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Gallaudet's Loss

The ouster of the university's incoming president defeats her vision of a more diverse institution.

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THE BOARD OF trustees at Gallaudet University certainly showed who was in charge when it voted to terminate Jane K. Fernandes's contract as president. Sadly, it wasn't the members of the board, who are supposed to serve the interests of the university. Nor, for that matter, were reason or right in evidence Sunday as the trustees ousted a woman they had recently judged to be the best person to lead the renowned school for the deaf. Instead, what triumphed was lawlessness and the principle that a university president should be chosen on the basis of popularity.


If this were just the story of another university administration crumbling under pressure, it might be of interest to the larger public only to the extent that Congress is Gallaudet's chief funder. But more was at stake: Alternative visions of Gallaudet were at war during the past months. Ms. Fernandes promoted a school that would welcome all sorts of deaf and hard-of-hearing people; that would accommodate itself to improving technologies, which in coming years will allow more and more deaf people to function in the hearing world; and that would emphasize tolerance of diversity. The protesters were promoting a university that celebrates what they call Deaf (with a capital D) culture, prescribes American Sign Language as the only acceptable medium of communication and relates with suspicion to deaf people who choose to function in the hearing world. To the extent the latter vision won out, it does not bode well for Gallaudet's future.

When students launched their protest against president-designate Fernandes in the spring, many of them stated the objection that she was "not deaf enough." Though deaf, she grew up speaking and lip-reading; she did not learn sign language until she was a young adult. That protest theme didn't play well beyond Gallaudet, and it was dropped from public discourse; students and faculty soon were reacting angrily if it was ascribed to them. But the protest movement never came up with a convincing alternative explanation for their anti-Fernandes passion. All that was left was a series of relatively petty complaints about her executive style as provost.

In a way it's too bad that the underlying debate couldn't have been played out more openly. The protesters' fealty to and pride in their language and culture are admirable and understandable. Not very long ago, deaf people were often regarded as substandard and were treated accordingly. Amazingly, Gallaudet's current president, I. King Jordan, is the school's first deaf leader, and it took a round of protests to persuade the board to name him in 1988. That technology and genetic science might provide more alternatives to deafness just as deaf pride has achieved a breakthrough is an understandable source of anxiety.

Neither nostalgia nor pride, however, are sufficient bases for educational policy. We have no doubt that Ms. Fernandes, a tough and qualified educator, will find other ways to contribute; her behavior throughout this painful time was exemplary. More consequential to the university is how long it takes for her inclusive and progressive vision to be accepted.

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