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ABSTRACT

During the late 1970s the Higher Education Research Institute of Los Angeles conducted open-ended interviews with 45 presidents of private, liberal arts colleges that had received grants from the Exxon Education Foundation between 1973 and 1977. The responses indicated that the collegiate style of governance exists at these schools only in limited form. The presidents displayed very ambivalent views of their faculty members. Typically, they praised their faculties' teaching abilities to the skies but otherwise found the faculties fractious, argumentative, and difficult to deal with. In evaluating their campuses' strengths and weaknesses, the presidents manifestly used subjective norms. They obviously measured their own schools not against national norms but against a small group of other colleges of the same approximate quality, in the same geographical area, or under the sponsorship of the same sect, as their own. (Author/PGD)

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Liberal Arts College Presidents:  
How they Perceive their Students, Faculties, and Colleges

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## Introduction

From 1973 to 1977, the Exxon Education Foundation made grants of about \$50,000 to each of 50 private liberal arts colleges and universities to improve their management techniques. All but four of these schools are classified, according to the Carnegie Commission typology, as "colleges"; they are located in all regions of the United States; they range from academically superior to academically marginal; they are sponsored by a wide variety of sects and by no sect at all. In short, they come reasonably close to being a representative sample of the nation's four-year, private, liberal arts colleges.

For the past six years the Higher Education Research Institute of Los Angeles (HERI) has studied these "colleges", collecting more than 1500 forced-choice questionnaires from faculty members and conducting open-ended interviews with about 700 administrators. Among the administrators interviewed were 45 of the college presidents; they were interviewed at their own campuses for one to two hours each. This paper is based on a careful content analysis of parts of these 45 open-ended interviews.

## Overview of the Findings

1. The "collegiate" style of governance exists at these schools only in limited form. These schools -- almost all small, many

of them rural, many more than a century old -- might be thought to have about as purely a "collegiate" form of governance as most American colleges. But their presidents, when asked whose opinions they particularly valued in making their decisions, seldom mentioned their faculty. Rather, they relied most heavily on the opinions of administrators, especially non-academic administrators.

2. Presidents have very ambivalent views of their faculty members. Most of them praise their faculty mightily for their work with students, but many of these same presidents, when asked what frustrates them most about their job, said it was dealing with the faculty, and they went on to castigate their faculties for their suspiciousness, their contentiousness, their obstructionism, and so on. One wonders how the faculty, at college after college, can be so angelic in the classroom and so devilish outside it. The data suggest that the same qualities which help make one an effective classroom teacher -- ability to see all sides of an issue, skepticism towards authority, and refusal to accept idées reçues -- make these faculty members, as seen by their presidents, considerably less than ideal in helping govern their college.

3. On these campuses in the middle and late 1970s, the influence of the "counter culture" seems to have been minimal. When asked what non-academic experiences are the least valuable for their college's students, not a single president cited drugs,

communal living, or "hippie" lifestyles. But almost one-third mentioned activities redolent of the 1950s -- fraternity and sorority hi-jinks, excessive drinking, and, more than anything else, intercollegiate athletics.

4. In evaluating their campuses' strengths and weaknesses, these presidents manifestly used subjective norms. Asked what was "most beneficial" about their school's academic offerings, presidents of colleges with tiny libraries lauded their book collections, presidents of colleges with three or four dozen faculty members praised the breadth and scope of their course offerings, presidents of colleges whose freshmen scored well below the national average on the SAT extolled their students' intellectual abilities, and so on. And presidents of some of the nation's most distinguished liberal arts institutions, asked what was "least beneficial" about their schools, cited programs and departments that would be the envy of most other colleges. The data suggest that these leaders are comparing their own college not to what David Riesman has called the "academic procession" as a whole, but rather to specific reference groups -- to other liberal arts colleges of about the same size, in the same region, sponsored by the same group.

We will now discuss these findings in some detail.

