Calling Dr. Pangloss: The Self-Defeating Logic of Forced Positivity

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Abstract: The philosophical orientation of an institutional governing board has profound implications for the operation and future of the institution. This case history presents experience and context for a small college board that adopted an extreme position that insisted on good news and denied the value of critical or negative information or opinions. The result is ongoing hazard for the future of the institution because leadership is unwilling and unable to realistically address substantial challenges. Readers are invited to reflect on perspective and practice in their own institutions to consider the degree to which these kinds of attitudes and behaviors may be adding to the challenges of operating in an era of relative scarcity and turbulence in the general environment for higher education in North America.

Résumé : L'orientation philosophique d'un conseil d'administration institutionnel a de profondes implications pour le fonctionnement et l'avenir de l'institution. Cette histoire de cas présente l'expérience et le contexte d'un conseil d'administration d'un petit collège qui a adopté une position extrême insistant sur les bonnes nouvelles et niant la valeur des informations ou opinions critiques ou négatives. Il en résulte un danger permanent pour l'avenir de l'institution, car les dirigeants ne veulent pas et ne sont pas en mesure de relever de manière réaliste les défis importants. Les lecteurs sont invités à réfléchir à la perspective et aux pratiques de leurs propres établissements pour déterminer dans quelle mesure ces types d'attitudes et de comportements peuvent ajouter aux défis liés au fonctionnement dans une époque de relative rareté et de turbulences dans l'environnement général de l'enseignement supérieur en Amérique du Nord.

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C-3PO: "Sir, the possibility of successfully navigating an asteroid field is approximately three thousand seven hundred and twenty to one!"
Han Solo: "Never tell me the odds."

Introduction

In December 2021, I was asked to consider joining the board of trustees at a small, independent, liberal arts college. I had a long connection with the institution as both an alumnus and from a dozen year stint as provost that had concluded just over seven years earlier. My prospective membership on the board was presented as a singular benefit in that no currently serving board members had any higher education leadership experience at the institutional level. Those encouraging me to serve noted my long career in higher education as a resource from which the board and the institution would benefit. After careful consideration, and with a genuine desire to be helpful to the institution, I agreed to stand for election to the board by its current members and was thus invited to participate in its first full meeting of the new calendar year. Aiming to be an informed participant from the outset, I carefully reviewed all the materials provided for board consideration.

Careful reading of those documents raised many questions about essential planning and operational matters. In my estimation, large operating deficits, enrollment decline, and incomplete proposals for new buildings needed to be addressed more completely by the college leadership. Thus, during my inaugural board meeting, I listened carefully to informational presentations, and when the opportunity arose, I asked the questions that I thought were important for the edification of the board and for the prospects of the institution. I asked the president and chief financial officer what the plan was for addressing the substantial operating deficit. I asked the chief of admissions how he envisioned bringing in enough completed applications to have even a hope of meeting the essential enrollment goals of the institution. I asked the chief academic officer to explain the needs, uses, and ongoing budget implications of the proposed building.

The responses to my questions were muted, to say the least. Though the college was again running an annual operating deficit of nearly a quarter of the planned budget, there seemed to be no

comprehensive strategy for addressing it effectively. The budget challenge reflected the fact that total enrollment had declined by almost a third over the past five years and almost half in the previous 15. In fact, the beginning of the most recent academic year saw a significantly lower number of entering first-year students than had been the case in at least 30 years. The report from admissions claimed substantial current improvements but used the dramatically weak numbers of the most recent year as the basis for comparison. The chief academic officer was not able to clearly explain the intended uses of substantial parts of the proposed building, nor were specific needs or operational plans for the facility articulated. A pledge to "get back to me" with detailed information to this effect was never fulfilled despite repeated requests for clarification.

For the sake of some additional context, this is a college in a rural area of the central United States. It was founded by an itinerant Christian evangelist, as were so many institutions in this region of the U.S. in the 19th century. It has been in continuous operation offering undergraduate instruction for almost 170 years and dates its founding back another 20 before that. It is an institution that has faced persistent challenges of budget and enrollment, though it has evolved a distinctive service-oriented mission and boasts a substantial number of devoted alumni. The combinations of rising costs, changing demographics, location in an economically declining small town, turmoil and turnover within senior leadership, and the disruptions of the pandemic put the college in a dire situation. Enrollment declines engendering the budget deficits noted above compelled the board to sell agricultural property held in trust simply to pay operating costs. Further sales of such property to cover operating losses are anticipated. Budget and enrollment shortfalls have been exacerbated by such factors as shockingly weak persistence of new students (75% attrition of first year students for the 2021-2022 academic year) and deeply disruptive levels of employee turnover (49% of staff since 2020).

