

# It's Not About Me

## Politics of the Public University President

RICHARD PATTENAUDE



One hears the occasional lament that university presidents do not speak out in the same forceful way they used to. Their voices do not lead the chorus on public issues and controversies in the manner of the great presidents of the past, such as Woodrow Wilson, Derek Bok, Clark Kerr, Theodore Hesburgh and others (I suspect time and fading memory have enhanced all this a bit). Of course there are significant exceptions to such a generalization but, in the main, the public president speaks out on policy issues very carefully. Why? What has changed?

*First: Vietnam.* The wrenching and horribly fragmenting nature of that debacle (oops, there I go) politicized campuses in ways that we are still experiencing. Presidents were pushed to be outspoken, to lead the charge to the barricades, only to find some very unhappy trustees guarding the castle. One of the ironies was that silence was considered support of the war and earned one the wrath of most of the faculty and students anyway. This made presidents wary of policy issues and their double-edged nature.

*Second: political correctness.* The politicization of language has made it risky to even speak out in favor of a group or an issue. It was (is) a verbal minefield (for example, trace the history of the use of the word *tolerance*). I think there is merit in some of this; when I teach my class on American Government, I lean heavily on George Orwell to help students ponder the power of language. Still, it all has a silencing effect.

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*Third: careerism.* Some time in the last 30 years or so, the professional academic administrative career emerged as a permanent career path. Or, as one of my friends said to me when I became an associate dean, “Now you are one of them.” I never looked back and have had a great time—and I still am. But to keep moving the institution ahead, it becomes important to be less controversial on campus and to have a lower political profile off campus. One develops a survivor strategy; you cannot change the university if you are on the street.

*Fourth: managerial realities.* Campuses are increasingly unionized, facing litigation at every turn, and bound up by rules, policies, procedures and governance documents. In this increasingly formal and legalistic environment, controversial public utterances can be viewed as bargaining in public, trying cases in public or prejudging issues. The president must be aware at all times of the risk-management impacts of his or her actions and words. This rational behavioral calculus often directs one to the more conservative option in a difficult situation.

*Finally (although this list could be longer): economic imperatives.* The governor and the legislature expect the university to be a partner in economic development. It doesn't matter if the prevailing party is Democrat or Republican, the university should be on board. If you are, resources and support might follow. If not, the university can be punished. The result is the need to be politically neutral on the issue of the day whether it is consolidation of school districts, landfills or the politics of creating casinos.

Yet the expectation from all quarters is that the public university president must work hard, facilitate change and progress, have strong values, act ethically, be courageous and make tough decisions. These are essential if one is to be an effective campus leader, to earn those “big bucks.” In the current era, one learns to do this more deftly in order to maintain a functional consensus on campus, generate support from external audiences and keep the university on track. Too much controversy saps energy, creates resistance to change and sometimes generates hostile opposition.

This balancing act is neither cynical nor cowardly. It can be done with great verve, integrity and decisiveness. It is a pragmatic stance, taken on behalf of the welfare

of the university. After all, the presidency is not about me, my opinions and my view of the new world order. I consider it inappropriate to think I might somehow represent the political views of all the people who work and learn on our campus. My job is to lead, prod, excite and push the university to a better future: higher quality, more efficient, more responsive, more diverse and better funded—and in the process to protect and guarantee its academic integrity. When people ask me what my job is, I always say, “To make the University of Southern Maine an even better university.”

When the day comes that I want to jump up on the bully pulpit and advocate clear and strong positions,

I will run for office or return full time to the faculty. Until then I will take seriously the responsibility of representing all the voices and views on campus, and to work as hard as I can to move this university forward on its journey towards our stated goal of “regional excellence, national recognition.” To do otherwise would abuse the opportunity I have been given and would undermine the broad stewardship responsibility that is inherent in the role of the 21st century public university president.

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# Declaring Independence

## A New Model for Public Presidents

ROBERT L. CAROTHERS

Once again this past summer, leaders of public colleges and universities around the country were left scratching their heads, trying to figure out how best to fulfill their missions in the face of continuing disinvestment by the states. This has become a predictable part of July and August, a time we once used to catch up on our research and reading and maybe even get a few days by the lake. To the dismay of our spouses, children and grandchildren, those days are gone.

July starts like this: After months of bickering about too-high taxes and government waste, the state legislature finally adjourns amidst finger-pointing and rancor. The budget it has passed is not as bad as it looked in March, but the appropriation to higher education is still several percentage points below what we received last year. To compensate, our boards are now called back into session to set even higher tuition and fees than the increases they had announced earlier. The presidents and provosts start making cuts in the budgets they had promised the deans and face the angry parents and students who have just been notified that their bills for September will be several hundred dollars (or several thousand) higher than they thought they would be. Next comes the annual letter from the state budget office

requiring that next year’s budget request be no more than 90 percent of this year’s appropriation. By August, we are sitting in small, hot conference rooms, listening to our finance officers wailing in the growing darkness.

Clearly, as we said ad nauseum in the 1990s, the paradigm has shifted. The days when we could advance the cause by pointing to the rapid growth of America’s Knowledge Economy and higher education’s role in building the common good are over. As University of Maryland President C.T. Mote wrote recently in the *Washington Post*, the “personal benefit” model is now firmly established in the minds of both federal and state governments, complete with a reliance on staggering amounts of personal debt that has dramatically changed the decisions our students make about their lives and careers.

Today’s political leaders, governing boards and college and university presidents now need to get on with creating a new model for supporting our colleges and universities. As always, the people need a vision.

For 30 years now, I have listened to corporate leaders and politicians opine that our institutions should be run more like businesses—whatever that meant to them at the moment. What I know about successful businesses is that they bring ideas and capital together and take calculated risks based on a reasonable appraisal of the evolving marketplace. They leverage whatever resources they have, and they curse bureaucracies and regulators