1. The "collegiate" style of governance exists at these schools only in limited form. If presidential consultation with the faculty is the cornerstone of the collegiate style of governance at colleges, then at the colleges we studied the foundation is shaky indeed. When 23 of the presidents were asked, "In making major decisions, do you have certain associates whose opinions you particularly value?",<sup>1</sup> the faculty, as a group, was not valued highly. Rather, most of the presidents relied on the corporate/bureaucratic model of decision-making where consultation is largely restricted to the president's staff (see Table 1).

Of the 23 presidents, 83% said they particularly valued the opinions of one or more of their non-academic deans. (Of this group, the deans of finance, planning, and admissions were most frequently cited). Only slightly more than half (52%) of the presidents said they particularly valued the opinions of their academic deans.

Only 48% of the presidents listed faculty opinions as among those they particularly valued, and those presidents that did cite the faculty almost invariably said that they would consult with some of the faculty -- for example, "key" faculty, senior faculty, or faculty members who had expertise in the particular subject at hand. Only two presidents mentioned standing faculty committees or faculty-student advisory committees as groups whose opinions

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<sup>1</sup>Though 45 presidents were interviewed, this question was asked of only 23 of them.

they particularly valued, and none of the presidents named their faculty as a whole.

The ideas of students were far less valued by the presidents than those of either the deans or the faculty; only five (22%) of the presidents cited students' opinions at all. Interestingly, though, those five presidents preside over five of the most distinguished colleges of the 23. Although findings from such a small sample should be interpreted cautiously, it appears that presidents of prestigious, highly selective colleges value the opinions of their students more than <sup>do</sup> those of other colleges.

When the presidents were asked whose opinion "outside the formal line of authority" they relied on, they cited a very diverse group of individuals. Four presidents reported that they regularly consulted with other college presidents; three said they sought advice from private foundation officers. In general, these presidents of small, liberal arts colleges showed a propensity for consulting with people all over the country. For example, the president of one liberal arts college in Tennessee, whose college enrolls barely more than 1000 students, said he relied on the opinions of college presidents in Alabama and Georgia, a university vice-president in Michigan, and a high foundation official in New York City.

Table 1

Associates whose Opinions College Presidents Particularly Value  
when Making Major Decisions

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Associate	% of College Presidents	n <sup>a</sup>
Non-academic Deans	83	19
Academic Deans	52	12
Faculty	48	11
Students	22	5
Members of the Board of Control	22	5
Other College Presidents	18	4
People from Private Foundations	13	3

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<sup>a</sup>  
N = 23

2. Presidents have very ambivalent views of their faculty members. One of the most intriguing findings about these college presidents' attitudes is how very differently they view their faculty as teachers, on the one hand, and as participants in wider campus life, on the other. When asked to name the "most beneficial" aspects of their schools, they cite the quality of teaching more often than anything else, but many of them bitterly criticize the faculty for other reasons (see Table 2).

Table 2

College Presidents' Views of their Faculty

View of Faculty	% of College Presidents	n <sup>a</sup>
<u>UNFAVORABLE VIEWS</u>		
Faculty a group that "inhibits, frustrates, or opposes" the President	42	19
President's relations with faculty are one of his or her "major disappointments"	38	17
<u>FAVORABLE VIEWS</u>		
Faculty is the aspect of the college's academic program that is "most beneficial" to students	42	19
Relationship with faculty is one of the President's "highlights"	27	12

<sup>a</sup>N = 45

All presidents were asked, "When you look at your academic program (courses for credit), what aspect seems most beneficial for students?", and often presidents who cited their faculty's teaching, in responding to this question, elsewhere severely criticized their faculty, as the following quotations show.

President of a college in South Carolina

The "most beneficial" aspect is "the quality of the faculty and fact that most of them are concerned about teaching undergraduate students."

But elsewhere he said that the faculty is "...not willing to adjust to the particular needs of minority students....the slowness of the faculty to change is one frustrating thing."

President of a liberal arts college in New York

The "most beneficial" aspect is the "seminar system and the donning system which provides small classes and one-to-one relations."

Elsewhere, he stated that his faculty has an "...inability... to perceive their jobs and lives in the context of an industry, and thus accommodating change and being imaginative."

