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Positive Collaboration: Beyond Labor Conflict and Labor Peace

Richard Boris¹

Institutions of higher education collectively constitute a major economic concentration that ranks—by whatever measure: resources, budgets, endowments, employees, constituencies—among the major industries in the United States. The unionized academic U.S. workforce ranks sixth among organized labor (Hurd, 2007) with 432,897 faculty and graduate student employees (Savarese, Berry & Boris, 2012). Yet, when compared to the top-tier manufacturing industries of steel or automobile or to national unions such as the UAW or the Teamsters, both the public institutions of higher education and their academic unions lack national visibility, lack influence on national debates, and, most tellingly, lack major successes in the quest for public monies. Health care, the environment, energy policies, and the current global economic crisis drive both state and national discourse.

At a time when many other countries invest in higher education because they recognize how critical intellectual capital is in the competitive and troubled global economy, American public higher education is the caboose of the train of public commitment (except to make declining public monies contingent on producing more graduates in less time with fewer resources) (Seligman, 2008).

Consequently, during the last two decades public funding—local, state, federal (including publicly guaranteed student loan debt)—for public institutions of higher education has diminished to the point that many if not most institutional budgets are dominated by non-public monies (student tuition, privately raised non-tax levy funds, grants, and gifts) *and* by savings achieved through use of cheap academic labor. Angelo Armenti, Jr. (2008), former President of California University of Pennsylvania, noted “declining public support for public higher education in Pennsylvania” and stated “without fear of contradiction... [that] California University of Pennsylvania is being privatized without a plan... [with] implications for our University, our students, and most especially for our faculty, and those implications are challenging, inexorable and increasingly obvious.” Loss of public revenues demonstrates how politically impotent our public higher education institutions and their unions have become. (I am

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not here speaking of the 200-300 top-ranked, exclusive private institutions, most of which are not unionized.)

This paper situates some of this political weakness and invisibility within the historical and current context of campus labor/management relations and offers some possible strategies for increasing local and national influence.

Chronic Political Weakness and Labor Climate

Chronic political weakness contributed to a general fiscal crisis that directly affects the current academic labor climate. Cheap contingent academic workers with few benefits help balance educational institutions' books and help to sustain not only higher salaries and reduced workloads for tenured/tenure track faculty but also corporate-level salaries and perks for university presidents. In a marked departure from past practice, the academic workforce has through reliance on cheap academic labor become transformed from a majority of full-time instructors to a majority or near-majority of part-time or contingent faculty (Plater, 2007; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006).

Incrementally this fiscal "fix" of relying on cheap labor took hold in the public academy without much union protest and with silent acceptance by most administrators and analysts of American higher education (Nelson, 2007). Moreover this "fix" has accustomed an entire generation of administrators and union leaders to accept sequential, *ad hoc* adjustments to difficult budgets so that no one has long-term political and marketing strategies to counteract these trends.

Few foresaw the transformative effects of this labor policy, which has both altered institutions and unions and embittered critical internal relationships within colleges and universities between faculty and administration and within faculty ranks. Rarely discussed is the backlash from students and parents as they face mounting tuition at the same time that the academic culture provides fewer sustained mentoring and intellectual relationships of full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty.

These fissures and frictions additionally impede a united, national, university response to diminishing budgets. On those campuses where labor relations are progressive, institutional peace too often is the final goal so that little or no effort is expended to leverage good relationships into common advocacy that could broaden external coalitions, develop strong messaging, and gain wider political influence.

In this environment of scarcity, labor relations at the table are often marked by conflict and suspicion. Slim resources plus escalating pension and healthcare costs constrain managers while

union leaders are pressured to deliver above-inflation contracts with improved benefits. Too often the fight is about scraps with negotiated contracts rarely containing what either side initially promised—or what institutions truly need.

Few have the courage to advocate for common strategy to gain more resources from public and *private* sources so necessary for meaningful negotiation.

Union leadership is frequently unstable: within union ranks there is generalized dissent, loss of trust between leaders and members, and generational conflict between young faculty and their senior colleagues. Moreover, the contingent labor flood has tested unions' abilities to provide fair representation for this newly dominant cohort of part-time workers. Other industries' unions that are newcomers to the educational domain (e.g., United Automobile Workers, Teamsters, among others) who claim that they can better represent contingent workers and graduate instructors are actively challenging the three traditional national education unions: the American Association of University Professors, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers.

