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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

What Your College President Didn't Tell You

By JOHN M. McCARDELL Jr.

Beaufort, S.C. — Much has been made in recent years of the unwillingness among college and university presidents to venture above the parapet and challenge some of the shibboleths of higher education. By this I do not mean advocacy of political positions. Presidents who would keep their campuses places where ideas are in fact freely exchanged ought to avoid signing public letters or endorsing candidates, tempting as it may be.

No, I mean something else. I retired in June as president of Middlebury College in Vermont, but during my 13-year tenure I was as guilty as any of my colleagues of failing to take bold positions on public matters that merit serious debate. Now, a less vulnerable member of the faculty once more, I dare to unburden myself of a few observations. As the new school year begins, there are many things I suspect university presidents would like to say to their various constituencies but dare not.

To faculties and governing boards: tenure is a great solution to the problems of the 1940's, when the faculty was mostly male and academic freedom was at genuine risk. Why must institutions make a judgment that has lifetime consequences after a mere six or seven years? Publication may take longer in some fields than in others, and familial obligations frequently interrupt careers. Why not a system of contracts of varying length, including lifetime for the most valuable colleagues, that acknowledges the realities of academic life in the 21st century?

Moreover, when most tenure documents were originally adopted, faculty members had little protection. Today, almost every negative tenure decision is appealed. Appeals not upheld internally are taken to court. Few if any of these appeals have as their basis a denial of academic freedom.

To current and prospective parents (and editors of magazines that profit by the American public's fascination with rankings): student/faculty ratio is overrated as a measure of quality. Can any faculty member persuasively argue that a class of eight or nine students is qualitatively superior to a class of 10 or 11? How many classes at any institution, large

or small, are the actual size of the celebrated ratio? (Answer: very few.)

More meaningful statistics, for those seeking to measure quality of education in terms of faculty accessibility, are average class size, average instructional load, percentage of faculty members who are full-time, and how frequently professors hold office hours or take their meals in student dining halls. And not all subjects are best learned around a seminar table. The large lecture, well designed and delivered, can, in fact, be a superior way to learn certain subjects.

To lawmakers: the 21-year-old drinking age is bad social policy and terrible law. It is astonishing that college students have thus far acquiesced in so egregious an abridgment of the age of majority. Unfortunately, this acquiescence has taken the form of binge drinking. Campuses have become, depending on the enthusiasm of local law enforcement, either arms of the law or havens from the law.

Neither state is desirable. State legislators, many of whom will admit the law is bad, are held hostage by the denial of federal highway funds if they reduce the drinking age. Our latter-day prohibitionists have driven drinking behind closed doors and underground. This is the hard lesson of prohibition that each generation must relearn. No college president will say that drinking has become less of a problem in the years since the age was raised. Would we expect a student who has been denied access to oil paint to graduate with an ability to paint a portrait in oil? Colleges should be given the chance to educate students, who in all other respects are adults, in the appropriate use of alcohol, within campus boundaries and out in the open.

And please - hold your fire about drunken driving. I am a charter member of Presidents Against Drunk Driving. This has nothing to do with drunken driving. If it did, we'd raise the driving age to 21. That would surely solve the problem.

I hope the public, and the higher education community, will be willing to engage these issues seriously and respectfully. My head is now well above the parapet. Gaudeamus igitur!

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