University Leadership: Slippage from Abiding to Peremptory Roles?

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1 The Issue

“Our university leadership strongly encourages you to attend today’s session on _____. This topic is of the utmost importance to us all.” Such urging populates the Inboxes of faculty, workers, and students at U.S. universities. They come from presidents, vice-presidents, deans, directors of diversity and inclusion offices, coordinators of training and development, and subordinates in the enlarging bureaucracy mobilized to support this leadership. Seminars train employees with “best practices” to improve their “cultural competencies” and correct their deficiencies. Meanwhile, senior administration’s moral purview extends to pronouncements on the political controversies of the day. Taken together, these internal and external roles mark huge scope for university leadership. Since when? Who signed such a contract when hired as faculty or paying tuition?

Deep breath and question: What does *University Leadership* mean? The matter-of-fact invocation of “leadership” in U.S. universities, often self-referentially, belies a murky reality: there is no simple, clear, credible answer, let alone consensus, on who leads a university, who should lead it, in what ways, with what prerogatives, and by what right. No international consensus on university leadership, none even in the U.S. alone.

At their best, universities have historically instructed students and sought and codified knowledge through free inquiry. The addition of “service to society” fundamentally contemplated faculty and student activity, leaving knowledge development and dissemination at the core. Today, the massive growth of U.S. university bureau-

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cracy has overreached into venerable faculty affairs (Ginsberg 2011) and added for itself roles, new and inappropriate to the university, even indoctrinating on hot button issues.

It helps to distinguish internal university leadership from university attempts to lead society. On each front, there are abiding leadership roles. Internally, a university with any autonomy needs some structured leadership authority. Beyond the university, any university leadership should be through persuasion that is knowledge-based. What then is problematic? Internally, it is licentious efforts to elevate the moral rectitude of the university's citizens, habitually leverage control over internal communications, or allocate resources to promote positions on issues of ongoing social controversy. Beyond the university, it is senior administrators' presumptuous speech *in the name of the institution*.

The essay develops in three parts. The first explores university leadership's legitimate range. It considers abiding (venerable, enduring, even sanctified) notions of administrative internal leadership institution and similarly long-established space for university actors, especially faculty and students, attempting to lead on matters beyond the institution. The essay's second part turns to peremptory (overreaching, presumptuous, even hectoring) senior administration leadership on both fronts and, as that substantive focus yields a U.S. focus, the essay's third part explores internationally for parallel overreach.

Notwithstanding our international interest, several considerations warrant special attention to the U.S.: its universities' overall pre-eminence, unmatched influence on other nations' universities, consequently unmatched international interest in the U.S. university, and the long-distinctive tradition of strong university administration making institutional policy. A prosaic additional reason is the author's own university work-life experience. More enticing is a sense that the U.S. may be rather exceptional for its peremptory university leadership. If so, perhaps that lends indirect hope for some relief.

Finally, the essay lacks space for three important related matters. One is why we exclude private universities except in the U.S. (Levy 2019). Second, our focus on problem identification and analysis extends only limitedly to alleviation (which, realistically, is itself limited). Third, ample space would have allowed elaboration of how (a) criticism of administration's means says nothing about their goals; (b) ambiguity surrounds when to cede principled ground for pragmatic or compassionate reasons, (c) institutional declarations on controversial policy have precedent. Were senior administration mostly about replacing abiding with peremptory roles, U.S. universities could not remain their society's and the world's leaders in free inquiry.

2 Abiding University Leadership Roles

Abiding university leadership roles inside the university have been fundamentally different historically between the U.S. and most of the world. Abiding university leadership beyond the university has been much more similar.

Classically contrasted to a European or Continental model, the U.S. model entrusts much greater authority and power to autonomous universities, creating a “thick middle” that requires centralized administration capable of decision-making rather than just complying with State rules from “above” or wishes of component units and faculty from “below” (Clark 1983). The thick middle is meant to allow for efficient autonomy and competition with other institutions largely through accountability to their own nourishers (students, governments, alumni, employers, etc.). Yet, the U.S. model emphatically does not contemplate university administration as supreme leader on the most vital university work. With trustee boards above, CEOs (presidents) and their cabinets and staffs exist within a pluralist structure ideally distributing power according to expertise and rights; thus, faculty make most curriculum and research decisions, students choose much for themselves (institutions, majors, courses), governments pursue their own or the public interest, etc. (Epstein 1974). Superior administrative expertise and authority is centred on managerial and financial matters, not conveying like authority over other university actors on academics—or morals.

