

## Evaluation of University Presidents: Broadening the Perspective

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This essay deals with the current status of university presidential evaluation and the narrow anti-evaluation perspective taken in the current literature. In an attempt to broaden the basis upon which the issues can be debated, the authors systematically analyze and expand upon the six advantages to presidential evaluation developed by John Nason in his book, *Presidential Assessment: Challenge to College and University Leadership*.

L'objet de cet article est d'engager la réflexion sur la question de l'évaluation des présidents d'universités, et surtout de la perspective anti-évaluation qui domine la littérature contemporaine. Dans le but de situer le débat dans un contexte plus large, les auteurs analysent et développent six avantages de l'évaluation des présidents d'universités, tels que présentés par John Nason, dans son ouvrage intitulé *Presidential Assessment: Challenge to College and University Leadership*.

Most of the opposition to presidential<sup>1</sup> evaluation comes from university presidents, ex-presidents, or presidential aspirants. Their arguments are not about evaluation; they are about charisma, power, turf, and the maintenance thereof. To suggest that university presidents should not be evaluated on decisions that affect an entire institution is to suggest that individual ends justify institutional means. Our concern is not with the means by which a university realizes its goals, for clearly faculty members are evaluated in these areas — namely teaching, research, and service. Our concern is with those who are in positions to make decisions about university goals — university presidents — and with the evaluation of their performance. A secondary concern is with the rather narrow perspective from which the issue of presidential evaluation has been viewed. Admittedly, there are rhetorical and practical advantages to maintaining support for certain points of view by exposing the unacceptability of the alternative. But when the opponents to presidential evaluation consistently win the debate by default, the perspective narrows further still. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the debate over presidential evaluation by addressing its advantages, a viewpoint seldom taken in the current literature.

The literature on evaluation of university presidents is sparse and grows out of a small group of seminal writings by Clark Kerr (1984), John Nason (1980), and James L. Fisher (1984). Thus, not only are their views considered authoritative, but, as all were university presidents, they have much in common. What is obvious from the literature is that the work of Nason serves as the focal point upon which most of the arguments against presidential evaluation are based. For example, Fisher and Quehl (1984) wrote an article entitled "Presidential Assessment: Obstacles to Leadership" which cited six disadvantages to formal evaluation, all of which were contained in Nason's (1980) work, *Presidential Assessment: Challenge to College and University Leadership*. And so it seems only appropriate that the advantages of formal evaluation, also contained in Nason's book, be given equal consideration, since simply to argue against evaluation misses the point. Each advantage cited by Nason will be addressed separately.

#### *Formal Evaluation Promotes Accountability*

Evaluation is only a tool to achieve a certain end, and that end, in our opinion, is accountability. That, after all, is the argument usually advanced in favor of *faculty* evaluation. Nason (1980) states: "Because they are public — on the record so to speak — formal evaluations make clear that the president is accountable for his or her actions" (p. 23). Nason draws a subtle distinction between evaluation and accountability that is often overlooked.

Too often, evaluation is viewed as synonymous with accountability. What occurs when accountability is perceived as evaluation alone is that any form of evaluation, formal, informal, excellent, or ill-conceived, justifies itself as meeting the requirements of accountability. But the concept of accountability is much more than evaluation. It implies, first, that one give "an account of" the decisions made, and second, that there be an audience to whom that account must be directed. It is the latter implication that has drawn the most fire from opponents to presidential evaluation.

There is less opposition to giving an account of presidential decisions, primarily because presidents have always enjoyed a modicum of control over the process. The overwhelming acceptance of evaluation models that are hierarchical and unidirectional have placed university presidents in a unique position — at the top of the hierarchy. Some will argue that the board of trustees is one rung up the ladder. It seems clear, however, that the primary control over information lies with the individual whose responsibility is to inform and guide the board, and that is the president. If evaluation is viewed as satisfying the requirements of accountability, it is advantageous to argue that boards should evaluate and that any other form of evaluation is an abdication of board responsibility.

