

The Impossible Life of a College President

You think it's a life of oak panels and big ideas. It's more like being a PAC fundraiser.

by Julie Rose

It's the kind of fantasy that might creep through the cabin of the Eastern Shuttle just after take-off. As harried professionals unlock leather briefcases, pour Canadian Club, and gaze sternly at ledger sheets and legal briefs, minds begin to wander. *It's 8:30 p.m.—puts me in at National at 10:00, the Hilton at 10:45, it'll take two more hours to pull the presentation together, and, Jesus, I've got to be sharp at that 7:30 breakfast when I make my pitch. ("Another Canadian Club, please.") Why do I live like this?*

As bankers, lawyers, and bureaucratic brass ponder their overworked bodies and underfed souls, The Fantasy takes shape: *If only I were president. . .*

Of a college, that is.

It's not that spending ten hours a day with the tax code has lost its appeal, exactly. It's just that after a few decades of power and money, it's time for something more, well, cerebral. *Soulful*. A college presidency seems like a dream job. It's a life of books. A world of libraries, quadrangles, and faculty clubs; of robes, ceremonies, and honorary degrees. A chance to ask the big questions, like what was Proust trying to say with the *madeleine* anyway? But the city lights rising up below push the fantasy aside, for now at least, and the life of briefcases and 15-minute billable bytes returns.

Now meet Mary Maples Dunn, president of Smith College and no stranger to the billable time-byte herself. She's got the robes and the degrees, but in substance her life seems little different than those the harried professionals dream about fleeing. She's on her own time now, away from the campus on holiday, visiting a friend of a friend when the Jasper Johns catches her eye. It's just one of a number of

the home's striking works of contemporary art, and Dunn listens attentively as her hostess describes her collection. Then, for Dunn, her hostess gets to the most important part: her one great ambition left in life is to finish her baccalaureate. Dunn leaves the conversation with the impression that this woman had even attended Smith for a year. It is all she needs to hear.

Back at her desk a few weeks later, Dunn is meeting with Smith's new museum director, Ed Nygren. It is a day in early December in which Dunn has let me sit in on her many meetings on campus. At the moment, Dunn is a little flustered. She is trying to describe to Nygren her hostess's collection. The whole house had a feeling of, mmm, the minimalist to it. No, no, she says, shaking her head. Realizing her description can't convey what she saw, she admits that she knows very little about art.

She knows quite a bit more, however, about fundraising, and she reaches quickly for the book to her right, a thick, thumbled volume: the Smith College alumni directory. She glances for the woman's last name and does not find it. Maybe it's under her maiden name, Dunn muses. More important, maybe she feels enough fondness for Smith to donate a painting or two, perhaps even some cash (a prospect that would grow more likely were the woman, with a little encouragement, to return to finish her degree). Completing the background check, however, is someone else's job. For the moment, Dunn has done her work—she went off for a drink with a few friends and unearthed a prospective donor.

She and Nygren press on to another subject—gifts already given. There is the presentation of the painting by George Inness that should be arriving soon. It is an important work; better yet, it arrived with

a \$100,000 donation. Dunn asks Nygren to drum up a little fanfare at the museum gallery to honor the donor. They speak of donors and potential donors; they thumb through the alumni directory a few more times. At one point the director assures Dunn that he has told a prospective donor that the prints she wants to give are not in lieu of giving money to the capital campaign. "The shadow loves you," Dunn murmurs with a laugh.

The shadow for Mary Dunn—and most of today's college presidents—is the constant specter of money. For Dunn's eye is caught not only by great paintings but by any cash donation that may come her way. In fact, she must raise \$6 million in the next three months to meet a deadline for the construction of a new \$12 million science center. ("I think we'll die first," she says.) And that's just one small part of Smith's five-year campaign to raise \$125 million—a goal that has dominated much of Dunn's presidency since it began in 1985. This is an enormous fundraising effort for a school whose enrollment has never exceeded 3,000 students, and in the past month-and-a-half it has kept Dunn on the road almost 50 percent of the time.

Is this really any way to run an academic institution? The job of college president should involve a large amount of intellectual leadership, including recruiting talented faculty, weeding out tenured deadwood, and championing curricular reforms. (See "How to Be a College President," page 20) Instead of having time to pursue this intellectual grail, most college presidents are left dashing for the Eastern Shuttle in pursuit of the next big deal.

