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ADMINISTRATION

The Battle Is Over. How Can Presidents and Faculty Members Mend Fences?

By *Emma Kerr* | MARCH 25, 2018

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Tim Gruber for The Chronicle

President Brian Rosenberg (left) and Professor Patrick Schmidt, at Macalester College, agree that the conflict around a union push there was lessened because of trust that had already been established between the administration and the faculty.

"rushing." The college hired lawyers — the "super expensive" kind with union-busting reputations, says Pate.

The administration "had a huge voice and were very intimidating," Pate, then a non-tenure-track professor at Macalester, recalls. "Those emails were telling full-time faculty not to speak to us, saying anything they said to us could be used against them."

"It was a full-on assault from the administration," SooJin Pate says, remembering the lowest points in a hard-fought 2014 unionization battle at Macalester College.

Emails came weekly, pitting adjunct and tenured faculty members against one another. They got emotional at meetings, giving impassioned speeches for or against the proposed union. In a campus newspaper, one faculty member described her mounting medical bills and pleaded for others to vote in favor of the union. But others said voting at that point would be

The unionization effort failed. But talk to Pate about Macalester and its still-seated president, four years later, and you'll hear her tone lighten. Though she's now left academe, she'll start ticking off improved salary policies and examples of voting rights, benefits, and title-system reform with a sense of pride. "It wasn't for naught," she says. "There was concrete, material progress made."

After no-confidence votes, unionization pushes, and controversial appointments, many college leaders crumble and fall. Over half of all presidents who receive votes of no confidence lose their positions within a year, according to Sean McKinniss, a college-governance expert who has tracked these trends. After compiling data dating back to 1989, McKinniss studied 180 cases of no-confidence votes. He says it is absolutely possible for presidents not just to survive the votes, but to grow and learn from them. That goes too, he says, for unionization pushes and tensions around controversial appointments.

The push for unionization at Macalester came to an end when the vote to unionize was canceled — not because the push fell apart, but because some felt the vote was happening too quickly. It's what college leaders did in the immediate wake of that canceled vote that re-established confidence in administrators, say faculty members and the president himself, possibly preventing a renewed attempt at unionization.

The president, Brian C. Rosenberg, began making changes, fast. First, he and the chair of the Resources and Planning Committee, a top-level faculty advisory panel then composed only of tenure-track and tenured faculty, began allowing non-tenure-track faculty representatives to join. That sent a message: All faculty members' opinions are valued here.

One of those representatives, Marianne Milligan, an assistant non-tenure-track professor of linguistics and environmental studies, says she wanted to be more engaged and advance in her career, but was still considered a visiting professor after eight years at Macalester.

"They didn't pay me hardly anything. Every time I wanted to go to a faculty training seminar, I had to pay my nanny more. It was this wall I was bumping into," she says. But after the vote was canceled, the provost and president immediately bumped up her salary and those of many others.

While the resources committee tackled salary and benefits, two other committees handled the rank and review system and voting rights, respectively. Committee members listened to a variety of perspectives on those hot-button issues. Give non-tenure-track faculty the title of professor, and tenured professors feel that their achievements have been diluted. Give non-tenure-track faculty too insignificant a title, and they feel undervalued.

"It was kind of a mess," Rosenberg says. "We had people who had been here for 15 years who had the title 'visiting professor.'"

Together, the three committees created proposals and presented them at the faculty meeting, Macalester's equivalent of a faculty senate. By a large margin, 117-3, faculty members voted in new standards. After being adjunct for four years, non-tenure-track faculty would now undergo a review process that could result in a promotion. The review would consider elements like a student evaluation and peer review. They would be called non-tenure-track faculty, instead of adjunct or teaching professors. If such faculty members were teaching four or five courses, their salary would now be prorated, and they'd be making the equivalent of a tenured professor. That would also put them into consideration for increased research grants. Under the old rules, non-tenure-track faculty could vote only if they were teaching full time at some point. Under the new rules, voting rights were extended further.

During the unionization effort, "there were instances when an individual who spoke with passion or tearfulness really did turn the tenor and tone of the discussion, helping us see things in new ways," says Patrick Schmidt, chair of political science and a tenured professor who helped find alternatives to unionization. "Those were very powerful moments."

Administrators had fought hard against the union. Rosenberg and Kathleen M. Murray, who was then provost at Macalester, sent messages to faculty members. One read, "We believe that this is not the right direction for any of our faculty members, will not strengthen our institution or our governance structure, will not help the faculty who are directly involved, and will not assist our students in any way."

But they had also tried to walk a fine line. Rosenberg says that from when the unionization effort first began to its stalling out, he and other administrators were quick to respond to the union's accusations while trying to limit damage to relationships with the faculty. Rather than demonizing the union, he says, the focus was on facts and correcting misunderstandings.

While tackling the big issues of titles and salary, Rosenberg says, he tried also to lessen the overall volatility. Besides the tensions between administrators and non-tenure-track faculty, divides had formed within the faculty ranks. Those who wanted to unionize were pitted against those who did not, those who were tenure track against those who weren't, Pate says. To begin mending fences, Rosenberg spoke directly with non-tenure-track faculty, met with representatives of the union, and held open sessions where anyone could come and voice their concerns.