When one recognizes, as Nason has, that accountability implies an audience or public much broader than current evaluation models allow, another issue must be given consideration and that is that evaluation *per se* does not make things better simply because it exists. Faculty members are accountable to their employers; they are accountable, although less clearly, to their disciplines or at least to the

demands of their field of knowledge and the ethical principles it upholds; they are accountable to the students they teach; they are, perhaps less clearly still, accountable to their colleagues, for the university is considered to be a collegial institution that espouses and usually practices a system of shared governance. (In this respect, a university is less like a school, which may, in part, account for the slower spread of formal evaluation practices into higher education.)

While these descriptions of accountability are accurate, its measure is taken by means of evaluation procedures, flawed as they may be. What holds for the faculty must surely hold for the university president, but in a more complex way, for the president deals not solely with academic issues. He or she deals also with a host of non-academic issues such as fund raising, public relations, finances, and care of the physical plant. This suggests accountability, not charisma.

If the president is accountable, he or she is accountable for something to someone. Technically, the president is accountable to the board of trustees. Ethically, of course, the president is accountable also to the groups with which he or she deals — students, faculty, staff, alumni, the public and its elected representatives, as well as to the trustees. One measure of this accountability lies in evaluation, and evaluation is necessary in order to describe what and how well the president is doing. Faculty members do not have the option to accept accountability and reject evaluation. But university presidents, as represented by their spokesmen, apparently feel that they do. We suggest they should not.

The primary reaction to the suggestion that presidents may be accountable to those affected by their decisions and who would then necessarily have to become involved in any evaluation process, has been for opponents of evaluation to focus upon the political process as a negative force in the university setting. It has even been suggested that participatory democracy in the universities may be the catalyst that led to the current nadir in effective leadership. Fisher and Quehl (1984) state that “the democratization of academe during the 60’s and 70’s brought about a general deterioration of presidential leadership” (p. 5). This implies that increased constituency participation and effective leadership are negatively correlated or even mutually exclusive. Clark Kerr (1982) also suggests they might be:

Internally, participatory democracy was introduced as a radical idea that turned out to be the most conservative element in the history of governance in American higher education, creating veto group after veto group. The only thing that cannot be vetoed is a continuation of the status quo. (p. 5)

There is the hint that university presidents cannot or perhaps do not want to function in a democratic situation. They prefer instead to work in a hierarchial situation where decision making, and the power inherent in it, are granted by default.

If democratic participation is perceived as an obstacle to presidential leadership, it becomes clear that what presidents are fighting to guard is not leadership, for tough, dynamic leadership can surely exist in a democratic setting, but power; thus they oppose all that threatens it, including evaluation. Could it be, rather,

that the presidents' quest to eliminate evaluation is politically motivated in order to retain power and eliminate participation in university affairs? Assessment would really answer the question of how politically successful a president is in an institution that provides a modicum of democratic participation in the evaluation process — a far better measure of accountability. And university presidents must be held accountable for their contribution to the institution. For it to be otherwise is to deny that the president is an integral part of the framework of the institution and, more importantly, denies that what the president does affects the institution. This leads to a second advantage to presidential evaluation cited by Nason.

### *Evaluation Focuses on the President Within an Institutional Context*

Nason (1980; 1984) suggests that one of the greatest advantages to public and systematic evaluation is the fact that it puts the role of the president in an institutional context which focuses on the governance structure. He further suggests that, given this context, any appraisal of the president's performance must take into account the attitudes, prerogatives, and behaviors of those constituencies that comprise the institution, such as faculty, students, central office, and governing boards. Nason appears to recognize that the position of university president is but one part, albeit an extremely important one, of a much larger institutional framework. This implies two things: First, that the role of the president lies imbedded within the institution, not outside of it; second, the actions taken or decisions made by the university president directly affect the actions and decisions made by others in the institution.

That the president is indeed an active force in the university seems obvious, and much of the literature on university presidents reinforces this notion, oftentimes taking it to the extreme. Clark Kerr (1982) states: "The president is still the most important single person in the life of a college or university" (p. 7). If this is true, and we are not arguing that it is, then it seems even more important that presidents be evaluated. Opponents to evaluation, however, seem to argue that evaluation should be deferred precisely because the presidential position is so important. What this line of argument does is to remove the president from the institution and place him or her above it, so to speak. And from this perspective, it is easy to dismiss as detrimental the necessity of taking into account the actions and attitudes of the constituencies.