President of a liberal arts college in Arkansas

The "most beneficial" aspect is that the college is "very strong on working with students (on an individual basis) who either have difficulties or who have strong interests. Very good at diagnosing. Several faculty are good at developing fresh approaches to learning.... The people on the faculty and staff have a good attitude to

providing the best possible education for the student....Very strong commitment to undergrad education. Everyone satisfied with and committed to good, solid, undergraduate education."

But he goes on to say that faculty "...behave in an immature way....," "are a serious frustration," "the most serious obstacle," "faculty can wreak havoc...", which is "very frustrating," and that "there are not enough resources that allow us to support or retain high quality faculty."

President of a liberal arts college in Ohio

The "most beneficial" aspect is "...an able faculty interested in teaching first and foremost...."

But elsewhere, the president says that the attitude of the faculty is "...a general disappointment....they won't take a cooperative look....very difficult for me....used to be very turbulent.... We're not nearly as compatible as I would like."

There are at least four possible reasons why presidents possess such widely divergent views of their faculty members as classroom teachers, on the one hand, and as participants in the wider campus life and human beings, on the other. The first is that faculty members at these small, liberal arts colleges are hired primarily for their teaching skills and interests, and only

secondarily for any other virtues they may have, and that they naturally are superior in those qualities for which they were carefully chosen than in others.

Second, college presidents may praise their faculty's teaching ability so highly because they themselves are not the audience for their faculty's pedagogical efforts. It is relatively easy to be satisfied with a service that does not affect one directly. Perhaps if the presidents actually had to take their professors' courses they would not be so enthralled with their faculty's teaching abilities.

Third, faculty members are the only group of people on campus who -- many of them, anyway -- possess tenure, and thus they have considerably more leeway in their behavior, in what they say and do, than do administrators and students, who are not tenured; thus the faculty, with the relative security provided by tenure, can cause the president more grief than can others.

Fourth, the same qualities that may make one an effective classroom teacher, in many cases -- irreverence towards received ideas, the ability to criticize accepted views, and a penchant for seeing many different sides of the same question -- may make one an abrasive colleague and member of campus committees.

At any rate, the college presidents we studied have more ambivalent attitudes towards their faculty members -- many of them love their faculty's teaching, and very little else about them -- than they have towards any other group of people on campus.

3. On these campuses in the middle and late 1970s, the influence of the "counter culture" seems to have been minimal.

Many college presidents spent the mid- and late 1960s worrying about the unholy trinity of sex, drugs, and treason on their campuses. In the mid- and late 1970s, on the other hand, the presidents we interviewed seemed much less concerned about these activities than about more traditional undergraduate hi-jinks.

We asked the 45 presidents, "What nonacademic programs or experiences (at your college) are the least valuable for the student?" Not a single president named anything relating to drugs, campus political disturbances, or counter-cultural activities in general. Twelve of them (27%) said they could not think of one single nonacademic program or experience offered by their college that was "least valuable" to students. Of the 33 presidents who cited such a program or experience, 11 (33%) cited activities which can be classified as traditional "collegiate" activities -- intercollegiate sports, drinking, and aspects of fraternity/sorority life.

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<sup>2</sup> These findings must be interpreted with considerable caution. It is quite possible that the reason why no presidents at all cited behavior concerning drugs and other counter-cultural activities is that these activities are often illegal -- spectator sports, drinking, fraternity/sorority hi-jinks, and so on may therefore be "safer" to mention to outsiders who are evaluating one's school. The fact that 12 of the 45 presidents we questioned were unable or unwilling to cite a single nonacademic program or experience that was "least valuable" to their students -- surely every campus has some nonacademic programs or activities which are not particularly valuable -- supports our speculation that the presidents may have spoken less than candidly on this subject.

Intercollegiate sports aroused more presidential ire than did any other activity; it was cited by six (13%) of the 45 presidents. One stated bluntly, "The biggest waste of time is spectator sports," and another said that intercollegiate sports took up far too much of his students' time and energy.

