

ONE

Preamble and Context

Hard as it is even for me to believe, I have lived in and around presidents' offices for more than forty years. Much of that time (1967–1988) was spent as provost and then as president of Princeton University. Those years in Nassau Hall, the last sixteen in the president's office, were often tumultuous, almost always instructive, and rich in associations as well as experiences. The Vietnam War provoked a sweeping and highly productive reexamination of principles of governance that remain highly relevant; the war also raised probing questions about the role of the university in society. The civil rights movement added to the sense of urgency so many of us felt as we tried to alter the university's persona in fundamental ways while retaining those elements of its character that remain basic to the intellectual power of the place. Then, there were more locally driven debates over issues such as coeducation and how to build faculty strength (especially in the life sciences) in the face of high inflation, high unemployment, escalating energy costs, and depressed stock prices. It was a stimulating setting for someone learning, as I was, about life in a president's office.

During those same years, I served as a trustee of Denison University in Ohio, where I had been an undergraduate, and thus had the opportunity to see the somewhat different pressures that beat upon the president of a small liberal arts college. After leaving Princeton, I went to the Andrew W.

Mellon Foundation, which placed heavy emphasis on working with the presidents and provosts of leading colleges and universities. These new associations provided opportunities of yet another kind to see how different presidents led their institutions as they addressed myriad problems that were frequently generic.

I have often been asked what (if anything!) I learned from these experiences. This book attempts to answer that question. It is not a memoir and not a history. Rather, it is a series of reflections on lessons learned through confronting challenges that present themselves to almost every president—including structuring relations with trustees, recruiting able colleagues (and also securing resignations when necessary), managing an effective tenure process, setting academic priorities and then raising the money needed to give life to the most important ones, budgeting wisely in order to ensure the institution's long-term financial viability, reconciling the need to be orderly and even somewhat bureaucratic (“business-like”) with the need to respect the special character and climate of the academy, creating an open and inclusive learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds, handling dissent and maintaining the openness of the campus to all points of view, protecting institutional integrity, balancing internal and external pressures on an unforgiving schedule, and, finally, deciding when—and how—to leave.

Nice as it is to get things right, some of the most compelling lessons I learned grew out of mistakes that I made. One characteristic of “lessons learned the hard way” is that a number of them involved a failure on my part to look closely enough at real evidence (pertaining to admissions, for example). I sometimes relied too much on what I simply assumed to be reality and succumbed to the temptation to believe what I wanted to believe.

I want next to acknowledge that, as Hanna Gray, a former president of both Yale and University of Chicago, wisely observed in commenting on a draft of the manuscript, what I refer to as “lessons learned” are sometimes more like “truths confirmed.” Moreover, some of these “truths” seem obvious—*are* obvious—when stated abstractly and removed from the often-wrenching contexts in which they manifested themselves. My tendency to look back on situations with the wonderful clarity that hindsight gives all of us may make judgments sound easier and less tangled than they often were, given

the “real-time” settings in which they were embedded—settings that were ripe with difficult trade-offs, tricky currents and crosscurrents. In short, the reader is warned that at times I may have violated, or come close to violating, one of my favorite Einstein aphorisms: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not more so.”

In discussing “lessons learned,” I will assume that the reader is familiar with the basic characteristics of both research universities and liberal arts colleges. It is not my purpose to discuss such topics as how the admissions process works or why academic tenure exists.¹ Nor do I provide a literature review or a systematic account of how this country’s system of higher education has evolved. Instead, I use specific events and stories to illustrate basic points. But I resist speculating about challenges not yet experienced (at least by me). Thus, important as it is for all of higher education to adjust effectively to the severe fiscal constraints associated with the 2008–2009 recession and the slow recovery from it, that is a story for another day.

Since much of what I learned is based on experiences I had in and around the president’s office at Princeton, there are, unavoidably, many Princeton references. At first I thought that this might be a serious problem—and it may be, for some readers. But the many commentators on early drafts of the manuscript (who are listed in the acknowledgments at the end of the book and often cited in the pages that follow) were nearly unanimous in arguing that it is a positive, not a negative, that much of the argument of the book is rooted in specific occurrences at a “known” place. Thanks to the contributions of many of these same commentators (including nineteen who were or are presidents of colleges and universities), I have included references to happenings elsewhere, and to lessons others have learned in different settings. Nonetheless, the book remains

¹Henry Rosovsky provides a thoughtful discussion of most basic features of research universities in *The University: An Owner’s Manual* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). I know of no comparable book on liberal arts colleges, but *Daedalus* (Winter 1999) published a useful collection of essays on these institutions: Steven Koblak and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000). Donald Kennedy, former president of Stanford, is the author of *Academic Duty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), which treats some of the same issues discussed here (and others) mainly from the perspective of faculty duties. Although I too talk at some length about the faculty, my emphasis is on the role of the president.

more “Princeton-centric” than I had originally intended it to be, and the particular characteristics of Princeton have unquestionably shaped my thinking. That being the case, I provide here a capsule description of Princeton so that readers will have that context in mind.