The breadth and depth of the problems facing this little college are unfortunately not unique in the U.S. for institutions of this type. Though Canada does not have nearly as many private, non-profit post-secondary institutions as the U.S., this sector has also experienced challenges in recent years that have resulted in various strategies to adjust and avoid financial failure, beyond the extreme case of the April 2023 suspension of operations at Quest University in British Columbia (Lawrence, 2018; Private

Universities in Canada, 2023). Though such closures have been more numerous in the U.S., many institutions across North America have coped with enrollment and finance challenges through mergers, mission changes, or severe retrenchment and that trend seems likely to accelerate over the next twenty years (Higher Ed Dive, 2023; Private Universities in Canada, 2023).

With that brief preface, let me note that it is not my purpose in this essay to argue either for or against particular action or policy, nor to prescribe solutions to the kinds of challenges now facing many small, independent institutions of higher education. I aim, rather, to contemplate the role and operation of governing boards at such institutions generally through reflecting on my specific experience as a member of this board. I offer this essay as a kind of single site case study with implications for educational organizations of all kinds in hopes of stimulating greater self-awareness on the parts of boards collectively and their individual members. I am using the term "case study" loosely because I present this more as a meditation and invitation for further thought than as a formal research undertaking. Single site case studies are often undertaken because they represent a critical, unique, or revelatory research situation (Yin, 2017). My experience and observations led me to see this as an example of Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan David's (2022 & 2023) observation that, "Forced positivity is not leadership. It's denial. Hope and optimism are different from false positivity. They are future-oriented and earned by a willingness to work hard and problem-solve to create a better outcome."

Thus, I offer this set of observations because I suspect that the situation I am describing is not unique and illustrates David's point, revealing attitudes and practices that are important for institutional leaders in various settings to contemplate and understand. My aim is to review the implications of a board culture that clings to David's "forced positivity," actively resists difficult questions or contentious issues, and has what a long-serving board colleague called "a proclivity for shooting the messenger." What follows is an assessment of my board experience during the year that followed and the implications of a culture of forced positivity that makes critical thinking and questioning anathema.

Returning to the story of my first board meeting, the responses to many of my questions were generally vague (a good

deal of what seemed to me to exemplify the colloquialism "talking in circles") and tinged with what seemed like a faint air of exasperation. It turned out that it was not my imagination, because what I began to learn by the end of that first day was that David's comments about false positivity are profound in ways the average reader who has not seen these dynamics at play may not immediately grasp. As I pondered my board experience and searched to better understand it, I found that David's comments were consistent with my observations. From my first meeting I could see that many board members regarded anything that was not clearly disastrous as progress and even a victory of sorts. From their perspectives, my challenging questions conjured painful images of budget, personnel, and enrollment struggles of recent years that remained mostly unresolved.

In the months that followed, I observed that a kind of group crisis fatigue had forged a resolute determination to identify and cling to even the most nominal "good news" in all board business. I want to be clear in stating that I don't regard this attitude as either irrational or perverse. While the outcomes of such a compulsion for positive thoughts only may be maladaptive or ineffective, that focus is not a result of overtly thoughtless or reckless attitudes or behaviors on the parts of individual board members. It became evident over time that the difficulties and turmoil of the recent past (including the controversial departure of a president less than a year into their tenure at the institution and the struggles of the current president) had led to an attitude that optimism and "being positive" was essential to hopes of successful institutional outcomes. In private conversation, the board chair told me that "everybody knew" that there were serious problems and that the institution had "probably three years" to solve persistent major problems before circumstances required considering the possibility of closing the doors permanently. The board, three-fourths of whom were devoted and successful alumni, was resolutely determined to avoid such an unthinkable outcome. The operant assumption seemed to be that disaster could be forestalled if success was presumed and even insisted upon.

