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The Better Mousetrap: External Accountability and Staff Participation

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IF THE 1960s SAW an educational revolution, the 1970s are surely witnessing a Thermidorian reaction. The conventional wisdom at the turn of the decade was that student excesses would bring a siege of catapults and starvation by an outraged society against the barricades of higher learning. The siege has certainly come, but the explanation was off the mark. The real causes are far more complex. Indeed, current demands from society for accountability by higher education may well owe more to Sputnik than to student uprisings. With the tremendous stress on and support of higher education after the late 1950s, teaching and research became a heavily subsidized national enterprise.[1] Some traditionalists at the time warned that there would be a price to pay for the newly gained affluence. The price is not exactly what they predicted, perhaps, but there is no question that public scrutiny today of the academic community has greatly intensified.

The economic reverses of the early 1970s inevitably prompted a reconsideration of the national portfolio. The rather sudden shrinkage of resources following years of sustained growth in social services required a new ordering of priorities. Higher education, as one of the nation's more absorbent investments, immediately came under closer examination.[2] Moreover, as a classic instrument for integrating excluded groups into a society, institutions of higher education assumed a major burden in the implementation of the social reforms enacted into law during approximately the past fifteen years. If the disturbances of the late 1960s played a part in this review, it was perhaps only as the secondary role of inviting attention to an area already surfeited with self-criticism.

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The exactions of accountability from the academy are now legion. Attempting to identify them, Alexander Heard, chancellor of Vanderbilt University, has listed:

local, state, and federal laws, regional accrediting associations, professional accrediting associations, teacher certificate requirements, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the National Institutes of Health, civil rights acts and executive orders, the Internal Revenue Service, the American Association of University Professors, suppliers of public utilities, labor unions, the Constitution of the United States as interpreted by the courts, local mores, and many more.[3]

This array, as incomplete as it is, is impressive — so much so that one educator has complained that the provision of the necessary information is now a principal concern of institutional life, and has wondered if the "accountability movement" can be made accountable; another educator has predicted that the mass of legislation involved may kill the universities.[4]

By all odds, the source of the most insistent demands is the federal government. The simple statistical reports of the past have expanded to include virtually the entire lives of universities. While it is recognized that much of this monitoring goes on in the name of worthy causes, there is a growing restiveness about the occasional arrogance and obtuseness with which it is done, the frequency and precision of information requested, and the mounting costs in time and money which it imposes. Most pertinently, there is a rising concern about the restrictions on governance, professional judgment, and academic freedom, which current application of federal regulations may entail.[5]

State governments have also now begun to expand their requirements of accountability from universities.[6] In addition to the usual monitoring by the established bureaucracies, many state governments have created new agencies or statewide boards to control state systems of higher education. These boards, with their attendant secretariats, have proven to be one of the most intrusive changes in the environment of public universities. They pose both a second level of supervision and a new echelon of administrators between the universities and the legislatures. Unfortunately, such boards are often subject to political pressure; and because they have the responsibility for overseeing the development of all state institutions, there is the distinct threat of a leveling process.[7] Already some of the most distinguished public universities in the country have suffered as statewide boards have diverted resources to smaller or less well-established institutions in the system.

[256]

The Better Mousetrap

Many of the external demands for accountability officially fall on the boards of trustees of individual institutions, which in turn are increasing their demands for a greater role in the internal lives of those institutions.[8] Held responsible by outside agencies, they understandably want more control over that for which they must answer. In addition, they share the general concern for the most productive use of available funds and consequently conclude that they should have a greater voice in the management of the institutions. The current challenge to the whole idea of tenure is just one manifestation of this concern.[9] Some rather alarming examples of board intervention in other areas have occurred in the past several years, and the literature of higher education has contained even more startling declarations of future intent by trustees.[10]

