Universities as Political Institutions

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Abstract

This paper explores universities as political institutions in the first place. Some principles related to interest groups, power, competition for scarce resources and negotiation in search of compromise are found to be common to businesses and the academic environment as well. We then reviewed the main characteristics of political systems which we also found to be present in universities. We argue that politics in universities is not necessarily a bad thing since using it in an appropriate, rational way is proven to have more advantages than disadvantages. Next, we analyzed universities as coalitions, looked into their sources of power and decision making processes and discussed the relationship between authorities and partisans. Finally, we discussed some leadership issues in political systems using examples from our own experience as employees in different Romanian universities. Our concluding remarks support the idea that political action in universities may be used as an instrument for reaching goals if it is backed by leadership skills as drivers for promoting collaborative and interdependent relationships between internal and external audiences.*

Keywords: *politics, universities, power, conflict, leadership*

1. Introduction

The traditional view sees universities as created and controlled by legitimate authorities who set goals, design structure, hire and manage employees and ensure pursuance of the right objectives. The political view describes a very different world. Authorities have position power, but they must vie with many other contenders for other forms of clout. Contenders bring their own beliefs, values and interests. They seek access to various forms of power and compete for their share of scarce resources in a limited "institutional pie".

The question is not whether universities are political but rather what kind of politics they will have. Political dynamics can be sordid and destructive. But politics can also be the vehicle for achieving noble purpose. Institutional change and effectiveness depend on leaders' political skills. Constructive politicians recognize and understand political realities. They know how to fashion an agenda, map the political terrain, create a network of support and negotiate with both allies and adversaries. In the process, they encounter a practical and ethical dilemma: when to adopt an open, collaborative strategy or when to choose a tougher, more adversarial approach. They have to consider the potential for collaboration, the importance of long-term relationships and most important, their own values and ethical principles.

This paper explores universities as political arenas in the first place. As arenas, universities house contests. An arena helps determine the rules of the game, the players and what is up for grabs. From this perspective, every organizational process is political. Some principles related to interest groups, power, competition for scarce resources and negotiation in search of compromise are found to be common to businesses and the academic environment as well. We then reviewed the main characteristics of political systems through the lens of their advantages and disadvantages as a starting point in support of the idea that using politics in institutions of higher education is not necessarily bad and counterproductive. Next, we analyzed universities as coalitions, looked into their sources of power and decision making

** Both authors have worked for many years in Romanian universities, public and private. The issues we have decided to discuss in our paper are frequently met in most institutions of higher education. This is the reason why we decided to refer to "the University", as representative for both public and private universities. We have also used the term "President" instead of "Rector" in support of the idea that universities are run like businesses in many ways; therefore, it is appropriate to think of the persons at the top as "Presidents".*

processes and discussed the relationship between authorities and partisans. Finally, we discussed some leadership issues in political systems using examples from our own experience as employees in different public and private Romanian universities. Our conclusions support the idea that universities are not "doomed" by politics. Politics may be good for an institution of higher education if leadership skills and tools are used properly to cultivate collaborative relationships with internal and external audiences.

2. Universities as Political Arenas: The Uncertainty of Political Outcomes

The political perspective views organizations as living, screaming political arenas that host a complex web of individuals and group interests. Principles that apply to businesses also apply to universities. There are five such principles that summarize the political perspective for universities (Bolman and Deal, 2003):

1. Universities are coalitions of diverse individuals and interest groups;
2. There are enduring differences among coalition members in values, beliefs, information, interests and perceptions of reality;
3. Most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources – who gets what;
4. Scarce resources and enduring differences make conflict central to universities' dynamics and underline power as the most important asset;
5. Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation and jockeying for position among competing stakeholders.

The parties in political processes have different preferences. As they interact through negotiations, compromises and coalition formation, their original objectives change. Since the groups with which they interact are also modifying their positions, the social environment in which they are functioning changes more quickly than they can respond to it. It is impossible to predict in advance which of many alternative outcomes will in fact take place. The actual outcome is likely to be the resultant by-product of many forces and may be neither intended nor preferred by any of the participants (Steinbrunner, 1974).