Kerr's next sentence is telling:

Who is in that position or how well he is able to perform is still the most important single aspect of college and university life. And the central responsibilities of the board remain: how to get the best possible people and give them the best possible circumstances. (p. 7)

And so, it seems that "how well they (presidents) perform" is not dependent upon what they do for the institution but rather what the institution does or does not do for them. Clark Kerr, like many others, argues against formal evaluation from this perspective, rather like blaming the victim. We suggest that evaluation of how well the president performs should be the primary factor in assessing his

or her level of importance in the institution. To argue that the president is a victim of less than ideal institutional circumstances effectively denies the importance of the role and circumvents accountability. Opponents to evaluation seem to stop short of accepting responsibility for failure, preferring to relinquish it to the institution. The arguments against evaluation suggest that if presidential evaluation is avoided, then the strength of the president is at least reinforced or maintained by default. Strength of the president, however, and strength of the president's position are two different things.

### *Evaluations Strengthen the President's Position and Period of Effective Leadership*

It is this advantage cited by Nason that is probably the most frequently utilized argument *against* evaluation. This is, in our opinion, the result of misunderstanding the difference between individual strength and positional strength. The opponents argue that if a president is to enjoy the advantages of strength, often referred to as power, formal evaluations should be avoided since they reduce charisma and authority. These are key elements in the argument that evaluation is detrimental to presidential effectiveness. The underlying assumption in the arguments against evaluation is that charisma and power or strength are synonymous with effective leadership. Hence, reduction in the former results in a reduction of the latter — evaluation being the mode by which this occurs.

Fisher and Quehl (1984) would opt to eliminate evaluation on this basis. It is interesting to note, however, that they have no definition of *effective leadership*: "It is impossible to catch and count and weigh; effective leadership is so amorphous as to be almost mystical. But we know that when it exists, things are better" (p. 6). They further tell us that "for a leader to ask the people he or she leads for an assessment reduces the poetry of leadership to the prose of second-level management" (p. 6). This simply begs the question. To define effective leadership *ex post facto*, as Fisher and Quehl do, and then to describe effectiveness as the result of charisma is certainly questionable. Fisher (1984) himself enlarges this argument in his book, *The Power of the Presidency*. He warns that the book is not for scholars, and states that it is only loosely rooted in research and intended for those "who work daily in the reality of the college and university marketplaces" (p. ix). Under the guise of practicality and reality, Fisher defends the use of power and charisma in the presidential office.

Fisher's suggestions for dealing with the office all require charisma. For example, he recommends:

It is also perfectly legitimate for a president to use the board as a scapegoat for unpopular decisions. A president takes the heat for enough unpopular decisions, so if the opportunity presents itself to use the board, go ahead. (p. 163)

It might be supposed that charisma rather than reason prompts the next line: "Discerning trustees understand this." Undiscerning trustees might take a different view! In any case, Fisher draws a rather narrow view of the role of anyone other

than the president. He assumes that trustees or any other group in the institution are of value only as vehicles, guided by charisma, to gain political power for the president. Surely it is dangerous to allow an institution, particularly one with the traditions of the university, to be led by a person who espouses power beyond all else, regardless of how it may be clothed in the trappings of effective leadership. Fisher's definitions of power — such as employing force; A getting B to do what he otherwise would not; or being late and having people continue to be thrilled that you show up — however benign, cannot be justified and should not be exercised outside the parameters of what is actually done, to whom, and to what ends. *Credibility* and *confidence* cannot, in the long run, be built upon charisma or how someone makes us feel.