These assertions of influence from nonacademics should not come as any great surprise. They are but another expression of a traditional theme in the history of American higher education.[11] While it may have been forgotten in the halcyon days of the last decade, American universities have never been autonomous, as some realistic scholars are reminding their colleagues.[12] Support for higher education has always rested on the society's approval, and it has always been necessary for the product of the universities to satisfy society.[13] In any period of scarcity, the universities have had to rely even more heavily on the public's understanding of their activities and goals in order to win the necessary support.[14] The present situation presents unusual difficulties, because the failure of many degree-holders to find gainful employment or to make positive contributions to the society understandably raises questions about the pertinence of this expensive activity called "the higher learning." It is now quite apparent that the society is demanding the accountability which might answer those questions, and the universities' consequent loss of autonomy could well become more acute as resources remain scarce.[15]

It is not an easy task to provide the accounting for, nor to attain an understanding of, higher education. There is much mythology about the nature and structure of an American university. It is certainly no one community or constituency.[16] Within each of its several communities, there are many members who seek only to be left alone to pursue their own personal goals. A certain lubricating ambiguity has prevailed in modern times concerning the relative authority and role of trustee, administrator, faculty member, and student. (This civilized sensibility to the raw assertion of power was clearly an inhibition to forthright action by most college and university officials during the student uprisings.) Even the forces pressuring the university are not always so obvious as those cited earlier.

One writer has maintained that the real shapers of higher education in the 1970s are anonymous — accreditation groups, state planning offices, scholarship and loan committees, budget commissions, offices of institutional research, and the like.[17] The locus of responsibility and authority in an American university has never been altogether clear, but it has never been more elusive than it is today.

Whatever the virtues of this loose organization, its weaknesses became obvious in the 1960s. Faculty influence within the university grew markedly as research grants proliferated and many recipients of them became academic entrepreneurs virtually independent of the institution's authority.[18] Some say that what was left of the splintering community of scholars came totally asunder at this juncture.[19] Neglect of students and teaching, coupled with faculty conservatism in reacting to students' requests for curricular and pedagogical reforms, was a major cause of campus unrest before it turned violent. Then, through some obscure change in sentiment, educational administrators, the traditional innovators in higher education from Gilman to Hutchins, took the brunt of the antagonism when the crises broke.[20] A curious alliance formed on most campuses, and the administrations, not the original cause of the discontent, became villains in the eyes of protesting faculty and demonstrating students alike.

As these events plainly revealed, the irony of the situation is that university administrators, the perceived executive officers of the institution, are usually not in control of its nature or behavior, despite the general impression to the contrary.[21] The chief officer of the university, in particular, finds himself caught between external demands for accountability regarding acts of student, faculty, and others, and internal demands for a greater voice in institutional policy-making, just as the options in that area are becoming more limited.[22] He is repeatedly held responsible by one group for actions of others over whom he has no real control.[23] He consequently must rely on his political acumen and persuasiveness, urging moderation on all sides. This rather powerless but highly vulnerable position of the academic executive no doubt accounts for many of the recent resignations and early retirements from those ranks.

The unmistakable helplessness of most institutions when faced with crisis in the late 1960s, the complexities of governance uncovered by the post mortem, and the reexamination of priorities in the new age of scarcity have opened up a discussion of the proper governance of a university. While there are still demands for increased faculty participation in policy-making, there is a chorus of precautionary voices pointing out that faculty decisions caused much of the earlier discontent and that faculty leadership

failed in the subsequent time of troubles.[24] The reality of the collegial model has been questioned, and it has received severe criticism as an organizational model, in any case. To the degree it existed, collegiality proved to be inadequate in the crises of the 1960s, often failing to resolve conflicts in a manner that permitted institutions to respond quickly and effectively to challenges.[25]

Libraries, as large and visible elements in educational institutions, have escaped none of the pressures on the academic world. The economic stringencies, the external demands for accountability, and the questioning of the administrative structure have all been seen in the library in microcosm. In addition, the libraries have faced dilemmas that are peculiar to them in this period of massive and rapid communication. The steady growth in the volume of publication, the proliferating forms of information, the sudden impact of new technology, the fragmentation of traditional disciplines, the growth in the size of collections and staffs, the challenges from media and computer centers for support, and the absence of an effective national system for sharing resources are problems unique to libraries that compound those faced generally by the institution.[26]