Not only are the outcomes of political processes often not consistent with the preferences of any of the actors, but because they represent compromises and are embedded in ongoing organizational processes, they are usually not as radical as the rhetoric of debate might suggest. Most change at the University is incremental rather than comprehensive and while some of the battles may be revolutionary in intent, the changes they provoke are usually neither radical nor dramatic (Baldridge, 1971). In the political arena of the University, loose coupling between what is said and what is done is the rule rather than the exception. Since the participants in the process know that the final result is likely to be compromise, they usually ask for much more than they expect in order to increase the chances of their getting at least a minimum of what they want.

Political outcomes are difficult to predict also because they may depend greatly on the forums in which they are discussed and the timing with which alternatives are considered. What happened in a particular case at the University may be related to whether the issue is discussed first in the faculty senate or the administrative council and the conflict related to where an issue is properly to be discussed may be at times as contentious as the issue itself. In addition, when there is a large number of alternatives, the sequence in which they are considered is critical; depending on these sequences, it is possible for an alternative desired by fewer participants to be selected over one desired by many more (Plott, 1982).

The University President has become aware of this possibility because of two versions of an initiative related to the distribution of meal tickets meant to be handed to all personnel before Christmas. There are two contending groups on campus: the unionized personnel and the non-unionized. If an initiative of the non-unionized personnel is accepted (distribution of tickets only to the non-unionized personnel because they have modest wages; the value of one ticket should be doubled as compared to the previous year), the President thinks the unionized faculty would reject bargaining and viceversa. In these circumstances, the President focused on interests (not positions) and insisted on objective criteria (standards for both substance and procedure). He chose the alternative proposed by the unionized personnel (a smaller group compared to the large group of non-union members) because they had asked to have these tickets distributed to both members and non-members of the union and opted for an objective criteria: a relative increase of ticket value pending on the rate of inflation. It is a good example of productive negotiation since *bargaining* is central to decision making for any effective leader.

3. Characteristics of Political Systems

Organizational politics involves acquiring, developing and using power to obtain preferred outcomes in situations in which groups disagree (Pfeffer, 1981). To consider the University as a political system is to focus attention not only on uncertainty, but also on dissension and conflict. The University is composed of a large number of individuals and groups that in some ways operate autonomously but in other ways remain interdependent. Without *interdependence*, there can be no politics and no power; it is only when individuals must rely on others for some of their necessary resources that they become concerned about or interested in the activities or behaviors of others.

Political systems depend on social exchange and, therefore, on mutual dependence. The power of any party depends to some extent on the value of that party's contribution to the political community and the extent to which such a contribution is available from other sources (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). For example, academic departments at the University that bring in highly valued external resources as research grants or that have high prestige and increasing graduate and undergraduate enrollments have more power and influence over the allocation of internal budgets than do other departments.

Power at the University is diffused rather than concentrated and many individuals and *groups have power of different kinds* in different situations. The vice-rector for academic affairs is believed to have considerable influence on campus, but the Business School at the University is often more responsive to its professional accrediting body than to the vice-rector for academic affairs.

The University has an organizational culture that is supported by norms. But development of a pervasive or coherent culture is inhibited by the various and *competing interests* of different groups. To be sure, there is widespread public agreement that the teaching, service and research missions are all important. But agreement in the abstract conceals the fact that people have different ideas about which programs are the most important. When resources are plentiful, so that everyone gets what they want, these ambiguities and disagreements cause no problems. But when *resources are scarce*, their specific allocation becomes vigorously contested and *conflict is inevitable*.

For example, the University has recently faced a tough decision: deans of two different specializations asked for approval to start new programs – one in public relations and the other one in hospitality industry. Both choices had pros and cons. Each had supporters and enemies. After long discussions, the senate voted in favor of the hospitality industry program. In this situation, choices had to be made not between good and bad things, but rather between *competing goods*. People in the institution differ about which objective is most important and even those who agree on the objective, often disagree on how it can be achieved. There are no data that can prove that supporting a public relations program is better than supporting a hospitality industry program, and there are no rational calculations, laws or rules to help decide what to do. In a collegial system, such decisions can be made by consensus. But these processes are either unavailable or unacceptable in the complex and decentralized social system of the University. The institution is too large and the interests of various groups are too diverse to achieve consensus and the socialization and expectations of the various participants make authoritarian decrees unacceptable and therefore unenforceable. If they are to be able to make a decision at all, they must rely on *politics*.

