Summers and Harvard

What has happened at Harvard University over the past year is important to *Science* readers for all sorts of reasons. Harvard was the first university established in the United States, and its excellence as well as its tradition have made it the symbol of higher education for the U.S. public and for many aspiring students in other parts of the world. Why else would last month’s departure of President Lawrence Summers, after a turbulent 5-year tour of duty, as well as some of the earlier incidents that led to this denouement, have been covered above the fold on the front page of the *New York Times*?

What fascinates me, as a Harvard alumnus and the former president of a university that does many of the same things as Harvard, is the extraordinary array of explanations given for these events. Summers’ resignation preceded a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which had previously passed a no-confidence vote and looked ready to do it again. But many have asked why a university, proud of doing the academic decathlon, left the faculties of Law, Medicine, Business, and Education out of such an important referendum? The faculty-versus-Summers theme has been a Rorschach test for outside observers interested in academic governance, management styles, constituency relationships, and obligations to undergraduate education. The *Economist* called Summers the wrong messenger with the right message, after a lead describing Harvard as “a world-beater in academic back-stabbing.” Observers who watched Summers in the U.S. Treasury Department, first as undersecretary and then as secretary, saw him as brilliant and accomplished, including his boss and predecessor Robert Rubin, who was influential in his appointment. On the other hand, many of his academic critics have found Summers arbitrary, blunt, and even arrogant. The *Washington Post* bought little of that, implying in an editorial that the future of academic leadership is in peril when the inmates are running the asylum.

So it goes. Every crisis has multiple interpretations, with the differences often resting on the interests of the interpreters. For some at Harvard and elsewhere, the problem was that in a list of possible explanations for the relative scarcity of women in the sciences, Summers had included genetic gender differences. Had that possibility been introduced with tact and some reservations, it is doubtful that it would have produced the same furor. Summers’ notion that Harvard should change—not a bad idea—was introduced through a series of conversations in which his listeners were made to feel part of the problem, not of the solution. Managerial style, in short, was plainly part of Summers’ difficulties. But some critics saw the faculty reaction in more harshly political terms: The ubiquitous Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz even persuaded the *Economist* to publish his improbable thesis that the “hard left” of the faculty had accomplished a coup d’état.

This multiplicity of perspectives makes it difficult to draw out useful lessons, but it does reveal some realities about presidential power in the university. Professor James March, a valued colleague of mine at Stanford, often pointedly reminded me that power in academia is primarily horizontal. There is little hierarchy in the organization, and the professoriate consists of smart, independent-minded people who don’t always do what they’re told. Governments are different, and Summers may have been unprepared for a venue in which failure to consult is costly the first time and unforgivable when repeated.

I was happy with his appointment and thought his challenge to Harvard was timely. It failed not because of political differences or constituency mischief, though his image and its contrast with Harvard’s has tempted many observers to misallocate blame. The real story here is a classic tragedy: a brilliant thinker and scholar, capable of great leadership, brought low by flaws of personal style. Well, the finger-pointing will finally stop and give us time to notice that, having experienced a very bad bump in the road, Harvard then brought off the perfect rescue. Derek Bok had served a successful 20-year term at Harvard: quite possibly the most successful U.S. university presidency since World War II. Harvard has talked him out of his productive study and into interim leadership, and they’re fortunate that he answered the call. That’s the good news for higher education, at least for now.

–Donald Kennedy

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