

TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION

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by Beverly W. Miller

Over the years tradition has played a major role in the life of most Americans. Especially has this been true of colleges and universities that guided their calendars, curricula, ceremonies, and organizational practices by harkening back to what had been the custom or “the way we have always done it.”

A review of the last twenty-five years of higher education demonstrates clearly the need to break with some of those traditions while preserving others that support the mission and authority of the collegial institutions to operate. It also gives ample evidence of the increasing legal pressures and concerns that often force the change in some traditions while emphasizing at other times the inestimable value of protecting others with constant vigilance and reinforcement.

One needs only to review the shifting allocation of presidential time to be aware of the increasing pressures. In 1971 most presidents were concerned with government grants or interest subsidies for building construction, along with their own supplemental fund raising, reinforcement and strengthening of the liberal arts curriculum, maintaining dormitory hours and access, providing social events for the alumni, and the increase in federal civil rights legislation as it affected admission practices and athletics. It was the era of the 20-year presidents who took prolonged summer vacations, maintained a community presence that was accompanied by a significant level of socialization and prestige, attended few professional meetings, and only visited Washington, D.C. or their state capitals for vacation or sightseeing purposes. They rarely consulted the colleges’ legal counsels, if they had any, and then usually only to draw up papers for land purchases or sales.

Presidents frequently worked without formal contracts on a “gentlemen’s agreement” until time to retire. They suffered little stress, as we define it today, and maintained reasonable control over their own calendars. Presidential searches were rare, ill-defined in process, and notably lacking in constituent

participation. Trustees rarely thought about the future needs of the college in addressing their hiring charge or placing definable goals and expectations before their candidates. Usually they wanted nothing more than a pleasant person, of good character, socially inclined, who could entertain in style, insure good community relations, secure a modicum of gifts for the college, present a cordial approach to faculty, students, and parents, and preside graciously at ceremonial events.

The average presidential term of office has been shortened in recent years to less than five years. The increased pressures posed by state and federal regulations and dramatic changes in society have worked together to contribute to the stress level that has discouraged longevity in office. The rise of consumerism, combined with increased competition for students, has set the stage for some changes in tradition. The tendency to seek legal remedies for all complaints, real or imagined, has altered the way colleges must deal with students. The pressure to maintain enrollment levels, while increasing financial aid and constraining tuition increases, has pitted parents' demands against the increasing cost of operation fueled by salaries, externally imposed legal requirements, and a range of demanded amenities such as Internet access for all.

Accountability is a word often seen and heard these days as the hallowed halls of academe submit to pressures that in the past would have been viewed as interference with the judgement of those most qualified to make the necessary decisions. Accrediting bodies, law makers, potential donors, magazine editors with their annual polls, and parents have all imposed standards on institutions that often have little to do with their mission statements.

All of this has reduced the pool of desirable presidential candidates, since approximately one-third of the 3300 accredited colleges and universities in this country are preparing to search for a new president or are actively engaged in the process each year. The cost to colleges in financial and time resources to carry out the necessary process has increased because of frequency and given rise to a whole new industry of search firms eager for the college business.

The students of today reflect the societal changes by which they have been surrounded. They are also the children of the students of the 1960's, the activist generation that challenged the establishment and its authority. They have perpetuated that interest by revolting against dormitory hours, grading practices, class assignments, payment schedules, and, in general, most rules and regulations. Their flagrant abuse of alcohol is a stellar example of their continuing disregard for both legal and campus regulations which are often viewed by both parents and students as unacceptably restrictive.

As products of the consumer age, their expectations and demands have also increased to parallel the life style of their "me generation" parents. They want all the amenities this society has advertised and few of the necessary responsibilities. The demise of the tradition of "in loco parentis" with the advent of the 18-year-old legal adult, who has the right to vote, has placed colleges in difficult positions with parents, who are often paying the bills. The decline in the college-age population has increased competition among colleges in an attempt to meet their admissions' quotas. Quality has declined, rules have been relaxed, financial aid has increased. This "buyer's market" has led to a decrease in civility on campuses to the point where student altercations with faculty, administrative staff, and other students are not uncommon. Often these students have older parents who have indulged them at home because they can afford to do so and are frequently only children or the first to enroll in college. Their parents have reached a comfortable level of financial security and use both their resources and professional attainments to try to bypass "the system."

