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President to Presidents

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I do believe my contemporaries are a unique generation of university presidents -- academic administrators with a social conscience. As I think back on it, it seems obvious why many of us, who as faculty or students were active in civil rights and the anti-war movement, made the natural progression from political action to university curricular reform. Rejecting the view that higher education should serve a predominantly elite population, we proceeded to overhaul what we perceived as an outmoded university curriculum as we struggled to open up the university to new ideas, new teaching strategies, and most of all to new populations. In my generation of young faculty, at least in the humanities and social sciences, there was a heightened commitment to the values of equity, justice and diversity and a tremendous concern for reforming the very institution that had given those of us who were not from wealthy families our edge -- the university. Our efforts at reform coincided with the articulation of an urban university agenda which a number of AASCU institutions embraced. Those campuses were invariably led, as I recall, by presidents and chancellors who saw an urban commitment as fundamental to an expanded sense of institutional mission. As successful as our generation may have been in challenging established institutional values and educational orthodoxy across the spectrum of American higher education, it seems clear in retrospect that we were quite unsuccessful in articulating a new value system to support the curricula reforms we helped to initiate. Not until very recently has higher education taken on the daunting task of identifying and institutionalizing a new set of civic and moral values to replace those that my generation helped to discard.

Indeed, in the 1970s and 80s there had been, instead, a faculty-led counter effort to make the individual classroom, and the university as a

whole, value-free communities. Depending on their political point of reference, or ours, critics objected to “right-wing proselytizing” or “left-wing political correctness” whenever the subject of values was raised. The result was several generations of students educated without a well-developed sense of moral integrity, institutional identification or a positive set of social, political and community goals. Thirty years ago, about 50 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds voted in Presidential elections; today, less than one-third do, and only 20 percent vote in Congressional elections. Shame on us!

As a result of the failure of our reform generation, by the 1980s public higher education found itself subjected to as much public criticism as we have received in our entire history. Certainly, we would be hard pressed to find a period when presidential leadership was held in such low esteem or subject to such public ridicule. Our reputations had begun to erode as early as 1968, when universities first exposed the extent to which they had lost touch with what our faculty often sarcastically described as middle America; when presidents were so successful in demonstrating how ineffectual we were in helping to midwife one of the most extraordinary educational and social revolutions in the country’s history. The truly monumental absence of academic and moral leadership on the part of university presidents in the 1960s, I then thought, seemed destined to be maintained in the 1990s by a new generation who seemed to have profited too little from the experience of their predecessors.

At a time when this country desperately needs inspired and committed university leaders, ones who can bring to bear the extraordinary resources of their institutions, far too many of us, myself included, often respond like bureaucrats. The situation is compounded when presidents also hesitate to speak out on the great moral and social issues of our day, leaving the public with the impression that not only do we not wish to lead, but that we cannot lead, that we are, in fact, not leaders, but merely

managers. As a case in point -- many of us, I suspect, received a letter not so long ago from a former university president announcing the formation of a new consulting firm. Attached was a resume listing the number of new buildings erected and private dollars raised while president. No mention of curricula reform, community outreach, student success stories, faculty achievements -- just the number of new buildings and private dollars! How sad, I thought at the time. We have moved in judging the quality of presidential leadership from victory on the football field to success in capital campaigns.

Yet I know that we did not give up the joys of the classroom and the comfort of the research library to take responsibility for seeing that the campus busses run on time! Of course it is important to maintain a well-managed campus, to ensure that it has a good budget, that the grounds are well kept, that the students get their courses when they need them, that financial aid works well, that the info-tech beast is fed. But the vast majority of us came into education first as teachers and moved to administration only because we saw in it a broader platform for achieving the goals we had set for ourselves as educators. It is in keeping with this broader mandate that we should take responsibility for dealing with the issues that face our community and should bring university resources to bear on them.

Consider our strengths: extraordinary faculty, great students, an enormous research capability, support personnel with skills that can be put to community use! Academic administration for me is simply the extension of my role as educator and both are extensions of my role as citizen. How can I be concerned about the kind of citizens I graduate and not be concerned about my own role as citizen or the civic role of the institution over which I preside? Should not the university be a model citizen that builds, rather than destroys, nurtures rather than alienates, comforts rather than harasses, working always to fulfill the needs of our complex society, and in so doing presenting a positive model for our students to emulate? In the past, I have speculated that part of the presidential leadership problem may have to do with length of service.

