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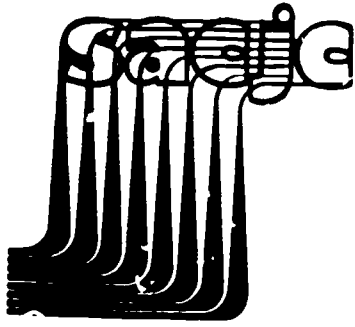
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ABSTRACT

Fulfilling the role of the community college president requires that a balance be maintained between internal constituents (e.g., students, faculty, administrators, and support staff) and external constituents (e.g., politicians, members of coordinating agencies, business leaders, trustees, alumni, and special interest groups). When the president sees that this balance has been lost, he/she must apply the proper amount of pressure and exert a positive and countervailing force to right the balance as quickly, as efficiently, and as painlessly as possible. The president must also keep in mind that imbalance between internal and external constituents may be caused by positive activities, as well as negative ones. Potential dangers to institutional balance include: (1) lack of an environment in which routine matters and minor problems are handled efficiently; (2) complacency on campus as reflected by a prolonged state of institutional inactivity in areas such as governance, construction, and teaching and learning improvement; (3) the tendency of groups on either side to band together to increase their influence, thereby presenting the president with continually shifting coalitions to either pacify or render less powerful; and (4) the possibility that various constituencies will crossover to other categories or otherwise act in an unexpected manner. A classic example of the president's role in maintaining balance relates to the issue of quality versus open access, which involves not only educational questions, but political, social, and economic factors as well. In this case, as in all others, the president must ensure balance, for without it, the college can never reach its full potential. (EJV)

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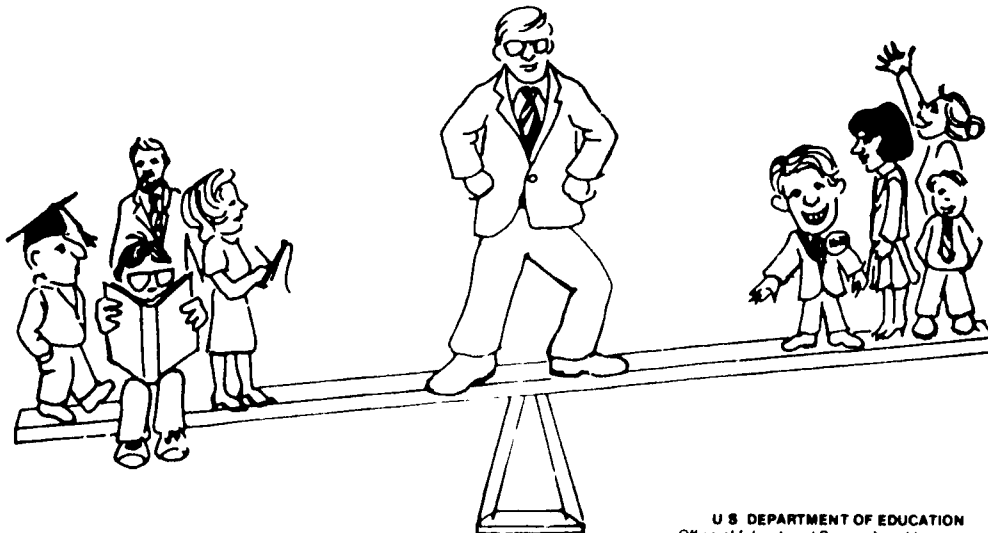
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Balancing The Presidential Seesaw

by George B. Vaughan

In considering the community college presidency, picture, if you will, a seesaw with a community college president on top, directly above the fulcrum, feet slightly apart, legs slightly bent for balance, and the weight shifting gently from side to side. This image, I believe, accurately portrays the role of today's community college president.

On either side of the seesaw are the internal and external constituents of the college. On one side—the left, perhaps—are students, faculty, administrators, support staff, and other internal constituents; on the other side are politicians, members of coordinating agencies, business leaders, trustees, alumni, special interest groups and other external constituents.

The primary role of the president is to keep the presidential seesaw in proper balance. Proper balance does not mean a lack of movement, to the contrary, it means keeping the seesaw constantly but gently moving at all times. It is imperative that neither end become overloaded because the college can not function properly when either end of the seesaw hits the ground too often or stays on the ground too long, or when movement ceases for a prolonged period of time.

