

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Bully Pulpit

When Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons recently took to the *Boston Globe* to lay out Brown's bold inquiry into its founders' role in the slave trade, she prefaced her discussion by lamenting that college leaders were increasingly unwilling to discuss such controversial ideas in an open setting for fear of being exposed to "indecorous behavior."

A few years earlier, when former Tufts University President John DiBiaggio publicly voiced skepticism about a Massachusetts lieutenant governor's plan to enlist college student tutors to help high school students pass the high-stakes MCAS exam, some of DiBiaggio's colleagues worried openly about the political future of Tuft's veterinary school, which receives funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Offering opinions is a high-risk activity for today's college and university presidents. If the indecorous behavior isn't bad enough, potential funders and de-funders are listening.

It's much safer to talk about the campus's latest "branding" effort or cost-cutting measures, or to rail against excessive regulation in higher education. And corporate-style leaders sought out by higher education governing boards and executive search firms to bring fiscal accountability and political favor to campuses are well-equipped to oblige. But is that a worthy use of the college president's "bully pulpit"?

Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nannerl O. Keohane acknowledged that she wrestled with how much to speak out on issues as president of Duke University, and before that, Wellesley College, concerned that "anything a president says about controversial issues while in office can be taken as an official statement" and worrying that "if an officer takes a substantive stand on a thorny topic, those on the campus who hold the opposite point of view may be less likely to speak out—especially if they lack power and job security." Nonetheless, Keohane concluded that the university president's bully pulpit simply offers too much potential for good to overlook, especially on issues that have "clear relevance" to the university's public purposes.

Which might lead one to wonder which issues do *not* have clear relevance to a college or university's public purposes. Higher education, after all, remains sufficiently at the center of public life that most important topics of the day are connected to the enterprise in some way—and, so even by this minimum standard, fair game for college presidents who are willing to exercise their moral authority.

War comes to mind, for its gravity, but also for its potential to wreak havoc with applicant pools, particularly among the under-represented groups that colleges profess to want to reach. Same goes for issues related to AIDS, guns in the community and impoverished public schools.

Likewise, civil liberties is hardly an external issue in an era when Congress is considering pulling federal funds on international studies programs that don't advance some vague national interest and scholars can be plucked from campus in the name of national security. Corporate ethics impacts endowment performance and trustee effectiveness. Excessive CEO pay steals jobs from fresh college graduates. Social inequity strains student aid budgets. Clearly relevant.

There are also more esoteric higher education matters that beg for moral voice. One cause that New England's private college presidents could champion effectively—and a handful have—is full and fair funding of *public* higher education. Their public counterparts would be credible advocates for full and fair funding of the state student grant programs that are sometimes seen as threats to funding for public institutions.

Presidents might even dare to speak out for things that are not obviously in the best interest of their institutions—like guaranteeing a living wage to unskilled campus workers or protecting university research from undue commercial pressures.

Ultimately, one of the great unheralded advantages of New England's concentration of colleges and universities is the potential public leadership of its 270 or so college presidents. The challenge they face is not that there are so many risks to speaking out, but rather, that there's so much to speak out about.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.