Subgroups wish to exert influence so that their preferences are reflected in the allocation of institutional resources such as *money, prestige or influence*. Since the board of trustees legally is the institution, and all legal authority resides in the board, some might say that the preferences of the trustees and the President as their executive officer should always dominate choice processes in an institution of higher education. But at the University, as at other institutions, legal delegation is not the sole source of authority and many *groups are able to exercise power in different ways*. Administrators have power through their access to budget and personnel procedures, to sources of information and to internal and external legal authority; faculty and other professionals have power related to their specialized expertise and to tradition (Clark, 1983). Blue-collar groups may invoke the power of their unions in order to influence policies; and, it is possible to obtain power also through informal contacts and through appeals based on ethical principles such as equity.

The problems caused by the dualism of controls are manifest at the University and there are constant *conflicts* between administrative and professional authority. Because of this, it is tempting to view the University as composed of monolithic groups and to refer to the battles as being between "the administration and others" or "the faculty and others". This view may occasionally be valid, but it is more often misleading. The president and the deans can have conflicting interests, trustees can disagree on many issues, not all students share the same concerns and faculty in different disciplines and departments are as much divided by their professionalism as united by it (Clarck, 1960). Academics are highly ideological and the ideologies of different academic departments – and therefore the preferences they might have in institutional decision making – are quite disparate (Ladd and Lipset, 1975). The University "is not one community, but several – the community of the undergraduate; the community of the humanist, the community of the social scientist and

the community of the scientist; the community of the non-academic personnel; the community of the administrators" (Kerr, 1963, p. 19). But, of course, the communities are far more complex even than that on a contemporary campus. On any issue, for example, subgroups of faculty transcending department or discipline bring young and old, male and female, tenured and non-tenured, local and cosmopolitan, into arenas in which their conflicting interests must be addressed. We commonly think of the president as the institutional leader and it is true that President X plays a part in decision making in many areas of governance. But in each, he is opposed by countervailing forces of different groups (Corson, 1960).

Some groups are stronger than others and have more power but no group is strong enough to dominate all the others *all the time*. Those who desire certain outcomes must spend time building positions that are supported by other groups as well. This requires the development of coalitions among various groups and trade-offs and compromises are often among the costs that must be paid.

For example, the University learned of the opportunity to obtain government funding (via the Ministry of Education) to develop experimental programs for talented and outstanding students. A small group of administrators met to develop a proposal for improving some aspects of the educational program. Few people were involved because there was so little time to meet the proposal deadline. When funding was approved, the administration announced with pride and enthusiasm their success in bringing substantial money to support this exciting new project. Faculty was stunned to learn the administration had committed to new teaching approaches without faculty input. Administrators were startled and perplexed when professors greeted the news with resistance, criticism and anger. Caught in the middle between the Ministry of Education and professors, administrators interpreted faculty resistance as a sign of defensiveness and unwillingness to change. The new program became a political game, producing more mistrust, disharmony and conflict than tangible improvement in education.

The idea that political processes in academic institutions are somehow "dirty" reflects the misunderstanding that *if people would act in the best interests of the institution*, they would agree on what to do. It assumes that the institution's best interests are either known or knowable, rather than that different people, especially committed to what they believe to be the institution's welfare, can, in good faith, have completely different ideas of what that means and how it should be accomplished. The allocation decision is primarily a political one of who gets what, when and how, and in a democratic and pluralistic organization, political processes are appropriate means for resolving such issues.

It might be expected that, because groups contend for power and there are differences in their preferred outcomes, the University would be typified by constant turmoil and instability. There are several reasons why this is usually not the case. First, organizations tend to develop continuing and quasi-stable dominant coalitions (Thomson, 1967) whose established power serves to inhibit overt conflict. At the University, the president, senior administrators and board have for a decade been the dominant coalition; they agree on policies most (but not all) of the time, and general campus recognition of their power inhibits those who would otherwise challenge it.

