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LINDA BLACKFORD

Capilouto's plan to dissolve UK University Senate is naked power grab and should be stopped | Opinion



BY LINDA BLACKFORD

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University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto is photographed at the administration building on the UK campus in Lexington, Ky., on Friday, Jan. 12, 2024. RYAN C. HERMENS rhermens@herald-leader.com

There's been a lot of obfuscation and fancy jargon over University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto's [plan to dissolve the UK University Senate](#), so let's call this

situation what it is: A massive, paradigm-shifting power grab that could complete UK's transition from an academic institution to a corporate degree mill.

First, let's stop the nonsense narrative that the UK Board of Trustees is leading this charge.

The board has never had a thought in its collective head that wasn't put there by Capilouto. Before those folks start to protest, tell me the last time anyone significantly argued — or even discussed — an issue without a unanimous rubber stamping of Capilouto's will. Remember [those secret meetings](#) they used to have to make sure everyone was on board before a public meeting? I do.

Capilouto wants UK to be more nimble, as though a school of 34,000 undergraduates could ever move quickly. He believes the University Senate, made up mostly of faculty, but also some staff and students, moves too slowly because of byzantine rules around admissions, graduation and course creation. Only the Board of Trustees can be responsible for educational policy, he says, despite the sad fact that most of the trustees are high-dollar political donors turned appointees whose experience of higher ed is that they went to college.

Capilouto's idea is to dissolve the senate and create three separate senates, made up of faculty, staff and students, who will "advise" him and his top leadership. None of the three will have any power over policy, therefore we can only assume that such advising will end up where most advisory groups end up: Exactly nowhere.

For more advising into the ether, he will also create a President's Council, another advisory board made up of four students, four staff and four faculty.

Only one member of the Board of Trustees, faculty trustee Hollie Swanson, has spoken up against this plan, so it's clear to see the skids are already greased. Nonetheless, it's worth saying the entire Board of Trustees should adamantly reject this plan.

First of all, there is the gaslit show trial process that Capilouto used to get here; a multinational consulting company, Deloitte, was already on campus doing God knows what (I say that because UK has consistently turned down our paper's open records requests for what Deloitte was doing for UK.) So they pivoted, as consultants like to say, and started interviewing people here and there on campus about the University Senate. (Deloitte interviewed 55 people in all, but UK officials have refused to say who these people were or what they do.)

Strangely, however, Deloitte neglected to interview the actual chair of the Senate Council or use any data from them for their recommendations.

Shockingly, the consultants' conclusions agreed exactly with the people paying their bills.

Then there are the deeper arguments.

The point of “shared governance” between administration and faculty in academia is that faculty — generally better educated than the administrators who lead them — spend the most time with students and have unique perspectives on courses and programming they need. They are well aware of the needs of their students and the needs of Kentucky.

Take, for example, [recent changes at UK's College of Engineering](#), which recently started Kentucky's first Aerospace Engineering program, and a new Engineering Technology program in partnership with Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

“Both programs meet a growing workforce need, both were possible due to the expertise of UK faculty, and both were strengthened through meaningful engagement with both faculty and administrators,” wrote engineering faculty Greg Erhardt and Tim Taylor.

“As researchers, professors understand where a field is heading and adapt their educational activities accordingly. Sometimes entirely new jobs emerge from our labs. It is a ground-up process that cannot be replicated by a top-down view.”

Shared governance also allows a checks and balance system absent most big corporations, which is why the corporate leaders in academia oppose it. Top officials cannot simply make it easier to get in to college or make it easier to leave. Such policy changes must be reviewed and approved through a well-thought out process which balances work and responsibility.

A University Senate is a check on absolute administrative power that provides balance across the university.

The University Senate process may indeed be too cumbersome or have too many rules. That is easy to change. Eliminate some rules and regulations; speed up the timelines by which the body must act. If the Staff Senate doesn't have enough authority, give it more. Ditto for student government. This can be fixed; it doesn't have to be razed.

In the various [national articles](#) about this debacle, writers have made it clear that dissolving university senates would not put UK more in line with their SEC peers (is that who we aspire to these days?) but is instead a transfer of responsibility that leaves almost total power with one person: President Capilouto.

Compromise on this problem is still possible, and should happen before relations between administration and faculty devolve still further. Capilouto and the faculty should listen to the words of Mike Nietzel, a former UK faculty member who also served as a dean and the provost.

“Did I ever find the university senate to be cumbersome and frustrating?” he wrote in an article in Forbes Magazine. “Yes, several times. Were its rules too elaborate? Probably so. Did it ever slow down actions that I and others wanted to move more quickly? Again, yes. Could its regulations be simplified? Most surely.

“But here’s what else I learned, and that I hope the leadership of the university will appreciate. The senate operated in good faith, it insisted on sound data for its decisions, its typically rigorous reviews often strengthened initially weak proposals, it contributed multidisciplinary expertise on curricular changes, it helped build institution-wide relationships, and it provided a layer of insulation against outside attacks and political meddling that college administrators often find hard to deflect on their own.

“Be careful UK — that’s a lot to give up.”

It certainly is. UK is the state flagship, our state’s top-of-the-line institution, but neither top faculty nor top students will want to come to a school perceived as a diploma mill.

In this case, Capilouto has the sole power to fix this situation ... before it’s too late.

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