When the seesaw is out of balance, the unsuccessful president applies the proper amount of pressure, a positive force, by shifting weight to alternate of the see-

saw as needed. Through applying pressure, the president rights the balance when either end of the seesaw hits the ground and keeps the seesaw in motion when external or internal forces attempt to bring it to a halt.

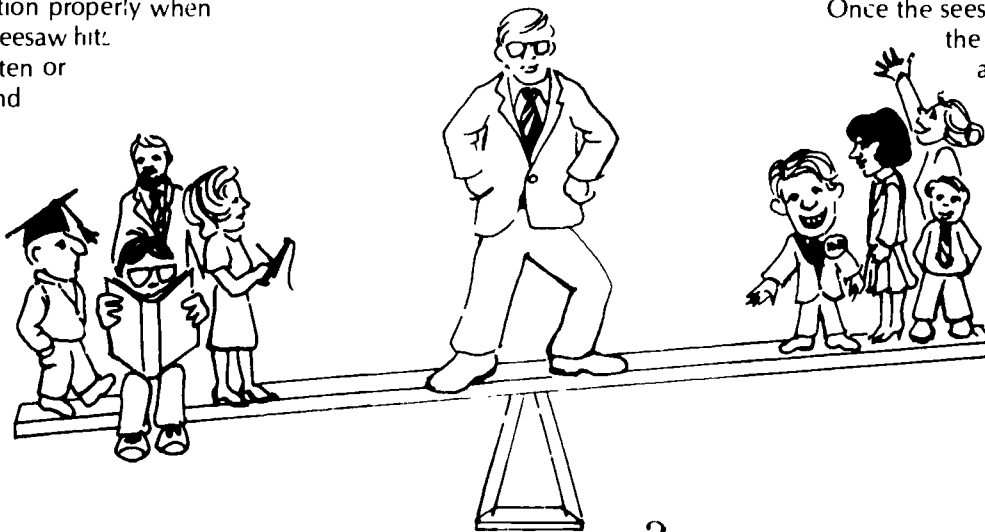
The Delicate Balance

The presidential seesaw, like the seesaw of one's childhood, is delicately balanced. Just as it does not take a 300 pound person to throw the childhood seesaw out of balance, neither does it take a major crisis to throw the presidential seesaw out of balance. When the presidential seesaw is out of balance, as all are at times, some constituents are left high in the air while others are unable to get their feet off the ground. Indeed, if the seesaw is out of balance for a prolonged period of time, the president will ultimately lose his or her balance and slide down the seesaw. (The imagery of the president sliding from the leader-

ship role is more accurate than falling, for the decline is usually gradual rather than sudden, by degrees rather than by a sudden drop.) Once the slide begins, the president is no longer able to control his or her own destiny, much less the destiny of the college. The successful president rights the balance as quickly, as efficiently, and as painlessly as possible.

Keeping the presidential seesaw in proper balance requires more than stopping the presidential slide (once the sliding starts, it is often too late to right the balance) and more than engaging in "crisis management." Maintaining proper balance is indeed a delicate undertaking, often requiring the sensitivity of an artist and the vigilance of a commanding officer. While most presidents anticipate and plan for major events that tend to throw the seesaw out of balance, the successful president deals effectively with the seemingly insignificant, unexpected events which can ultimately throw the seesaw out of balance if they are not dealt with properly.

Once the seesaw is out of balance, the president must serve as a countervailing force to those constituents or groups that are causing the imbalance. **A word of caution: causing imbalance must not be viewed as analogous to causing trouble, for the imbalance may be caused by positive activities as**



well as negative ones. For example, a very capable program head or a group of faculty members may be performing in an extraordinary fashion, thus dominating campus activities to such an extent that the seesaw is out of balance, a situation that cannot be tolerated indefinitely no matter how noble the cause. (Big-time sports are infamous for causing imbalances on campus, and certainly those university presidents with major athletic programs can readily identify with the imbalance that occurs when the football teams win too often—or not often enough.)

While the successful president does not become involved with a large number of college-wide day-to-day activities, it is nevertheless only through the actions of the president that the total college is kept in balance and its mission accomplished. Indeed, if the president is unable to create an environment in which routine matters are handled routinely, the seemingly endless stream of problems and issues will permanently throw the seesaw out of balance. If minor problems are not handled efficiently, they stack up on each end of the seesaw, causing it to bow in the middle—a situation that smacks of incompetence to even the most casual observer. When the weight becomes too heavy, the seesaw snaps, and with it the president's tenure in office and reputation on campus as a leader.