Drinking was cited next most often as the "least valuable" nonacademic activity, being mentioned by four (9%) of the presidents. One said, "I'm not at all fond of the amount of alcohol consumption that goes on around here," and another added, "The partying, beer drinking atmosphere many students wish to maintain is the biggest threat to our academic program."

4. In evaluating their campuses' strengths and weaknesses these presidents manifestly used subjective norms. Another striking characteristic of the presidents' remarks was how strikingly subjective their views of their colleges seemed to be. Time and again, presidents cited both strengths and weaknesses of their own schools -- particularly strengths -- that appear to an outside observer to be questionable. It is difficult to put these findings into percentages, because whether a president used subjective norms in rating his or her own college is itself a subjective judgment, but time after time presidents' perceptions of their colleges' characteristics indicate that their frame of reference is something other than national

college norms. Some illustrations of presidents' subjective perceptions, both of the "strengths" and "weaknesses" of their campuses, are cited below.

### Strengths

The president of a tiny liberal arts college in southern California, asked to name his school's "most beneficial" academic program, lauded the "practical aspect" of his college's education. Actually, a scrutiny of this college's catalog shows that virtually all its courses are in the liberal arts and religion, that these courses are presented, so far as one can tell from the catalog, in conventional ways, and that, in general, this college's curriculum does not seem to be as "practical" as that offered by hundreds of other colleges.

The president of a small liberal arts college in Maine extolled his college's "excellent library." Actually, this library owns about 300,000 books, fewer than not only the libraries of hundreds of American colleges and universities, but also than several liberal arts colleges in New England that are younger and also possess smaller enrollments than his college.

The president of one liberal arts college in the South cited, as one of his institution's strengths, its "honors program." Actually, this college's freshmen achieve, year after year, some of the very lowest SAT scores of those at any college in the United States. Indeed, in the eighth edition of Cass and Birnbaum's Comparative Guide to American Colleges, which presents data from the year this president was interviewed, this college's

combined freshmen SAT scores are listed as well below 700, making one wonder how vigorous an honors program it can offer,

The chief executive officer of one urban college in New Jersey cited as a particular strength of his college its "proximity of people to people." Actually, at his institution, according to the eighth edition of Comparative Guide to American Colleges, fully 50% of his college's students live off-campus, and 50% of those who live on-campus go home for weekends, leading one to doubt that his college's "proximity of people to people" is comparable to that of the hundreds of American liberal arts colleges where most students live on campus and fewer than half go home each weekend.

Finally, the president of a college in one middle-sized, Southwestern city said that one of the great strengths of his college is its "access to (name of city) and its culture." Actually, while this city -- the second largest in its state -- may offer more cultural amenities than most of the hamlets and farm communities that surround it, it is not what most Americans would think of as a place with vast cultural resources.

#### Weaknesses

The chief executive officers seemed almost equally subjective when asked about the "weaknesses" of their campuses. To cite only two examples, the president of one college lamented that its "academic standards need reviewing," although his school,

nationally famous despite its tiny size, is considered among the very best American liberal arts colleges, and its standards, even before they are reviewed, would be the envy of most other colleges.

And the president of another liberal arts college said of two of his departments, "English is very weak" and "math is an absolute disaster. We fail most at developing the student's ability to think critically." Actually, his school is one of the half-dozen or so most esteemed liberal arts colleges in the United States. Every professor in the mathematics department, at the time the president called it an "absolute disaster," possessed a Ph.D. from one of the seven highest-rated math departments in the country, according to Roose and Andersen's A Rating of Graduate Programs (1970). Though the math department at this school may not be as good as the other departments, it seems likely that most American liberal arts colleges would be delighted to trade math departments with this president.

### Conclusion

These are our study's major findings -- that at American private, liberal arts colleges in the mid- and late 1970s, the collegiate style of governance existed only in limited form, college presidents had ambivalent views of their faculty members, the influence of the "counter culture" appeared to be minimal, and that presidents, in evaluating their own schools, often used manifestly subjective norms. It would be instructive to find out

whether these findings -- based on data which are now four or five years old -- could be repeated today, and whether they characterize other types of colleges -- for example, universities and comprehensive four-year colleges -- as well.