

Roles of a College President

INSIGHT

CROSSROADS asked Father Bradley to write about the President's role at Belmont Abbey College, since, though it is generally known that the President's job is a demanding one, comparatively few have the occasion to know the many areas it covers and the various challenges it poses.

--Editor

By REV. JOHN P. BRADLEY, President-

A number of studies have shown that the role of the college president in recent times has changed substantially and that, particularly in the larger institutions, the president has much less authority and influence than people realize. Generally, this is attributed to the fact that in the past few years such constituencies as faculty and students have succeeded in obtaining a significant influence on and participation in decision making. For a number of reasons I believe that this broadening of the base of decision making has many advantages, but it does, understandably, make the reaching of decisions more difficult and also more time-consuming. A recent study by Cohen and March has concluded that as a consequence of these changes, a college president must nowadays have "a good sense of humor and a feeling for the absurd." While this may indeed be true in the case of a large university, it does not, in my opinion, quite fit the facts in the case of a small college such as Belmont Abbey, even though in this case, too, the president nowadays does get the opportunity from time to time to prove that he has indeed a sense of humor and the ability to shrug off the absurd.

Complex Operations

Another development affecting the role of a college president in recent times is the growing complexity in the day-to-day operation of institutions of higher education, whether large or small. Litigation of various kinds involving the college is now quite common -- for instance, since last summer, Belmont Abbey College has been involved in litigation concerning the constitutionality of State aid to students who choose to attend a private college, and one would have to be directly in the midst of this to realize the enormous amount of time this kind of litigation consumes. Again, increasingly, Federal and State government bureaucracies claim more and more of the time and attention of college administrators; the financial problems bedeviling most private colleges today compel their presidents to devote more and more of their thinking and time to fund-raising and to involvement in State politics in an effort to win financial aid for residents of the State who enroll in a private college. These are but a few of the recent developments that cause many presidents of private colleges to complain that, though they realize they must spend themselves on such tasks if their college is to survive, there is precious little time left over for participating in the normal life of the college, getting to know the students better, and spending more time with them and with individual members of the faculty, etcetera. In my case, it seems that the very things I most enjoy doing, and which I believe are important in the life of a small college, are the things one gets too little time to do.

Few Know What's Important

A problem connected with this is that very few on campus have the occasion to know the various things on which the president has to spend so much time, and even if they do know, it is difficult for

them to understand why the president judges them to be so important. A good example of this is Belmont Abbey College's need to become better known and better understood in our local community. For many years all kinds of strange myths have grown up around this College in our local area, making it difficult to communicate the real facts about the College to our local public. I was alerted to this shortly after I became President in 1970 by friends in the local area who told me that I had to do everything possible, not only to make the College better known locally, but also to correct the distorted notions of many who regarded it as a seminary for Catholic priests, a place that only accepted Catholic students, and so forth.

Lunch with Editors

With this in mind, I arranged to have lunch with the editors of both *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Charlotte News*. My purpose was to persuade them to give the College more exposure so that people would get to know it and understand more accurately the kind of institution it is. After listening to me, they gave me the following advice.

People nowadays, they told me, are bombarded with information from the various media, and even if their newspapers published articles on the College, this would not achieve my purpose, since the public nowadays is provided with so much information, little of it makes much impression. Consequently, they said, I would have to set about doing the job the hard way by accepting numerous speaking engagements so that through me and others in the College, faculty and administrators, people would come to know the College in a personalized way. If this were done, they insisted, a newspaper article would then make a worthwhile impression on those people who already had their interest in the College stirred through having heard the President or others representing the institution give a speech at some gathering they had attended.

Believing their advice to be sound, I have since that time accepted hundreds of invitations to speak at public gatherings, so that eventually Belmont Abbey College might cease to be, as some wag has put it, "the best kept secret in our local area." It is, of course, primarily the responsibility of the president to interpret the college to its various publics. But others, too, in the institution have helped significantly in this important work, and I would like to take this occasion to urge faculty members and administrators to join me in the task of helping more and more people in our local area to know and understand the College better.

The experience we gained in the Centennial Fund Campaign shows very clearly how important this work is. So many of those who worked in the Campaign and those who contributed to it became involved with the College directly through our efforts over the past few years to make the College better known. It is also very clear to me that private colleges nowadays, pushed as they are by inflation to keep raising their charges year after year, are getting perilously close to the point of pricing themselves out of business. Belmont Abbey College is no exception, and in my opinion the only way we can get some relief from this danger is through the building of a good development program that has the constant and loyal assistance of everyone connected with the College and can thus increase significantly contributions to the College that will permit us to slow down the dangerous increasing of our charges.

It is a pity that so much of my time and thought has to be given to the raising of money. But, as is the case with other penurious private colleges, I realize that this has to be a priority if the College is to continue to exist. The long work hours, the

constant frustrations, the agonizing over hard decisions I wish I did not have to make, the ever present worry of how to pay the bills, all these things make the job incredibly demanding. Why, then, do I continue to do it? I have often been asked this question, and the best answer I can give to it is as follows. Being as honest with myself as I can, I believe it is because I am convinced that the kind of college Belmont Abbey is, or at least can perhaps be, is urgently needed by our society at this time. I say this because I am convinced, without, I hope, being a prophet of doom, that our culture today is on the road to Yeats' vision which saw that when "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" and that we are finding more and more in our midst, to quote Yeats again, "these strange souls born everywhere today with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy." It seems to me that any thoughtful assessment of our present-day culture must conclude that this is one of those times Hermann Hesse spoke of "when a whole generation is caught ... between two ages, between two modes of life," with dire consequences for society.

Some of the reasons for this sobering assessment are to be found in a book titled *Trousered Apes* authored by Duncan Williams, a professor of English at Marshall University, who took its striking title from C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*. I find myself in agreement with those viewers who have stated that this book provides a devastatingly accurate and frightening account of our present culture. Dr. Williams' thesis supplies, I believe, an excellent argument for the critical need for a college that espouses the educational philosophy, goals and purposes officially declared by Belmont Abbey College. I believe that everyone who works at the College ought to read this excellent book to get a better understanding of the enormous challenge a college such as ours faces nowadays in its efforts to implement its educational philosophy, goals and purposes. It also can help us in understanding better what the present generation of young people has to cope with in growing up in times such as these. If we can provide for our students an education that equips them to cope with a culture that idolizes self-gratification, that prides itself on establishing a new morality that resembles, rather, an amorality founded on feeling and expediency, that is heedless and sometimes contemptuous of God, a culture that generates a "death-oriented hopelessness" particularly in our young people, among whom suicide is now the second largest cause of death after automobile accidents -- if indeed we can do this, all the frustrations, the work, the sacrifice demanded of the President and indeed all of us here at Belmont Abbey College are truly worthwhile.

Achieve Goals and Purposes

In saying this I am, of course, simply referring to another most important duty of every college president, namely, the obligation to keep before the entire college community the importance of implementing the institution's educational philosophy, goals and purposes. For my part, it is important not simply because the Southern Association in Standard I for accreditation requires this. More important, I believe, in the case of Belmont Abbey College, is that the constant striving of all of us at the College to implement our stated identity, goals and purposes provides this institution with its reason for existence. I have no hesitation whatsoever, therefore, in saying that if we fail to make a constant and vigorous effort to implement the College's educational philosophy, all the work, frustration and sacrifice required to keep it in existence most certainly should be discontinued, for a merely secular college education can be supplied, at much less expense for the student, by the state-supported institutions.