

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

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OP-ED

UK President Capilouto is pecking away at shared governance and students' futures / Opinion

BY CAROL MASON

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University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto RYAN C. HERMENS rhermens@herald-leader.com

As a professor who grew up in Appalachia, I have been impressed with University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto's care for high-need in-state students who benefit from some of his innovative financial programs. But President Capilouto's recent approach to the University Senate and shared governance will eradicate his legacy of caring for people of the region.

My mother was born in the coal camp town of Hardy, Kentucky. She studied political science then earned a master's degree in education from West Virginia University. Had she been a man, Mom told me, she would have been a lawyer.

My father lost his left leg on a minefield as an infantryman in France. When he returned to West Virginia, the GI Bill allowed him to attend WVU. Dad did not squander the opportunity, which I later learned was systematically denied his fellow soldiers who were African American. Dad received a bachelor's degree and went on to earn and maintain his Professional Engineer license. The nation and the state invested in him, a young disabled veteran.

Dad built a business in 1959 that continues today to provide livelihoods. (Imagine what prosperity there would have been had higher education been encouraged for everyone, regardless of race and gender.) The company bears his name still, although we had to sell it when Dad died from cancer in 1982 at age 58. Even with that loss, we benefited from higher education at a time when America saw higher education as a public good.

Consequently, I was heartsick to see WVU get radically transformed due, supposedly, to fiscal deficits. UK has none of that financial hardship, its president recently crowed. Yet he wants to make changes that leave us vulnerable to financial and political interference.

President Capilouto proposes to change the governing regulations (GRs). In an email he notes that "Right now, our GRs delegate what is often called education policy to the University Senate." Comprised primarily of teachers, the University Senate has historically been trusted to make decisions about policies that shape who, what, and how we teach. The President wants to change that by altering the GRs according to a newly proposed principle that "the Board determines – and has authority for – all policy matters at UK." This authoritarian impulse risks eliminating the University Senate's power to make educational policy decisions and hinders the University's ability to address change.

Change is in the air. Without the University Senate sharing governance as a decision-making body, we will be vulnerable to [change dictated by political interference](#). Examples of this trend are [growing](#). Without retaining the University Senate as a decision-making body, President Capilouto *intentionally or not* will contribute to the incremental attacks on the freedom to learn and to access education, such as banning books, curricula, and long-established fields of study. Concrete plans for future political interference in public education are spelled out in a [recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay](#).

Why, at this juncture – when there are so many existing and promised ploys to radically remake higher education – does President Capilouto want to diminish the safeguard of shared governance at UK?

If there is one thing we learned from the past 50 years, it is that piece-by-piece, incremental attacks succeed over the long haul when more direct attacks couldn't stand a chance. That's what we have seen about the pecking away our right to

reproductive freedom. Kentucky is one of the states that, despite its conservatism, has voted to reject a measure denying constitutional rights to abortion. We have seen how incremental attacks, which at first blush don't seem so bad or may even seem virtuous, can culminate to our detriment when the power structures shift. In shifting the power structures now, UK administrators will leave us vulnerable to a radical remaking of higher education in which, I fear, Kentucky families won't prosper.

Kentuckians, don't let them peck away your right to education like they pecked away your right to determine when, if, and how to parent. President Capilouto, please consider the unintended consequences of your proposed actions.

Carol Mason is the author of "Reading Appalachia from Left to Right" and other books.

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