Terrence E. Deal identified the problem in the foreword to Elio Zappullo's (1983) book, *Evaluating Administrative Performance: Current Trends and Techniques*:

Charismatic ideals would focus our attention on special qualities of school leaders. If someone has character, personal attraction, or worthy goals, *ipso facto* his or her leadership must be sound. One's magic charm intact, why question the performance? But in times like ours, both tradition and charisma have paled before a robust blossoming of rational assumptions. And in the ebbtide, most institutions and their leaders are being asked to prove they make a difference, to show that they produce results. Believing is no longer seeing; most people want it the other way around. (p. vii)

The second element contained in the arguments for the promotion of power is the idea of "legitimate" authority. "Formal public assessment undermines the authority, status and potential effectiveness of the presidency" (Fisher and Quehl, 1984, p. 6). Fisher and Quehl cite the action of some boards of giving "to staff, students and others rights that presidents once granted as privileges" (p. 6), as reducing legitimate authority. What appears to be legitimate then is any action taken at the sole discretion and benevolence of the president. It is questionable that taking rights away and reassigning them as privileges is real authority, much less legitimate. Rights, like equality, are not assigned by anyone; they are recognized or they are not recognized. Assigning them the status of a privilege seems only to temper the fact that, in reality, they are not recognized.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that evaluation is perceived negatively. Fisher and Quehl (1984) assume that evaluation is necessarily subjective and tell us that "knowledge that this type of non-objective process is going on undermines the ability of the president to lead, for it automatically reduces the legitimate authority of the office" (p. 6). This is certainly true if it is believed that presidents alone have the right to control evaluation and that assessments of performance are inherently negative. Then it is easy to see why evaluations are perceived as threats. But the assertion that evaluation is negative will come as a surprise to experts in the field. Moreover, as faculty members themselves are subject to evaluation, where does this attitude by their leaders leave them? One would assume that the philosophical or theoretical advantages of evaluation espoused by academicians would be used by their leaders to transform theory into practice.

This has been done to a point. Most universities evaluate the faculty and staff. Upward evaluation of faculty by students is widely utilized, rationalized, and defended as functional by administration and boards. The logic stops there. It is hard to imagine that university presidents, who espouse faculty and staff evaluation, truly value it when in fact most refuse, vehemently, to become guiding examples. This dual standard trivializes the concept of evaluation and reinforces its political status as a tool to be used at the discretion of the president.

It seems obvious that opponents perceive evaluation as a threat to power, but the advantage cited by Nason refers not to individual power but to institutional strength. There is a difference. Evaluation is descriptive, not explanatory. In this context, evaluation serves to describe the complexity of the presidential role and in a real sense increase constituency appreciation for the difficult and often thankless task. This is the strength Nason refers to. The consequent description, via the process of evaluation, leads to increased understanding, credibility, and confidence in those directly or indirectly affected by the president. Accountability enters, however, when those affected *do not* understand and so ask, even demand, an explanation for the decisions made. Herein lies the real strength, the institutional strength of checks and balances, of participatory and public strength. Evaluation does little more than describe what has been accomplished through a given position — it must necessarily belong to the position. Accountability, on the other hand, belongs to the individual in that position, who must, if asked, provide a rationale for decisions made while in that position of public trust. The strength of the president lies in the *process* of participation not in the outcome.

### *Evaluations Strengthen the Board's Position*

Because any evaluation system that is designed to promote accountability must, by necessity, have an audience, it is imperative that the evaluation be communicated to the board. For it is the "knowledge" of the president's role that allows intelligent and fair minded decision making on the board's part. Otherwise, the board is left to evaluate only information that the president cares to share. Although much decision making is deferred to the president, and rightly so, it is irresponsible for any board to put a president in a position of selecting the information that it will use for evaluation.

What Nason suggests is that the board's strength comes from having unbiased, accurate knowledge of the issues, an absolute necessity for adequate evaluation of decisions. Without that strength, the board merely enacts a formality within the institutional framework. And all too often this is how boards are perceived. "For a president to expect helpful support and influence with such a board (multi-school public boards) is almost always detrimental to the institution as well as the president, for one's charismatic potential is slowly reduced to the level of the persons who serve on the board" (Fisher, 1984, p. 156). Combine this with the self-proclaimed status of the "single most important individual" and it is easy to appreciate the need for boards to know that in a real sense the information they receive can be severely limited by the president's perception of their role.

Evaluation can avoid this dilemma by causing boards formally to recognize and outline expectations for the president. This awareness eliminates the arbitrary nature of second guessing. Until it knows what the president does, the board cannot make reasonable judgments about the effectiveness of those actions. Unless it evaluates, it cannot hold the president accountable and the only way to know what the president does is to establish expectations and evaluate how well that performance meets those expectations. This leads to the fifth advantage.

