Who's in Charge Here?

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The governance of a university is unique and so complex that it is hard to summarize it in a few pages. However, I will try to summarize some of its major aspects. I do so for three reasons.

First, with today's spotlight trained so intensely on universities, it is important that more people know how they are organized.

Second, the current demands for "student power" can be constructively considered only if we understand how "power" is now distributed and exercised within a university.

Third, and quite personally, I want to answer the kind of question that I often hear addressed to me: Why don't you do this or that—you run the place, don't you?

What I write here will be in terms of one institution, Washington University. But some of it will be applicable to virtually all American universities (and colleges, too), and much of it might be written about any one of a large number of privately endowed universities.
THE LEGAL PICTURE
Legally, Washington is a non-profit corporation, managed by a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees. The Board delegates to the Chancellor (whom it appoints and who serves at its pleasure) the responsibility of operating the institution. In certain matters, however, the Chancellor can act only with specific Board approval: appointing Vice Chancellors, or signing major construction contracts. The granting of “tenure” to professors, and degrees to students, is the responsibility of the Board, ordinarily on the Chancellor’s recommendation. The annual operating budget is presented by the Chancellor and approved by the Board. The one thing from which the Chancellor is specifically excluded is the investment of the University endowment; for many years, the by-laws have made this the exclusive province of the Trustees.

That’s the legal picture. It’s misleading. True, the Board has responsibilities which it delegates to the Chancellor who is answerable to it; but the fact is that the Chancellor’s actual authority is nowhere near as broad as his responsibility. I will illustrate this by referring to three areas in which you might think that as the University’s chief executive officer, I could do whatever I liked: hiring and firing professors, deciding what should be taught, and admitting or expelling students.

ACADEMIC PERSONNEL
Any university’s faculty is a combination of the separate faculties of the various schools that comprise the institution. Each school is headed by a dean. The dean is appointed by the head of the institution—the President or Chancellor—but rarely will any such appointment be made without a pretty clear indication of faculty approval. Last year, for example, we had to fill vacancies in the deanships of the Schools of Business Administration and Social Work. In each case a faculty “search committee” proposed a candidate, my colleagues in the administration and I approved, but, more important, there was noticeably warm approval among the faculty members of the school involved. I can imagine a situation where a Chancellor could feel that a particular school’s future depended on his bringing in a new dean with a fresh approach, regardless of what that school’s faculty thought. But if he imposed his choice on a hostile faculty, the faculties of other schools might be disaffected, too, for professors are quick to object to any exercise of administrative authority that runs counter to any faculty’s wishes.

Professors are recruited by deans and, in the larger schools, department heads. Again, however, the major selections are concurred in by at least the senior members of the school’s or department’s faculty. Decisions to promote a junior man, or to let him go, are made in the same way.

The most significant decision in academic personnel administration is whether to grant a person tenure. Like most good universities, we have a tenure policy. This was adopted by our Board in 1953. A professor with tenure can be discharged only after a fair hearing, and only on these grounds: gross incompetence, gross neglect of duty, moral turpitude, or conviction of treason. And while these rules don’t protect young assistant professors who have not been accorded the tenure status,
as a practical matter any wise Chancellor would be very slow to use his power to fire them. If his decision to do so lacked the concurrence of the young man’s dean, department head, and senior colleagues, a general faculty remonstrance would be certain and vehement. And just as a dean ordinarily needs a good measure of faculty support if he is to accomplish anything, so does a Chancellor.

Normally the initial recommendation for tenure, in the larger schools, comes from the department head with the concurrence of all or almost all of his senior colleagues. Then it is considered by the dean—aided, in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, by an elected faculty advisory committee. (In our School of Medicine, all the department heads, assembling as the “Executive Faculty,” must give their approval.) Then the recommendation goes to the Executive Vice Chancellor and the Chancellor, and thence to the Trustees.

The Chancellor, then, ordinarily can affect the selection of the faculty only by (1) selecting (with faculty concurrence) a top-notch dean; (2) suggesting names to deans or department heads (and he had better be on friendly terms with them, or the suggestion may be resented); (3) giving to the dean or department head his own opinion of active candidates for a position; (4) helping to persuade good men to join the faculty, or to stay here in the face of attractive offers, and (5) interposing a negative on a particular recommendation for tenure.

THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM
Day by day, the faculty of each school within a university has preponderant influence on the institution’s central, essential job of educating young people. Each school’s faculty ordinarily determines what courses shall be offered, what the prerequisites shall be for taking a particular course or for earning a degree, and what the grading system shall be.

