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OPINION

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Activist Trustees Wield Power Gone Awry

By CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

Imagine the following:

The political pendulum in the United States has swung again. Campaigning under the slogan "We Are the Real People," militant progressives have won a significant number of Congressional and gubernatorial elections.

The new governors champion goals in common, among them the need to reform higher education. They vow to appoint their people to the boards of state-university systems and institutions.

The governors move quickly, stating three criteria for appointees: loyalty to those who appoint them; racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; and willingness to attend periodic workshops that a new organization, the Progressive Alliance for Educational Justice, will conduct. The association's executive director formerly served as the chair of a feminist-studies department at a major university.

Once appointed, the new trustees announce a bold reform platform. They unite in the belief that too many college and university presidents cozy up to corporate moguls and "outsource" educational services to the private sector. Each trustee also has individual planks to enact. One, who has run a non-profit economic-development agency in an inner city, promotes access and insists that every high-school graduate of any age be able to attend college, get credit for life experience, and receive financial aid. Another trustee, whose primary concern is the curriculum, declares that every economics and business department must offer a mandatory course in workers' rights and union history that will highlight the racial and gender diversity of workers throughout the world. Still another calls for tenure for all faculty members -- full and part time -- after five years of service.

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Now imagine the outcry that such a scheme would provoke.

I would join in this censure.

My scenario emerges from observing, with growing wariness, the new self-described "activist trustees" who have been appointed by conservative governors to the boards of public universities. Unlike my imaginary trustees, they are largely social and political conservatives, but they resemble my imaginary trustees in that they believe that they must act aggressively to cure sclerotic, selfish American higher education. Although the activist trustees are comparatively few in number, they have become a muscular presence on the governing boards of systems of higher education in such key states as California, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Virginia.

Lest I be misunderstood -- willfully or inadvertently -- let me state unequivocally that healthy boards represent a spectrum of ideas. Moreover, the loftiest rhetoric of the activist trustees is irreproachable, for it legitimately calls on board members -- variously called trustees, directors, overseers, visitors, regents, or curators -- to discharge their fiduciary responsibilities with seriousness and high purpose.

However, the current wave of activist trustees often seems to prefer a single set of ideas to a wide spectrum, and power to shared governance. Furthermore, these trustees have recently begun to focus their energies on the curriculum -- one of the most inappropriate topics for them to take up. Their actions could snap shut the open book of the modern curriculum.

Campus officials should be worried when a trustee of the State University of New York System attends a conference sponsored by the women's-studies department on the New Paltz campus about women and sexuality and then, upset by the event, calls for the president's resignation. And when, last November, the policy-making body for higher education in Virginia rejected a major in African-American studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, despite the institution's support for the proposal.

The depth and complexity of the questions about higher education today -- including questions about the curriculum -- demand fresh thinking by everyone. Yet the activist trustees seem to be adopting the well-worn battle plan that conservatives have long pursued in fighting the equally well-worn "culture wars."

The primary strategies in this battle appear to be:

First, tap into the fears of Americans about the cost of higher education by demonizing colleges and universities as radical, slack, and wasteful. Treat faculty members and administrators as adversaries who have earned the suspicion and contempt of right-thinking people. Declare that you cannot trust established sources of information -- such as the staff members of a state system or a president. Set up your own research unit on the institution -- no matter what the cost -- as the board of the City University of New York did. Lament that current trustees have been too negligent, passive, or frightened even to admit to the stink from the Augean stables that higher education has become.

Second, move into curricular issues by offering yourself as a disinterested, diligent party of redemptive virtue who will "take back" the American campus -- by restoring academic excellence, freedom of inquiry, and a liberal-arts curriculum that focuses on the great books, great ideas, and achievements of the West. Claim that you will raise Shakespeare from the grave into which the contemporary faculty has stuffed him. And note that, in the process, the purified campus will also have been cleansed of faculty sloth, fiscal bloat, and racial preferences.

Whether demonizing the campus or promising its redemption, today's conservative activist trustees give in to the temptation to let the balloon of rhetoric float above the messy fields of accuracy and nuanced interpretation. Thus a new, young member of Virginia's State Council of Higher Education recently charged that while she was an undergraduate, the English department of the University of Virginia had offered only one class on Jane Austen -- and that blasted by a feminist perspective. But the head of the department points out that she and her colleagues present an average of four courses each semester that include Austen.

Another example: The spring 1997 issue of *Inside Academe* -- a publication of the National **Alumni** Forum, a group set up in 1995 to combat alleged "political correctness" on campuses -- featured a story about the activist trustee who had become head of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. It tells of her discovery that "17 per cent of the students receiving state financial aid do not bother to maintain a C average." The clear assumption is that the 17-per-centers are lazy wastrels whose fondest desire is to mooch off the taxpayers of Virginia. That assumption neglects the fact that many students with uneven records might be in their first year of college -- and in the first generation of their family to go to college at all. They might

well be having a tough year, but could eventually pull through -- if shown encouragement rather than disdain.

Third, enlist high-profile spokesmen and spokeswoman for this struggle. Last November, for example, the actor Charlton Heston signed a fund-raising appeal for the National **Alumni** Forum. Also, establish a national infrastructure that will sustain and train a movement of like-minded critics of higher education. Activist trustees today can call on the well-established National Association of Scholars for reports about the curriculum, and can look to the National **Alumni** Forum's ATHENA Project -- an acronym for **Alumni** and Trustees for Higher Education Accountability -- for roundtables, retreats, reports, and advice on searches. In fact, as a sign of its hope to serve trustees, the **alumni** forum has just changed its name to the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**.