In Europe and elsewhere, lack of a strong public university middle means much less university administration authority and power to run the university. With so much policy made by the State and faculty units, it is difficult to contemplate counterparts to legendary U.S. university presidents making distinctive internal reforms that then led by example and competition to reform at other universities. Correspondingly, we see differences between the U.S. and much of the world in how universities have *lost* power. Loss of power to the market is worldwide, though the market has always been important in the U.S., whereas net loss of power to the government is clearer and much greater in the U.S. than elsewhere, given the U.S. weak State history. Regardless of who the rising power has been, a key difference is that in the U.S. lost university power has meant diminished autonomy and institutional power (even as administration takes new powers).

As we turn to abiding university authority externally, however, historical leadership has been much more similar between the U.S. and Europe and most of the world that allows academic freedom—whether with strong university autonomy and internal administration or without them. The IAU some 70 years ago enshrined the “pursuit of knowledge for its own sake” as the university’s prime purpose internationally. It then proceeded to sanctify service to society as well. Nearly a century ago, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset’s (1930) classic mission of transmission of culture, science, research, and training also envisioned societal relevance. No stereotypical Ivory Tower.

But, crucially, such university leadership in society has generally been the faculty’s domain, notably “through teaching and research,” in the IAU’s words. There is no legitimate corollary in administrative authority. And globally, far more than in the U.S., a university pretence to leadership on national political, social, and moral dimensions has also involved students. If Latin America is most illustrative, Africa, Asia, and Europe also provide powerful examples, apart from Communist, military, or other stifling regimes. National political parties have had prominent student wings, and where national universities were expected to help lead in consolidating and

advancing new nations, it was through their students and faculty. Granted, this elitist conceit generally lost steam as higher education grew and diversified while other parts of civil society blossomed. Regardless, and worldwide, whatever was considered legitimate university leadership in guiding society was not the province of university administration.

3 Peremptory University Leadership

Some conservative critics argue that, if the university has any leadership role in society, that role rightfully belongs to faculty. Faculty members, however, have no right to speak in their university's name. Could the university then be the exceptional institution in a free society with no capacity to speak for its institutional interests? It seems especially implausible to reconcile that view with the venerable role of U.S. administration in internal leadership.

This, however, leads to a slippery slope. One reasonable but vague guideline is that senior leadership can (even should) speak out on matters central to the institution's functioning. But what is central or so clearly central that it confers a right to propound? *An* institutional interest should be insufficient justification. Yet, it too often becomes *de facto* sufficient where moral conviction or felt pressure from internal and external groups is strong. Administrative imperialism can be bold and imaginative. An issue of guns on campus, for instance, becomes license to address gun-control policy generally.

If administration feels compelled to speak on controversial societal issues, it should limit itself to whatever aspect most affects the university and where it can demonstrate special expertise. That generally leaves inadequate justification for an institutional position on environmental or foreign policy. Crucially, senior administration should make clear that it does not speak for the whole university community even where it speaks for the institution. The university's true voice is not a unitary "all" but rather the range of expressed individual opinions, expert and non-expert—and surely the most hallowed right to speak freely on external issues belongs to students and, above all, faculty. Senior administration has no legitimate authority to sum up or override those views. In the same vein, and just as senior administration must beware the slippery slope of what social issues to speak on, so it must resist the profoundly anti-university tendency to declare debatable questions resolved. Free inquiry, not sanctification of any "right" idea or solution to problems, is a university's consecrated leadership calling (Cabranes 2019).

The threat to free inquiry is even greater inside the university, where it combines with institutional authority and resources, than it is beyond the university. Cultural training sessions for incoming and current students, staff, and professors exceed legitimate bounds when they identify the right way to think and act on controversial matters. Increased mandatory training (sometimes stemming from government coercion) is often stuffed with infantilizing questions whose true rather than "correct" answers are debatable, whereas questionnaires leave no room for No Opinion, Other,

or completing surveys if left blank. Less blatantly intrusive, the “we hope to see you at the _____ seminar” is inappropriately menacing. One wonders how many senior administrators appreciate the anxiety felt by many students and their own staff subordinates who resent the coercion, elite conceit, or both. Can objective participant observers be blind to political litmus tests in some faculty hiring and even student admissions, and more baldly in invitations and awards for external individuals? And for internal appointments to . . . senior administration? Imagine a presidential candidate’s response of no, I don’t believe the president should have a public position on national environmental policy. Meanwhile, infatuation with “engagement” provides new justification to proselytize and materially incentivize, although engagement administrators seem unable to identify what engagement adds to the abiding service role. Of course, like equity, inclusion, and diversity, engagement commonly translates to subjective notions of social justice, perilously promoted as objective notions and fed with material incentives (and disincentives) furthering an ostensible virtuous cycle between internal and external.