Frequently parents are divorced and let the lives and concerns of their now legally adult children take second place or, sometimes, no place at all. Colleges today have very active, full-time, counseling centers, staffed by professionals, which were rare 25 years ago.

As the era of technology and distance learning becomes a reality, many more traditions crumble. The need to attend a class or ever frequent a classroom may be diminished. The average 18-year-old, however, still needs to become actively engaged in the socialization process. Hibernating in a dormitory room or a computer laboratory does not promote the desired face-to-face interaction necessary for developing skills in building

friendships, valuing cultural diversity, forging integrity, and learning cooperation and team work. It fails, also, to allow the students of today to observe directly the current scholars and their work habits. Their personalities and humanity are often obscured by the printed word.

Higher education, in the eyes of many students, has changes from a privilege to an expectation to a right to a guarantee of personal life achievement and financial abundance. They expect automatic admission, prepaid tuition supplied by the college, good grades, a comfortable existence with a myriad of social opportunities in a safe environment, a dearth of study requirements, and few, if any, restrictions on their freedom. Guaranteed jobs in their fields of choice paying high salaries and available in their preferred geographic locations are a must immediately after they take their post-commencement, month-or-two-long vacations to shed the stress of college. If all this is not forthcoming, they have no reluctance to initiate legal action to get what they want. While the courts have been reasonable in their judgements, the costs to the colleges have been additional legal fees, unwanted publicity, reduction in applications for admission, and extraordinary consumption of personnel time, including that of the president. In the first 350 years of American higher education, such action was never contemplated. Only in the last ten years have such burdens been added to the presidential agenda and alerted trustees to select capable leaders willing to deal with them.

Parents and students have traditionally considered college campuses to be safe havens. As the ills of society have grown, they have become as much a part of the college community as they are of the surrounding civic community. Students exercise little vigilance against intruders while contributing significantly to campus crime through their own behavior and altered values encouraged by peer pressure. The presence today of visible, active, security forces of necessity more closely parallels that of the local police than the historic picture of bucolic academic retreats far removed from mundane law enforcement procedures. Campus crime, addressed through federal legislation, has dictated this change.

Among the faculty there have been at least two traditions that have undergone change. The first has to do with tenure. The tradition in higher education has been to reward demonstrated competence in the academic life of the institution with a guarantee of employment for life. Over the years tenure has become the faculty's "security blanket," while its original intent to preserve the individual's right to speak, teach, or publish research findings in his or her field of expertise without constraint has been obscured. Although the probationary period required to obtain tenure has remained relatively constant over the years and the spectrum of colleges, the removal by federal legislation of the mandatory age for retirement has created quality concerns for teaching. Previously, at 65, faculty left their active classroom roles to enjoy more leisurely activities. Today they may literally teach all their lives with many actively engaged past the age of 70.

Questions concerning currency of material, accuracy of data, appropriateness of scholarship, and classroom effectiveness have led to an increase in post-tenure evaluations. Actions have been initiated to limit the employment of those considered less capable than quality instruction would dictate. Faculty handbooks are beginning to specify reasons for dismissal of tenured faculty other than the traditional "moral turpitude" or "financial exigency" of the college.

The second faculty tradition undergoing challenge is that of scholarly research and publication of findings. The integrity of the faculty and their findings was the hallmark of the institution. Recently the falsification of findings and plagiarism have been documented among academic personnel, leading to issues of credibility with regard to government and donor support as well as institutional reputation.

