

Thomas J. Straka: Intended consequences of the push to hire private-sector UW campus leaders

Posted on Monday, Sep 18, 2017

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

UW Board of Regents President John Behling has an obvious agenda that would require UW system campuses to recruit leaders from the private sector. On the surface that policy has strengths; recruitment should be for the best person, without someone being eliminated from the search due to the lack of an academic background.

Policies like this are often said to produce unintended consequences. I suspect there may be intended consequences in this case, with the potential to inflict real damage. An Administration Hiring Workgroup, without a UW-Madison member, is now working on recommendations. It shouldn't be hard work, as the conclusion was pretty much given to the workgroup at the beginning.

President Behling called this "the latest trend" in higher education. The trend is really conservative boards destroying liberal universities so they can be remade into vocational schools, best achieved with hand-picked nonacademic leaders. This should be easy to see in Wisconsin as Governor Walker has been demonstrating how to slowly dismantle the liberal university framework.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

Cautionary tales of business leaders mangling the leadership of universities are many, like the former tech executive at the University of Missouri who let racial strife devastate the campus last year. Or, former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels,

the president of Purdue University, who recently orchestrated the acquisition of for-profit Kaplan University to become the online distance education branch of Purdue University. Following the private sector model, it was done in secret and without faculty input. There is no telling how much the Kaplan legacy will do to diminish the Purdue “brand.” But it is bold private sector thinking.

Notice in the example of Purdue University that the president was a former governor. That portends what could happen in Wisconsin. University president or chancellor positions are plum jobs for politicians, with lots of prestige, power, and visibility. It’s what politicians live for. Let me give you a nightmare: former Governor Scott Walker as chancellor of a UW campus! Far-fetched? Read on.

About three years ago the College of Charleston, a major public university in South Carolina, founded in 1770, was searching for a new president. A search committee produced a list of final candidates for the board of trustees to choose from. Instead, the board added the lieutenant governor to the list. Seven members of the search committee even wrote to the board and warned that if “the politicization of this process occurs, the consequences will be far-reaching.” Politics being what it is, guess who got the job. This happens all the time; it is not “the latest trend,” but nothing more than appointing political cronies to plum jobs.

The story goes on. There’s always uproar, short-lived, when boards make political appointments. The lieutenant governor, Glenn McConnell, was prominent, even beyond the state, as a contentious Confederate sympathizer, well-known as a Civil War re-enactor. There is a photograph that shows him in a Confederate General’s uniform, grinning, while standing between two African Americans in slave garb.

Clergy, civil rights groups, faculty, students, and alumni objected. McConnell served about three decades in the state senate and was its president pro tempore before becoming lieutenant governor. The consensus was that the Board was strong-armed by the legislature. Out of fairness, McConnell seems to be doing a good job and some of the resentment has faded; after the Charleston church massacre, he even supported removing the Confederate flag from the statehouse grounds. But the hiring process still stinks.

It makes sense it would be one of Governor Walker’s appointees that is pushing for the new policy. To think it would not lead to politicization of academic leader hiring decisions would be naive. There is no telling who’d end up as a UW chancellor. I apologize for the many nightmares I have probably caused across the State of

Wisconsin.

— *Thomas J. Straka is a forestry professor at Clemson University in South Carolina and a 1972 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.*