The New Battle Between Political and Academic Cultures

By ROGER W. BOWEN

Since I became a university president in 1996, I have found myself intermittently embroiled in a controversy that is emblematic of issues that affect higher education across the United States. In fact, the controversy never seems to subside for long. It persists in different guises, despite the hope of people on both sides that it will fade away. I do not believe that will happen.

The center of the controversy is not the old battle of the 1980's between the right wing and the left wing, but a new battle between two cultures -- the political and the academic -- that are in conflict over fundamental issues that define the academy. The cultures are contradictory and inhospitable to each other.

Conflict first arose when universities began to turn into corporations, a trend that resulted from the boom economy of the 1990's and the simultaneous collapse of Soviet-bloc socialism. The triumph of capitalism reinforced Americans' belief in the market's role as the informing principle of politics. Capital now reigns supreme, the laws of supply and demand serve as the mechanism for who gets what, and success is measured in net income and levels of productivity. The prevailing attitude in our culture is: If something is not measurable, then it lacks value.

The spread of that ideology has turned university presidents into chief executive officers, provosts into chief operating officers, and vice presidents for administration into chief financial officers. Deans have become middle management and department chairs lower-level management. Faculty members are now labor, and students are consumers, or clients. Assessment and accountability refer to measuring productivity; colleges and universities set up entrepreneurial ventures and seek presidents from outside higher education.

Underlying the changes is a suspicion of academe and its arcane traditions; its inefficient, labor-intensive ways of educating students; its practice of lifetime employment through tenure; and its procedures of shared governance. Those who admire the corporate model see higher education as a social atavism sorely in need of comprehensive reform.

Reform is often the goal of boards of trustees, many of which are composed of people from the corporate world. Some trustees take office with the missionary impulse to remake academe in the image of the corporation; others are intent on changing academic values to reflect the politics of the elected officials who appointed them to the board.
Both groups may be hostile toward many of academe's traditions, including academic freedom, tenure, tolerance of unconventionality, and intellectual experimentation.

Of the two sets of values that have overtaken higher education, especially at public institutions, the political is more pernicious than the corporate. Academic administrators held to corporate standards can get by. Student retention, graduation rates, dollars raised, and the like can all serve as relatively reasonable measures of performance.

But politicized trustees expect college presidents to follow their orders, not to question them. I will never forget the time a senior official at the State University of New York told me that one of my character flaws is being "an independent thinker."

Politicians and politicized academic leaders cannot adequately safeguard academic freedom because they are more concerned with public image, re-election of their political allies, and making a reputation for cleaning up academe. It is a mistake to fault them for thinking and acting more like politicians than educators. It is also a mistake to be disappointed when they insist on introducing corporate values into academe, impose conservative agendas, or demand obedience. They simply do not understand, because they come from a different culture.

Politicized leaders want to be certain that their faculty members and students never do anything silly that is then reported in the news. The chief operating officer of SUNY told campus finance officers earlier this year to take a message back to their presidents: Any event on any campus that causes embarrassment to the chancellor will be met with immediate, public rebuke. Of course, for a university like the one I lead, at New Paltz, where some zaniness is central to our traditions and culture, the message is chilling.

In the free-thinking world of higher education, intellectual risk taking, critical thinking, debate, and challenges to authority and convention are commonplace. But in the political culture, the goal is not truth, but victory. Politics means competition, winners and losers. While the academic culture thrives on ambiguity, the political culture depends on eliminating it. The two are so unlike that they should be kept apart. The academic will always lose to the political if they compete for dominance. If you doubt this, recall the trial of Socrates.

New Paltz fits the description of the academic culture. Indeed, I may be guilty here of defining the culture in New Paltzian terms, so let me elaborate a bit. New Paltz has been described by The New York Times as "artsy" and "progressive." Both descriptions are accurate, but they are also redundant. To be artsy is to be progressive, if art is to have any meaning and value. Art involves imagination, and imagining requires thinking about things that do not exist. Tradition, convention, past practices, the tried and true -- imagination overcomes them all. To think creatively is intellectually liberating and basic to our development as human beings.

The political world, in contrast, tends not to be progressive. Politics looks for certainty, order, and rules. It is a Hobbesian world, not just because everyone is at war with
everyone else, but because it inevitably produces a Leviathan whose authority is, or seeks to be, uncontested. The Leviathan demands a settled, conforming, obedient citizenry -- not dissenters who challenge convention.

We are dealing, then, with polar opposites. The academic and political cultures are as far apart as they can be in the values they hold dear, the behavior they accept, and the freedom they allow. And when the political culture trumps the academic, problems will occur. Let me use my own situation as an example.

A few months ago, I was told by a SUNY official that I would be happier working at a private university where "independent thinking" was valued. That observation came not long after an editorial in the New York Post lampooned a symposium on female sexuality organized by female students at New Paltz. I was charged with not controlling my students, though I explained that the event was entirely paid for by student fees, the students had followed normal procedures, and I had no prior knowledge of the event, any more than I know in advance who the Philosophy Club invites to campus to speak.

What struck me in several subsequent conversations with that same SUNY official was the absence of any reference to my performance as an academic leader, fund raiser, writer, teacher, financial administrator, or community leader. I recall the official's repeated comment that I would be happier at a private institution, where I would be "valued" and have time to finish my new book. The official's collegial tone, statements of concern about my emotional well-being, and candid revealing of confidences reminded me of one of Machiavelli's observations about the ideal ruler: "I mean that he should seem compassionate, trustworthy, humane, honest, and religious, and actually be so; but he should have his mind so trained that, when it is necessary not to practice these virtues, he can change to the opposite and do it skillfully."

I do not expect politicians and politicized academic leaders to understand my remarks in the way that I intend them. They may take what I say as personal, though I am trying to be analytical and empirical. I am seeking to describe the gulf that separates the academic and political cultures.

Partisan politics, as I have stated many times since I came to New Paltz, has no place in academe. No doubt that view makes me a naif in the eyes of the politicians. So be it. From my perspective, they show little understanding of the academy and at times seem contemptuous of its values.

I am not saying that the people now in control of public education in New York do not have good intentions. I believe that they want to strengthen education and thereby make New York a better place to live and work. But I agree with Associate Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who said in the 1928 case of Olmstead v. United States that "[e]xperience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficent. ... The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding."
The zeal of some trustees and high officials at SUNY and other institutions across the country is informed by a political agenda, not an academic one. They are not prepared to defend academic liberty because they do not understand its centrality to higher education. They appear to believe that academic institutions should be supported as long as that support makes their party's candidates more attractive to the voters. Those of us who belong to the academic culture eschew political bias in assigning values. And we support the right -- and the obligation -- of members of the academy to speak truthfully in every imaginable arena.

Academe is a sort of secular church, no less high-minded than the temples and churches that our ancestors had the good sense to protect from the state. The comparison is old and trite, but academe is no less concerned with truth than are religious bodies. In contrast, politicians are concerned with capturing and exercising power. We must not allow them to compromise our search for truth.

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