In addition, individuals belong to more than one group, and they participate in many political processes, each of which involves different people. The existence of a large number of small cross-cutting disagreements provides checks and balances against major disruptions so that the agitation of political processes can ironically lead to system stability. At the University, people who engage in total conflict are generally referred to as "crazies". Most people on campuses are not crazies: they participate in conflict segmentally – for example, supporting the administration on one issue and disagreeing with them on another. Even within the faculty senate itself, which has quasi-stable pro-administration and anti-administration voting blocs, the balance of power is held by a third, "unaffiliated" coalition whose members align themselves with one or another bloc on the basis of specific issues (Bowen, 1987). As a result, deep cleavages dividing major groups at the University on many issues are unlikely (Coser, 1956). By permitting groups to assess their relative power and by encouraging the development of associations and coalitions, political conflict may increase the cohesiveness of the University.

A central characteristic of most political communities is indifference. Most people at the University are not concerned about most issues most of the time. Even during the last great budget crisis which had the potential for faculty layoffs, only a small percentage of the faculty actively participated in governance activities while another small group looked on with interest; the majority were apathetic (Baldridge, 1971). Most of the time, most of what happens at the University is routine and guided by existing procedures and informal understandings. But at irregular intervals and for reasons that are not at all clear, a specific issue emerges and becomes contentious on campus. Sometimes the issue is one of great substance, and sometimes, it is primarily symbolic.

Finally, disruptive conflict is inhibited because power in higher education tends to be issue specific. Different groups develop spheres of influence around issues of concern to them (Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker and Riley, 1978). Deans at the University leave course development to faculty most of the time and the president leave faculty recruiting to the deans most of the time. As long as these tacit agreements are maintained, contention is unlikely. All parties recognize

that intrusion into tacitly approved spheres of influence is usually costly and they ordinarily go to unusual lengths to avoid it.

The political processes at the University have organizational *advantages* and *disadvantages*. If there were institutional consensus about preferences and agreement on how to achieve them, political processes would be wasteful and unnecessary. The costs and benefits of any proposed programs could be specified and calculations would give unequivocal direction to the participants. But since at the University such a consensus does not exist, decisions can be made only through the exercise of power (Pfeffer, 1981). A major advantage of political systems therefore is that they permit decisions to be made even in the absence of clear goals. Political systems also simplify the influence process since it need not involve the active participation of everyone in the organization but only their representatives (Weick, 1979).

They also simplify budgeting processes. If politics is a game in which power is used to influence resource allocation in support of one's preferences, then *the budget* is the document on which the yearly score at the University is kept. "Rational" approaches to budgeting would suggest that the funding of all programs be reassessed each year with the costs and benefits of each compared to each other and decisions based on the optimization of stated objectives. Political processes in budget formulation, on the other hand, simplify calculations and usually lead to outcomes acceptable to a majority of stakeholders. Among other things, only those issues raised by specific groups need be addressed (most programs approved in the past are continued so that budgets next year are likely to be similar to budgets this year), only politically feasible alternatives need to be considered (so that time is not wasted on alternatives that could not be supported) and participants need consider only their own preferences without worrying about others (since other groups will have representation somewhere in the process) (Wildavsky, 1974).

Political systems have another great advantage: their inefficiency provides institutional stability. There is a lot of consistency at collegial forms of organization because people tend to think alike and because people follow the same rules. In this case, having similar data and sharing uniformity of opinion or action make it possible for small changes to be amplified as they move through the system. Everyone knows what is going on, an unexpected situation may become volatile and balance becomes precarious. But at the University, people have access to different data from different sources on which they place different interpretations. No one knows the totality of what is happening and their activities often resemble random movements that cancel each other out and provide stability.

There are, of course, disadvantages to political systems as well. Some groups at the University attempt to control information as a source of power to achieve their own ends and this may weaken other organizational functions. Competing for resources means that groups have to present the reasons why their claims are stronger than those of other groups. This ensures that the best arguments are given but at the same time it may lead to advocacy, the hardening of positions and difficulty in developing reasonable compromises. Since not all programs get reviewed all the time, programs that are no longer effective may be allowed to continue if no one challenges them. The system therefore has little accountability. In addition, coalitions can arise that are not concerned about protecting the weak. Also, political processes may sometimes be used in situations in which more rational approaches are feasible and could be more effective.