Complex constituent demands and budgetary shortfalls present similar challenges to university and college presidents and administrations. With university presidents now serving as institutional fundraisers, corporate contributors have become critical supplements to the diminished public monies and alumni giving that had been traditional revenue sources. Union leaders, especially those imbued with heroic labor imagery, are deeply suspicious of the “corporate/ized” university; they must politically and ideologically object to university-business ties. Few union leaders are willing to acknowledge the financial conundrum that university administrators confront or the pressures inflicted on presidents (about curriculum, on speech, and for favoritism) that such ties inevitably bring. Nor are presidents and administrators any more expansive or generous in their understanding of the political demands and complexities that union leaders face from their members, preferring instead to take leaders' political rhetoric at face value rather than see parallels with what they themselves must do to bolster support in their own constituencies.

Three Constructive Steps

From my perspective of twelve years (2001-2013) as executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, a forum for both management and labor, I can offer several constructive steps. One solid step would be, as suggested above, a mutual acknowledgement that together administrators and faculty—in their governance and union roles—must jointly guard the academy and that together they must locally and nationally articulate a clear *strategic* vision of public universities as critical for the United

States in a globalized world. However, at present few voices are joined to speak out about strategically connecting public universities to American national interest.

Administrators and faculty must mutually acknowledge that the conflict model has been played out, making essential a new partnership as a prelude to a strategic, shared vision. Discarding past labor relations practices, administrators and faculty must develop mutual sensitivity about their respective constituent needs in order to build a revitalized academic culture that nurtures true collaboration among faculty and unions and administrations. For those convinced that academic labor relations mirror (or ought to mirror) those in industry or that *collaboration* evokes Vichy France, there will be no need to read further.

Another step essential to building trust would be frequent and predictably scheduled *private*, off-the-record meetings so that frank conversations about all current issues and about medium and long-term programs and policies can take place. This step can lead to development of joint local programs outside of the collective bargaining agreement, can help build constructive relationships, and can help show all constituents that positive outcomes from collaborative relationships are possible. Some possible programs are lecture series on the future of the university or on professional development, seminars on grant writing, workshops about work/life strategies, and so on. Essentially the goal is to build secure, stable, and long-term relationships that can serve between contracts and during negotiations as a continuing base of mutual confidence for faculty leaders, administration members, and union constituents.

A third, perhaps most critical step in relationship and confidence building would be a common effort to identify all institutional as well as local, state, and national stakeholders. These include, among others, trustees, alumni, students, businesses, cultural establishments, and the media. Union presidents and college and university presidents must jointly and frequently meet with these stakeholders—formally and informally—for open discussion of convergences and even disagreements. Could faculty and union representatives be included in such meetings? Constituents could then become accustomed to this joint stewardship of colleges and universities with partners who are mutually respectful and understanding.

Within the context of this outreach and relationship building, it will be necessary to confront new strategies for funding collective bargaining agreements. In light of a decades-long decline in public support for public higher education, the wisdom of continued dependence on public monies has to be raised no matter how difficult and uncomfortable. While the main common goal ought to be coalition building and marketing to increase public revenues, there ought to be a simultaneous effort to tap private revenue that would be dedicated to directly funding collective bargaining agreements or indirectly funding critical features of faculty work/life such as housing and child care.

Equally constructive would be the inclusion (whenever possible) of administrators and presidents at some union executive and membership meetings and of union leaders at some presidential cabinet meetings to foster candid conversations and improved understanding. During the budget cycle where shared information and data would be critical to a coherent response, such appearances ought to become “normal,” as they also should during periods of campus crisis. These are common sense practices whose absence startles.

Does collaboration as defined above violate basic principles of faculty leadership or unionism? Union leaders must achieve substantial contract gains (or, at a minimum as the climate darkens, no concession contracts) to justify their stewardship. Without strong contracts, no union leader could convince union members that their interests are well served through strategic partnership with administrators or that joint outreach to all internal and external stakeholders and to those who control public monies well serves everyone’s needs.

On the need for strong contracts, the fundamental interests of administrators and union leaders should converge. For too many years, academe has lost sight of its core logic: educating and training students to think critically, to welcome diversity, and to contribute to civic culture. Building faculty and academic programs on the cheap will not bring institutional excellence or global competitiveness. In every possible forum, university presidents and union leaders together must, with clarity and force, proclaim that global competitiveness is not possible without excellent, high-achieving, educational institutions.

Agreement on a common mission would mark a major turning point on our campuses. But campus peace must not be the ultimate goal.

In our state and national arenas, before legislatures, and in the media, public higher education is being upstaged and outclassed by other claimants (some of whom come with entitlements) to public monies or by associations with national agendas. In our federal system, all of these claimants confront local and state rivalries as well as sovereignty and boundary issues and competing views about national image and message. But those that are successful—the National Rifle Association comes to mind—are able to combine singularity of purpose with crystal clear pronouncements, muscular lobbying, political organizing, and constant media presence.