It was in the midst of this maelstrom of difficulties that the issue of greater staff participation in academic libraries' decision-making surfaced. Already beset with diminished support and with complaints that they were not functioning properly, these libraries now confronted the prospect of broader-based (but slower and more costly) processes. The origin of the application of the idea to libraries is unclear. To be sure, there had been growing interest among librarians in managerial techniques since the 1950s; and certainly the findings of the behaviorists on the motivation of employees, including the investigation of the effects of greater staff participation, became a prominent influence on those techniques during the intervening period. From the start, however, the idea, like some faculty demands for a greater voice in university affairs, bore many of the markings of the protests of the 1960s. In any event, the timing of its introduction could scarcely have been worse in terms of library administrations' abilities to respond positively to it.

From the start, too, there was a good deal of confusion surrounding the idea. Its advocates seldom defined their terms. Participation in what? To what degree? To what purpose? Early critiques raised these and other points, some of which have never been addressed, much less answered.[27] Furthermore, caricatures of past administrative practices in libraries were contrived to provide strawmen for the argument.[28] Few, if any, academic administrators in the past fifty years have been free to be as autocratic as

these presentations made them appear. None of them has had the unchallenged authority to control his or her organization that a business executive (for whom most management theories were intended) possesses. None has ever had the clear measurement of productivity and profits by which to judge the results.

In the confusion resulting from the absence of clear definitions, the discussion of greater staff participation in decision-making tended to settle on Douglas McGregor's "Theory Y," as set forth in his *The Human Side of Enterprise*.[29] Briefly described, Theory Y is the belief that a worker becomes more productive if he or she has the maximum amount of freedom from external control and the maximum opportunity for self-determination consistent with organizational goals. McGregor saw this hypothesis as simply consistent with human nature and with a universal desire for self-esteem. Although Theory Y did not pertain directly to greater staff participation in decision-making, it became loosely interchangeable with the concept of "participative management."

While Theory Y has won many supporters, it has also had its share of critics, many of whom are quite impressive. Perhaps the most impressive is Peter Drucker, who apparently first advanced the ideas on which McGregor based his theory. Drucker has pointed out that McGregor did no original research on the subject;[30] and Abraham Maslow, to whom McGregor was also deeply indebted, has added that the research that has been done is far from conclusive.[31] Moreover, Drucker has rejected the notion that Theory Y is a theory of human nature, suggesting that we still do not know enough about that mystery to formulate hypotheses about it.[32] Maslow, while endorsing Theory Y, has said that McGregor was so "pious" about democratic dogma that he lost sight of the fact that the task to be done was the only proper objective of management.[33]

This last criticism makes a crucial point. The unhappy truth is that much of what has been written on the subject, by students of management as well as by librarians, stemmed from a basic misunderstanding of McGregor's theory. Early descriptions of Theory Y left the impression that individual self-fulfillment was to take precedence over the organization's purposes rather than to provide a better approach to achieving them.[34] In point of fact, Theory Y was an invitation to the worker to make a more creative contribution to the organization, not a declaration of independence from administrative authority. McGregor clearly assumed that this basic intent was understood, but his original statement led both Drucker and Maslow to criticize it for stressing the point insufficiently.[35] McGregor himself subsequently attempted to rectify this weakness by emphasizing

that Theory Y did not imply permissiveness and that the primary consideration was the attainment of organizational goals.[36]

Indeed, it is apparent that Theory Y makes more demands on an employee than does Theory X, which is McGregor's term for the autocratic management style based on the belief that all workers are essentially lazy and require close supervision. Theory Y entails the substitution of self-discipline, self-direction, and self-motivation for control, guidance, and prodding by a supervisor. Its principal concept is the replacement of external supervision by self-supervision, and its goal is a more motivating balance of freedom and authority, not the absence of authority. It presupposes the possibility of an environment in which ultimate authority is sufficiently unobtrusive to allow an employee to pursue higher-level objectives voluntarily and thus to become more productive.

