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What would Thomas Jefferson do?

After the debacle: Trust, governance and transparency at the University of Virginia

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The debacle over the ill-conceived firing of University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan challenges “good sense and propriety.” How did this happen? This question must be asked, not simply to dredge up the past but, more importantly, to determine how the university moves forward in an atmosphere of unity and trust.

Was this fiasco essentially a fundamental disagreement regarding UVa’s philosophy and future direction for higher learning as has been implied in various media articles? If so, why don’t those conversations receive more discussion in the sunlight?

Or was this debacle a sign of internal strife, politicking and ill-conceived actions of a few? And if so, how did the fate of the great University of Virginia come to reside so vulnerably in the hands of a few? More importantly, what actions must be taken to ensure this kind of fiasco does not happen again?

At the least, this situation is a wake-up call to take a long look at the university’s governance to see what went so terribly wrong, how to prevent it from happening again in the future, and perhaps, most importantly, how to move ahead.

As UVa's founder, Thomas Jefferson himself might provide us with useful guidance. He was no stranger to political intrigue, difficulties of academic governance, personal biases, differences of opinion and machinations for personal ego, power and influence. He might likely demand answers to the following questions and expect appropriate actions from each member of the Board of Visitors:

- » Is there an established code of conduct and are there expected behaviors for the board's academic governance? If so, how do you plan to adhere to and practice those behaviors in the future? If not, what changes are needed in the board's governance process and how and when will these changes be addressed?

- » What checks and balances or protocol should be put into place to assure transparency, accountability and full and fair disclosure of material facts?

- » How will you re-establish your leadership and credibility in light of the negative publicity surrounding the recent actions?

- » What steps can and will you take to assure the UVa administration, faculty and students can trust the board in all matters in the future?

- » How will important behaviors such as care, reliability, sincerity, competence and restoring trust be made part of the healing process?

- » What do the board members care about in this specific situation and how are you "taking care of what you care about," both individually and collectively as the board?

- » What role will each member of the board commit to and carry out to rectify the current situation and re-establish honesty and integrity in all university interactions?

- » How will the board self-govern its actions in the future, especially knowing the academic world, corporate world and world-at-large are watching closely?

- » What criteria should be used to select and de-select board members? Should the board be composed of members including the student body, faculty and citizens-at-large having no political affiliations?

If distrust is the real culprit in this case, then there's longer-term reparation the board members will need to engage in and fully embrace to avoid future occurrences. This cannot be solved by a quick reversal of decision, stroke of the pen or surface collegiality. The sense of trust, both among the board members and between the board and its various constituencies, can only be achieved through a purposeful deliberation and commitment to the process of rebuilding trust.

The public trust is not easily earned but can be quickly destroyed and is difficult to restore once broken. While difficult, with the proper amount of awareness, dedication and commitment, restoring this trust is not impossible.

As author Dov Seidman states, "We live in an era where trust is the currency of the age..." Put simply, trust is everything. *How* will trust be assured in the future for the Board of Visitors and the University, *how* will decisions be made, and *how* will actions be taken?

In "Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts," authors Carol Tarvis and Elliott Aronson note that "in the final analysis, the test of a nation's character, and an individual's integrity, does not depend on being error free. It depends on what we do after making the error."

The glare of sunlight is upon the board and its every action. The questions are before you, Board of Visitors and university. What say you? What will you do to restore trust, governance, and transparency?

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