The colleges themselves have found it important to break with some traditions of operation while being compelled by outside agencies to do so in other cases. The non-profit status institutions have traditionally and legally enjoyed has deterred them from referring to their operations as businesses, a term more readily accepted and assigned in the profit-making world. Faculty have rebelled at being employed by a business enterprise. Although trustees have frequently come from the world of business and industry and have occasionally tried to govern the colleges in a similar fashion, they have been constrained by such integral operations as fund

accounting for handling the institutions' financial records. This system, unique to non-profit organizations, set them aside from the world of business.

Recently FASB (the Financial Accounting Standards Board), which controls practices in the private college sector, revised its requirements to move accounting operations more in line with those of the business world. Colleges now, more than ever, resemble businesses in daily operation.

As economics of scale become important for survival, colleges have had to abandon their familial modes of operation. In their places they have substituted non-traditional offices, procedures, job descriptions, combined duties, merged activities, all designed to effect efficiency of time and resources while enhancing client satisfaction. These moves have been painful, both for clients and employees, as the security of knowing how things have been done for centuries was no longer sufficient to ensure necessary survival techniques.

Cities and towns in which colleges are located have fallen on hard times. Unemployment and eroding property values have drastically reduced the tax base in many areas, limiting resources to carry out local government functions. As city officials view successfully operating colleges within their jurisdictions, they are increasingly tempted to attack the tax-free status of these entities and require some sort of payment in lieu of taxes. These take many forms such as payment for fire and police protection, excessively expensive building permits for construction or remodeling (called linkage taxes), or contributions for repaving roads. In many cases the contributions are simply needed to balance the city's budget for the year. While colleges have compelling reasons to protect their tax-exempt status, they are increasingly required to demonstrate their responsibilities as good citizens within the communities in which they exist. The age-old tradition of good town-gown relations is still important but has taken on greater significance as the economic problems of society have grown.

The verification of quality within academic institutions has traditionally been the work of the regional and specialized accrediting bodies. The services of site visitation, review, evaluation, and recommendations for improvement have been performed by peer academic personnel from other, presumably similar type, institutions. In recent times state and federal governments have attempted to substitute, through laws and regulations, their

own processes carried on by government bureaucrats almost always devoid of academic experience. Such changes have been tied to federal financial aid and promoted by the perceived lack of accountability attributed to colleges today.

Accreditation agencies have responded by undertaking national debates, revision of procedures, and creation of a new oversight board, CHEA (Council on Higher Education Accreditation). Non-academic personnel hold elected positions on the governing board of this Council along with college presidents. This attempt to reestablish credibility by mounting some minimal national standards applicable to all regional groups is a break from the tradition of regional autonomy. Significant changes can be expected in the near future that may require totally different campus procedures to define and assess quality. Many of these will meet with faculty resistance while increasing the consumer quest for guarantees.

Perhaps the most important break with tradition dictated by many of the above items is the now necessary interaction between college administrators and their legal counsels. Personnel need workshops and proactive conferences such as this to prevent litigation before there are grounds to initiate it. All college documentation needs legal review before adoption by governing boards. College counsel needs to be kept fully informed and involved as previous traditions are changed. The public relations concerns of the college grow as more and more traditions undergo change. The college attorney can pave the way for safe and effective changes that will, in many but not all cases, preclude legal entanglements colleges can ill afford today.

Collegial institutions currently face previously unknown breaks with tradition. The security of the status quo no longer exists. Faculty and staff, who formerly sought academic life as a safe haven from the ills of society and the tainted practices of business, now must recognize the changed environment of higher education. The former guarantee of an undisturbed lifestyle with little intrusion into their activities simply is no longer available. The number of learning disabled students now being admitted to colleges under federal legislation is ample proof of this.

Colleges are being drawn more and more into the political legal arenas. If the proverbial ounce of

prevention was at one time worth a pound of cure, it is now worth a ton of conserved time, financial resources, reputation, and preservation of institutional mission. Those institutions that truly know who they are and what they want to be, as well as how they wish to serve, and take necessary steps to ensure that mission, will survive the onslaught against tradition. They will substitute better ways of achieving their goals while steadfastly preserving those elements of American higher education that have made it unique in the world and extraordinarily successful in purpose.

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