The Hersh Resignation-
Dropped Out or Kicked Out?:
The Opinions of Students, Faculty, and the Mass Media

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Education 400
Background

• Richard Hersh’s Background
  - Held a range of positions at various institutions
  - President Hobart and William Smith Colleges (Geneva, NY) 1991-1999

• Hersh Presidency at Trinity
  - Selected by search committee of trustees, faculty, students and staff as “the ideal candidate to lead Trinity College” (Trinity Press Release, 2002)
  - April 1, 2002- Assumed office as 19th president of Trinity College
  - Agenda: focus on internal problems (curriculum review, alcohol abuse, and diversity issues)
Fifteen Months Later…

• Resignation
  - June 26, 2003

• Importance of Research:
  - Other recent resignations
  - Historians look at facts, I looked at opinions of people affected

• Research Question:
  - According to President Hersh, why did he resign from Trinity College?
  - Do students, faculty, and the mass media explain the cause of his resignation in the same way?
Thesis: A Range of Opinions

- **President Hersh**
  - Conflicts with students and faculty over issues became more of a focus than his agenda for the school

- **Student, Faculty & Mass Media Explanations:**
  - **Initially**: divergence between groups
    - Students: Policy related issues led to resignation
    - Faculty: Political process led to resignation
    - Mass Media: Cultural misfit
  - **When prompted**: convergence of opinions to 3 main causes
    - Leadership style and approach to issues didn’t fit Trinity’s culture
    - All knowing from the beginning, didn’t get to know Trinity
    - Lost support of students, parents, faculty, administration, & trustees
Hersh’s Own Opinion

• Success in terms of:
  - campus introspection, application numbers, increased fundraising, reduction of budgets, faculty retreat, progress with issues of racism, strengthening urban program

• “But, not all has gone well”
  - “A significant number of faculty and students have experienced [his] leadership style in a way that has resulted in [his] becoming too much the focus of attention”
What about everyone else?

- Random Selection of student and faculty interviews
  - 7 students from Sophomore, Junior, & Senior classes
  - 7 faculty members
- Interview Questions:
  - Why did President Hersh resign?
  - Prompted by topics of leadership style, alcohol policies, campus racism, finances, curricular review and specific actions
- Mass Media:
  - Trinity Tripod
  - Journal of Higher Education
  - Hartford Courant
Students

• **Initial Response:**
  - Policy related issues
  - “people didn’t like his policies, people didn’t like what he was doing for the campus”

• **When prompted:**
  - **Leadership style**- 100% responded yes
    - Style: “disagreeable”, “didn’t listen”, “opinionated”, “arrogant”
  - **Alcohol policies**- 86% responded yes
    - Approach to dealing with problems- forced policies
    - Played a significant role in shutting down a fraternity & arresting 40 students from a local bar
Students continued…

- **Other Topics**: majority said no or didn’t know
- **Actions**:
  - “he came in here too quickly and made too large [of] decisions”
  - Result of snowballing of actions starting from the beginning along with a personality and style that clashed with Trinity
Faculty

- **Initial Response:**
  - Political process led to resignation
  - Lost support of students, faculty, trustees
    - “virtually everyone pulled off”

- **When Prompted:**
  - **Leadership style**: 100% responded yes
    - Leadership Style: described in negative terms
    - “leadership style didn’t jive with the position that he held of president”
Faculty continued...

- **Alcohol policies** - 71% responded yes
  - The way he handled the policies antagonized student body
  - “…he said that he was willing to empower students to take control of their party life and their alcohol consumption. But if they couldn’t handle it, he would step in…”

- **Actions:**
  - Mishandled evaluation of the Dean of Faculty
  - Voiced strong opinions in articles in Courant and Tripod
  - Result of snowballing of actions starting from the beginning which were expressed in final meetings
Mass Media

- **Trinity Tripod** - “The Beginning of the End”
  - Editorial by Editor-in-Chief (Abigail Thomas)-
  initiated discussions on and off campus of problems that had existed all along
  - “Failure as our president”:
    - 3 articles in Courant with “dismissive and disparaging comments about the Trinity community”
      - Accused Trinity parents of “not fulfilling their duties” of setting clear rules for their children
      - Exaggerated racial issues
    - Leadership style: “moralistic”, “paternalistic”, “belittling” of students and faculty
    - Never took the time to understand Trinity
Mass Media - A Cultural Misfit?

- **Leadership style:**
  - Described in negative terms
  - “style that doesn’t historically fly in collegiate, collaborative halls of higher learning” (HC)

- **Policy Issues:**
  - focused on alcohol abuse, campus racism, fraternity behavior (J of HE)

- **Political Process:**
  - relationship with students and faculty was falling apart
Other Research

• Rita Bornstein (Journal of Higher Education: Nov. 2003)

• 6 threats to success of presidents:
  1. Cultural misfit- mismatch between president’s style and the culture of the institution
  2. Grandiosity- experience causes feelings of expertise
  3. Erosion of social capital- loss of support by individuals at institution
  4. Managerial incompetence
  5. Inattentiveness
  6. Misconduct
Conclusions

- **President Hersh**: Conflicts with students and faculty over issues became more of a focus than his agenda for the school.

- **Comparison**: when given time for introspection and prompted with certain topics and questions:
  - Agreement with Hersh: *Cultural misfit* - style and approach to issues didn’t fit Trinity’s culture.
  - New Ideas:
    - *Grandiosity*: All knowing from the beginning, didn’t get to know Trinity.
    - *Erosion of social capital*: lost support of students, parents, faculty, administration, & trustees.