



Eliminating University Senate at UK an exceptionally bad idea

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As many of you may know, the University of Kentucky voted to eliminate its university senate – at least as we have understood its role for the past several decades.

“The now-defunct University Senate held a symbolic no confidence vote in protest,” Sarah Michels noted in the June 17th Daily News. “Previously, the university senate made policy decisions, but now, the new faculty senate will be relegated to a strictly advisory role.”

In case you are unaware, the university senate traditionally approves all curricular changes at the institution. And make no mistake, the curriculum is the heart of higher education’s mission and value to society as well as the students it serves.

So eliminating the university senate strikes at the very foundation of so-called “shared governance” over control of the curriculum; i.e., joint decision-making by the faculty, administration, governing boards and other relevant stakeholders.

A quick history lesson.

In a now infamous speech in 1950, President Dwight Eisenhower, who served as the president of Columbia University from 1948 to 1953, referred to the faculty as “employees of the university.” Isidore Rabi, a Nobel Prize winning physicist who was teaching at Columbia at the time, astutely responded, “Mr. President, we are not employees of the university. We are the university.”

And that was the case – at least until recently.

The actions of Eli Capilouto, president of the University of Kentucky, and his power-hungry cronies are emblematic of a larger movement toward authoritarian leadership that seems to permeate our culture at all levels these days.

The voices of the people who know the most are increasingly marginalized by those who arguably know the least. And the consequences of this detrimental shift have not been beneficial to either the institutions or their students. It is not coincidence that the rise of a more managerial control strategy has mirrored the decline in the perceived efficacy of our colleges and universities.

Unfortunately, the misguided notion that faculty need more administrative oversight to save us from ourselves has gained traction among the ignorant and uninformed. A false narrative continues to evolve that faculty are no longer capable of providing the guidance and direction necessary to successfully navigate the immense challenges that lie ahead.

Apparently, we need administrators to take the wheel and steer the ship clear of the icebergs that are always just over the horizon.

No single individual, administrator, faculty member, or board member, should have the right to develop, implement, or overturn a policy that has been developed and passed through multiple levels of the approval process. Ever.

If higher education is to remain relevant in the decades to come, control of the direction of colleges and universities needs to be wrestled out of the hand of the self-proclaimed saviors and returned to those who rightfully should be in charge: the faculty.

Shared governance used to be the universally accepted management strategy at most colleges and universities. No more.

And given the bandwagon nature of contemporary higher education, I fully expect this unhealthy trend to spread across the institutional spectrum.

The real elephant in the room has been the gradual adoption and integration of the business model into the framework and administrative structure of higher education. According to this philosophy, colleges and universities need to be managed just like any other large corporation, with financial considerations being the key component of the decision-making process.

Departments become independent revenue centers, faculty become employees, and students become customers.

We're not that far from realizing this questionable vision of how colleges and universities should be run. In this dystopian vision of our collective future, faculty are merely contract workers, cogs in the wheel of the higher education machine. People who should be happy just to have a job.

What's next? Time and motion studies?

Obviously, Rabi's assertion no longer has the credibility it had 74 years ago.

And that's not good for anyone.



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