

Power and University Presidents International Higher Education, Winter 2009

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The question of who should lead research universities has been the focus of my work: should they be individuals who are essentially good managers, or are good scholars more desirable? In a number of IHE articles (in 2006 and 2007) I have argued using statistical evidence that top scholars as presidents improve the performance of research universities. Drawing from interviews with university leaders, I have raised four possible explanations for the empirical patterns. First, a president (vice chancellor, rector, principal) who is a distinguished scholar will have a better understanding of the core business of a university, that of research and teaching. Second, a scholar-leader will likely demand higher academic standards, and their appointment may also signal a university's priorities. Finally, he or she will have greater credibility among their academic peers.

Credibility is important for leaders because it extends their influence. Arguably, any discussion about whether a leader should be a scholar or a manager is irrelevant if an institutional head has little direct power. But how much power does a university leader need?

Are Presidents Responsible for University Strategy?

In interviews with university presidents in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) I started to get at this question by asking how much power each leader had to undertake certain tasks, for example, to design university strategy or hire top team members. I interviewed presidents from the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Rockefeller U, Cornell, Oxford, LSE, Imperial, University of Manchester and Southampton, among others (19 in total).

I asked: "whose role do you believe it is to write or construct the strategy for the university?" The degree of congruence on this topic was striking. Little or no hesitation existed among respondents, who, with few exceptions, stated that it was the responsibility of the president or vice chancellor (VC) to set the direction of a university. The general feeling was that the president is the *only* person who can ask "Where are we going? What is our strategy?" Debates emerge, it was suggested, out of the top team, but responsibility to finally say yes or no about an area of strategy remained with the head. Common among interviewees, was the belief that if decision-making is devolved too far down, leaders lose control, particularly of the academic direction.

Committees tend to have greater authority in European universities than those in the US. However, as was evident from the interviews, UK VCs are beginning to take certain rights away. The British heads stressed the leader's responsibility as differentiated from that of committees, arguing that it is the role of the VC to put together university strategy and then to get it approved, not the job of any committee.

A number of authors have argued that presidents need power if they are to successfully lead a university. Similarly, an institution that has too much “democracy” can become impotent. The decline of many European universities is attributed partially to their diffused decision-making processes—specifically, decision-making by elected committees. Political scientists may refer to ‘tyranny of the majority’. The form of consensus decision-making that can exist in European universities protects the status quo and curtails the actions of leaders, thereby reducing the likelihood of change. Interestingly, some scholars have suggested that university presidents with possibly the most direct powers reside in some of the best schools in the world, for example, Ivy League institutions, Stanford, and Caltech. Seemingly, leaders are appointed to make decisions, direct the institution, and take the fall when things do not work out. This explains why they tend to receive the highest salary in their organizations. If governance mechanisms are functioning properly, powerful heads are, I believe, good for universities

Selecting the Top Management Team

Another of the powers bestowed on university heads is the right to hire top team members. At any rate, these powers exist for US presidents. There are a number of tiers of leadership in research universities. Below presidents are provosts, pro-vice chancellors and other deputy heads, senior administrative staff, and leaders of key strategic units, such as deans of schools or faculties. For a leader to execute strategies and extend his or her influence, it matters whom she or he selects as provosts and pro-vice chancellors. It is normal for university presidents in American institutions to choose top team members and make other important hires. But this practice is less established in the UK, and even rarer in Europe.

Almost all of the twelve UK vice chancellors I interviewed complained that they had first to change or adapt the selection process, before hiring their own choice of top team members. For some VCs this procedure was slow and involved a great deal of negotiation. One UK head protested that his actions had been blocked by incumbent pro-VCs for two years, until their terms were completed and he was able to alter the process. In his institution PVCs were appointed by Senate that had 200 members. This style of selection was common in the UK, but many of those I interviewed had started to flex their muscles. Some UK heads negotiated the power to hire top team members as part of their contract. This was true in the case of an experienced leader who was asked to take over the reins of a weak and struggling university: “They all went!” He introduced new PVCs, COO, registrar, among others. One leader threatened to resign unless powers to select top team members were transferred exclusively to the VC.

The claim that collegiality does not mean that everyone makes decisions was common. This assertiveness by British heads is quite recent. Thus, in UK research universities, power to select top management teams is slowly following the US example. Interestingly, it is more common for heads of UK’s New Universities (those established from polytechnics after 1992) to have direct powers to hire top team members.

The traditional, and for the most part continuing, European approach has been appointment through a process of faculty elections. This practice has been criticized because, again, it substantially weakens presidential powers, inhibits organizational change, and favors the status quo. One former and very experienced US dean said he was strongly opposed to

faculty making the selection of provosts or presidents, and he went on to say, “I am against the notion of democracy”. This is interesting because many construe universities to be collegial and therefore non-hierarchical, with democratic decision-making structures. The same experienced former US dean argued that universities are at least as hierarchical as the military, and our obsessive labeling would imply this is the case (‘Professor Dr Dr’ is not an uncommon title in Germany).

I have argued that leaders need power. The executive powers given to university presidents in the US extend far beyond those conferred on European rectors, although vice chancellors in the UK are becoming more assertive. The world’s outstanding research universities are located in the US. These top institutions outperform their European counterparts. Presidents having adequate clout in meritocratic organizations may explain some of this difference.

This work appears in Amanda Goodall’s book ‘Socrates in the Boardroom: Why Research Universities Should be Led by Top Scholars’, published by Princeton University Press.