Antisemites and backwoods boys

American university presidents haven't always been too busy to think about education. During the latter part of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century there were presidents whose leadership, intellectual and otherwise, was never in question: Charles Eliot of Harvard (1869-1909); William Harper of the University of Chicago (1891-1906); Woodrow Wilson of Princeton (1902-1910); and Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia (1902-1945), among others.

To be sure, their success was due in part to the moment. Gone were the ecclesiastical ties that had bound many institutions from their founding in the 17th century through the Civil War. American industrialists were pouring their fortunes into new schools—the University of Chicago, Stanford, Johns Hopkins.

But it wasn't just the times; the men left their mark as well. At the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins (1929-1951) established the Great Books program, which today deserves emulation. His contemporary, Nicholas Murray Butler, saved Lionel Trilling's job

at Columbia by intervening with the WASPish English department dons who wanted to deny Trilling tenure because he was a Jew. True, these and other presidents also had power that is unknown today. Woodrow Wilson could dismiss faculty at will.

Today, presidential leadership may seem less monumental, but it can still be strong. Take, for example, John Sawyer of Williams College (1961-1973), who rid the school of its backwoods boys club im-

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age by dispensing with the entrenched fraternity system and admitting women.

More often, however, the race for funds has become the *sine qua non* of the academic institution. More than 60 of the nation's colleges are now trying to raise more than \$100 million each for what are called "capital campaigns." And the presidents of three universities—Stanford, Boston University, and New York University—are each seeking more than \$1 billion. Some are on a continual fundraising roll; when B.U. reached its goal of \$200 million a year ahead of schedule, John Silber, the university's president, immediately set his sights on \$1 billion by the year 2000. In opening the drive, Silber said that B.U. could "stand still or go ahead. We're at the takeoff point to become one of the ten best universities in the nation." Silber talks about education the way many college presidents do: "best," they imply, gets measured in money, not knowledge.

When governing boards go hunting for presidents, it's often the candidates' fundraising, rather than academic, talents that catch the eye. Such might have been the case in 1984, when the regents of the University of Texas began a search to replace Peter Flawn, the retiring president of U.T. Austin. In the end, the choice came down to two candidates, both at U.T. Austin: Gerry Fonken, vice president for academic affairs and research, and William Cunningham, the dean of the business school. While Cunningham, whose doctorate was in marketing, had all the seemingly essential exterior graces, he was viewed as no great intellect by the faculty. But Cunningham had done a terrific job raising funds for

the business school. If he could sell the mission of the business school, why not the whole university?

Butterflies and massages

The college president's life is, of course, going to be more fragmented and frustrating than *The Fantasy* allows. College presidents, not without a trace of self-pity, liken themselves to mayors. Joseph Duffy, chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says his job includes, among other things, running a bus line and providing housing, food, and custodial services. In addition, presidents almost inevitably play a role in the life of the town where their institution is located. And, as if that didn't tax their time, few can resist invitations to sit on corporate boards, another prestige-enhancer. Some brave ones,

like Dunn, will even try to teach a course, but it's usually a short-lived attempt. "I don't read as much [in her field of American colonial history] as I used to," she said. "I am not prepared enough."

This potpourri of prosaic presidential concerns inevitably breeds frustration. "Fragmentation" is how Peter Pouncey, president of Amherst College, describes it. "It's a great job for the butterfly-minded," he says. "You get to do something for about a minute and a quarter." Adele Simmons, until recently president of Hampshire College, says being a college president means thinking in 15-minute segments. And, sure enough, Simmons thinks that way—as she ran down for me the many activities of her day, her schedule included time for a massage.

The mayor analogy becomes even more apt when you realize that college presidents must cope with

How To Be a College President

The Editors

Redefining the role of a college president would entail ridicule and resistance. But it's unlikely that the next Robert Hutchins can spend half of his or her time milking alums and still secure the reforms that campuses need.

Such as:

►**Make faculty members teach more.** When Nicholas Murray Butler rescued Lionel Trilling from the bigotry of the Columbia English department in the 1930s, top professors were spending about 15 hours a week in the classroom. Today, at most major institutions, they spend about five. Presidential pressure to put scholars back in the classroom could curb the undue emphasis on publishing and the concomitant explosion of obscure, jargon-ridden journals. Moreover, the more teachers teach, the farther a department's budget would go—and the less time college presidents would have to spend with hat in hand.