Public universities have not yet found ways to do the same. Public universities have not fully prospered during good times and have always suffered disproportionately when times are bad because political weaknesses at all governmental levels make easy targets for fiscal cannibalization. There are indeed multiple historical and situational explanations for this impotence. The continued legacy of guild culture in academe often promotes institutional

independence or insularity in a professoriate hesitant about political engagement when the issues are smaller than peace and war. Management and university associations have multiplied and fragmented to the point where every vertical constituency has its own state and national organization. Academic unions are equally balkanized into three large, rival national organizations and into multiple, inchoate state and local associations and alliances. And then there are the newcomers trying to organize contingent, graduate, and other non-traditional academic workers.

In short, the present scene is a recipe for disaster. When further viewed locally from our campuses where old struggles have too long endured, there can be little doubt as to why public universities are far removed from the center of our national conversation. Therefore everyone connected to a public university must work to change this situation.

What Is To Be Done?

Within states, public educational institutions and those responsible for their governance must learn to speak with one voice before legislators, the public, and the media. Intra- and inter-mural struggles must be left on institutional doorsteps. That means disciplined, targeted messaging, which requires consistent coordination and a surrender of institutional ego among all academic leaders of public institutions. Coordinated testimony and lobbying require discipline and a long-range strategy, something that has not yet been achieved. This messaging, the lobbying, and the presentations before all constituencies are not one-shot, one budget-season affairs. Permanent mobilization is the hallmark of politically successful institutions which leverage the media well and establish a presence on talk radio and television. These platforms plus local news are where broad public consensus is built today. Again, the National Rifle Association could teach multiple lessons with its professional political and media staffs and substantial, independent budget.

The inspired Massachusetts initiative, the *Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts* (PHENOM)², offers a promising start with its broad constituent coalition and clear messaging: “First to be cut, last to be restored, our state colleges and universities are chronically under-funded by the state. In good times we gain back only a portion of what was

² “The 500,000 people who make up the Massachusetts public higher education community are the sleeping giant of Massachusetts politics. By mobilizing a large and engaged grassroots network, PHENOM is waking up this sleeping giant so we can get the resources to create the public higher education system we and our children deserve. For the first time, all the constituencies in Massachusetts public higher education can speak with one powerful voice. PHENOM unites students, faculty, staff, alumni, and others from community and state colleges, the UMass campuses, and the broader community. PHENOM was founded in February 2007... ”
<http://www.phenomonline.org/>

lost during budget crises. In the best of times, the system has not been funded at a level for us to achieve our common goal: creating one of the top systems of public higher education.”

However, this is a shoestring effort with weak resources, wordy “professorial” statements, and a gap in its constituent cohort: the higher education institutions themselves, their presidents, and their trustees are as absent as is the business community. The Massachusetts initiative serves to illustrate how much additional progress needs to be made to achieve an effective media presence.

Most striking at this historical juncture of heightened global competition, characterized by persistent and profound instability in the international economic system, our public universities have made no united, visible effort to focus the national conversation on how important intellectual capital and a critically thinking citizenry are for our national interests, for the nation’s economy, and for international competitiveness. Right now there is so much potential opportunity to seize the national imagination. Precedent exists for such a conversation. The Sputnik shock in 1957 unleashed a profound conversation about our universities and their role in our national destiny.³

How Can National Invisibility Be Remedied?

An embracing inclusive national public higher education organization should be created. That organization must recruit the best publicists and lobbyists to craft an open public discussion that will help build grassroots support for public higher education, a critical pillar of local and state economic prosperity and national competitiveness. This process will require time—not just one or two political cycles—and a large independent budget that constituents contribute.

Universities—students, alumni, trustees, administrations and unions, their communities, and the nation—have much to lose if they don’t seize the initiative. Only inspired paradigm-breaking can shed the political cocoon and engage citizens in extensive support of the public universities that help underpin the nation’s destiny.

³ “When President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) into law on September 2, 1958, he was responding to a perceived national threat represented by the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik I satellite the previous year. In the years following World War II, science and technology (S&T) had become key measures of a nation’s military prowess and international strength. The NDEA’s funding of science, engineering, and foreign language education would, it was hoped, enable the United States to regain scientific and technological preeminence over its Cold War rival.” Pamela Ebert Flattau, Project Leader, Jerome Bracken, Richard Van Atta, Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi, Rodolfo de la Cruz, Kay Sullivan, *The National Defense Education Act of 1958: Selected Outcomes*, March 2006. Institute for Defense Analyses, Science & Technology Policy Institute, 1899 Pennsylvania Ave., Suite 520, Washington, DC 20006-3602. <http://www.ida.org/stpi/pages/D3306-FINAL.pdf>

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