

# Are College Presidents Strong Enough For This?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 01-26-2018

Page: 01

Looking back, it was the moment in which I first began to see the dimensions of the problem.

Following a long corporate career, I had joined the faculty and staff of a small liberal arts college, where I taught courses (with adjunct status) in management and international business.

A member of the economics department faculty had invited a speaker from the free enterprise think tank *Foundation for Economic Education* (FEE) to speak on campus, and the college president was cordial enough to invite the speaker to a small dinner at his residence, with the department faculty members in attendance.

Towards the end of the conversation, the president asked the FEE representative what he (the president) could do to be more in step with free market principles. Without hesitation, our guest responded that the most effective way would be to abolish tenure. Also without hesitation, the president replied that he would do so immediately, if only he could be assured that his competitors would do the same.

I jumped in at that point and suggested that we abolish tenure, pay a salary premium of 25% over competing colleges, and thereby attract highly competent faculty who were confident in their abilities and value to the college, viewed themselves as worth the pay premium, and who cared not a wit about tenure.

The rest of my (tenured and tenure track) faculty colleagues looked at me like I had just stepped out of an alien spaceship, and the conversation died right there. Needless to say, the president did not heed my advice, and tenure is alive and well at this college today.

But that was 15 years ago, and much has changed.

Changing demographics and a waning belief in the economic value of a college education are putting pressure on colleges and universities. As Richard Vetter recently reported for the James G. Martin Center for

Academic Renewal, “the National Student Clearinghouse reports enrollments are down for the sixth consecutive year, which is unprecedented in modern American history. Even during the Great Depression, enrollments grew”.

Tuition costs have soared far above the rate of inflation for many years, reflecting cost increases heavily tied to administrative bloat and physical plant maintenance – and decidedly not due to runaway instruction costs. On the contrary, poorly paid adjuncts (averaging \$3,000 per course, with no benefits) now account for fully half of the courses taught in colleges and universities, up from about a third some 20 years ago.

Six-year graduation rates are only 58%. Student debt, fueled by the federal government’s direct student loan program, has topped \$1.3 trillion. And, of course, much of that is borne by students who never did manage to receive a degree.

Student fixation on victimization, and the often violent student responses to campus speakers with whom they disagree, has been well reported, and has done much to further damage the higher education reputation.

In short, it’s a mess. But what can be done to help combat these problems and restore faith in our higher education system?

In previous posts here on See Thru Edu, I have offered my thoughts on what faculty members should do - adding more rigor to their courses, facilitating the students’ exposure to truly diverse thought, demanding that students thoroughly research opposing points of view on the issues that divide us today, and develop their own well thought out positions on the issues.

This would give us better leaders than, say, [Virginia Senator Mark Warner](#), who said of the recent classified report compiled by the House Intelligence Committee, which reportedly details abuses by federal law enforcement and surveillance agencies: “I have not seen

# Are College Presidents Strong Enough For This?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 01-26-2018

Page: 02

the memo. But I think it is sloppy, careless, and again, I think has no grounding in fact.” He had not read the memo! Why research facts, when perceptions are so much easier?

In a second post, I turned my attention to the role that the Boards of Trustees need to play in truly understanding issues in higher education, demanding transparency from their administrators, and setting policy that is specific enough to fix the things that are not working.

To illustrate how important this is, the Michigan State University Board of Trustees has now finally acknowledged the gross mishandling of the years-long allegations of sexual misconduct against their Sports Medicine Director Larry Nassar, [who is now convicted of molesting young women](#) who competed for USA Gymnastics. The Trustees have also forced out the MSU president, Lou Anna K. Simon, which brings me to my thoughts on what college and university presidents need to do to address the systemic issues threatening their institutions.

As I have outlined in the two previous commentaries, both faculty and Trustees have serious obligations. The President, occupying the pivot position between these two important constituencies, needs to step up in significant ways:

Require that Trustees attend all meetings of the Board, as well as all regular committee meetings, and further require that they spend substantial time on campus. If a Trustee cannot commit to this, find a Trustee who can. It’s about much more than writing checks.

Provide the Trustees compete access to the finances of the institution, with none of the screening that can be accomplished through super summaries.

Require Trustees to have regular, random exposure to students, faculty and staff at all levels, and across the enterprise.

Focus all institutional resources on the development of a new strategic plan that starts with an unvarnished look at the current demographic and market forces affecting higher education generally, and their institution specifically.

Articulate the specific market niche on which the institution needs to focus, in order to survive and prosper.

Eliminate all courses and extracurricular activities that do not directly support growth in this market niche.

Eliminate tenure. Develop a balanced faculty that represents the best in research and current market involvement, rewarding strong (and verifiable) teaching skills. Operate with 3-5 year contracts, which can be renewed or terminated at will, at the conclusion of each cycle. This will quickly let faculty know that there will be accountability for their performance and will clean up much of the nonsense prevalent on campus today.

Within the context of this market niche and balanced faculty composition, aggressively reduce costs and tuition. Set enrollment goals that will be sufficient to provide continued financial support, and demand that the Admissions department develop a marketing plan that articulates all of the above.

Fix the woeful first year retention rate and the four-year graduation rate (which nationally average 75% and 58%, respectively). Anything less than 90% on either of these is unacceptable, and represents a failure of the admissions department and/or faculty.

Overhaul the Career Services organization, getting them involved with students on an active basis beginning in the student’s first semester. Have them partner with the student faculty advisors,

# Are College Presidents Strong Enough For This?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 01-26-2018

Page: 03

meeting jointly with the students twice each year. Be sure that the career services staff is adequately staffed and has a good mix of counseling skills, writing expertise and relevant business experience (recent retirees, still youthful and current in their markets, would make excellent and enthusiastic additions).

Develop a true zero tolerance policy on alcohol, drugs and assault on campus. A few well-publicized expulsions will clean this up, and the school's standing among parents of potential applicants will skyrocket.

Leave fundraising largely to the advancement staff. Presidents who perform their full range of duties will have precious little time for cocktail parties and outings. If the mission and character of the institution is developed and communicated well, alumni and other donors will step forward.

Eliminate all possible connections with federal and state governments. Be independent, plot your own course, and eliminate the burden of control and regulation that comes from accepting government money. Hillsdale College has shown that this can be done, and done successfully.

Finally, fund intercollegiate sports only if it can be shown to be self-sustaining financially, and in keeping with the mission of the college.

Think I'm overstating things? Ask the Michigan State Trustees, and their now-former President.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)