One can at least discuss McGregor's idea. The broader concept of "participative management" defies much discussion because it is so vague. It is safe to say, however, that any form of staff participation imposes heavy responsibilities, for it is, after all, *management* as well as *participative*. Beyond that, there is a serious difficulty in the application of any single philosophy of management in a service institution. Service institutions, unlike business firms, cannot be monolithic, and no director of this kind of organization has the authority to assure the adoption of one consistent style of administration on all levels of management. There is, in a sense, too much Theory Y inherent in these institutions to permit that kind of consistency. It is even arguable that middle management in a service institution is more influential in shaping its atmosphere and character than is top management.

Peter Drucker has said that the management of "service institutions for performance will increasingly be seen as the central managerial challenge of a developed society, and its greatest managerial need."[37] He has argued that businesslike management in a service institution is the control of costs, not performance and results, as in a commercial enterprise.[38] This argument speaks directly to the problem of the costs of extended deliberation or excessive committee work by a library staff. With equal pertinence, Drucker describes service institutions as operating in a monopolistic situation without the discipline of either dissatisfied customers or competition. Public criticism, perforce, becomes the major restraint on them, so that they, like bureaucratic agencies of government, are vulnerable to the charge that they are run more for their employees than for the public.[39] Drucker therefore concludes that in order to be successful, the staffs of

service institutions must define their purposes and functions clearly and acquire a sense of mission that overarches individual goals.[40]

The parallel between the university and the academic library holds true here, too, and these strictures apply equally to both. It seems quite likely that the public desire for accountability will perpetuate active interest in the structure of the university. There seems to be broad agreement that no one form of governance at all levels is adequate and that a high degree of flexibility is necessary.[41] Some have suggested, in line with Drucker's exhortation, that the form of governance should emerge from a clarification of the university's goals and purposes — but they despair of that clarification's emergence.[42] Others have pointed out that bureaucratic, collegial, and political models all have an appropriate place in the university.[43] Whatever the form, it is clear the governance of the future university will have to be politically responsive and able to accommodate the increasing intervention of the society in the affairs of the academy.[44]

Any new shape of university governance will inevitably affect academic libraries, but perhaps librarians should begin independently to consider the issues involved. There is some evidence that this kind of exploration is already beginning. The extensive discussion of participative management, whatever its faults, has certainly prompted a salutary examination of management practices in the profession. Some sobering reassessments of the subject are now appearing, however, opening up the opportunity for the creation of management theory based on the functions and purposes of libraries.[45] The faculty model, which librarians have used excessively, is not fully adequate for libraries. The difference between an interdependent and coordinated staff and a faculty of individual instructors must be acknowledged with the same emphasis as are the differences between a library staff and employees of a business.[46] Librarians have compared themselves to everything from doctors to automobile workers, and the time is long past due for them to seek their own solutions. Surely, it is possible for the profession to evolve management theories which retain many of the benefits of broader participation by the staff while accommodating the responsibilities and constraints which every library faces.

Librarians fearing that modifications in the pure (if undefined) concept of participation will expose them to the alleged autocracy of the past should recognize that any future efforts to address the subject will occur in a context totally different from that in which the original statements on it appeared. The introduction of affirmative action programs, equal opportunity requirements, and the creation of grievances procedures, have severely limited any administrator's freedom to be arbitrary or capricious.

Recent studies have also indicated that an increasing number of directors have had extensive experience as library staff members, in contrast to their predecessors, who quite often held no previous library position before assuming the directorship.[47] This new emphasis on staff experience in these appointments should produce an increased sensitivity to staff concerns and provide leadership which identifies more with staff members than with peer administrators. In sum, recent laws, undergirded by management which has more experience of a staff member's perspective, constitute unprecedented safeguards that should allay many anxieties based on past experience.

