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Boards, Leadership, Politics

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Our Universities: Boards, Leadership, Politics

Public university boards, and the presidents or chancellors they appoint, have a delicate line to walk between the political realities of contemporary higher education and the academic realities of effective universities. The nexus of politics and academics is not always tidy. But when politics win everyone loses.

"All politics are local."

Tip O'Neil

University boards are made up of political appointees in most states. In some, they are elected and become politicians: running campaigns, promising support for key issues in response to voter interest, maybe even providing scholarships for family members, arranging jobs for friends and carrying all of the other baggage of electoral politics - evidently necessary but patently detrimental to the cause - behaving exactly as too many elected officials.

The U.S. Congress, according to a recent Gallup poll, gets an approval rating from the general public of less than 1 in 10 people. Tough. Those identified by the electorate to lead are not highly regarded by the very population that put them to work. Odd.

While politics may be local -- Tip's take -- all good university education is global. A sound education is not created for a particular place. The machinations of boards as political constructs and universities as academic constructs only work when everybody knows that a good education has a long reach.

I am listening to a discussion, in the region where I live, suggesting board members should come from the regions of the campuses represented to create "fairness." However, a good university is not place bound but exists in a globally aware and competitive marketplace. Boards have fiduciary responsibility towards the public trust and educational excellence in response to need regardless of where members or students are born, live, or have studied, lest they become parochial.

The reputation, appeal, and authority of any university are determined by the global dispersion of successful graduates. This does not mean an excellent university neglects the needs of its locale, but the opposite. Impactful universities produce positive results locally by being globally competitive in thought and action, creating an informed citizenry and strong local economies that support town and gown.

Well-functioning educational institutions produce intellectual capital. Good ideas and hard work always produce prosperity and jobs. Politics and politicians may or may not. Political infighting confounds educational purpose and mission thereby smothering both academic and economic growth.

The Board of Regents of the University of Texas is accused of reaching into the campus too much -- micromanaging say the naysayers -- rather than working through the constitutionally established chain of authority and responsibility, according to a story this month in **The Texas Tribune**. The Regents see the institution as a patronage machine greased by the quip of Tip. Concern for academic integrity should be paramount.

The University of Georgia just announced that the board will have more impact on intercollegiate athletics, according to a March 15, 2013, story in **Inside Higher Ed**. OK; at many universities athletics has undue influence. Imagine paying a football coach 75 times what the average faculty member earns. Sounds

crazy? At the University of Alabama, Coach Nick Sabane: \$6 million, average faculty: \$80,000. Neighboring Georgia fears athletics may be driving the train. In response, the Georgia Board thinks it will solve this problem by managing athletics, but that is the work of the executive. Here's a tip: It's local, and it's politics. An academic executive, with academic values, insight and vision for university purpose should lead with fiduciary oversight from the board. If not, fire the executive, or appoint a new board, and pray any damage is temporary. Concern for academic integrity should be paramount.

The University of Virginia Board -- dissatisfied with presidential leadership -- sought to effect a change in presidential leadership. There was a public outcry and now a report from the American Association of University Professors suggests the board was wrong in its meddling. According to **Bacon's Rebellion**, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Colleges, the accrediting body, also became engaged. And, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni wrote to Arne Duncan, a Chicago product and former chief of the city's public schools -- now U.S. Secretary of Education -- to ask him to help mend the mess. Mr. Duncan might ask the U.S. Congress -- you know the politicians that 1 in 10 Americans believe are doing a good job -- to weigh in.

Propelling politics from the local to the national stage hides internal inadequacies, executive inabilities, and shifts blame but provides no fix. In the political arena, statesmen create progress, political hacks create messes. We see so little of the former that we forget what it looks like, and the hacking continues. Concern for academic integrity should be paramount.

Henry Kissinger was not talking about partisan politics when he purportedly jibed *"University politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small."* He was talking about the fine edges of various ideas and perspectives that are argued passionately on university campuses. That may seem like small potatoes but, for universities, sometimes it's the main course.

The best universities are academic enterprises that need to be led and managed in a businesslike fashion, driven by academic insight and vision, not partisan politics, local or otherwise.