►**Cut tenured positions by two-thirds.** Tenure was meant to safeguard independence. Today it typically safeguards indolence.

True, tenure can protect iconoclasts and give the university a core protected from fad and fashion; we wouldn't want to reinstate the total hire-and-fire powers that Woodrow Wilson had as president of Princeton. But today's blanketed tenure is worse than the disease it aims to cure, leaving many departments choked with deadwood. With as many as 80 percent of faculty tenured at many schools, a two-thirds cut would suit most campuses fine.

►**Actively recruit young scholars.** Frank Cashen didn't take the New York Mets from the cellar to the series simply by boosting cash flow. And he didn't just buy big-name players. Knowing stars when he saw them—and before others saw them—he signed a teamful of Dwight Goodens and Lenny Dykstras: obscure talents destined for big things. College presidents ought to have the same approach to scouting talent and pursue young scholars with the passion they currently reserve for donors.

►**Reform curricula, with a heavier emphasis on the Great Books.** The erosion of requirements means that even the brightest students at the best schools have gaping holes in their education. As Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, recently wrote in *The New York Times*, freshmen at toney Middlebury can now choose between Shakespeare and "Literary California." To fulfill an expository writing requirement, the Wellesley student can delve into a course that asks "Why is Donald Duck so much smarter than the criminal Beagle Boys?" A pressing issue, no doubt, but perhaps weightier issues get aired in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Paradise Lost*.

►**Improve the quality of teaching.** With all the pressure to publish, what increasingly perishes is concern for classroom exchange. It brings no additional pay, garners no renown, and counts precious little toward tenure. Alan Brinkley, a celebrated teacher, was recently denied tenure by the Harvard history department, despite consistent rave reviews from students. Surely there's

something wrong with an academic culture that places greater value on publishing papers like "The Core and Stability of Group Choice in Spatial Voting Games" in the *American Political Science Review*, which five or six scholars might read, than on the teaching that can awaken young minds.

The Washington Monthly has long promoted one such approach—the case study method—that could help rescue political science (and much of history) from dreary quantitative oblivion. Rather than running regression analyses, political scientists should be leading their students through the nuances of real political events, teasing forth the lessons. A comparison of the Kennedy administration's behavior during the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis—and what it shows about the need for skepticism toward the bureaucratic chain of command—has more to teach than 100 number-crunching studies.

►**End corruption in sports.** Like homelessness, the corruption of big-school athletics is now so common that it's lost its ability to shock. With pressure for Heismans and Division I championships so strong—a winning team makes it easier to raise funds not only for the gym but for libraries and computer labs—the president needs to lay down a zero-tolerance policy in the athletic department. One who did was Eamon Kelly, president of Tulane. When members of the basketball team were caught shaving points in exchange for cash, Kelly shut down the basketball program for a few years—and weathered the resulting alumni heat. Most college presidents are more inclined toward expressing "concern" and convening committees. They need to incline towards real academic programs that guarantee student athletes make it.

►**Revolutionize student aid.** Nothing fuels the angst of the middle class quite like the prospect of financing a college education. Or three. Or five. Meanwhile, the student-loan sports car, like the Welfare Cadillac, has entered contemporary folklore to boost almost everyone's skepticism about government help. There's a way out: offer government guarantees for long-term loans (30 years or more) from private banks. In the event of default, the money can be recouped through income tax assessments. It would cost taxpayers nothing, and it would spread out the repayment time—which is usually ten years after graduation—into years when the former student has higher earnings.

The result would be good for families: Mom and Dad would be free of the guilt and worry that

often tether them to unsatisfying work in order to finance Junior's diploma. It would be good for Junior, too: with the money coming out of his own pocket, he'd likely pay more attention to questions of whether, when, and what to study. And it'd be good for the colleges: Junior himself might take a more skeptical view of those tenured dinosaurs when he realizes their cushions are being financed by his earnings. While university presidents often justify their dollar-chasing by citing the need for scholarships, here's a way to really expand educational opportunity.

