

## The Failure of Higher Education Leadership

*Unfortunately, presidents have not spoken out or engaged in the debates about essentially all the key issues confronting colleges and universities today, argues Philip G. Altbach.*

By [Philip G. Altbach](#) // September 28, 2017

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, while 55 percent of Americans think higher education has a positive impact on the direction of the country, only 36 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents do. This is despite the fact that the economic returns of a college degree have never been greater.

In addition, much of the media coverage about higher education, especially from the hyperactive right-wing media, is negative. Colleges and universities are seen to be inadequately defending free speech on campus, caving in to demands for “trigger warnings” and in general infantilizing students. Stories about massive student debt abound, despite the fact that a significant portion of that debt has been taken out by students attending for-profit institutions. The news about higher education is largely negative -- although the sector is actually doing a reasonably good job of educating ever increasing numbers of students and generally preparing them for the labor force in the face of shrinking budgets.

Unfortunately, America’s college and university presidents have been noticeably absent from the debates about academic freedom, the benefits of a college degree, the financial woes of their institutions, the broader purposes of education, the challenges of the Trump era and essentially all the key issues. Occasionally, when a crisis occurs, such as the shouting down of a speaker and resulting tumult at Middlebury College, the president does speak out, but usually such responses are as anodyne as possible.

It was not always this way. In the past, some college and university presidents were active speakers on the higher education issues of the day, and a few had major influence on policy. Clark Kerr, president of the University of California, and Ernest Boyer, who served as U.S. commissioner of education as well as chancellor of the State University of New York, are two prominent examples. They were not only commentators but also had an impact on higher education policy.

More recently, Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, and William G. Bowen, who headed Princeton University, have written influential books and contributed to current debates. Other leaders who have spoken out on controversial issues of the day have included Stephen J. Trachtenberg, retired president of George Washington University; Johnnetta Cole, former president of Spelman College and Bennett College; John Silber, formerly of Boston University; and Charles Vest and Jerome Wiesner, both former presidents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had a major impact on American science policy.

## **Why the Silence?**

Without doubt, being a college or university president in the 21st century is not an easy job. Incumbents worry about alienating trustees, faculty members and students. Those internal constituencies are less willing to accept presidential opinions that may disagree with their own.

And academic communities, no doubt reflecting the rest of society, are divided on many issues. They expect their leaders to reflect an often nonexistent consensus. Trustees increasingly see the president as a CEO and expect him or her to avoid controversy rather than be an educational leader. Further, presidents are expected to spend more time and energy fund-raising and may not wish to alienate potential donors by speaking out on contentious issues.

Current issues are complicated, and developing a well-articulated position is not always easy. And any position is almost guaranteed to arouse animosity. When, in 2014, John Ellison, the dean of students at the University of Chicago, issued a strong statement of commitment to free expression on campus, it was immediately attacked from the left and right. Who, one might ask, would oppose a defense of free expression on the campus? In today's society, many.

## **Leadership Needed**

As never before, higher education needs strong and articulate leaders to speak out on the academic issues of the day. College and university presidents are at the nexus of the 21st-century communication hub. They are the people who have expertise, institutional knowledge and the credibility to speak on higher education and other major societal issues -- the bully pulpit, electronic and otherwise. And they have the responsibility to do so.

Presidents operate at several different levels. Leaders of nationally known academic institutions can speak to a national audience -- perhaps in collaboration with colleagues -- on national issues. But campus leaders must also play a key role in the local context: meeting with community groups and speaking on national and local issues. Many do so, but the point is to ensure that people everywhere are aware that higher education institutions play a key role in their communities -- and that education is a central value, both for the knowledge that it imparts and for the skills that benefit graduates and the economy. That requires constant engagement. And only presidents can reflect on the key issues facing their own institution; it is very difficult to speak broadly since the higher education sector in America is so variegated and complex. Of course, such communication is especially important when there is a campus crisis, or when national issues, such as debt burdens, the attacks on the liberal arts or a strong defense of academic freedom, require a local voice.

Communication is complex in the digital age, and academic leaders must intelligently use all means available -- from Twitter, Facebook and podcasts to traditional meetings with community groups and editorials in the local newspaper. If higher education is to regain the esteem that it once had, it will take a major commitment from college and university leaders. And it is not just the medium but also the message that higher education is more important than ever in a technologically oriented economy and a politically and socially divided society.

## **Bio**

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