The evening of that first day I fretted over whether I had overstepped and been perceived as questioning college leaders too aggressively. Yet as I reflected on the experience, I knew that it was important to be clear about what I understood my role to be as a member of the board, and indeed, the role of the board itself in overseeing such a complex enterprise. A traditional institution of

higher education entails a wide range of distinctive functions. Colleges and universities are variously committed to such core efforts as preserving, conveying, and extending knowledge and its applications; serving as a cultural resource (libraries, athletics, performing arts, visual arts, humanities) internally and for the larger community; making the expertise of faculty and professional staff available to the benefit of the larger community; and asking critical and necessary questions to nudge the larger society toward greater reflection and introspection. Boards must facilitate these kinds of functions and understand them, but first they must assure the operational health and potential of the institution.

The work of achieving such assurance is substantial and challenging. It requires board members to be thoughtful, informed, and careful students of higher education. They must be equally dedicated stewards of the mission and the resources of the institution, which are inextricably interconnected. A mission without resources is simply aspiration; resources without a mission are potential without purpose. To serve these essential functions an institutional governing board must be fully and accurately informed; it must ask thoughtful, honest, sometimes critical questions; it must hold senior institutional leaders accountable; it must assure the financial health and well-being of the institution; it must assure that the institution operates ethically, legally, and within the boundaries of its established policies. Accreditation, government approvals (especially for credentials for professional practice), and fiduciary health are paramount. All of this is not to say that boards should run institutions – that's why the best and wisest boards hire smart, effective presidents and then let them build a leadership group that will keep the board informed while tending to the day-to-day work to advance institutional mission.

More than 40 years of professional experience in education had impressed all of this deeply in my thinking about my role as a board member. I resolved to continue to read all board materials carefully and critically and to ask any questions I thought were important to the operation of the institution and the oversight role of the board, even if the questions were regarded as difficult or challenging. For the remainder of the year, that is exactly what I did, because despite whatever concerns anyone may have had about my inclination to ask questions, the next morning the full membership of the board voted unanimously to elect me to formally join their ranks. I would carry forward to the best of my

ability with concerted efforts to determine paths toward the long-term success of the college. To me that had to mean maintaining a strong orientation toward critical analysis, strategic thinking, and decisive action, all tempered by informed reflection and adjustment aimed at assuring the best possible outcomes and evolving potential of the institution.

I understood that being guided by that philosophy might not always come across as charming bonhomie, because it does often require asking hard questions, making difficult decisions, and challenging people who seem to be compromising the effectiveness and integrity of the institution. It seems a difficult truth of organizational behavior that behaving in ways that are conventionally perceived as "nice," though they may soothe feelings, too often result in seeking a path of least resistance, avoiding conflict, and meeting challenges in ways that minimize emotionally difficult experiences. I have worked with genuinely nice people who were good and kind colleagues but sometimes ineffective leaders. In a culture where group cohesion, positive regard, and "team spirit" are priorities, "nice" may often be preferred because it is easier, seems less abrasive, and seeks to minimize discomfort. Tact, good humor, and charm are qualities to be prized and cultivated but they are of modest instrumental value as ends in themselves. The perspective I tried to bring to these tasks was that the greater good was best served by employing tact, good humor, and even (I hope) charm while still addressing the existential challenges facing the institution in direct and frank ways.

Positive Thinking as Organizational Mantra

One does not need to look far to find the roots of contemporary organizational preferences for positive thinking. Though optimism seems an obviously desirable characteristic of organizational culture, Ehrenreich's (2009) history of the evolution of "positive thinking" as a strategy for individual and organizational success reflects ways in which such principles may become dysfunctional. In an institutional setting the influence of the board and senior leadership on the culture of the organization, especially at a small college, is profound. In that setting the board is the ultimate source of all institutional authority, thus making inconsistent or ineffective leadership norms and behaviors major sources of organizational stress (Sull & Sull, 2022). Certainly, it makes little sense to somehow suggest that the institution would be better

served by leaders who are negative or pessimistic. But extreme and even militant insistence on positive thinking erodes meaningful analysis, leadership accountability, and effective problem-solving.