►**Reflag a V.P.** Rather than have subordinates making crucial academic decisions while presidents are off chasing dollars, wouldn't it make more sense to designate a subordinate the chief fundraiser? He or she will need a fancy title and a big salary, perhaps even bigger than the president's, in order to impress potential donors. (More doors will open for "Chancellor Smith," than they will for "Mr. Smith, vice president for development.") But reflagging a v.p. or two is a small price to pay in order to keep the president in home port.

►**Restrain salaries.** Sure, some academics, particularly junior faculty, are underpaid. But the number of well-paid administrators is soaring on many campuses. And, cries of genteel poverty notwithstanding, many professors have it pretty good. Stars at big-name schools now regularly top \$100,000, and the *average* college professor, including those at community colleges, pulls in \$37,000. But wait—that's for only eight months' work. On a yearly basis, then, the average professor earns \$51,800 from teaching. And that's not counting outside income, like publications and consulting fees. (In 1984, *The American Lawyer* reported that Lawrence Tribe, a Harvard Law professor, had netted at least \$240,000 in outside fees. Tribe, of course, is an extreme example, but such "consulting" is an increasingly common faculty pursuit.) Nor does that figure count the tuition subsidies, sometimes up to 100 percent, that many universities offer faculty children. Or all those nice athletic facilities. Or the sabbaticals. Or the housing subsidies many schools provide. Or the chance to lead those student tours of Florence. Sound tough?

But how to restrain faculty salaries and still attract those rising academic stars? Offer them something that even billion-dollar endowments don't necessarily buy: a place where the essential currency of education—ideas—can thrive. But don't look to college presidents to turn things around. They're too busy dialing for dollars. □

a number of constituencies—students, faculty, alumni, the board of trustees, and the public. All want a piece of the president's day. "Each group could create gridlock for a president," says one former dean. "There are faculty who come for one hour to converse about the geology department's postal budget." Where college presidents differ from mayors, however, is this: only one group of constituents vote. "A president conceives of his or her constituency as the board of trustees that hired them," the dean said. "This helps to explain why presidents of colleges with academic backgrounds find themselves acting as chief executive officers, responding to the nonacademic parts of the college."

Dunn harrumphs again,
explaining it's just a
committee to discuss
how to plan, as
opposed to actually
planning.

No wonder, then, that when Clark Kerr, the former president of the University of California, conducted a study for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1986, he found that 50 percent of the traditional candidates for the top college job—provosts, deans, and vice presidents for academic affairs—didn't want it. Kerr calls them "refusniks." Why would they turn it down? "The position of president has deteriorated," said one typical respondent. "It mostly involves raising money and recruiting students."

If the life of a college president is inevitably distracting, it becomes frenetic when the trustees saddle presidents with wildly ambitious fundraising goals. There are at least two solutions. One is for other administrators or the trustees, who now perform considerable fundraising work, to take on even more. The second line of attack—tougher to initiate but potentially transforming—is to rethink how much money colleges really need.

No one expects that running an institution is a low-budget affair. The costs are real and escalating. Money stocks the library, stokes the boilers, hires the faculty, modernizes the computers. It provides aid to students who otherwise would be unable to attend. And universities correctly argue that they've been hurt by declining federal support, including the erosion of financial aid for needy students during

the Reagan years, and the "capital starvation" that has resulted in deterioration of research facilities.

But federal cutbacks alone can't account for the rampant tuition inflation of the past decade. In 1987, a congressional study found that tuition at private and public universities during the 1980s grew at more than twice the rate of inflation. Since 1980, tuition and fees at Smith and other elite institutions have climbed more than 130 percent, to more than \$16,000. With a record like that, the public—and college presidents—ought to be more skeptical about what constitutes a necessity.

Rather than exercising tough leadership to restrain costs, university presidents take to the road. Their fundraising pitch often sounds like that of Cold War generals justifying the arms race: we need more because the competition has more. Of the \$125 million that Mary Maples Dunn is currently chasing, \$6 million is for the indoor track and tennis facility. Another \$450,000 will build an *indoor* riding arena. Why is this necessary? Because Smith's neighbor, Mount Holyoke, has just built the largest equestrian center in New England at a price of \$1.8 million.