While the instrumental activities associated with obtaining benefits at the University are one side of politics, there is another side as well. Political processes and structures also have important symbolic elements and outcomes (Edelman, 1967). They permit interest groups at the University to display or confirm their status, provide individuals with rituals and enjoyable past times, protect organizations from disruptions by deviant members and confirm important institutional values and myths (Birnbaum, 1987). It is the constant involvement of various constituents in campus political activity that permits both change and stability. The existence of political instruments for change and the potential of influencing policy rather than merely getting one's way permit people at the University to work together even as they have disparate objectives.

4. Universities as Coalitions: Authorities, Partisans, Power and Decision Making

A coalition forms because members have interests in common and believe they can do more together than apart. To accomplish their aims, they need power. One among many forms of power is authority. It recognizes the importance of human needs but emphasizes that scarce resources and incompatible preferences cause needs to collide.

Viewing a higher education institution as a coalition rather than a pyramid questions many orthodox views. Academics and managers alike have assumed that universities have or should have, clear and consistent goals set at the apex of authority. In a business, the owners or top managers set goals such as growth and profitability. Goals in a university are presumably set by the board of trustees and the president. Since universities act like coalitions, individuals

and groups have their insular objectives and resources, and they bargain with other players to influence goals and decisions. If political pressures on goals are visible in the private sector, they are blatant in the academic field. Universities operate amid a welter of constituencies, each making demands and trying to get its way.

Consider a case of policy conflict at the University. A group of graduate students in an academic department wants the university to become more democratic and responsive while faculty members insist on tightening control and standards. How can the two engage in a productive dialogue to learn from one another, explore differences and find a mutually satisfactory solution? Or, in other words, how does each group articulate preferences and mobilize power to get what it wants? Power, in this view, is not necessarily bad: "We have to stop describing power always in negative terms: [as in] it excludes, it represses. In fact, power produces; it produces reality"(Foucault, 1975, p. 12).

Our example of conflict in an academic department illustrates the relationship between two political roles that are often central to the politics of both universities and society. Professors are authorities; their role entitles them to make decisions binding on the students. Students are partisans; they want to exert bottom-up influence. Gamson (1968) describes the relationship in this way: "Authorities are the recipients or targets of influence, and the agents or initiators of social control. Potential partisans have the opposite roles – as agents or initiators of influence and targets or recipients of social control"(p. 76).

Even though partisans lack authority, they may have other power sources. A number of social scientists (Baldridge, 1971; Kanter, 1977, Pfeffer, 1992; Russ, 1994) have tried to identify the various wellsprings of power. In universities, these alternatives include:

1. Position power (authority). Positions confer certain levels of formal authority: professors assign grades and choose their own assistants. Positions also place incumbents in more or less powerful locations in communications and power networks. It helps to be in the right unit as well as the right job.
2. Information and expertise. Power flows to those with the information and know-how to solve important problems. It flows to the faculty in elite universities and to superstars conductors of symphony orchestras.
3. Control of rewards. The ability to deliver jobs, money, political support or other rewards bring power.
4. Alliances and networks. Getting things done in a university involves working through a complex network of individuals and groups. Friends and allies make things a lot easier. Pfeffer (1992) found that a key difference between more and less successful university presidents was attentiveness to building and cultivating links with friends and allies.
5. Coercive power. Coercive powers rests on the ability to constrain, block, interfere or punish. For example, a union's ability to walk out or students' ability to sit in. In the early 1970s, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) created havoc at Stanford University by stealing and publishing a listing of faculty salaries. Publicizing a list that had been a well-guarded secret revealed enormous disparities in how much faculty members, even in the same department, were making. This strategy bolstered the sit-ins and other coercive measures the SDS employed in its bid for power.
6. Access and control of agendas. A by-product of networks and alliances is access to decision arenas. At the University, some groups have more access than others. When decisions are made, the interests of those with "a seat at the table" are well represented while the concerns of absentees are often distorted or ignored" (Brown, 1986).

In a complex institution such as the University, member groups tend to be more specialized and heterogeneous, with divergent interests and preferences. Subgroups may have their own perceptions of community, but the institution as a whole seldom does. Sometimes these subgroups are work groups, such as academic departments or administrative offices, and sometimes they are based on social factors such as sex, age or ideology. Those who identify strongly with any of these groups think of each other as "we", and "they" can come to refer not just to groups outside the institution, but to other groups *inside* as well.

