Making college presidents more visible

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
Letters from Academia

Last week I wrote in this column about the issue of the increasing gap between administrators (mainly presidents) and the faculty. This is an issue that has been going on for decades and does not seem to be resolving by itself. How many institutions of higher education can succeed when their leaders are seen as "missing in action" because they seem to be out of touch with reality?

Presidents of institutions of higher education have been the focus of numerous books, yet their roles are not well understood. That is the result of the sheer number of colleges and universities together with their diversity. According to the Carnegie Foundation, there are more than 4,600 schools grouped into 33 categories. To that add the different nomenclature for the leadership position that includes – but is not limited to – president, chancellor, rector, and the like, which can lead to tremendous confusion. Some systems such as SUNY (State University of New York), where the top executive is called chancellor, have campus presidents reporting to him/her. In the University of California system the CEO is called president and the top campus executives are called chancellors.

On top of that, the authority vested in presidents varies from very broad with loose reporting to a Board of Trustees (BOT) – whose names also vary such as regents or visitors – to being just executers of the policies designed by the head of the system or by a member of a BOT.

Most presidents give the appearance of being the public face of their institution for ceremonial functions, while most people have little understanding of what they actually do beyond showing up at public events. They are vaguely seen as the top fundraising and public relations person of the institution unless there is a major crisis or scandal, at which time people look to the president for answers. And when that happens they seem to respond by following the advice of their public relations people rather than giving an authentic and sincere reaction. And if they are fired or forced to resign, it is usually under confidential agreements that leave little room for comprehending the reasons behind that incident.

Part of the problem is that, with some notable exceptions, most college presidents today are seen as people who had a short (and sometimes not very brilliant) careers as scholars and who have spent most of their profession climbing the administrative ladder. Even worse, there are and have been college presidents who have no academic pedigree and who have come directly either from industry or from government with zero experience in higher education.

Sometimes it seems that BOTs are oblivious to how important it is for faculty members that college leaders have strong academic credentials. Despite the fact that many trustees are business people, they don't remember that if you name as CEO of a corporation someone without a business background, that that will have an ill effect on the morale of staff. People will think that the new CEO is either phony of just a puppet of the board of directors.

What do faculty members feel about academically un-engaged presidents? Not very much. For one thing, presidents tend to talk more and more about budgetary difficulties and the need to cut costs. It makes people nervous when the average college budget is made up of more than 90 percent personnel costs. Presidents also love to talk about things such as rankings (most of them meaningless when it comes to the effectiveness of the institution in terms of students learning outcomes) or athletics. And, for the most part, faculty don't really care about those things.

Also, presidents rarely attend major academic lectures, or only show up for conferences to give the opening remarks. In other words, they don't appear interested on what really matters to the faculty: academics.

There was a time when college presidents had a strong scholarship pedigree. Take the example of David Starr Jordan. Born in 1851, he turned out to be not only one of the most outstanding zoologists in American history, but also went on to become president of Indiana University and later the founding president of Stanford University. Or consider the case of David Baltimore, who was awarded the 1974 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine and later became president of the California Institute of Technology and president of Rockefeller University. Neither of these people were perfect presidents, but you don't have to be the preeminent scholar in your field, or won a Nobel Prize, to have the respect of the faculty.

What you need is to show genuine interest in faculty work in particular, and academics in general. You may think that the obligations of the president are too demanding to spend time attending lectures or having in-depth academic discussions with faculty, but if one knows how to manage time, it can be done.

For example, you don't have to be on time for every important academic speech, but being a little late is better than leaving in the middle. Also try to personally congratulate faculty for their achievements. Most times a brief, but sincere, email will do. You can say the same thing about authenticity. Carefully crafted communications using the language typical of marketing departments will look artificial. If you think you need to convey a message, put yourself in the shoes of the faculty. Be authentic and transparent and if you make a mistake, recognize it.

We need leaders who are genuine, not cartoonish.

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