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## Our Universities: Governance

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## Our Universities: Governance

Governance -- leadership in a word -- in the froth of forces at work in a contemporary public university seems unattainable.

*The job of mayor and Governor is becoming more and more like the job of university president, which I used to be; it looks like you are in charge, but you are not. (sic)*

Lamar Alexander

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From World War II until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century university leadership was supported by a seemingly endless flow of state funds, research support, and able students eager to study, facilitated by federally subsidized loans given to all who came calling regardless of ability or commitment. A veritable gravy train.

And then, we rounded the corner into the 21st century.

The need for astute governance of public universities led by appointed lay boards has never been more conspicuous. Funding streams stagnate. Student preparedness sinks. Campus competitiveness climbs. Loan availability levels. Research dollars recede. Industry support is stymied. Given all this, innovative, clearheaded, articulate, mission-focused leadership is clamored for.

The challenge rests in the diversity of public universities. It's trite to say that no two are the same but it is, in fact, nearly the truth. Just as business, healthcare, and industry are uniquely tailored to meet the needs of their setting and clientele, universities are distinct in mission, purpose, and in student populations served.

The Association of Governing Boards (AGB) *Statement on Board Responsibility for Institutional Governance* "...encourages all governing boards and presidents to examine the clarity, coherence, and appropriateness of their institutions governance structures, policies, and practices, and recommends a number of principles of good practice..." AGB promotes "integral leadership." Integral leadership is the clear relationship of authority and responsibility between the board, the president and the faculty.

This is always good advice and requires a level of maturity from all parties, but most assuredly it requires academic acuity, intelligence, perception, and passion from the president of the university. The president is the communicating mediator and leader between the needs of the public expressed through the board and the desires of the faculty and students expressed in their academic priorities.

Top-down or bottom-up leadership and management will not work. It is the nature of public higher education to be "integral" rather than isolated, fractional, factional, or

piecemeal. This does not diminish the board's role in being accountable for the mission of the university and reflective of its own history. It enhances it. Mission and reflectivity are two points that set a future trajectory—a communicated vision. The board must lead that process with an effective president.

University faculty are akin to hospital physicians. Bill Santamour, managing editor of *Hospitals and Health Networks*, suggests in a July 2012 editorial that there are some remarkably similar challenges in leading a health care institution and a university.

Santamour is correct.

Both enterprises are frequently supported with public funds and exist for professionals to ply their craft. Hospitals do not exist for patients. Hospitals exist for doctors to guide the healing process of patients. This is a tough pill to swallow. Universities do not exist for students. Universities exist for faculty to guide students through the educational process. This is a tough lesson to learn. Turns of phrase maybe -- but primary purpose loud and clear. The seeming persnickiness of members of the guilds central to the respective enterprises provide challenges to leaders of every stripe.

Governing boards must exercise fiduciary oversight and legitimately expect clarity and precision in accountability. In addition, the stew in the managerial pressure cooker: communication on and off campus, a commitment to clear responsibilities, pronounced flattening of authority structures, and an open deliberative approach to academic mission -- thrusts boards, presidents, and faculty leaders into a trinity that, at times, is anything but holy.

But that is the point. Governance is, at times, an uncomfortably shared enterprise.

While the leadership from all three parties is critical to a well functioning university the president is the axle on which the wheel turns. His or her understanding of student aspirations, academic life, governance, teaching, research, creative activity, public service and the centrality of these things to the heart of the university, is essential. The board and faculty must hold these values central too. Successful presidents positively modulate and illuminate perspectives from faculty to board, and board to faculty.

Our universities work best when boards, presidents, and faculty work together. There will be difficulties, but good presidential leadership must stay scrupulously focused on holding academic mission at the zenith.