That is what has happened at the University. The institution grew, became more diverse, added new missions and increasingly received resources from the Ministry of Education. Resources are no longer under the sole control of a small group of administrators, decision making has become diffused and decentralized and the organization is too complex to control activities through bureaucratic systems. As centralized authority has weakened, consensus for preferred goals has diminished. The University has become fragmented into special interest groups, each competing for influence and resources. The influence of any group is limited by the interests and activities of other groups; in order to obtain desired outcomes, groups have to join with other groups, to compromise their positions and to bargain.

The University's leadership is also responsible for carrying out regular performance evaluations of academic staff that will determine the resources dedicated to departments and faculties. But the current salary system has only one performance-related component, namely the salary increase paid to a professor who is offered a chair or a vice-dean

position. The goal should be to introduce a flexible salary structure, consisting of a non-performance related basic salary plus variable performance-related salary components, clearly specified. In practice, the University rewards some of its employees/professors once in five years with the so-called "gradations of merit" – a 25% increase of salary. It is said that this is a fair competition – which is not – since the management does not make public any of the performance criteria. In this particular case, the control of rewards is used as a political tool meant to ensure loyalty and obedience from those who support a dean's initiatives, ideas or programs.

To consider a university as a political system is to consider it as a supercoalition of subcoalitions with diverse interests, preferences and goals (Cyert and March, 1963). Each of the subcoalitions is composed of interest groups that see at least some commonality in their goals and work together to attempt to achieve them (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). If the collegium can be metaphorically described as a family, and the bureaucracy as a machine, then the political college or university can be seen as a shifting kaleidoscope of interest groups and coalitions. The patterns in the kaleidoscope are not static and group membership, participation and interests constantly change with emerging issues.

5. Leadership in Political Systems

President of the University acts like a political leader much of the time. He gives high priority to informally learning about the concerns and attitudes of the many institutional constituents. He knows that leadership depends in good measure on presence and timing; influence is exerted by people who are present when compromises are being negotiated. "Being there" is critical and part of the president's influence as a political leader comes from knowing where to be. It has also been said that in politics, "timing is everything". Timing refers to the understanding that a political leader brings to the questions of the positions of other campus groups, the possible linkages between one issue and another and one's own power in a particular moment.

The heavy reliance of political leaders on intuition, experience and a sense of the particular situation at hand makes it difficult to generalize about what works in specific circumstances. Practitioners and scholars from the time of Machiavelli have offered their council on gaining political advantage. College presidents who see politics merely as the exercise of raw power might wish to heed the advice said to have been offered by a former master at Oxford: Never retract. Never explain. Get the thing done and let them howl!

But the President of the University sees the campus as a democratic community whose leaders depend on the consent of the governed (Walker, 1979). He believes that persuasion and diplomacy are his most reliable administrative tools. He sees conflict and disagreement as normal rather than an indication of organizational pathology and he recognizes that others may hold different views in good faith. He tries not to attack opposing opinions but use them creatively. The president believes that there are many ways that objectives can be achieved and he tries not to become irrevocably committed to any single proposal or program. He strives for "flexible rigidity"; he is willing to compromise on means but unwilling to compromise on ends. Most of all, he is a realist and tries to understand the dynamics of the institution not as he would like it to be but as it really is.

Political systems have many sources of power. The President of the University is certainly a leader but only the naïve on campus think of him as *the only* leader. Many groups attempt to exercise influence and leadership at the University must be referred to in the plural rather than the singular. Representatives of each of the various coalitions and subgroups must all be leaders in the sense of representing or altering the interests of their constituencies, entering into negotiations with other representatives and seeking outcomes acceptable both to their constituencies and to their coalition partners. Of course, not all groups and therefore not all representatives have equal power and the central power figure is the one who can manage the coalition (Thomson, 1967). At most colleges and universities, as at the University, that individual is the President.