Compared to some of the legendary giants who preceded us, far too often today's presidents are relatively transient, moving every five years or less, bringing along all of the baggage accumulated in former positions and leaving too soon with too many unfulfilled promises. Not surprisingly, the footprints they leave behind are often faint and easily blown away -- not like the deeply embedded tracks of those earlier, long-serving leaders after whom scholarships, buildings and even the occasional baby are named. It is difficult enough in five years to have a significant impact on the institution itself, let alone the larger community. If we cut and run, seeking higher salaries, more prestige or an easier life -- say one without faculty unions -- we may find it exceedingly difficult to assert our moral authority, to provide a model for our students and faculty, and to speak out in knowledgeable and persuasive terms on the significant issues of our time.

The charge made by some of our critics is that we are not risk takers. Hardly anyone in San Francisco can recall the names of the two presidents who preceded me in office but everyone in town knows who preceded them -- S.I. Hayakawa. And he is remembered not simply because he was a U.S. Senator; he captured the public imagination because he was perceived as a risk taker. I sometimes wonder if an unintended and unwelcome by-product of the modern search process has been to weed out risk takers and individuals with strong beliefs in favor of consensus-driven, "don't rock the boat" candidates? I am of mixed mind about this. Many of the men and women who are outstanding presidents and chancellors today would probably not have made it to their posts when the white old boy network ruled. There is no doubt that higher education has benefited extraordinarily from opening up the process, but we have closed out some very exciting people as well. Still, there is much that we as sitting presidents can do about this as we select new department chairs, deans, and provosts. We can seek out, appoint, and support the risk takers, the men and women of great integrity, moral character and vision. We can have the most dramatic impact on the leadership of higher education in the decades to come by virtue of whom we begin to choose now -- beginning with department chairs. Despite

my earlier pessimism about our progress in the 1970's and 1980's, I am delighted to see that after a long hiatus, we are once again discussing the university mission in terms of values, especially those of active citizenship. As presidents, we have come to recognize that our students need a sense of community and social values, and that our democracy depends on the readiness of each new generation to take personal responsibility for the governance of society. As educators, we have accepted our obligation to turn things around again, to demonstrate that there are life-enriching alternatives to cynicism, categorical distrust of authority, and a sense of civic powerlessness. As a broad movement, this revival of what my friend and colleague, Tom Ehrlich, has called "civic and moral learning" can be said to have started more than a decade ago when a small band of college and university presidents committed themselves and their institutions to community service by creating Campus Compact. Now numbering over 750 member institutions, Compact has grown into what many consider to be the most exciting movement in higher education today. As the concept of community service has evolved into service learning and now beyond that to the even broader goal of civic engagement, we even have a Republican President using the bully pulpit of the White House to assert the importance of civic engagement in a time of social, political and international stress. Today, viewing the national scene, I have come to believe that we have reached a very exciting stage – perhaps even a turning point – as we pursue our commitment to civic and moral learning. Remarkably, for higher education, we now talk openly, and with great enthusiasm, about values, particularly those of active citizenship. As this wave sweeps across the nation, we are presented with an historic obligation and unprecedented opportunity. Civic engagement promotes everything we most value in the academy, and if we embrace this movement together we can truly transform our students, our communities and our selves. Belying my earlier criticism that the presidential role has been educationally diminished, shrunken into a "businessman president" model that affords little scope for personal moral leadership, we can see abundant evidence that a new generation is taking up the charge expressed so eloquently by University of Hawaii

President Evan Dobbelle: "... to awaken the conscience and assert the moral authority of academic institutions...to look beyond our gates...to exercise our responsibility to society in our own sphere of influence – our neighborhoods, our community, our city."

There are many presidents amongst us who care – about nurturing students' idealism and honing it through community action. About practicing the values we espouse – social justice, equality, empowering the disenfranchised. About refusing to be an island of relative privilege in a sea of need. Among the most vivid examples are those of universities that have become deeply involved in the overall improvement of a distressed community. At his previous presidency, Connecticut's Trinity College, Evan Dobbelle forged a partnership with the city of Hartford to rebuild the poor and dangerous neighborhood surrounding the campus, and \$175 million from many sources has since gone into the project.

