

No confidence votes may be 'symbolic,' but the effects at UK will be all too real | Opinion

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It's true that in higher education a faculty vote of no confidence in a university president is "symbolic."

[The recent vote of no confidence](#) in University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto by the soon-to-be-extinct University Senate holds no real punishment, no demotion or firing.

It probably won't be included in his personnel file, and I have no doubt the Board of Trustees won't even mention it in his next review. If you believe the UK administration, which I do not, trustees directed Capilouto to dissolve the

university senate, thereby dissolving the shared governance that is a bedrock foundation of academic life. This is why senators made this “symbolic” move.

But as writers like Joseph Campbell might tell us, symbols are still important to how we perceive the world. Symbols stand for things, and that means they can have very tangible effects.

For example, a vote of no confidence shows a fractured campus, where employees have publicly repudiated the behavior of their leader. The best faculty will certainly think twice about coming to a school where they are so little valued; top administrators will question whether UK is a good place to work.

The most discerning students will certainly wonder if they should be part of an operation that is moving toward “soft skills” and away from liberal arts instruction.

And what’s so sad is it all could have been avoided.

The administration could have used all this time and energy, months of planning, endless meetings, wordsmithing and gaslighting to instead force the University Senate to become less Byzantine, more nimble and more inclusive, instead of eviscerating it altogether.

The whole process they undertook was like a Soviet show trial. Imagine collecting information about a group without bothering to interview the leader of that group, as happened here when Deloitte consultants neglected to talk to University Senate Chair DeShana Collett.



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As professor and former faculty trustee Robert Grossman [said in a recent op-ed column](#), Capilouto expertly maneuvered some staff and students into a three-way competition against faculty, and now they will all lose out.

As they will soon find out, four advisory boards are both Byzantine and completely non-binding. Capilouto is good at listening, but is required to hear nothing and do even less. There will be little to no trust between these groups or between the top administration and everyone else.

That is not a good atmosphere for any kind of job.

(I can't stop thinking of the scene in one of the Star Wars prequels where Emperor Palpatine snarls, "I am the Senate," before taking absolute power in a galaxy far, far away.)

"I Am the Senate."



Still a mystery is why Capilouto, 74, would tarnish his admirable legacy in this way at the end of his career. (Although he does have [a rolling contract](#), so maybe he's planning on staying a lot longer.)

Is he smoothing the way for his alleged heir apparent, executive vice president of all things Eric Monday? Has he always wanted to stick it to the faculty? Did he get some kind of signal from the legislature that this would be the right move?

Capilouto has obliterated the faculty's trust in him. That is far more than symbolic and will bear fruit in the few remaining years the president has left in this job.

The state's flagship school will be the poorer for it. In a recent message to campus, Capilouto said: "We don't have to all agree about the changes, but I hope we all agree that we must continue to move forward as a community."

Good luck with that.

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