No Confidence: College Faculties Rebel With More Votes Against Leadership

Declining enrollment, falling public aid and tight budgets at some schools spark discontent—and rising no-confidence votes—among staff

By Douglas Belkin
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As the president of Rider University, Gregory Dell'Omo wanted to cut the art, French and philosophy majors among others to help solve the New Jersey school's budget shortfalls.

The faculty rebelled, passing a vote of no confidence in the president in April 2017 by a ratio of 3 to 1.

"His approach to the school is to treat it as just another business," said Arthur Taylor, a philosophy professor and president of the faculty union, at the time.

Mr. Dell'Omo pared back the cuts and instead took steps to sell a piece of property to balance the books. Still, his message to the faculty was clear: The good old days in higher education are over. Adapting to the future is going to mean a lot of tough decisions, he says.

In a sign of the changes roiling academia, faculties are voting no confidence in university and college presidents four times more frequently than a decade ago.

Between 2013 and 2017 there were an average of 15 such votes a year, up from an annual average of three between 2000 and 2004, according to research by Sean McKinniss, who wrote
his doctoral dissertation on shared governance in higher education and now works in corporate training. As part of his academic research, Mr. McKinniss tracked 184 votes of no confidence against presidents dating back to 1989.

At different schools, the votes can be generated by a single adamant faculty member or after a committee investigation and can focus on anything from perceived financial mismanagement to leadership style.

“These can be really finicky affairs,” Mr. McKinniss said.

The votes are generally held on a ballot, typically among the faculty senate but many are faculty wide. They are purely symbolic, but they frequently carry significant weight. Within a year, more than half the presidents who were the target of a vote left the institution, Mr. McKinniss found.

Behind the rancor is a competition for cash. Top tier schools continue to thrive but many universities are facing declining enrollment and public cuts in funding.

Hostilities between faculty and administrators can impugn a school’s reputation and lead to high administration turnover that can affect enrollment and ding the school’s credit rating, said Susan Fitzgerald, an associate managing director at Moody’s Investors Service. The credit-ratings firm downgraded the standing of the University of Missouri, Birmingham Southern University, Adams State University and Howard University in part because of turnover of senior management.

“The real question is can universities keep up with the pace of change? I think we’re going to see a lot more of this,” Ms. Fitzgerald said.

No-confidence votes are serious because the governance structure at schools distributes power between trustees, administrators, faculty, students, staff and alumni. This deliberative approach prizes consensus. That worked fine when enrollment was rising across the nation, but it is paralyzing schools at a moment when they must innovate to survive, said Sally Johnstone, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

“Schools must change so they can compete with the new models emerging and continue to serve their populations, but they are dripping with rules that make that very hard,” Ms. Johnstone said.

Faculty at Eastern Michigan University voted no confidence against the school’s governing board in 2016 after the board backed a plan to take over public schools in Detroit. Budget reductions this year have resulted in cuts to four Eastern Michigan University sports teams and staff layoffs which have, in turn, prompted discussion of a vote of no confidence in the school’s president.

“There’s a very high level of frustration,” said Judith Kullberg, president of the faculty union who supported the vote of no confidence.

Regents withdrew their support for the Detroit public school plan after the 2016 vote of no confidence, but Jim Webb, the chair of the board of regents, said faculty displeasure had little impact.
The professors look at their little part of the university, but they don’t take into account the totality of what’s going on,” he said. “When they don’t get their way then they say shared governance doesn’t work.”

At the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, faculty voted no confidence last year in Jim Johnsen, the university system president, because they believed they had been cut out of the decision making process during a massive restructuring forced by budget cuts.

As a result of the vote, the school slowed down the process to address faculty concern, a spokeswoman for the university system said. Mr. Johnsen remains with the University of Alaska system.

“President Johnsen very much respects and values the perspectives and input from the faculty,” a school spokeswoman said.

At Rider, when Mr. Dell’Omo became president in 2015, enrollment was down, tuition discounts were up and debt was rising. “We had a $7 million to $8 million deficit in the operating budget,” Mr. Dell’Omo said. “We are a not for profit... but revenues must still exceed expenditures.”

To avoid cutting majors Mr. Dell’Omo is in negotiations to sell a music program and the campus where it sits to a Chinese company for $40 million. He called the vote of no confidence a negotiating tactic.

“Nobody likes change,” he said. “It’s unnerving and it’s scary.”

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