At Fresno State University in California, President John Welty saw in an adjacent neighborhood, with one of the lowest per capita incomes in California, an opportunity for a partnership providing educational and social services from dental care, to the arts, to technology training. Welty's leadership has been critical to the program's creation – and its continuance. He has said: "If we expect our students to be meaningfully engaged in civic life, we must expect the University to demonstrate leadership as well." As president of Portland State University, Judith Ramaley rebuilt morale and gave a new sense of self to an institution that badly needed both, transforming Portland State into what many consider a model urban university. At the heart of her success is an innovative undergraduate curriculum called University Studies that engages faculty and students in community-based research and service projects throughout the Portland area. As Ramaley has said, "There's nothing quite like focusing the mind by knowing that the results will be viewed not by your instructor or fellow students, but by people whose livelihood or quality of life or options will be reshaped by what you do."

Presidential moral leadership has many forms, and many voices. Duke University's Nan Keohane writing her campus to explain why she would not sign a "statement of concern" circulated after September 11 by faculty and students opposed to the use of military force against terrorism. Graham Spanier making Penn State a national leader in efforts to curb student alcohol abuse. John Di Biaggio guaranteeing before he accepted the Tufts presidency that the Board of Trustees shared his commitment to extending outreach and service activities by students, and teaching a course every year – a course that he created – entitled "Leadership for Active Citizenship." Robert Carruthers at the University of Rhode Island living by his belief that the leader's challenge is "to make it more acceptable and safe for people to bring their moral force and vision to the fore" – a view that transformed the energy of a group of black students who took over the administration building from protest to problem-solving. What all of these presidents, and hundreds of others, have in common is a vision that goes beyond the more traditional mission of an educational institution, one that reflects a keen sense of values, of what is right and wrong. Such presidents are firm in their beliefs, but not unbending. They recognize clearly the need to accommodate other values, or other sensibilities. Time and again it seems to me, such presidents demonstrate a sense of who they are and what their institution is, not always bowing to the latest fad or the latest set of pressures. There are things such presidents will not do. They have developed a guiding ethical basis -- some social imperative, sense of institutional goals, and personal values -- that will make them willing to say, if necessary, "I can't do that, I will not do that, I will step down from the presidency because what I'm being asked to do now is not compatible with my own particular value system." Or conversely, they will push in the strongest way for what they believe is right, even if it costs them their jobs.

To this point, I have focused on what we can, and should, ask of ourselves as holders of a bully pulpit. Let me offer some recent, and to me very heartening, observations about what our campuses are seeking from us as presidents. Since September 11, I have come to believe that

faculty, staff and students are really hungry for -- and responsive to -- presidential moral leadership and support, particularly at a time of crisis. All of us have faced special leadership challenges in the last year -- comforting our communities, working to ensure that free speech did not become hate speech, addressing fears, providing factual information, and maintaining a supportive campus for all.

On my large, decentralized commuter campus, e-mail has proved to be a powerfully effective means of reaching out. From the very first all-campus e-mail, sent on September 12, return messages started to come in immediately from students, faculty, and staff. Overwhelmingly, they expressed gratitude for the outreach to them and appreciation of the ideals we were seeking to reinforce. The messages were often brief: "Thank you for your leadership in sending out this very important message" or, "I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate the thoughtfulness in your messages and it makes me happy to be a SFSU student."

I mention this not as a personal point of pride, but as a vivid reminder of the power to inspire, encourage, comfort -- in short, to lead -- that is ours, if we but seize it. For me, one of the insights emerging since September 11, and continuing in this current period of intense Middle East violence and tension, is a recognition that our past lapses notwithstanding, the position of university president retains a greater ethical and emotional power than many of us may realize. This suggests to me that a larger public forum is available to presidents than they commonly use. The end message, however, is not one of reproach but renewed belief in ourselves and our institutions. We have the values; we have the podium; we have the resources; and we have in our ranks splendid models of presidential civic and moral leadership. Now, more than ever, such leadership is needed.

I would like to think that some decades from now, our successors will look back to this period as a turning point -- more accurately, a returning point -- for college and university presidents, that they will see in us

women and men committed to using our position for the fullest good – women and men who helped to strengthen hearts as well as minds, and communities as well as curricula. We can do this. We will do this.

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