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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

From the issue dated April 7, 2006

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trustees Behaving Correctly

To the Editor:

Richard P. Chait grievously errs in citing two board actions at the State University of New York, with which I was deeply involved, as examples of "inept governance" ("[When Trustees Blunder](#)," *The Chronicle Review*, February 17).

The SUNY Board of Trustees did in 1998 institute a systemwide core curriculum, badly needed to equip undergraduates with some modicum of general knowledge and to bring some semblance of coherence to the decades-long accretion of overspecialized and trifling courses among which students had heretofore been invited to inchoately choose. But in no way did the trustees improperly dictate specific curricular content, as Chait implies.

In order to impugn the trustees, he also charges that they "threatened academic freedom and the campus president" as a result of being "troubled by the sexually explicit substance of an academic conference on the New Paltz campus." This grossly trivializes what in fact transpired at this event, with the blessing of Roger W. Bowen, then campus president and now general secretary of the American Association of University Professors. ... The antics at this event included the solicitation of students by members of a lesbian sadomasochistic club, the demonstration and sale of sex devices, and an obscene striptease by a female "performance artist."

Both cases involve the contravention of the great purposes for which state universities exist, and the trustees rightfully exercised their duty to intervene. It is deplorable that Chait should so cavalierly catalog these actions alongside cases of financial mismanagement, fraud, and similar board misconduct.

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To the Editor:

Richard Chait sheds important light on recent missteps by boards of trustees. Where Mr. Chait gets it wrong is when he suggests that two boards, those of George Mason University and the State University of New York, have inappropriately meddled in curricular affairs.

As Mr. Chait well knows, boards of trustees are fiduciaries, with the ultimate responsibility for the academic and financial well-being of their institutions. It is incumbent on them to exercise that responsibility fully and to do so in a way that gives due regard to the faculty's rights and responsibilities in academic matters.

But due deference to shared governance does not absolve trustees from their ultimate authority for the effective and appropriate use of the taxpayers' dollar. ... Far from blundering, the GMU and SUNY boards properly undertook general-education reviews and, working with faculty members, adopted rigorous curricular requirements. ...

Rather than criticizing them, Mr. Chait should be seeking more trustees like those at GMU and SUNY, trustees who direct their energies to changes that put students first.

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