### *Formal Evaluations Provide a Rational, Orderly, and Systematic Way of Doing Them*

As Nason (1980) suggests, formal evaluations “presuppose clearly articulated criteria” and depend on “systematic efforts to gather opinions within and without the academic community” (p. 22). Besides eliminating the capricious nature of informal or reactive evaluations, formal evaluations promote a common baseline for making evaluative judgments. More importantly, formal evaluation promotes the development of an appropriate and realistic perspective of the major function of evaluation — and that is to strengthen the institution (Nason, 1985, p. 65). It is obvious that the institution is more than policies, plans, and purposes; it includes the actions and reactions of faculty, students, staff, alumni, and the public at large to those policies, plans, and purposes. And certainly no evaluation by a responsible board could be considered valid that does not at least include evaluation by the faculty and staff who carry out those policies and plans, and who work to reach the stated goals.

As stated earlier, any formal evaluation system is primarily descriptive in nature. It should be premised on the belief that those individuals, including the president, who make up the institution can, in fact, reliably describe their perceptions of the current state of affairs. And this description depends upon a rational, orderly, and systematic methodology or *formal* evaluation. Otherwise, it falls victim to self-serving and arbitrary opinion gathering.

This issue brings us back to the relationship between accountability and evaluation. Surely all groups to whom the president is accountable should participate in the evaluation process. Who else can give an accurate account of the effects of various presidential decisions (or lack of decisions) than those who are directly affected by them? We are ready to admit that the degree of participation should bear a relationship to the degree to which the president’s actions or decisions affect various groups. Hence, faculty opinion would be more heavily weighed than, say, the opinion of alumni, whose views will be more highly weighed than, say, those of the general public.

The constituent groups can be involved several ways in the evaluation process — their elected or appointed representatives may participate; one can select a random sample; or the entire group may be involved. The first is by far the simplest, but it is fraught with problems. The representatives can only speak for themselves, they may be insufficiently informed, they may be self-serving and tell the evaluators, acting for the board, what they want to hear. To canvass the

entire group is by far the most difficult, and, with such groups as alumni and the community, would be an almost impossible job. It would be easier to canvass on-campus groups; and it is on-campus groups that not only see the work of the president more closely, but also who carry most directly the consequences of his or her actions. For example, if the president promotes one department and is perceived as doing so at the expense of the other departments, then participation in an evaluation is the only way that these perceptions can be validated or refuted. Otherwise, those who voice their perceptions to the president may be subject to cursory consideration, glib quips, or perhaps severe sanctions, dependent upon the amount of threat that the president perceives the individual or group to pose. In order to secure serious consideration of all concerns, groups most affected by presidential actions must be the most involved in the presidential evaluation and in more than an informal way.

Another secondary issue along these lines has to do with confidentiality of the presidential evaluation. The three leading commentators on the role of the president — Kerr, Nason, and Fisher — do, it must be conceded, accept limited evaluation. If the evaluation must occur, it must be kept private, covert, and a matter for the trustees alone. If one takes the position that evaluation should be confidential, it follows that there can be only limited involvement by the various interested constituencies, for a widespread evaluation cannot be kept quiet. The arguments in favor of a confidential evaluation range from that of “pricking the bubble of charisma” to the assertion that “good people” will not submit to public evaluation. Some even suggest that public evaluation is the reason why university presidents serve such short terms. As relatively few presidents are evaluated publicly, this is a feeble rationale (Surwill & Heywood, 1976, p. 3). More revealing, perhaps, is the tacit assumption that the results of public evaluations will be negative. Is a positive evaluation, which would enhance prestige and the charisma of a president, altogether improbable? While negative outcomes may indeed result from evaluation, no one should suggest they are the purpose. The proponents of confidentiality are not convincing, primarily because confidentiality is maintained in the interests of the president. Evaluation should be conducted in the interests of the university.