The Greatest Danger

While minor events, as well as major ones, can destroy the balance of the presidential seesaw, the greatest danger to most colleges is more insidious and potentially longer lasting than the failure to deal with disruptive events. **This insidious, potentially devastating situation results not from a major budget cut, not from a march on the president's office by faculty or students, and not from a major confrontation**

with the governing board. The greatest danger to the college is when the seesaw stops.

Lack of the seesaw's movement brings about complacency on campus. Complacency is an insidious danger which can snare the campus administration and faculty in its web. Ironically perhaps, this great danger rarely results in the dismissal of the president because various individuals and groups prefer the temporary calmness that comes from lack of motion. The governing board may perceive the lack of motion as stability resulting from presidential effectiveness; politicians may be relieved that costly new buildings are not being built nor new programs being developed. Faculty members may view a lack of motion as satisfaction with the teaching and learning process. Coordinating agencies will likely welcome the relief from the pressure of the past two decades, and the president may perceive the lack of motion as an endorsement of presidential performance. **But the president who promotes or accepts a prolonged state of inactivity is doing the college a disservice and has outlived his or her usefulness as president of that particular institution.**

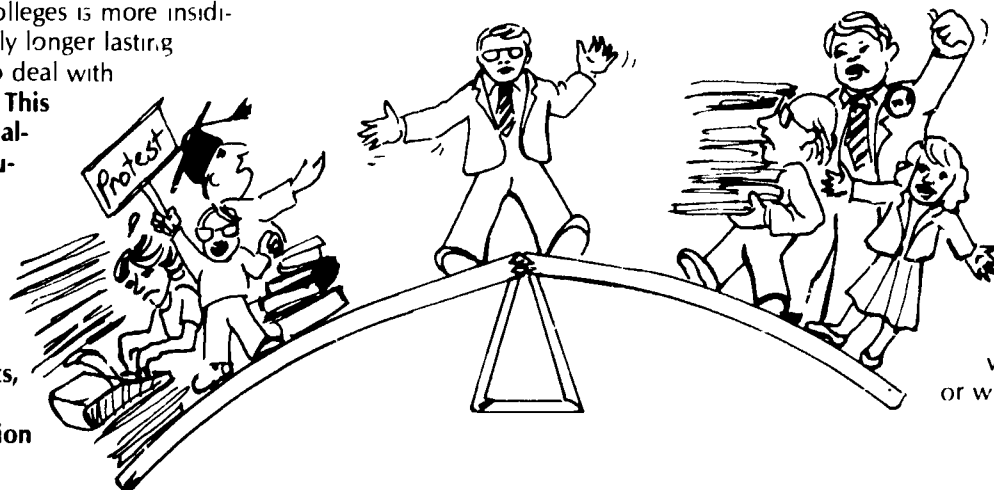
When the motion stops, the successful president must apply the necessary pressure to restore movement. To be effective, the pressure must be a positive force and might be viewed as—to use the phrase made famous by Charles Atlas, the boyhood idol of many college presidents—dynamic

tension. (A more sophisticated, but less descriptive term, and one used by those not familiar with the 97-pound weakling with sand in his face, is "creative tension.") Ideally and realistically, the president works through the various constituent groups of the college to see that movement is restored in any event, if the college is to progress, movement must take place, and if the president is an effective leader, the movement will be in a positive direction and will be strongly influenced by the president.

Shifting Coalitions

The imbalance that may occur between the two sides of the seesaw is complicated by the tendency of groups on either side, and especially on the internal side, to band together in order to increase their influence, thus the president is faced with continually shifting coalitions. When a coalition becomes too strong, not only is the seesaw out of balance, but those internal groups that are not members of the coalition are excluded from an important part of the governance process—an unacceptable situation. When the coalition becomes too strong, the president is faced not only with keeping some balance between the two sides of the seesaw but also in engineering a compromise whereby the coalition is either pacified or rendered less powerful. Meanwhile, if the institution is to function effectively, the seesaw must continue its gentle movement.

