Book Review

Big man on campus: A university president speaks out on higher education

Stephen Trachtenberg

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INTRODUCTION

Written by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, *president emeritus* of The George Washington University, 'Big Man on Campus' is a memoir of Trachtenberg's 20-year tenure as GW's sixth president. Trachtenberg's narrative is a colorful and entertaining look at American higher education from the vantage point of a university president. Although grounded in humor, the text offers significantly more than entertainment. Trachtenberg boldly exercises the freedom of expression so highly coveted in academe by speaking candidly about the most pressing issues facing college/university presidents as they go about the business of managing the complex enterprise that higher education has become. From faculty to fundraising, Trachtenberg addresses the tough issues and offers the benefit of his keen insights and years of experience. In the end, the reader is left with the feeling that he has been given

an eagle's eye view of the higher education landscape and is a bit wiser for having had the opportunity.

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS – LESSONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

At the end of a long and distinguished career in higher education, Trachtenberg exercises a point of personal privilege in reflecting on his career in general and his leadership of The George Washington University in particular. At first glance, one would conclude that the autobiographical text contributes little to the academic discourse on higher education leadership and management. It largely comprises fond memories, short stories and excerpts from letters written to various constituents over many years. However, between the humorous anecdotes and often highly personal reflections, Trachtenberg manages to inject poignant lessons in higher education leadership that help to

shape the dialogue on a number of critical issues.

At the outset, Trachtenberg notes that American universities have evolved over time and become rather complex institutions. Thus, a university president must 'be able to hold a businesslike perspective at the same time that he or she understands and supports the deepest values and ambitions of the people within who are committed to scholarship and learning' (p. 3). Simply stated, the president must continually balance a host of competing interests for the good of the institution.

Among the most contentious issues Trachtenberg cites are the roles and responsibilities of 'managing' university faculty. He adeptly chronicles the inherent struggles between faculty and administrators over scarce resources and issues of shared governance and faculty autonomy. Trachtenberg's thoughtful and detailed insights about the delicate relationship between faculty and higher education administration, which span several chapters of the book, draw attention to a number of policy issues that merit the attention of higher education scholars.

In his analysis of the sacred cow, commonly referred to as 'tenure,' Trachtenberg strongly advocates for a mandatory retirement age for tenured faculty. The rationale for the suggestion is that universities are, or should be, places where new ideas are encouraged and developed. Limiting the duration of tenure would create openings for newer, younger and often less expensive, faculty thereby balancing the competing interests of experience and innovation.

In addition to tenure, Trachtenberg describes the difficulty associated with getting faculty to be informed and heavily engaged in the life of the institution beyond the classroom. He laments that 'faculty assumes that there will always be a university' (p. 109). Such an assumption ignores the fiscal challenges facing most colleges and universities. The fundamental unwillingness to be concerned with the broader university agenda, including but not limited to, how it sustains itself financially is a significant barrier to the kind of shared governance that most faculty members insist upon. Ultimately, Trachtenberg concludes that the faculty disconnect is associated with the failure of graduate programs to educate aspiring academic administrators about the business of higher education. This is a glaring deficit that must be addressed in graduate education curricula.

Another critical issue highlighted by Trachtenberg's memoir is the never-ending quest for resources and the president's role in fundraising. His view is that the college/university president must actively pursue any and every opportunity to secure a gift for the institution. In this regard, he is not unlike many contemporary writers who suggest that the college/university president has become much less focused on academics and much more on resource acquisition, management and allocation.

Having earned a law degree rather than a traditional academic doctorate, Trachtenberg could be described as an unconventional president. However, despite his training and educational preparation, his views on academia are decidedly traditional. He strongly advocates for a college president

who is well read and academically grounded, as education is the commodity that colleges and universities offer to their consumers. The president should be the embodiment of that ideal. He openly laments diminished academic standards and the level of preparedness expected of college students.

Throughout the text, Trachtenberg highlights the role ambiguity that often plagues the college/university president. He or she is expected to be a politician, a manager, an educator, a leader, a counselor among a host of other responsibilities. In short, college presidency is not for the weak. In fact, Trachtenberg points out that it is hard though enjoyable work and that 'no tired bureaucrats need apply' (p. 67).

Toward the end of his text, Trachtenberg offers insights on the value of a common liberal arts core that is representative of history, literature and the arts. Although he takes care to note that no college/university can be all things to all people, he firmly supports the notion that an educated person should

have a firm grasp on matters of literature and history. In this regard, Trachtenberg once again hints at a key policy issue in higher education.

Although the book is not based upon quantitative analysis, it is nevertheless a useful resource for students of higher education. Simply stated, 'Big Man on Campus' is the culmination of a thorough qualitative study of higher education from the inside out. In what could best be described as a 20-year action research project, Trachtenberg has crafted an anecdotal study of the challenges facing college and university presidents. It should be required reading for those who aspire to lead a higher education institution.

REFERENCE

Trachtenberg, S. (2008) *Big Man on Campus: A University President Speaks Out on Higher Education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

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