

## Universities need a new model of governance

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When former University of British Columbia president Martha Piper was asked in 2011 about the impact a university president has, her swift response, after nearly 10 years at the helm before her retirement in 2006 was, "not much." As Ms. Piper returns to the university as interim president after Arvind Gupta's hasty departure this month, would she say the same thing today?

And there lies one of the many paradoxes of universities. What other type of institution would consider denying the essential role of its chief leader? Universities are a place where academics who aspire to climb higher are relatively unsupported, and often discouraged from leaving their research and teaching roles. But when they do make the transition from doing to leading, they give up power to stakeholders, always negotiating carefully their support to promote change.

As we've witnessed through the public misalignment between UBC faculty and the board, universities don't work in a typical hierarchical fashion. Universities are not businesses. Thought leadership is not for sale.

University presidents are coming under the microscope in an unprecedented manner. Is this increased accountability making universities stronger? Or are we wasting precious time and resources, decreasing the pool of potential presidential candidates, and subsequently weakening the productivity of our country's universities? Take a quick look at a few examples in the past six months of the lives of Canadian university presidents.

Bene Busch-Vishniac was fired last year in a dramatic controversy at the University of Saskatchewan, less than two years into her mandate. She's launched an \$4.5-million wrongful dismissal lawsuit against the university, naming Premier Brad Wall and the former minister of advanced education among the defendants.

Richard Floriozono deals with uncertainty at Dalhousie when a controversy erupted over misogynistic comments some of the university's male identity students made on Facebook. With the support of his board, Mr. Floriozono showed strong leadership through turbulent times.

At the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières, Nadia Ghazzali stepped down three years into her mandate after a Quebec government report heavily criticized the school's governance.

The University of Western Ontario's Janet Chalmers was under fire for receiving double pay at the end of his first mandate, as outlined in his contract with the board. He seems to have survived the controversy, despite a rocky ride from faculty members.

UBC's Mr. Gupta resigned earlier this month, only one year into his five-year mandate. While the reason for his resignation remains unclear, early signs point to issues of board governance.

Over the past few years, my PhD research has led me to some of the 18 Canadian university presidents who resigned or were fired before the end of their contracts. Many of these presidents share a common story. Each spoke of discord with the board. A lack of communication, a misunderstanding of the academic enterprise, issues related to hiring and transition, and a misaligned relationship with the board chair were some of the concerns they expressed.

All shared a concern about mistrust within their executive team. In many cases, a vice-president worked against the president, communicating directly with the board.

Universities are a paradox. While their governance structures are slow and process-driven, professors enjoy a high degree of flexibility and independence. Universities should be innovative and forward thinking, yet, conservatism of governance structures plagues many universities and impedes change.

University presidents are juggling multiple relationships with many stakeholders who often hold a contradicting view of the role. They are lead fundraisers, institutional ambassadors, chief pedagogues and government lobbyists. They answer to board members, faculty, students, donors, alumni and government. A committee of 22 people chose Mr. Gupta in a global search that lasted about two years. Did the board fail in hiring or in supporting their leader? The issue of board governance is at the core of this story. Universities are built on a model of shared governance. They are disruptive institutions where academic freedom and questioning the status quo are a cornerstone of higher learning.

We need to support university leaders through turbulent times and improve governance models. We need to do a better job learning from leadership failures and building our universities to compete on the global stage. We can do better.