The President' s major leadership role is to help the community manage its own affairs, to assist in the process by which issues are deliberated and judgments reached and to take the actions necessary to implement decisions (Tucker, 1981). This emphasis on giving direction to a community suggests that the President of the University does not rule – he serves. Since a university consists of different groups with legitimate interests, he tries to find solutions to problems in a manner that constituencies find acceptable (Walker, 1979). Probably the most famous statement of this political role of the president was Clark Kerr's characterization of the president as "leader, educator, creator, initiator, wielder of power, pump; he is also office holder, caretaker, inheritor, consensus-seeker, persuader, bottleneck. But he is mostly a mediator. The first task of a mediator is peace…peace within the student body, the faculty, the trustees; and peace between and among them" (Kerr, 1963, p. 36).

The responsibilities of *mediation* as Kerr defined them transcend merely the institutional and personal survival that peace might bring – they include institutional progress as well. The political leader therefore is a person who practices *the*

art of the possible while developing a sufficient power base. Moving up the ladder confers authority but also incurs increasing dependence, because success depends on the cooperation of many others (Kotter, 1988). People rarely give their best efforts and fullest cooperation simply because they were ordered to do so. They accept directions when they perceive the people in authority as credible, competent and sensible. The President of the University has learned that he cannot always get what he wants. But he can usually get something. He has become an expert in analyzing differences in the stated preferences of different campus groups, designing alternatives that find a common ground between them and persuading the conflicting parties that their own interests are furthered by accepting these compromise alternatives (Lindblom, 1980). He tries to develop positions that can be endorsed by the dominant coalition(s) to minimize disruption and maximize satisfaction while at the same time moving the University - even if only in an incremental way – towards progress.

A consideration of leadership in political systems can conclude in no better fashion than by returning to the sage advice of Cornford, directed towards persons who, like the President of the University wish to be influential in academic institutions: "Remember this: the men who get things done are the men who walk up and down King's Parade, from 2 to 4, every day of their lives. You can either join them, and become a powerful person; or you can join the great throng of those who spend their time in preventing them from getting things done, and in the larger task of preventing one another from doing anything whatever" (Cornford, 1964, p. 31).

6. Conclusions

Our goal is to explain why universities may be seen as political institutions and why politics within universities is not always "dirty". Political processes are universal and they will never go away even in institutions of higher education.

A university is a coalition of individuals with different interests. A coalition forms because of interdependence among its members; they need one another even though their interests may only partly overlap. Goals are also rather diffused in a university. They are not set by fiat at the top but through an ongoing process of negotiation and interaction among players.

The assumption of enduring differences implies that politics is more visible and dominant under conditions of diversity (as found in universities) than of homogeneity.

The concept of scarce resources suggests that politics will be more salient and intense in difficult times. Universities, for example, have lived through alternating times of prosperity and decline in response to peaks and valleys in economic and demographic trends. When money and students are plentiful, administrators spend time determining which buildings to upgrade and which programs to initiate. Conversely, when resources dry up, conflict mushrooms and administrators may often succumb to forces they don't sometimes control or understand.

Modernization of the employment and salary regime should be a key-point on the political agenda. The university should envisage standardized performance-related increases of wages for specific functions (serving as president/rector, dean, chair of a department), for outstanding achievements in research and teaching and for the teaching of individuals in which qualified subjects are difficult to recruit. In addition, performance-related salary components could be negotiated on an individual basis, either to facilitate recruitment or to prevent a scientist or a scholar from leaving. "Wise politics" would mean, in this case, the introduction of a composite mix of self-assessment procedures, external peer-reviews and indicator-based performance criteria. It would be "wise" because it would include a fundamental principle of governance – transparency – and it would be still "politics" because it would stimulate internal fair competition and merit-based rewards.

An important issue in universities is power – its distribution and exercise. In much of the academic life, individuals and groups are interdependent. They need things from one another and power relationships are multidirectional. Since combinations of divergent interests and scarce resources produce conflict, how to use power, as President, in order to resolve conflict has become an important function of authority. Individuals compete for jobs, titles and prestige while departments compete for resources. While inevitable, conflict has also a "bright side": it challenges the status-quo and stimulates interest. If conflicts will not go away by using business-like strategies and tactics, the question becomes how to make the best of it. As our examples have proven, leadership skills such as negotiating and bargaining are important tools in conflict resolution within universities.

At the University, "being there", managing a complex coalition of different group interests, using the art of mediation and being flexible are proved to be essential tools in building collaboration and alliances that cement deals that enable the University as a group, to move forward.

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