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Michael DeCesare
Merrimack College, decesarem@merrimack.edu

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BUSINESS EXPERIENCE AS ACADEMIC QUALIFICATION? OH, REALLY?

Posted by Guest Blogger in faculty and tagged with faculty governance, University of Toledo

The following is a guest post by Michael DeCesare, associate professor and chair of the Department of Sociology & Criminology, and president of the AAUP Chapter, at Merrimack College.

The president of the University of Toledo plans to appoint his former chief financial officer (CFO) to the position of provost and executive vice president for academic affairs.

While it is not uncommon for a CFO to slide into the role of president, it would be both rare and unsettling for a CFO to be appointed as a provost. One might reasonably wonder, after all, what exactly in a financial officer's background and experience would qualify that person to become the chief academic administrator on campus. Indeed, President Lloyd Jacobs’ proposed appointee, Scott Scarborough, has extraordinarily little experience with...
academic affairs (read his bio). To many observers, this appointment would represent, above all else, the encroachment of a non-academic into an uncharted territory of the academic realm.

Business professionals have long been members of governing boards; the destruction they have wrought upon higher education in this country can be traced from Thorstein Veblen’s attack on “captains of industry” to the recent hullabaloo created by UVA Rector Helen Dragas’ ill-informed decision to oust President Teresa Sullivan.

Over the past couple of decades, people from the business sector have routinely been appointed, for better or worse, to college and university presidencies without significant protest. Now, it seems, they are being inserted into lower posts.

Where will it end? At the deans’ level? At the level of department chairs? Or will business and finance professionals ultimately manage to finagle their way onto liberal arts and science faculties, thus completing the corporate infiltration of the academy?

Perhaps just as troubling as Scott Scarborough’s pending appointment at Toledo is President Jacobs’ rationale for it: “It is my belief that higher education across the country at the national level is inbred, and we need to look outside and bring new external skill sets into higher education . . .” By “new external skill sets” Jacobs evidently means business-related skills: “Too often universities offer the courses they want to offer while students struggle to graduate on time because too few class sections are available to meet student demand. Those days are over. The debate as to whether students are our customers is over. They have money and they have the choice of where or whether to invest in a college degree. That’s the definition of a customer.” In his effort to “shake things up,” it seems that President Jacobs has given up even pretending that Toledo is a university.

For a second, let us put President Jacobs’ (and therefore the U. of Toledo’s) unabashed—almost proud
—lunge toward corporatization and consumerism aside. Let us also put aside the obviously growing business orientation of many colleges and universities.

Instead, let us focus on one line from the AAUP’s statement on *Faculty Participation in the Selection, Evaluation, and Retention of Administrators*: “The role of the faculty in the selection of an administrator other than a president should reflect the extent of legitimate faculty interest in the position.” This undeniably reasonable sentence tells me that the process of selecting a provost, an institution’s chief academic administrator, should include a great deal of faculty input. Is there an administrative position that entails a greater degree of “legitimate faculty interest?” Probably not.

Unfortunately, President Jacobs never sought faculty input into his nomination of Scott Scarborough; the president simply informed the faculty what he had done. I can only hope that the Toledo faculty voices its collective opposition to a business professional serving as the next provost. If the faculty does not do so, it will open the door even wider to similar actions at institutions across the country. I wonder what would be next: Appointing a comptroller as a dean? A procurement director as a department head?

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