4 And Internationally?

The peremptory administration this essay bemoans appears unprecedented in U.S. history (Geiger 2019). We need research to determine how exceptional it is internationally. Fortunately, the identified overreach appears limited internationally—fortunately for the world, if all the more damningly for the U.S. Yet, our international sense is only tentative, from background knowledge and numerous discussions with leading scholars of higher education in societies with ample freedom. It is a terrible irony that the U.S. leaps to the forefront on political abuse of university leadership, blatantly contradicting the U.S. model. How often leading U.S. universities advised aspiring emulator professors and administrators worldwide to keep administration “above” the political fray (Levy 2005) and pointed to U.S. university leadership’s *comparative* protection of their institutions from external and internal coercion. And how often U.S. universities hailed the virtues of professional administration, not only apolitical but also managerially skilled, responsible, and accountable to society, market, and government. This rosy view probably made, and makes sense generally . . . as long as the administration acts as advertised—even if that sometimes requires board intervention. But when administration turns to peremptory political leadership while trustees remain irresponsibly idle, all bets are off.

Additionally, while praising their own model, U.S. experts bewailed other countries’ “co-governed” supreme councils of faculty, students, and even workers, for surely these administrative amateurs are prone to non-pragmatic, inward-looking, and irresponsible policy. Yet, however large the continuing problems resulting from co-government or weak institutional administration are, they apparently do not include the abuses rampant today in the U.S. While students and faculty from India to Chile sustain abiding activism to lead society, more than their U.S. counterparts (unless 2020 is the U.S. new normal), even co-governing councils generally exercise restraint

in issuing declarations in the university's name on external political matters. When European universities issue statements on the environment, they are generally bland, and on an issue less contentious than in the U.S.; recently increased statements on immigration and race likewise tend to be bland. Significantly, even where council control in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere is markedly leftist, efforts to make less progressive members think and act correctly appear rare, albeit more frequent in "soft" fields of study.

We have only informed speculation to explain such restraint. There are hard-nosed power realities. University central administration remains far from strong or "thick." This is true in Europe despite decades of some shift from State standardization to university autonomy. Decades into worldwide government-forced partial privatization, most public universities depend heavily on government budgets, even where there is public tuition, as in Japan and South Korea. Dependence suggests prudence in criticism, including of parties that might ascend to power. South Korea further illustrates how national universities largely execute government directives. In Australia and New Zealand, few look to university administration to be public leaders; senior administration accepts that public policy authority lies beyond and sticks to council-backed sporadic virtue-signalling. Ethical training is on matters like business ethics, mandated seminars on matters like safety rules. Generally, no thick middle, no great potential for strong peremptory university leadership. And if co-government develops urges to progressive activity and training, it has limited resources to fund such.

But apparently, more than raw power and money restrain peremptory action. One sees in Brazil, for instance, that co-government composed mostly of individuals primarily engaged in teaching and learning comes with an academic ethos generally alien to a *university* presuming to speak with one voice, let alone for university officialdom to indoctrinate. In much of Europe, the academic ethos likely combines with a political culture of coalition, at least compared to contemporary U.S. hyper-polarization.

How ironic if the U.S. model of powerful professional management is what allows leadership to run wildly into peremptory leadership. How ironic if the U.S.'s robust institutional autonomy and resources help victimize academic freedom. Ironic too that for all the university's autonomy, the vast majority of its putative leadership says mostly the same things!

One can debate university leadership's responsibility for ground ceded to government, markets, or social demands, but it is always inappropriate when the reach to serve society undermines the primary mission and obligation of free inquiry. It is dubious that anyone in the name of the institution characterize policy beyond as "irrational," "unjust" or "counter to *our* core values." It is likewise dubious when leadership unequivocally voices "*their* university's strong support for x," x not being free inquiry, and leadership should never be party to, let alone supervise, internal indoctrination. The question-mark in this essay's title is warranted by international reality, for the sad answer in the U.S. must be that indeed there is ample slippage from abiding to peremptory university leadership.

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