In brief, Princeton is a wealthy, private, research university of high standing with a long history. It is located in a largely affluent suburban community that is home to a number of highly educated people associated with knowledge-intensive institutions such as ETS (Educational Testing Service) and the Institute for Advanced Study, as well as Princeton, Rutgers, and other colleges and secondary schools. The university is residential, operates at a relatively small scale, and is highly selective at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The undergraduate college was all male until it became coeducational in 1969—a change that occurred a few years earlier at the graduate level. It has a famously loyal (some would say “fanatically loyal”) alumni body.

Compared with other research universities, Princeton offers a limited range of graduate and professional programs. It is basically an arts and sciences university that also has programs in engineering and applied science, architecture and planning, and public and international affairs. For reasons that I discuss in chapter 6, it has none of the mainline professional schools (law, business, medicine, education) that are found in most research universities. An important organizational consequence is that Princeton has a single faculty, is highly centralized, and its president and provost do not have to deal with the innumerable complications present in more complex settings. The obverse side of this coin is that Princeton lacks the advantages that go with having professional schools that are linked closely to programs in the arts and sciences.

Princeton is without question a highly privileged place, as rich in resources as it is consciously limited in its organizational reach, and some policies that worked at Princeton would be much more difficult to put in place at institutions without Princeton’s advantages. Still, I think that many of the propositions I discuss are transferable across a wide range of institutions, including those that are less affluent and less selective. Some also apply to foundations and other nonprofit institutions.

It is well to recognize explicitly that each president has individual strengths and weaknesses, and individual likes and dislikes, that must be taken into account in deciding how to lead and manage. Even within a given institutional context, there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to prescribing rules of the road for a president. Leadership styles will—and should—vary. The propositions in this book inevitably reflect my own proclivities and may or may not make sense for others.

Finally, it may be helpful if I make a few introductory comments about the culture and core values of academia in general. As everyone who has worked in a college or university knows, these institutions are less hierarchical than businesses and less “top-down” than many other non-profits and most governmental entities. But they are certainly not “democratic”—nor should they be. Although there are many differences across the landscape of higher education, shared governance models of one kind or another are found nearly everywhere, with heavy faculty involvement in many aspects of university life, especially academic aspects. Trustees (regents)² have the ultimate authority in all areas, but many aspects of decision-making and most tasks related to “execution” are delegated by the trustees to the president. The president in turn delegates some powers to other administrative officers and to faculty—who in some cases may then make more limited delegations of authority regarding campus life to student groups. Commentators on university governance have often noted that this multifaceted, layered system works tolerably well because most trustees understand that they would be foolish to exercise all of the authority that they possess.

Things generally get done through a combination of extensive consultation, much persuasion, carefully constructed incentives, and some sanctions—rarely by straightforward “commands,” though of course presidents and others with executive authority must make decisions and take responsibility for them. This contemporary model stands in contrast to the more authoritarian model of earlier days.³ It relies on both trustee

²Whenever I write “trustees,” I mean to include “regents” as well.

³See Jonathan Cole, *The Great American University* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 66ff., for a discussion of the evolution of decision-making authority in research universities.

restraint and a general—though far from universal—understanding and acceptance of governing conventions by faculty, staff, students, alumni, and society at large.

Shared governance works for a second reason: the core values of academic communities, which lead to implicit “institutional rules,” are generally understood and embraced by the key parties. The missions of institutions of higher education—to transmit inherited knowledge and simultaneously to build on what is known and to correct the errors of the past—are so deeply ingrained that they almost go without saying. Aggressive pursuit of new insights, collection of new evidence, and preparation for the ever-present possibility of being wrong all condition how members of campus communities relate to each other—as does the emphasis placed on the need for individuals to think for themselves. There are of course definite differences of opinion (thank heavens), and sometimes heated clashes over curricular content as well as over assumptions underlying research models, never mind issues of public policy. But these clashes occur within a framework marked by wide acceptance of implicit institutional rules that are rooted in a strong tradition of tolerance for different points of view. Commitment to some version of the idea of shared governance is a thread that runs through the academy. But this shared commitment to core values is rarely, if ever, determinative. There is plenty of opportunity to disagree on important matters—and to get things wrong!