University presidents, in their sphere of authority, are empowered to make a range of specific decisions with ethical implications on behalf of the university. For example, at times the president must decide if a reprimand by the supervisor of an employee is a matter of imposing a high standard of work expectations or an act of harassment. Or the president may be the last line of appeal to determine whether an employee is being laid off for stated financial reasons or as punishment for speaking out against departmental practices. Similarly, did a promotion committee turn down a candidate for legitimate reasons or because of personality clashes? Should budget cuts disproportionately protect instructional funds? Can there be circumstances that might lead a president to intervene and countermand a penalty against a student found guilty of plagiarism?

For most people in leadership positions, knowing how to treat other people is, fundamentally, a matter of common sense. We learn and understand what is right, good, just, fair and honorable from our families, social groups, religious affiliations, schools, culture and society. These understandings generally converge, and we enter adult life with a developed sense of morality. Our ethics—the articulation of the moral principles we live by—are hardly mysterious by the time we assume positions of leadership such as a university presidency. We must ask, however, is common sense sufficient to help a president make the range of decisions he or she is likely to encounter?

While common sense can certainly take a president a long way into the ethical decision making process, this role also carries with it some special obligations that go above and beyond the morality that is the foundation for most of our interactions with one another. I would like to explain briefly why university presidents have special ethical obligations, and also outline what they are.

Moral obligations, according to the early 20th century British philosopher W.D. Ross, are generated from our significant relationships with others in our communal lives. Our neighbors stand in relation to us “of promisee to promiser, creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman and the like; and each of these relations is the foundation of a prima facie duty…” (W.D. Ross, The Right and the Good). In other words, a debtor, for example, has a special obligation to repay a loan simply because...
the debtor/creditor relationship is defined, in part, by the repayment obligation. Ross calls this obligation “prima facie,” or conditional, because it is possible that it may conflict with some other, more pressing, obligation. The obligation to feed, clothe and shelter one’s young child could take precedence over the loan repayment in some circumstances.

Following Ross, if we can identify the core significant relationships that a university president has with faculty, staff, students, alumni and others, we can identify the president’s special obligations that attach specifically to the president’s position.

To uncover the president’s special obligations, it is useful to think of the university as a mission-driven organization with a membership that is consensual and contractual. In other words, faculty, staff and students freely choose to associate with a university (they are not compelled or directed to do so). Once they consent to this association, they (faculty and staff) contract for employment, or they (students) pay tuition to access credit-bearing study toward a degree.

Faculty, staff and students may be presumed to attach themselves to a university as a matter of free choice. Furthermore, we can presume that they made this choice because they identify with the mission and values of the university. Employees and students go through a process of application and acceptance. Common to these processes is the determination that there is acceptance of the mission (consent) and a desire on the part of the employee or students to be publically associated with it (contract) ... both as a profession of values and an acknowledgement that those values are not likely to be realized outside the context of the common enterprise of the university.

To reframe Ross’ general analysis of obligations specifically for the president in the university setting, we can ask: What are the defined obligations of the presidential decision-maker to those who have freely put themselves under his or her leadership?

The first obligation is clearly to promote the mission of the university. Employees and students who voluntarily attached themselves to the university signed on with expectations that it would remain true to its mission. A leader who does not vigorously pursue the mission, or who permits part of the mission to lapse, or who makes decisions to use institutional resources for non-mission-related activities is forsaking his or her prima facie obligations to the university’s constituents.

A second obligation of university presidents is fair access to the resources of the institution. The consent of each person who attaches himself or herself to the university is no more or less important than the consent of any other such person. Each has the right to fair treatment according to the rules and policies governing participation in a relationship—faculty, staff or student. The president’s obligation, therefore, is to treat all persons in each category fairly. “Fairness” here means no special treatment that is not provided for in policy and no neglect of some members of the university for reasons unrelated to rules and policy. A fair allocation of sabbaticals for faculty, for example, would set aside extraneous factors (factors not listed in the criteria) like generally good institutional citizenship (favoritism) or persistent criticism of administrative decisions in unrelated areas (punishment). Fair treatment is not equal treatment, but rather adheres to the maxim: treat similar cases similarly.

A third obligation of presidents is trustworthiness: using the power of the organization for the good of its members. People who consent to, and contract with, an organization, knowingly accept the fact that others (the president and his or her delegates) will make decisions for them. By accepting this, they effectively place their trust in the hands of the decision-maker. The special obligations associated with trust include using the resources of the organization for the benefit of the members, and the corollary of resisting using those resources for one’s personal benefit. For example, there is a line between presidential entertainment that supports the goals of the university and entertainment that may be superfluous, but desired by the president. Although the line may not be bright, crossing into the area of personal entertainment is a violation of the obligation of trustworthiness.

A fourth obligation is to engage the members of the organization in the organization’s work. Here, too, the presumption that people join an organization to be associated with its values and to accomplish through it what those values represent, supports the obligation of the leader to provide opportunities for engagement. Excessive reliance on an inner circle of advisors and limited consultation with representatives of faculty, staff and student groups would be failures to meet the prima facie obligation of engagement.

In this compressed space I have focused on the most salient defined obligations that arise from the relationship between a university president and faculty, staff and students. There are, no doubt, other obligations that are grounded in these relationships, distinct obligations for each category, and distinctive obligations related to other constituencies, such as community and alumni.

Thinking about these relationships and the duties that attach to them can help the president clarify his or her ethical obligations and avoid some of the pitfalls that attach specifically to the office.

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