What I observed during my time on the board was that the insistence on positivity and optimism invariably led to the dismissal of and frustration with reports that were insufficiently positive. It may seem paradoxical to hold that positivity itself can become toxic and even pathological within an organization, but it does not take much searching to discover that demands for a kind of enforced optimism have characterized some of the worst excesses and failures of human history. Witness, for example, the brutal campaigns against "defeatism" waged by authoritarian regimes over time (Ehrenreich, 2009; Overy, 2022). Isolation, disciplinary action, and even dismissal have historically been comparatively common overt responses to individuals identified as "negative" or unwilling to conform to "positive thoughts only" organizational norms (Ehrenreich, 2009). "Optimism only" leadership leans toward assigning responsibility for institutional success to the attitudes of rank-and-file faculty and staff. Organizational failure is then defined in large part as individual failure to be sufficiently positive or committed. Perhaps more insidious, these kinds of expectations can make those within the organization self-monitoring, self-censoring, and even self-suppressing, creating a framework for a kind of thought control that can deprofessionalize and demoralize faculty and staff (Ehrenreich, 2009; Foucault, 1981; Scott, 1985). These kinds of factors contributed significantly to departures from the college of critical senior staff who felt ignored, leaderless, and ultimately hopeless.

Some key examples are illustrative of the board's approach in this regard. First, shortly before I formally joined the board the board chair, the vice-chair, and the president engaged in a process of meeting individually with a select group of administrators and staff members. The meetings were scheduled as vaguely described "informal conversations" about institutional culture and morale. It seems clear that the intent of these meetings was to "rally the troops" and help cement support for the president and institutional directions supported by the board. Unfortunately, many staff members called to meet in this way felt confused and intimidated by the sudden requirement to meet with the most senior leaders of the institution, especially when there was no

clear explanation of what was to be discussed or why. The effective purpose of the meetings, it turned out, was for the most senior institutional leaders to question administrators and staff members about their contributions to institutional culture and operations, and especially how they could demonstrate more "constructive" and "positive" attitudes.

Several of those who were summoned to these meetings described feeling that they were identified because they had asked questions or offered critical perspectives in committee meetings on issues of general institutional policy and procedure, including matters of budget, personnel policy, and strategic planning. One of the senior administrators summoned to such a meeting described the situation as a "bizarre witch hunt" intended to single out individuals regarded as insufficiently positive about institutional operations. A lengthy formal complaint about the matter was submitted to the human resources director, president, and board chair near the beginning of my board term. Having reviewed that document carefully, I know that it raised substantive and important questions of policy, procedure, professional ethics, and institutional mission, but the board never discussed the matter nor was any official response to the complaint ever offered. Thus, a strategy that was initiated with positive intentions resulted in negative outcomes because the process came across as rigid insistence on "correct" thinking, further alienating key members of the institutional community.

A second example involves the handling of evaluation data that are collected annually from faculty and staff. These data are gathered through a detailed questionnaire composed of items asking the respondent to offer their assessment of various offices and operations within the institution, including specific evaluation of the performance of the president, provost, and vice-presidents. The data are routinely summarized and written up descriptively by the director of institutional research. The summary report is then distributed to the board as well as faculty and staff. Concerns about the president's performance were evident in the data, though in my observation the issues and opinions reflected needed to be addressed but were hardly damning. The board chair, however, interpreted the data as an unmitigated negative. For this reason, his initial reaction was to refuse to allow the summary report to be disseminated. Withholding this report, however, was inconsistent with both institutional policy and long-established practice. The report was only finally released after a

lengthy debate in an executive session of the board. I believed strongly that withholding this information from the college community would be a substantially greater negative than allowing people to see that there were broad concerns. The fundamental issue in this instance was again regarding concerns that attitudes or communication deemed insufficiently positive justified a kind of preemptive gag order on a normal part of institutional operations. The board chair and many board members continued to fear that critical or negative information or commentary were greater risks to the institution than open and frank engagement with the data and issues that would be reported.