The question of purity of concept or purpose is not without its significance. It has long been an axiom among management experts that no one managerial approach is appropriate to all situations. No theory or approach is going to be flawless, much less universally applicable. Many of the recent discussions of management, nevertheless, have had overtones of eighteenth-century rationalism, which have given way to suspicion and cynicism in the face of the realities of the human condition and an imperfect world. Presumably, it was the observance of this naïveté that moved one distinguished library educator last year to write that library staffs should learn that no administrator can solve all the problems confronting them.[48] In his own rather subtle way, he was speaking to the issue of mutual trust — the absolutely indispensable ingredient in any productive organization, according to many authorities on management theory.[49] While no one should be so complacent as to be vulnerable to exploitation, there is no virtue in paranoia; and neither supervisor nor supervisee should presume the guilt of the other party. For any number of reasons, one would hope that a new theory of library management would give a central place to mutual trust and respect among all members of the organization.

That it should be necessary to reiterate that problems, like the poor, will always be with us, may be in part the fault of library administrators. Too often they have sheltered their staffs from the harsh realities of life in the institutions in which they both work. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the staff's expectations outrun possibilities. Insofar as possible, an administrator should educate the staff, particularly junior members of the staff, in the restrictions under which the library operates. One excellent method of instruction is the sharing or delegation of responsibility, where that is appropriate, so that staffs can experience firsthand contact with institutional life beyond the library. The need for enlightening experiences of this sort is, in point of fact, one of the most cogent arguments for broader staff participation in management.

A theory of library administration that is to survive will have to recognize that no staff speaks with one voice and that there are varying degrees of desire to participate in decision-making within every staff.[50] It will have to give prominence to the added responsibilities and self-discipline that participation imposes on each participant, as McGregor's presentation of Theory Y did not. It must set the limits on participation and reflect accurately the peculiar characteristics of a service institution. It must allow for the interdependence of individuals and units in a library, as well as for the crucial role of a variety of talents and types of professional judgments. Ideally, it should provide for professional growth and increased status, independent of the assumption of additional administrative duties. Ultimately, however, it must accommodate the library's place in the institutional community, its budgetary constraints, and its accountability to the institutional administration and to the public supporting it.

Above all, library administration in the future, like university governance, must be sensitive to this last element. In a period of economic stringency and aroused public concern, as well as of competition from other agencies disseminating information, libraries must perform well. Librarians cannot afford to degrade services nor alienate their users in an effort, however enlightened or well-intentioned, to make their jobs more challenging and satisfying. Participation and consultation cost time and money and often, like faculty deliberations, produce rather conservative results. In this connection, it is useful to remember Maslow's belief that Theory Y is possible only in periods of affluence.[51] It is also healthy to recall Drucker's statement that service institutions do not operate for the people who work in them.

The overriding reality is that all service institutions exist in a highly political environment, which is becoming more political every day. It may well be that the most effective library administrator today is the one who is politically adept and able to gain support for the library, not just within the institution but in the world outside it. The university itself has shown itself to be largely a political world, in which an administrator functions more as an arbiter between conflicting forces than as an authoritarian, and relies more on persuasion than on power. The library is part of this world. It was recognition of this reality that led Jeffrey Raffel, an economist who had closely investigated the economics of libraries, to conclude that political analysis was more pertinent to a library's welfare than was economic analysis.[52] Thus, one of the greatest benefits a library administrator can provide for a staff is to perform so well politically that the library staff will have an adequate share of the institution's resources to meet their

responsibilities. In the long run, this attribute may be as important to job satisfaction of the staff as any particular managerial style.

There is no reason, however, that these external realities, while disciplining any new theory of library management, should preclude it. It should be possible to reconcile personal fulfillment and organizational goals, to accommodate both hierarchical requirements and professional growth, to have a significant degree of participation without crippling costs and delays, to offer excellent service through interesting jobs, to engender professional respect and trust without encouraging exploitation, and to provide the complex accountability now required — yet allow for broad contributions from the staffs in libraries. None of these goals, it should be repeated, will be realized perfectly, of course — but none will be realized even partially by pursuing the solutions of others in different circumstances. The appropriate model must be conceived in the context of the library and specifically designed for that environment. It is a large but fascinating challenge, and it should be commended to librarians studying management theory. The profession needs less adaptation of established ideas and more creative thinking on this important subject.

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The Better Mousetrap

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