




COMMENTARY

A professor's wake-up call to University of Kentucky president and trustees

| PHILIPP W. ROSEMAN

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 The campus of the University of Kentucky, where trustees are set to give final consideration to controversial internal governance changes on Friday. (Photo by Mark Cornelison | UK Photo)

On Monday, the University of Kentucky's University Senate passed a vote of no confidence in President Eli Capilouto. In response, both Dr. Capilouto and the chair of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Britt Brockman, released separate statements doubling down on the controversial plan to strip the Senate of its oversight over core

academic matters. President Capilouto's email message to the university community even ended on an ominous note: "That is the expectation of our Board, which has directed this effort to accelerate our progress in advancing Kentucky. ... And believe me, that is what I intend to do."



📷 UK President Eli Capilouto (Photo by Mark Cornelison | UK Photo)

There is no indication here that the president has learned from his mistakes. It is not a few disgruntled faculty who have reservations about the proposed changes to the university's governance structures. The vote of no confidence passed with 58 votes against 24, with 11 abstentions.

This means that President Capilouto and the board that is backing him – "unequivocally" even – have lost the good will of a large majority of UK's faculty. They will have to implement their plan against the objections of most of those who teach UK's classes and conduct its research. "Believe me, that is what I intend to do." Seriously?

The University Senate's no-confidence resolution focuses on the manner in which the proposed changes were fast-tracked without proper consultation – despite the fact that the Senate repeatedly signaled its willingness to engage in conversations about how its procedures could be improved. But there are several other aspects of "Project Accelerate" that are equally ill-advised. Let me point out three.

First, the president and Board of Trustees intend to strip the faculty of its authority in academic matters: decisions on the content of programs, on admission and graduation standards, approval of new programs or discontinuation of existing ones, and so forth. An analogy of this plan would be the idea to deprive a baker of the authority to decide what kinds of bread, cakes, and cookies to bake, and to shift this authority to the baker's support staff. Or the idea to let management decide how fast to build airplanes, rather than to trust the judgment of the engineers on the ground who are intimately familiar with the complicated technology that goes into a safely constructed flying machine. Does the last example sound familiar? It should. This is what happened at Boeing – with the tragic results that we know.

The bakers and engineers of a university are its faculty. The notion that faculty should have a merely advisory role in relation to the university's core academic operations shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what a university is: it is an educational institution, which is why educators need to be at the center of how it is run. (By the way, this is not a revolutionary idea: when the first universities were founded in Europe some 700 years ago, this is how they were designed to function.)

My second point concerns the notion that, in order to serve the Commonwealth of Kentucky, UK needs to “accelerate” and do “more” of everything. “More” isn't necessarily better, nor is it a good idea, in this age of breathless exhaustion, to speed everything up. We need to stop and think where our civilization is going, rather than confusing progress with heedless rushing toward the abyss.

Not so long ago, under President Lee Todd, the commonwealth and its flagship university agreed that UK should, by 2020, become one of the nation's 20 leading public research universities. The emphasis then was on quality, not quantity. President Todd is quoted as saying, “As the state's flagship institution, UK is mindful of its responsibility to help all Kentuckians. Our land-grant mission calls on us to make a positive impact across the state. We need to be an education leader, while remaining accessible to all Kentuckians. We need to be a cultural leader, sharing new ideas and opportunities across the state. And we need to be leading Kentucky's charge into the new economy. We are the catalyst for a new Commonwealth.” Ironically, this statement remains on [UK's website](#) to the present day.

Thirdly and finally, UK's President and Board of Trustees have taken to referring to UK as "Kentucky's university." UK is not Kentucky's university. It is Kentucky's flagship university. Its mission is to be the leader in higher education in the commonwealth, not to squeeze the life out of the other state universities by trying to do what they are already doing and siphoning off their students. These local universities are vital to the health of Kentucky's regions.

Wake up, President Capilouto! Wake up, trustees! There is still time to stop your wrong-headed reform of UK's governance structures, and to work together for a better UK and better life in the commonwealth.



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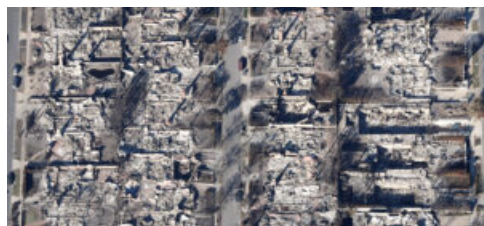


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