possibly, be taken up by the media. Forget that academic freedom, in its origin, was meant to free academics from the pressures of outside forces, so that a professor could not be fired owing to a trustee or politician not agreeing with his views, say, on labor unions. Today academic freedom is generally interpreted to mean that a teacher may teach just about anything he or she damn well pleases, and anyone who says otherwise is a tyrant, a fascist, you fill in any other opprobrious words that come to mind.

In any case, the disgruntled young professor in my previous paragraph is unlikely to have called in the president of his university. Increasingly nowadays the understanding is that education, what goes on in classrooms and laboratories, is well outside a contemporary university president's jurisdiction, interest, ken. The university provost, the deans of the various colleges and professional schools, run all that secondary stuff. A university president can, to be sure, help boost endowment, enrollment, and his school's reputation in the dependably myopic eyes of the outside world. But about education itself, he is largely without influence or even interest.

The president is the public face of the university, which is to say, staying with anatomical metaphors, its public relations arm. His job is to be photographed in sweaters and neckties in university colors surrounded by racially and ethnically diverse students, to recount great advances made under the school's roofs in medical and technological research, to blab away about the happy victories the university has scored in the realms of diversity, inclusivity, and widened tolerance generally, to show up at football and basketball games with wealthy alumni in tow.

The traditional purpose of the university has in recent decades been dealt a near deathblow by the incursions of political correctness. In recent years large contemporary universities have increasingly taken on, at what one assumes to be serious salaries, associate provosts or deans in charge of diversity, generally appointing a black man or woman to the job. Might they do this because of a strong need, or because the federal government requires them to do so? If they are to continue to receive federal grants for their scientific and other programs, have they any choice? In any case, the contemporary university president is likely to be the last person to object.

A similar pressure, to do not the right but the necessary because expected thing, occurs in the choices universities make for their commencement speakers and honorary degree recipients. Here, too, political correctness stretches out its long, dirty finger-nailed hand. Commencement speakers were once scientists, scholars, artists, men and women of intellectual accomplishment. No honorary degrees were bestowed upon billionaires, politicians, television anchormen, famous jocks. Currently, though, no commencement ceremony could be complete without honorary degrees given to African-Americans and women, preferably both. If, along with being politically O.K., a commencement speaker is also amusing, all the better. Bill Cosby, black and amusing (at least in an earlier day), and the holder of some 60 university honorary degrees, killed a good thing when he bought all those Quaaludes.

Today many universities now go to speakers bureaus or even talent agencies to find politically correct speakers. The majority of commencement speakers this past year (2018) were—no surprise here—women. Rutgers landed Queen Latifah; the University of Connecticut, Anita Hill; Yale, Hillary Clinton; MIT, Sheryl Sandberg; and Northwestern, which last year had Billie Jean King, this year had Renée Fleming. The fees paid to such people are not, one assumes, negligible. But for universities they are worth every dollar, for a disappointing—which is to say unamusing or God forbid politically incorrect—commencement speaker might send the customers (the students and their parents who are now paying \$50,000 a year and more for undergraduate education at private schools) away unhappy.

Here we come to the changed view of the university as an institution. Where once its leaders were content to view the university as existing in splendid isolation, nicely distanced from the noise of the world, devoted to the tradition of the liberal arts and to pure scientific research, leaders of the contemporary university more and more view their students and their families as customers, and the schools that house them for four years as something like a hotel. These customers, the hope is, will spread the word about how they enjoyed their stay, and, who can say, some among them may be good for a million or two in future fundraising endeavors.

The money is likely to be spent on new buildings. The contemporary university president has increasingly become more realtor than educator. His main heritage will be in the buildings erected on campus during his time in office. With great good luck, such a building, or an entire school within the university will be named after him. Whether the buildings are needed or not is quite beside the point. These often otiose edifices suggest progress, and progress, for university presidents as for once upon a time General Electric, is their most important product.

The highest paid public employee in every state, it was recently revealed, was the state university football coach, who earned a great deal more than the state's university president. The same is largely true of private universities with Division I teams. As of 2016, the salary of Duke's basketball coach was \$8.89 million; its president's salary, or total compensation package, was \$1.3 million. In the early 1960s, when I lived in Little Rock, Arkansas, the football coach's salary was \$25,000, the president's salary, if only in those days to save face, was pushed up to \$26,000. Of course the coaches of winning football and basketball teams—or “programs,” as these money making and fundraising outfits are called—are worth more, often vastly more, than mere university presidents. The chef (or football coach), to stay with my notion of the contemporary university as a hotel, deserves to be paid more than the *maitre d'* (or university president).

Different universities are controlled by different sources of power. At some universities, the center of power is the administration; at some it is the trustees; at state schools it is often the state legislatures; at some rare schools, it is the faculty. At most private universities the president's chief job, the ultimate measure of his success under the current dispensation, is raising funds, both among alumni and trustees. Hanging with the wealthy in a position of unspoken but obvious subservience cannot be much fun. But, then, that is why university presidents are paid what they are, and why they are allowed to live—in mansions, with servants, plush pensions to follow—as if they are themselves rich.

The average tenure of a contemporary university president seems to be eight or ten years. Afterwards some go back into teaching; others go off to head or work in foundations; some sit, for impressive emoluments, on corporation boards. In my thirty years teaching at Northwestern, no university president has left any notable impress on the quality of the school's education, or at least none that I have been able to notice. What has been true of Northwestern has, I suspect, been so almost everywhere else. Each university president has merely kept the pot boiling without noticing what wretched fare was cooking inside it. None has prevented or even slowed any of the continuing rot of the humanities and social sciences within their institution, nor even thought to do so. What a blessing that there cannot be feminist physics, or gay chemistry, or Afro-American biology, or the contemporary university would today be an all but entirely useless place!

A strange job, that of president of a contemporary American university, one filled with ambiguities and ironies. In our time every university president is in his day a minor-league Ozymandias, within the small compass of his realm a

king of kings—and yet a king without any real power to change things that matter. How many, when it is time to depart, have had the introspection to look upon his own works and despaired? Too few, I fear.