College presidents must embrace their bully pulpits

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I'm frequently asked about my involvement on a variety of boards and as the author of columns and op/eds in differing publications such as College Planning and Management, The State Journal, The Huffington Post and my own widely distributed President's Letter and President's Blog. I also am active on Twitter and LinkedIn and host a public-figure page on Facebook. In addition, I do monthly webcasts via our Bethany Broadcasting Network. I also jointly edit "Presidential Perspectives," a thought series for college and university presidents now in its seventh year.

Utilizing these venues, I've voiced an opinion on a variety of topics, from the value of residential liberal arts colleges, to cost containment in higher education, to campus safety, college sports, church relations, town/gown relations, the national drinking age and a plethora of other issues as they impact higher education. My two most recent opinion pieces have inspired very active discussions nationwide about developments at the University of Virginia and Penn State.

The great presidents of my early years as an administrator used what is called "the bully pulpit" to inspire discussion and inspire change. These presidents included Theodore Hesburgh at Notre Dame University, John Silber at Boston University, Clark Kerr at the University of California, Jim Fisher at Towson University and Bart Giamatti at Yale University. More recently, Stephen Trachtenberg at George Washington University, Steve Sample at the University of Southern California, Freeman Hrabowski at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Buzz Shaw at Syracuse University and Gordon Gee at Ohio State University are some of the higher education CEOs with an activist agenda. They were often described as change agents, transformational leaders, who effectively utilized the "platform" afforded presidents to advocate for issues that would positively move their institutions forward.

All you have to do is look at a typical advertisement for a vacancy in a higher education journal to know that today's college president is expected to be a multi-tasking fund-raiser, media specialist/spokesperson, effective lobbyist, synergistic community partner, student and environmental advocate, visionary leader, strategic planner, town-gown specialist, budgetary wizard and social media expert all at the same time! While current-day presidents typically have a limited number of opportunities to formally address internal constituencies (usually three or four times a year), they also are provided a unique platform to speak out on diverse topics. Savvy boards encourage their presidents to write and speak on issues that will influence their respective constituencies. The governing boards during all three of my presidencies have encouraged my activist agenda.

As a college president of nearly 22 years, I've lived through an era of radical growth and transformation — many changes have been good, some bad — that impact higher education throughout the world. These include the emergence of community colleges in the 1960s, multi-campus state systems across the country in the 1960s and 1970s, proprietary education, private institutions reaching out to growing adult populations, and most recently, online education. The best
stories of vibrant growth have occurred at institutions headed by strong, outspoken, transformational leaders.

Business leaders want to hear from presidents, and political leaders recognize the influential role of presidents. Students are more demanding of access to their presidents than was the case in my days behind a desk, and alumni and faculty also expect the president to be front and center and highly visible as the foremost advocate of their institutions. I spend much of my summers traveling to meet with alumni, friends as well as current and prospective donors living throughout the nation. I always speak to the value of the residential liberal arts education, because this is the most important agenda item. It is imperative that I speak to the quality of the well-rounded, educated person benefiting from a liberal arts background, including the advantages of living and learning 24-7 in a residential campus environment. Time and again, I remind our key constituencies, especially families, employers, admissions referral personnel and funding sources, that outcomes of primarily residential liberal arts colleges around the country reinforce the value of the leadership skills, close personal relationships with faculty and other students, sense of community and the need to “give back,” all of which constitute a very solid return on investment.

Through the years, I’ve played an activist role in incorporating the town around my college (Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee), addressed community redevelopment in an economically depressed, crime-infested community adjacent to another school I served as president (Wesley College in Dover, Del.), and economic development and the gas industry in my third institution (Bethany College). My involvement on the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, or ACUPCC, is another prime example of another important activist role, that of an environmental advocate. I was one of the earliest presidents to sign on with ACUPCC when I was at Wesley College, and then did the same at Bethany College when I accepted its presidency. Serving on the governing body of ACUPCC gives me an opportunity to influence institutional stewardship of our environment nationwide and to advocate for ways in which our member campus communities can foster “green” policies in their own spheres of influence.

In recent years, fewer presidents have taken advantage of the "bully pulpit," primarily because the Internet and 24-hour news cycle have caused every word spoken to be scrutinized almost immediately and subject to be taken out of context. Because we tend to make the mistake of feeling that we must respond immediately to negative feedback, this tendency does not lend itself to thoughtful analysis or creative solutions, but rather, creates a reactive mindset. Most presidents have therefore moved toward a form of political correctness, speaking in prescribed sound bites which do not address in-depth the complex issues impacting their institutions and presidencies. It's often easier and safer just to stay silent than to risk alienating key constituencies — especially public and private funding sources.

I firmly believe, however, that presidents need once again to seize the opportunities for transformational leadership on issues vital to our campuses, our students and our nation that are afforded them. Although leveraging the "bully pulpit" may carry more risk than it did in the past, today's media also afford us an unparalleled opportunity to reach new audiences and to shape policy, nationally and even internationally.

Remembering that silence is often perceived as acceptance of the status quo, let us continue to speak out fervently and forcefully, as our executive roles suggest we should.
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