Originally, I suppose, the faculty’s control in these areas was simply a matter of power being delegated to people assumed to have expertise. Over many decades, however, it has come to be looked upon by many professors as an “unalienable right.” Yet while this “right” is jealously guarded against administrative intrusion, there is a new interest in the possibility of sharing some of the authority with the students. In 1968, our largest faculty, that of Arts and Sciences, delegated to a joint faculty-student committee the power to establish new non-departmental “General Studies” courses. In 1969, it is beginning a two-year experiment in “bicameralism,” whereby decisions to change the grading system, the requirements for a degree, and the General Studies program will require the concurrence of both the faculty and an elected student council.

THE STUDENTS
Who decides what students are allowed to come here, how they should behave, and when, if ever, they should be sent away?

Admissions policy is determined by a combination of faculty wishes and administrative judgment, the latter being exercised in the light of both what the faculty wants and what practical realities require. For instance, a faculty might wish to admit only students who scored
in the top 5 per cent of all those taking the Scholastic Aptitude Tests; but this might reduce the incoming class so drastically as to cause financial disaster. Conversely, a faculty desire to admit increased numbers of students would run up against a shortage of classroom, laboratory, and dormitory space. One thing, though, is clear: the actual decision on whether to admit a particular applicant must be made on the basis of impartial judgment uninfluenced by any Chancellor's or trustee's or professor's personal interest in that applicant.

Permissible student behavior—codified in a widely-distributed statement on the "Standards of Student Conduct"—is and should be a joint concern of administrators, faculty, and students. Thus the rules governing conduct in our residence halls are made and revised by house masters and students together. Our prohibition of actions which would seriously disrupt the operation of the University stems from a resolution adopted by the University Community Council—two administrators, four professors, and six students. While this Council is advisory to the Chancellor, its recommendations give to executive action the attribute of legitimacy. And this concept of legitimacy is especially precious in a community where anything that smacks of an arbitrary use of power is abhorrent.

Arbitrary exercise of the power to expel a student would be not just abhorrent to many professors and students alike, but probably ineffectual as well. All of us have read about angry university presidents saying that disruptive students "are expelled." It isn't as easy as that. Certainly in state universities, the courts now require that an accused student must be given a fair hearing before he can be expelled; and it looks as though this judicial insistence on due process will be applied to private institutions too.

I have described an institution where power is widely dispersed. This is primarily because of the concept of a university as a community for free and rational inquiry conducted by people, old and young, whom Lee DuBridge has described as "companions in zealous learning." It is their university, professors say; and nowadays students are saying the same thing.

But the Chancellor (in our case, the Executive Vice Chancellor also) is the one full-time official whose concern is the present and future of the whole University. He prepares the budget. This, of course, is his chief instrument of potent influence. There is never enough money to provide everything desirable. Limited resources have to be allocated, and policies, programs, and personnel are all affected by the budgetary allocations proposed by the Chancellor and approved by the Trustees. The Chancellor, however, cannot wisely make these decisions without consultation with other administrators, deans, and professors, and an earnest effort to achieve something at least close to consensus.

A university's quality depends chiefly on the quality of its faculty. Able professors today are more in demand and more mobile than ever before. The university's chief executive, therefore, has the responsibility of sharing responsibility, especially with the faculty. Often he should refrain from using the power that is legally his, lest his use of it will alienate the faculty and damage the university.
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A President or Chancellor has plenty of executive functions to keep him busy: for example, overseeing the maintenance of the plant, controlling expenditures, managing research grants (a big business in itself), raising money, representing his university, staffing all the administrative offices, allocating space that is always less than needed. But in the central areas discussed in this message, he must think in terms not of power but of persuasion. What he says and what he leaves unsaid can have influence on his institution. In 1965, I suggested that it would be a good idea to permit undergraduates to take some courses without being graded—the "pass-fail option." Eventually the arts and sciences faculty did this, though whether it would have done it anyway, nobody knows. Also in 1965, I refused to accede to demands that I publicly denounce a professor because of his lawful but unpopular associations. My silence gave to the faculty renewed confidence that academic freedom would continue to prevail at Washington University.

Who's in charge here? The answer seems to depend on what aspect of the University we are talking about. But the very question itself is of dubious relevance. Companions in zealous learning need to have someone do the administrative jobs, and often they are glad to have leaders whom they will follow in the educational enterprise. They don't want bosses.

Thomas H. Eliot
Chancellor