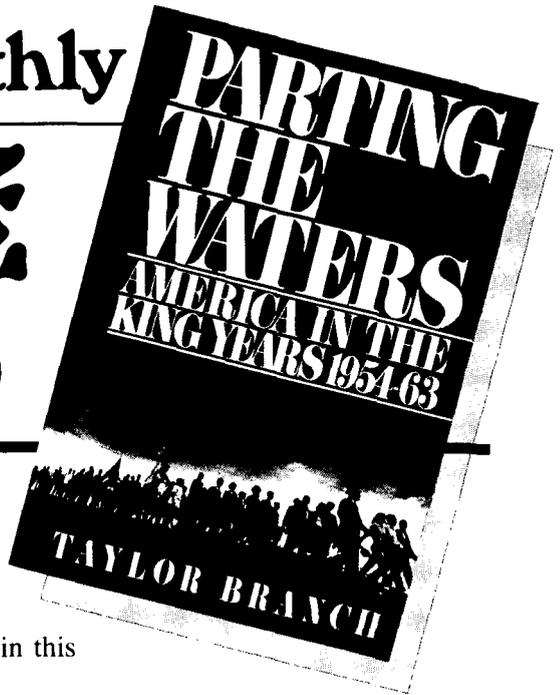
Listen to Smith's capital campaign brochure: "By the fall of 1985, most of the colleges that compete with Smith...had upgraded their athletic facilities...improving the college's facilities is critical if Smith is to attract these scholar-athletes." Never mind that the brochure also boasts that "Smith now provides the finest athletic facilities intended primarily for women anywhere in the world." How about a little educational leadership that says: "If you want to ride horses, join the rodeo; if you want to learn something, come to Smith?"

Even at universities with endowments worth hundreds of millions, or even billions, of dollars, the presidents I spoke with felt they could never stop raising money. They worried about inflation; that salaries, library, and maintenance costs would rise unchecked. Or, perhaps more troublesome, that they would fall behind in the race for the most up-to-date equipment, i.e. computers. But at least one college president, who declined to be quoted, thinks that colleges have enough for their current needs and beyond. "Many of these college presidents are like squirrels, putting nuts away for the future," he says.

There's another more personal motive driving the culture of college fundraising. It's a great way to be remembered. Take a recent news item about the retirement of Thomas Reynolds, who has been president of Bates College for the past 20 years. Reynolds is a fine academic who clearly strengthened the intellectual standards of the school. The item mentioned this fact in passing, dwelling instead on Reynolds's two successful capital campaigns.

The Washington Monthly

ANNUAL POLITICAL BOOK AWARD



The political book award for 1988 goes to *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* by Taylor Branch. In a review of the book in this magazine, Jason DeParle wrote:

“What’s striking about Taylor Branch’s terrific book is how mightily *uninevitable* King’s victories seemed at the time. . . . Branch’s meticulous research laces the saga with nuance and irony. There is news in his additions to the story of the FBI’s dishonor, but much of the book’s joy is simply in the reading. . . . Branch’s prose shines.”

RUNNERS UP

Laboratories of Democracy. David Osborne. *Harvard Business School Press.*

The Best Congress Money Can Buy. Philip M. Stern. *Pantheon.*

And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry. John P. Hoerr. *University of Pittsburgh Press.*

Sparrows Point: Making Steel—The Rise and Ruin of American Industrial Might. Mark Reutter. *Summit.*

Honest Graft: Big Money and the American Political Process. Brooks Jackson. *Knopf.*

What’s Wrong with Wall Street: Short-term Gain and the Absentee Shareholder. Louis Lowenstein. *Addison-Wesley.*

A Fool and His Money: The Odyssey of an Average Investor. John Rothchild. *Viking.*

A Bright, Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam. Neil Sheehan. *Random House.*

Landslide: The Unmaking of the President, 1984-1988. Doyle McManus, Jane Mayer. *Houghton Mifflin.*

William F. Buckley Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives. John B. Judis. *Simon & Schuster.*

The Spy Who Got Away. David Wise. *Random House.*

Wild Blue Yonder: Money, Politics, and the B-1 Bomber. Nick Kotz. *Pantheon.*

Nowhere to Go: The Tragic Odyssey of the Homeless Mentally Ill. E. Fuller Torrey. *Harper and Row.*

Getting Better: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous. Nan Robertson. *Morrow.*