Fourth, once in control, and despite promises to restore a lost freedom of inquiry, be skeptical of independent voices. Silence those who do not obey. Dismiss presidents or directors of state systems if they do not agree with you, no matter how respected they might be. Question faculty tenure, or, at the most extreme, call for its abolition, ignoring the links between tenure and academic freedom.

The dangers of this battle plan to the curriculum are plain. I have long argued that the liberal arts -- in subject matter and method -- can combine tradition and innovation. In brief, I want all students to read Shakespeare *and* to understand how a postcolonial or a feminist critic might read him as well.

Like others, I fear that many activist trustees thoughtlessly dismiss the revisionary scholarship and curricula of recent decades. To be sure, I sense a split among activist trustees in their general picture of higher education, into which the curriculum fits. On the one hand, some of them evoke an industrial model, in which the curriculum is comparable to a product, and the students to customers, to be served on the lowest possible cost-per-unit basis. Faculty members are comparable to contract employees who deliver the product, trustees to the corporate board, and the president or chancellor to a crisp but responsive chief executive officer. Last month, James F. Carlin, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, told *The Chronicle* that he objects to faculty contracts in which "clause after clause says the faculty run the academic side of the institution. That's like telling General Motors that the president can't be involved with making cars."

On the other hand, many activist trustees praise the highly selective liberal-arts college devoted to a canonical curriculum. The belief in a traditional curriculum is fine and dandy. What is not fine is trustees decreeing *a priori* that new ideas, even disturbing ideas, are bad ideas. What is not dandy is longing to impose a one-size-fits-all syllabus for the liberal arts on the rich variety of American institutions.

Moreover, some activist trustees apparently have no qualms about substituting their judgments -- no matter how rash, limited, or rooted in mere opinion -- for those of an institution and its faculty members. In November 1997, when the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia rejected the proposal from Virginia Commonwealth University to establish a major in African-American studies, one member of the council rationalized the decision by citing fiscal prudence. But the major would have required adding only three courses to the curriculum -- while at the same time providing intellectual sustenance for a multicultural, urban student body.

The council's rejection of that major raises questions not only about race as a curricular subject, but also about diversity among the activist trustees themselves. For these appointees, although not exclusively white, lack the pluralism that increasingly characterizes the best American institutions.

Virginia seems to put up poster boys for the activist-trustee interrogation of the curriculum. Charles H. Cunningham, a new member of the board of James Madison University, vowed in 1996 that he was "planning to go course by course in the James Madison manual to see what I don't like and what I think doesn't have a place on our campus." Such attitudes are a symptom of a disdain for academics in general and faculty members in particular, an attitude that inexorably stimulates scorn for shared governance and the faculty's primary role in determining the curriculum.

As a faculty member who has worked in both public and private institutions, as a university administrator, and as a college trustee, I have often been dismayed by faculty members who dither about the curriculum, who put their own interests or those of their department before the institution's well-being, or who refuse to think through the fiscal consequences of curricular decisions. However, the reasons why faculty members should determine the curriculum are so compelling that I set aside my occasional grumpiness about their behavior. I urge activist trustees to do the same.

Faculty members, after all, should know more than other people do about the raw materials of the curriculum. A molecular biologist should know more about DNA than a real-estate developer who has been appointed a trustee; a European historian should know more about the Thirty Years' War than would most dentists. Thus, the faculty is better equipped than trustees to make informed judgments about what should be studied and taught. Moreover, in institutions with any tradition of faculty governance, faculties have developed a deliberative process that suggests, refines, and amends ideas about the curriculum. Of course, individual faculty members can have great latitude about the content of specific courses. Nevertheless, faculty committees and meetings provide an interdisciplinary arena in which the curriculum is systematically debated. A wise trustee distrusts these debates at some peril. Finally, faculty members are the ones who must implement the curriculum in the classroom, which both tests its soundness and deepens the insights of all but the most obtuse and arrogant teacher.

A few years ago I became a trustee of Bates College, a liberal-arts institution. I was a fortunate initiate, in that I was able to learn how to be a trustee by watching an exemplary board in action. No doubt, members of the Bates board vote very differently in political elections, respond very differently to avant-garde art or rap music, think very differently about the nature of the family or of God. However, the group that taught me shared a keen, but keenly judicious, awareness that it bore ultimate responsibility for the well-being of a college, one to which it was selflessly devoted.

So self-regulated, this board articulated a mission for the college and set policies about such issues as buildings and grounds, legal questions, the budget, capital campaigns, and financial aid without buzzing like a headstrong bee around the hive of detail. It knew how to hire a president and then give the appointee respect and freedom. It set a tone of dignity, collegiality, civility, and devotion to educational principles in its own deliberations and in those with faculty and staff members and students. It asked the hard questions without indulging in the petty pleasures of being hard-nosed. It interested itself in the curriculum and curricular developments while granting the faculty authority in that domain.

Having learned from a strongly virtuous board, I like to imagine a scenario in which the current cohort of activist trustees also could be the beneficiary of such an education. Their orientation materials would include some readings

from Shakespeare -- perhaps a passage from
King Lear warning against power
gone awry, power that is heedless of the less powerful and
the powerless, power that has decapitated both reason and
compassion, power that feeds on arrogance rather than
humility. What activist trustee could doubt that Shakespeare
is a source of compelling wisdom?

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