As a final example, I was present when representatives of the faculty and staff met with the board and in very direct, but professional and thoughtful ways explained sources of concern that were demoralizing to their colleagues. These concerns included very low rates of compensation compared to peer institutions, inconsistent institutional leadership decisions and behaviors that included apparent disregard of formal policy, inadequate staffing that resulted in individual employees working extraordinary numbers of hours weekly with no compensatory recognition for their time and efforts, inadequate support for materials necessary to assigned tasks, and more. From my perspective, the reports from these faculty and staff representatives were cogent and compelling, aside from being empirically verifiable. It seemed apparent that the board would do best to work with the officers of the college to seek ways to ameliorate these problems to the degree possible. Some board members, however, were defensive and argumentative during these faculty and staff presentations. But my surprise grew during an executive session that followed when board members made comments that characterized the faculty and staff reports as unwarranted and simply negative. Most board members did not offer such comments but sat in a kind of resigned silence that I found somewhat inscrutable. No one challenged the overt narrative that the faculty and staff comments were indicative of negativity and counterproductive complaining. Individual employee hopes for improved compensation, advancement, or professional success were openly deprecated as negative and self-seeking, implying that those expressing such concerns were prioritizing personal preferences or gains over institutional success. It seems clear that persistent resource scarcity and an implicit institutional narrative of decline and loss

can drive people, from the board to rank and file staff, to moments of deep frustration and finding individuals or groups on which to place blame.

But such attitudes and emotional responses can yield to the stubborn persistence of facts. In a higher education environment, enrollment, financial resources, and effective faculty and staff are necessary ingredients for institutional success and survival. Data related to budget and finance, student academic achievement, student persistence, faculty productivity, fundraising, and admissions, to name a few, are essential for understanding the status of any institution and the near-term prospects for its continued viability. Each of these variables allows for empirical and reasonably unambiguous measurement and reporting as well as the development of strategies aimed at optimizing each.

Disregard of difficult or unwelcome facts can grow from a preference for selective or partial information that complements and reinforces denial in service to the conviction that hope and goodwill are themselves strategies for institutional effectiveness and success. As I have noted, it is entirely understandable that the demand for positive thinking arose out of crisis fatigue and genuine fear for the future of the institution. Yet disregarding, distorting, or misinterpreting crucial data cannot offset the negative consequences of failures, regardless of the intensity of the faith in the power of positive thinking. When the observable and objective budget expenditures exceed the equally observable and objective revenues available to the institution, the impact is problematic and good cheer can do little more than perhaps reduce the sting of the difficulty. The elevation of attitude to supreme organizational importance depreciates critical, empirical analysis and instead emphasizes preferred signs and signals of positivity.

The hard work and problem-solving to which David refers as part of effective leadership necessitate receiving and facing up to accurate and meaningful intelligence on operations and outcomes (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2009). Indeed, while it is obvious enough that positive thinking does not necessarily equal good or effective thinking, on the other hand there is, interestingly, evidence to suggest that skepticism, anticipation of less than optimal outcomes, and even simple grumpiness may be valuable in strengthening analytical thinking and effective problem solving (Lai, 2023; Gawande, 2007). Still, while organized skepticism and scanning the horizon for danger or sources of failure may be entirely rational, human beings need more than a droning

recitation of facts and calculations of the odds of negative outcomes. In the midst of danger there is little interest in being advised of the statistical probability of failure. Further, experience and research have demonstrated that highly rational management systems have real limitations and have not always proven to be a basis for high levels of individual or organizational motivation, ideals, or even success (e.g., Saul, 1997; Vallas, 2011). Human beings remain seekers of meaning and even inspiration in their work and lives. Still, a monomaniacal focus on optimism and positivity risks approaches that are simply divorced from reality. A la *Star Wars*, more often than not, spaceships flying at top speed into a cloud of asteroids will experience collisions with devastating consequences, heroic derring-do notwithstanding. Optimism is a virtue and even a beauty of the human condition but insisting that "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds" courts absurdity, if not disaster (as Voltaire vividly illustrated long ago). The challenge is in finding a functional and sustainable balance between informed optimism and dispassionate realism.

It may seem clear enough that the alternative to positive thinking is not necessarily defeatism or abject negativity, yet my board colleagues became increasingly frustrated and even angry at what some of them overtly described as my "divisiveness" and "rudeness." It was seen as unproductive and even hostile to ask officers of the college to be accountable to the board for the massive and cascading failures in areas across the institution. As a case in point, it was also seen as unforgivably rude to interrupt the board chair during an executive session rant in which the motives and character of dedicated and long-serving faculty and staff were attacked by name for being negative schemers somehow determined to subvert the work of the institution. Why individuals who had devoted themselves to decades of service to the institution and had even been formally cited in years past for their outstanding contributions would now be bent on its failure was never explained, though the chair implied that they had questioned the president and were therefore disloyal. I interrupted this lengthy diatribe and observed that it was inappropriate to so publicly and vehemently criticize veteran colleagues who had served the institution faithfully and honorably. A long-serving board member later told me that my interruption of the chair in this instance was the acme of uncivil behavior (they had "never witnessed such rudeness in a board meeting.") Yet the individuals subject to this attack were people with whom I had

worked for years on a near daily basis in my experience as an administrator at the institution and knew firsthand to be dedicated, capable, and highly professional. I did not believe that I could carry on in good conscience if I did not offer a word to defend their integrity and demonstrated devotion to the cause of the institution.