Rational, systematic, and orderly evaluation will not make presidents strong, nor will it make them weak. It will describe the current state of the institution, thereby helping the president to strengthen the university, and if this descriptive process results in a call for accountability, then it works for the good of the institution. After all, one should expect that decisions are made for the good of the institution and accounting for those decisions should provide for increased understanding of the issues. Of course, if decisions are not entirely made with the growth of the institution in mind, the evaluation system serves as the mechanism which identifies the problem and allows for correction.

### *Evaluation Promotes Periodic Review and Resetting of Institutional Goals and Objectives*

Those who are interested in the growth of the institution should recognize the

need for change and embrace it. Formal evaluation of presidential effectiveness, relative to the goals of the university, is one of the best barometers of the need for change. And when evaluation is systematically conducted, the board and president will have a singular perspective from which to generate changes based upon identified strengths and weaknesses of the institutional leader.

The difficulty arises when the presidents perceive their role as an end, in and of itself. From this vantage point, the institution becomes the means to secure the end. Hence, the rationale for the arguments that presidents are not effective because of institutional constraints. When the growth of the institution is the end, then it becomes easy to see that presidential performance as one of the most important means to securing a proper end, and evaluation simply acts to describe that performance.

Nason points out that, theoretically, institutional review can take place independent of formal presidential evaluation but that from a practical standpoint it is seldom done unless a special event triggers a reassessment. Nason explains that unless both institutional and presidential assessment are considered together, it is "too easy to duck the long range and difficult questions of institutional direction" (Nason, 1980, p. 22). Review of institutional goals and presidential evaluation go hand in hand. To evaluate the president is to strengthen the institution, regardless of the outcome of the evaluation.

It is also advantageous to evaluate the president's impact on institutional goals in order to secure or protect the president from spurious evaluation. Goals and objectives of the institution can serve as the yardstick against which the president's effectiveness is measured. Researchers know that the only way to validate the results of a treatment is to get pre-treatment data and to compare them with post-treatment data — the pre and post tests. When presidents are evaluated it is usually at specified intervals (commonly, every 3 or 5 years), but there is rarely any data base for doing so. Even with such data there are a host of intervening variables, but at least a base line — in this case, the goals of the institution — is better than nothing. Surely institutions of higher education of all places should set an example here, and evaluation procedures should be in place *before* the president begins his or her term? They could then make better judgments on the success with which the president has filled the position.

While most opponents to participatory evaluation will agree that goals and objectives of the institution may well suffice for measuring presidential effectiveness, fearing lack of objectivity, they also refuse to allow others than the trustees to do the evaluating. In reality, can those who approve the goals, policies, and plans of an institution be truly objective themselves when it comes time to evaluate them? Boards and university presidents seldom give birth to orphans! And so it seems that the individuals who work daily in the institution can best describe the progress toward the goals if not the goals themselves, and in that description offer some insight into how well the objectives and goals are being met.

## Conclusion

The issue is not whether university presidents should be evaluated, for there is enough evidence in the literature to suggest that evaluation is inevitable at all educational levels, even at the top. It is important to understand that the benefits of evaluation must accrue to the institution's growth, not the growth of powerful individuals. Further, individual, positional accountability must necessarily be viewed in this context. This being the case, it is unthinkable to suggest that anyone who controls his or her own evaluation, directly or indirectly, is truly accountable. We believe that this is precisely the direction that current opponents to formal participating evaluation processes are taking.

Recently, we heard an account of an administrator who submitted to evaluation by the faculty, fully expecting overwhelming support for the manner in which he had carried out his mandate. It was an unpleasant surprise for him to discover that the perceptions of his performance were in fact as negative as his own were positive. He was removed from his position. The evaluation might well have turned out the way he anticipated and he would still have his job. The point is that, either way, he would never have known anything about the quality of his work, and neither presumably would the trustees have known, had there not been the opportunity during the evaluation process for widespread participation on the part of those most affected by that work. The real winner is the institution. Perhaps the toughest part of any leader's task is not the daily grind, but simply deciding to risk validation of his or her perceptions. This is admittedly risky and perhaps even altruistic, but in the long run necessary.

## Notes

1. Although the nomenclature is not consistent, we mean by "university president" the chief executive officer of a university campus. In those cases when the university is part of a system, our arguments could be used to justify evaluation of the system's CEO as well as the campus presidents.

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