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Pandemic, Partisanship, and Polarization: The Urgency of Bridging the Gap on Our Campuses

by David V. Rosowsky

As university presidents, system chancellors, boards, and even governors have weighed in on the pandemic response including campus re-opening plans, strategies for keeping people healthy, and even policies around testing and quarantine, it was inevitable perhaps that criticisms would be raised and attacks on leadership would follow. Less obvious, perhaps, was that those criticisms and attacks would come from virtually every direction (inside and outside the university) and from every constituency (students, faculty and staff, alumni, community members).

What is happening in US higher ed today, as a result of COVID-19, has arguably been made worse by many years of prior budgetary decisions, strategies, priorities, and realities. Higher ed has become a lightning rod for social, political, and economic commentary. It seems that all of our present challenges as a society, a people, and a planet are focused inward upon or reflected outward from where higher ed finds itself today. Our colleges and universities, and collectively the entire institution of higher education, is both the poster child and the expected savior of all that ails us as a nation.

The good news: higher education has been there before. We rise to the occasion and we deliver. I have written about this before, *e.g.*, [Deep Learning in the Age of Disruption: Hopeful Times for Higher Education](#), [The University: Agent of Change in a Changing Age](#).

The bad news: we are at the nexus of a financial crisis, a public health crisis, a racial justice crisis, and a public trust/confidence crisis, and (as a nation) a crisis in democracy. This may just be too much to expect similar successful outcomes without also requiring significant change. Most universities struggle with change.

¹ *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic [letters](#) from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief series* continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

Calls for university leaders to resign, senior administrator ranks to be reduced, and resources to be redirected from what some believe are ancillary or frivolous activities to the instructional faculty are becoming commonplace. And they are becoming more disruptive and divisive. College and university presidents and boards will say they are more committed to shared governance than ever as they face serious and difficult decisions about the university's future and pathway. And at the same time, faculty are sounding the alarm that shared governance is being trampled and that the very existence of this treasured model is in jeopardy. Why is there such a disconnect?

The same polarization we are seeing across the nation appears to be playing out at colleges and universities. The loudest faculty voices are *less and less representational of the broader faculty*, and yet are likely to receive the most airplay, attention, and responsiveness. This can come at the expense of the goals, needs, and aspirations of the broader faculty.

Similarly, the university administration (the vast majority of which, remember, came up from the faculty ranks themselves) is being boxed into a defined corner, a stereotype created by certain faculty and amplified by a supportive media. They are portrayed as autocratic, deaf, unfeeling, self-interested, single-minded, corporatized, and more. In fact, this is not the case. Most senior leaders are dedicated, informed, student-centered, true university citizens that are working to balance competing needs, expectations, and requirements with ever diminishing resources. Most possess a deep respect for the faculty who deliver on the educational and research mission of the university and do all they can to support and enable their success. Most are firmly committed to the principles of shared governance. The defined corner is *not representative of the majority of university leaders*.

This is the polarization seen today on many college and university campuses. And it seems to have increased since the start of the pandemic.

What if the growing polarization cannot be reversed? What if the governance constructs that exist (and have existed for generations) precisely to bring ideas and people together to work toward productive outcomes cannot function as intended? What if the broader faculty either chooses not to seek representation through the shared governance channels or is unable to do so? What if the administration cannot maneuver out of the corner into which it is painted? What if the external pressures are so great that significant (rather than incremental) change is needed quickly to respond? And what if the faculty-administration dynamic has become paralyzed?

This would likely mean a series of steps (quite predictable, actually) that would lead to the end of the university as we know it. Faculty, often those speaking the loudest, are focused primarily on their own immediate future. They want to ensure their needs are met, their jobs are secure, and their future is safe. They are not wearing university citizen hats. Senior leaders function first and foremost as university citizens, often having insight into operational, fiscal, legislative, and legal details that few faculty possess.

So let's allow a scenario to play out. To be clear, this scenario of total dysfunction and rapid devolution into chaos is not realistic. It is offered only to be illustrative, if not provocative. But none of the individual elements in this scenario are out of the realm of possibility. Some campuses have

come close to experiencing some of these elements. Some constituents have vocally called for these elements. Fortunately, as a probable or even possible sequence of events, we are not there. Yet.

The scenario:

The president steps down or is asked to step down under pressure from one or more constituent groups. S/he is replaced by a senior faculty member and faculty governance leader by a faculty vote of acclamation and a board seeking to calm rising tensions. The CFO is told to open the books to the Faculty Senate for review and ultimately resource allocation. Athletics, research, extension, university communications, business services, human resources, and advancement are all told to reduce their budgets. The number of senior administrators is reduced, a longstanding demand of some faculty, despite the fact that most universities have already taken these steps. The number of vice presidents is cut in half, requiring each remaining vice president to oversee two portfolios of campus operations.

Within months there is acrimony, protests, grievances, and lawsuits from those losing their jobs. Within one year the alumni support is in real jeopardy. Fewer contacts, less confidence in the president or future direction of the university, and a sense that the institution has lost its way has discouraged all and disenfranchised many alumni, especially those who have historically been most supportive. The number of legal actions rises, taking the university's general counsel and president away from other critical tasks.

Within one year, some of the most productive and ambitious faculty choose to leave. At the same time, faculty searches are less successful, often colleges and departments are unable to recruit top choices. As faculty ranks are reduced, teaching loads are increased. This angers many faculty, forces others to take time away from their research and scholarship to meet the teaching need, and forces others to leave.

The university abandons a cohesive, forward looking, and inspiring vision. There is no case for fundraising, for strategic investment, for growth, or for achieving national visibility. There is no communication of the university's value, impact, promise of student success, faculty achievements, or service to the community or state. By this time, faculty are struggling to meet research deliverables and federal agencies are issuing warnings to the institution or opening investigations into how funds have been spent.

Within two years the board is forced to step in and direct mergers or closures of colleges. The pushback is swift and the acrimony is increased. Protests, walk-outs, and building take-overs ensue. The local media pays close attention and offers broad coverage. The national media smells blood and amplifies/extends the coverage. The board first references the possibility of financial exigency. The university has devolved into such a level of dysfunction that all that can be hoped for is a week-by-week survival without anyone getting injured. By this time, the decline in student interest has grown to levels that admissions targets can no longer be met with qualified applicants.

This bleak and dramatic series of events unfolds within just two years of the complete end to faculty-administration cooperation and functional shared governance. The year or two that follow may be the final of the university as we knew it. Downsized and in financial exigency in transition to

closure, likely with some form of executorship and very public discussions around sale of assets, the end is not pretty. But it was certainly predictable.

Again, this dystopian scenario is neither realistic, at present, nor likely to play out any time soon. It is an extreme view of a level of dysfunction that colleges and universities must avoid if they are to survive. But it highlights just how tenuous our position of organizational stability is, and how easy it would be to become unstable, and how quickly dysfunction and instability could lead to very bad outcomes. Faculty-administrator relations sit on a knife's edge. Whether we use that blade to cut into or away at one another, or to sharpen our resolve to carving a shared path forward is up to us.

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N.B. To be clear, it is **not** my contention (or belief) that the intentionally provocative example will necessarily play out at any college or university. In fact, the optimism and confidence expressed in many of my other essays and articles remains intact. However, I am more and more convinced that faculty and administrators – whom I have long believed are on the same team, if not working toward the same goals – must mutually recognize the urgency of this time and the tenuousness of our current situation. Only then will there be parity in their motivation to see change made and to placing the university on a successful and sustainable path.

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