By this point the reader must reasonably be asking whether my narrative reflects a bias toward making myself the hero of this story. It is certainly true that we all tend to find justifications for our own thoughts and actions and confirmation bias is routinely evident in human thinking and decision making (e.g., Koslowski & Maqueda, 1993). I offer three primary observations in hopes of adding context regarding my own perspective and behavior. First: I earned a Ph.D. in Educational Research and Evaluation from a major research university in the U.S. in the late 1980s. Prior to my work as a full-time administrator, I spent a dozen years as a faculty member at research universities teaching graduate level courses on statistics, research design, assessment, and evaluation. Beyond that I spent another 15 years as an accreditation peer reviewer at institutions across the central U.S., evaluating institutions as well as overseeing comprehensive accreditation reports for my own institutions. Second: I served as chief academic officer for almost twenty years at two different small, independent institutions of higher education and was involved in virtually all aspects of institutional operations (including a yearlong stint as interim chief financial officer) and was formally cited by my board on three different occasions for contributions to the collective achievements of my institution. Third: I asked trusted third parties who were present for the board sessions at the heart of this essay about my questions, comments, and general deportment in these meetings. Three different individuals (all accomplished professionals in their respective fields) independently assured me that from their perspectives I consistently asked fair, though challenging questions, and never spoke disrespectfully to anyone present (to say nothing of the frequent personal texts I got during board meetings from faculty and staff present who expressed deep thanks that someone was finally asking such questions). As a colleague involved in the situation commented quite pointedly, "if no one wants to hear the truth, actively covers up the truth, or villainizes you for telling the truth, it's time to update your resume."

Certainly, other observers may have drawn different conclusions (as most of my board colleagues ultimately did), and I am not making a claim to objectivity or irreproachable behavior. But whether I was difficult or not is ultimately tangential to the core of the matter. As I have tried to explicate, I hold that the board demand for positivity and optimism has led and will continue to lead to flawed and damaging processes and decision making because it is fundamentally disconnected from reality. Good attitudes do not create favorable financial circumstances any more than positive thoughts will prevent disease (e.g., see Ehrenreich, 2009 on research into the assertion that positive attitudes affect the outcomes of cancer treatment; David, 2021). Tellingly, at the time of this writing the college is on its way toward another year of very weak enrollment, facing a substantial budget deficit, the continued exodus of senior staff, and a regional accreditation visit focused on enrollment and finance for which it is woefully underprepared. Regarding the latter point, in one of my final meetings as a member of the board I listened in near astonishment as long-serving board colleagues rhapsodized about the college's prospects for substantially greater enrollment and financial stability. They further assured those present that the upcoming accreditation review would be passed with the proverbial flying colors. I wanted to believe that these comments could prove to be prescient, but my analysis of the situation made it clear that their assertions were grounded in the requirement for positivity and not in the available evidence.

The disconnection from reality was also reflected in the fact that multiple members of the board held that the "real" problems facing the institution were epitomized by my persistence in asking questions. Their frustration was predicated on an apparent assumption that asking the questions was a greater hazard to the institution than the subjects of the questions. Again, this perspective is understandable when the primary goal of the group is to assert and enforce a single permissible mindset. If questioning, skepticism, and critical analysis result in uncertainty and discomfort, then the problem is framed as stemming from these behaviors. For the issues at stake to be acknowledged as deeply problematic and potentially even unsolvable was and remains simply unacceptable to the majority. Admitting such a reality means entering cognitive and emotional territory that is dissonant, risky, and bleak. It was thus easier to define *the* problem in terms of the people who focused on the problems, not

the manifest problems themselves. The collision of hope and reality can be difficult, indeed.