"I didn't delegate it to anyone else," he says, and he tried to assure all involved that the administration didn't think the unionization push was inappropriate and wouldn't retaliate for it.

That relationship repair work might be more crucial than you'd think. Some say it has saved Bruce Harreld, president of the University of Iowa. Harreld was appointed in September 2015 and promptly greeted by a wave of criticism, frustration, and faculty protest. Less than 2 percent of faculty felt he was qualified to be president at the time of his hiring. The board of regents considered four candidates for president and selected the only one with no experience in higher-education administration. Some faculty members feared that Harreld would run the institution like a corporation and that he wouldn't be able to share governance or grasp the complexities

of academe. Moreover, nearly everyone was suspicious of the board's decision because it was made behind closed doors, with little to no transparency or true consideration of faculty concerns, faculty members said.



Tim Gruber for The Chronicle

"It was kind of a mess," says President Brian Rosenberg, shown here meeting with faculty members, of the situation at Macalester before the reorganization. "We had people who had been here for 15 years who had the title 'visiting professor.'"

"The circumstances surrounding the hiring challenged the entire campus," says Steve McGuire, director of Iowa's School of Art and Art History. "Lack of transparency, favoritism had been displayed — there was an overall sense that the process was at a basic level incomplete, if not corrupt."

After this rocky appointment, as a new president, Harreld faced budget cuts. His Iowa colleagues were impressed when he stood up for the university.

"Usually a president would lead the institution in saying, 'These are going to be difficult but we're going to do it,'" McGuire says. "Instead, his response was, 'When you cut into us like this, you cut into our base budget and we have to cut things that affect students.'" To make that point, he discontinued legacy scholarships.

McGuire says that big, risky move showed the legislature and citizens the impact of cutting millions of dollars from public institutions. It also showed faculty Harreld prioritized core programs over legislators. After an outcry, Harreld walked the decision back, but the scholarships became a bargaining chip in his dealings with regents and state legislators. The gesture, in combination with the financial insight he brought to board and regents meetings, began to inspire more confidence in him, McGuire says.

To this day, not everyone on Iowa's campus is sold on Harreld. Matthew Brown, a professor of English there, says the president's efforts were just for appearances. "I'm open to alternative models of higher-ed leadership," he says, "but there is no dynamism

or creativity or, frankly, fund-raising chops that would offset his lack of experience in academia."

Still, Harreld, who declined to comment, has managed to keep his position over the two years since his controversial appointment.

"He didn't come across as trying to change people's mind about him," McGuire says, "but within two months people began to see he was doing hard work and reaching out to as many people as possible."

Another campus-clash survivor is Rose B. Bellanca, president of Washtenaw Community College, in Michigan, who has stayed on after a faculty-union vote of no confidence four years ago. Faculty say it's been pretty smooth sailing lately.

In 2014, union members felt their voices weren't being heard. Those feelings had escalated when Bellanca abruptly fired the vice president for instruction in 2013, five months before his contract was set to expire. The college's spokeswoman told the news media she had no information about why he was fired, and Bellanca herself informed faculty and the campus community of her decision in a vague email.

She had reached the decision after long consideration, she wrote, and, "As president, building a team with the necessary leadership skills is critical to the success of the college." Faculty members circulated petitions and initiated the no-confidence vote.

Bellanca said at the time she was "disturbed" by the vote but offered a renewed commitment to improving communication.

"I'm sorry that you felt that you had to give me that vote of no confidence. You had my attention without it," Bellanca said to faculty at a Board of Trustees meeting in May 2014. "If you want to talk about things, I would love to talk about them. My offer is out there to you, and now I'm just asking you to consider it and meet me halfway."

Now, many of those same faculty members say the professional climate has improved. (Bellanca declined to comment.) Michael Duff, a Washtenaw professor of automotive services, was union vice president at the time of the no-confidence vote and says many of the issues faculty raised have since been resolved through negotiations.

"She's reaching out to us. Financially, our college is doing well. Our enrollment hasn't dropped like everyone else," Duff says. "We didn't know her, and there was a learning curve. ... Some people thought she wasn't approachable, but we've moved forward and we've had a couple contracts in since then."

At Macalester, as crucial as it was to connect and act in the days and months after the canceled unionization vote, Schmidt and Rosenberg agree that the period before the crisis partly determined how it played out.

Establishing a culture of trust was key, Schmidt says. The administration approached small-scale issues with non-tenure-track faculty thoughtfully and fairly. Ultimately, Rosenberg, who had been president since 2003, was confident that faculty had an underlying trust of the institution to do the right thing.

"When we talked to them during that effort, they were willing to listen to us," Rosenberg says. Boiling it down, he advises: "Understand where you are and where the strengths and weaknesses of your situation are. Look at your policies and your compensation as they exist and ask yourself if they're fair. Try to be proactive."

Correction (3/26/2018, 4:26 p.m.): A picture caption accompanying this article originally misstated who was in a meeting with Macalester's president, Brian Rosenberg. It was members of the college's faculty, not its staff. The caption has been updated to reflect this correction.

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