Further complicating the presidential balancing act is the fact that various constituent groups fail to "stay put." For example, a group of faculty members may join with an external group devoted to establishing a child care center for those who attend college or who would like to



attend if child care facilities were available. A logical location for the center may appear to be the campus of the community college. In some instances, the governing board may be drawn into internal conflicts which involved either students, faculty or both. Any time the "crossover" occurs, the president is more than simply caught in the middle: the president finds that the normal alliances one expects to find among internal groups have now become even more complicated, and that the movement of the seesaw is highly irregular. When constituent groups act in a manner that is not expected, the pressure on the president to slide into the vortex of the debate is greatly heightened, however, any position that causes the president to be removed from atop the seesaw is unacceptable if presidential leadership is to be effective.

Balancing the Mission

A classic example of how the presidential seesaw must be balanced if the college is to fulfill its mission is seen in the community college's age-old nemesis, quality versus open access. Cast by both critics and defenders of the community college in almost mythic terms, the "good" of high admission standards versus the "evil" of trying to serve everyone, or the "good" of open enrollment versus the "evil" of restrictive admissions, must be balanced by the successful community college president to assure both open access and quality.

The balancing act is extremely difficult, yet critical, in the comprehensive community college with its diverse student body. Open access dictates that the college welcome individuals with diverse backgrounds. The president must see that this diverse student body is not only admitted but that high quality is present and consistent in all programs and courses.

Quality versus access has generated even greater pressure on the president's office in recent years when the debate re-entered the national policy arena. Indeed, for those presidents who had not realized it before, the "quality versus access" debate

demonstrates clearly that questions concerning education are rarely limited to just educational issues, the questions are political, social, and economic. These outside forces, if not kept in balance, or "controlled," as many presidents naively believe, will shake the seesaw to its fulcrum.

Finally, quality versus access becomes too complicated to define, much less measure, when one understands that many community colleges rely on part-time faculty to a far greater degree than do most four-year institutions. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to measure educational outcomes for the majority of community college students because many move in and out of college much as they move in and out of a shopping mall, with time, money, and current needs dictating their direction to a greater extent than does any well thought out career plan. More and more the typical community college student attends college part-time and is taught by a part-time faculty member. These "part-timers" (both students and faculty), while extremely important to the fulfillment of the community college mission, bring a complexity to the quality versus access debate that does not exist on college campuses having essentially all full-time faculty and a "captive audience" of homogeneous 18-22 year-old students, all of whom are working toward the bachelor's degree.

The Role of the Fulcrum

The seesaw imagery is incomplete without a discussion of the fulcrum, for the fulcrum plays a key role in the functioning of a seesaw. But how is a fulcrum related to the presidential seesaw? If one examines the definitions of a fulcrum, the relationship becomes obvious. The fulcrum supports a lever and is the point around which the lever turns, or the fulcrum can be the position through which vital powers are exercised. These definitions, when applied to the current discussion, enhance the image of the president atop the seesaw.

Viewing the fulcrum as that which provides support for the seesaw fits

the traditional and accepted supporting role associated with the presidency. This role, however, is often seen as a passive one by much of the college community.

The second view of the president with respect to the fulcrum is more vital and enlightening to this discussion. If one views the fulcrum as the position through which vital powers are exercised, then the president posed above the fulcrum is in a very powerful position to influence the activities and direction of the college. If things are going well, the president can exert just enough dynamic tension to keep things interesting and exciting; if things are going poorly with any segment of the college, the president can shift the weight of the president's office in such a manner as to create just the right amount of pressure to correct the problem.

From atop the seesaw, the president can lead, effect compromises, keep things running smoothly, and determine that the college is fulfilling its mission. Or, from atop the seesaw, the president can slide from grace. **The point is that balancing the presidential seesaw is the primary role of the college president, for without balance, the college can never reach its full potential nor can the president ever be an effective leader.**

As every college and university president knows, riding the presidential seesaw can be fun, challenging, and at times breathtaking. However, all presidents are equally aware that the ride can be bumpy, boring, or professionally fatal. Fortunately, the president can, to a large degree, determine the quality and duration of the ride by successfully balancing the presidential seesaw.

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*Designed by Emily Fols,
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Continued on next page.

For an in-depth examination of the community college presidency, see George B. Vaughan's The Community College Presidency. New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan Series on Higher Education, 1986.

Additional copies of this occasional paper may be obtained by writing the editor, care of Piedmont Virginia Community College, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901. Copies are three dollars each, including mailing.

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