Disengagement and Conclusions

In the end, my year on the board concluded with my resignation. I couldn't in good conscience remain as a member of a board that was not willing to concretely address the substantive issues at hand, and simply rejected critical and informed analysis to better understand and effectively address those issues. I became a pariah of sorts because I believed it necessary to insist that senior administrators be clear about details, meaningful analysis, and the development of coherent plans. I was pursued to provide leadership as an experienced hand at institutional management but was then rejected for such a role because I ran afoul of the insistence on positivity above all. On reflection I found myself thinking about Plato's famous ship allegory from Book VI of *The Republic*. Plato was deeply skeptical of democracy as an effective form of government largely because he feared that the majority could too easily be composed of individuals who were uninformed, incapable, or simply wrong-headed. As Steinbauer (2014) commented, Plato believed that an experienced and capable leader (in his example a navigator on a ship) could be overwhelmed by "those who shout the loudest and make the most confident claims, though they know nothing of the skills of navigation." As many people in many settings have experienced - the loudest and most self-assured voices often carry inordinate influence. Despite my decades of experience in navigating the waters of higher education, my board colleagues rejected the idea that I had something valuable to offer in the ongoing work of the institution.

Drawing further from Plato, in his dialogue *Apology* he described Socrates, during his trial in fourth century BCE Athens, referring to himself as a "sort of gadfly" that bit and annoyed the people and their government with the goal of helping them be more thoughtful, honest, and introspective about their actions. The stakes Socrates faced were infinitely more consequential than mine, but the principle is similar enough. I worked hard to be informed about business before the board and I asked a lot of challenging questions. I saw it as both my duty and a necessity to "arouse and persuade and reproach," (Plato, p. 49, 1942), in the interest of actively seeking the best possibilities for meeting the immense challenges facing the college. My voice was ultimately silenced by the clamor of who did not want to hear what

I was saying. Whether that redounds ultimately to the benefit or the detriment of the college remains to be seen.

In the end, it is clear enough that the work of colleges and universities today has become increasingly complex, uncertain, and unpredictable. In such difficult environments it is easy to fall into a sense of what Yeats perceived when he wrote the line "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." The challenges can sometimes seem insurmountable and, indeed, crisis fatigue is a real thing that can drive an irrational demand for optimism. The fear of failure can itself engender paralysis and dysfunction, and every year more institutions slip closer to the abyss that will end their venerable stories. But for any institution to persist and advance its mission effectively, an active, informed, courageous, and candid partnership between the board and the leadership of the institution is necessary.

That partnership necessitates honest, sometimes critical, but always professional communication. It may also necessitate the presence of an informed gadfly or two to help minimize the possibility of intellectual carelessness or complacency. It requires attention to the expertise and learning of experienced administrators and practitioners, including a commitment to ongoing, effective board education. Perhaps at the top of this list is the need for the cultivation of the practice and application of what I will call pragmatic idealism. I don't use these terms in a strict philosophical sense, but rather as they may be understood in common usage. Pragmatism should apply specifically to the empirically verifiable details pertaining to critical elements of institution operation – especially regarding budget, enrollment, and effectiveness. Idealism reflects the mission and purpose of such institutions – the faith in serving a genuinely greater good in perpetuity. Both sides of this coin are essential, and neither are served when a board demands that all wear the distorting lens of rose-colored glasses through which to view all institutional activity. That lens impedes essential awareness and knowledge. Optimism for its own sake much too easily devolves into denial.

The self-defeating logic of a dictatorial "positive thinking" regime does not lend itself to a simple solution. Institutions of higher education absolutely must realistically address their circumstances but still convey a sense of deep purpose, inspiration, and enthusiasm. People do need a sense of hope and possibility, but militant, enforced optimism must not override an ethos of pragmatic idealism. There is much in higher education that should

foster and sustain such idealism. It is, after all, a business that is fundamentally about transforming lives and contributing to the commonweal. It is noble, worthy, and meaningful. It is also challenging, complicated, and often uncertain. The way forward is often subject to a wide range of opinions, arguments, and competing data. Those competing ideas, however, cannot paralyze leaders into the lazy comfort of Panglossian assurances that "all is for the best" (Voltaire, 1967). Boards and the presidents they hire must, as a veteran colleague of mine has often asserted, be both microscopes and telescopes in scrutinizing present details while simultaneously attending to the long view. It is a challenging balance that can too easily be lost in these parlous times.

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