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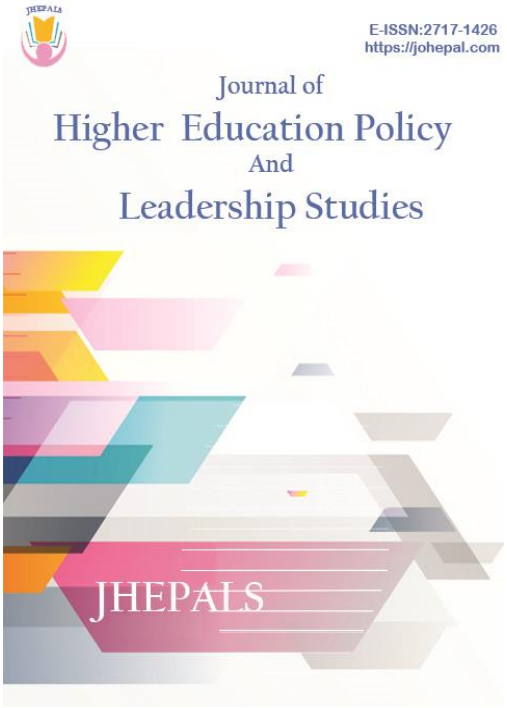

Book Review: **No Confidence: When Faculty Turn Against Their Presidents**

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No Confidence: When Faculty Turn Against Their Presidents

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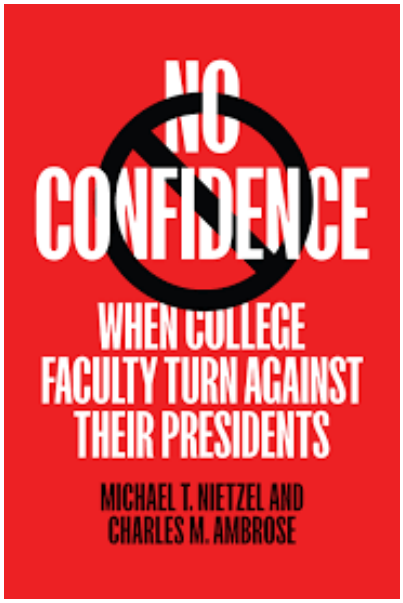

Hilary Houlette *

Keywords: No Confidence Vote (NCV); Higher Education; University Governance; College Faculty; University Presidents

While I was a Higher Education PhD student at the University of Arizona, I witnessed my first No Confidence Vote (NCV) set upon a university president. It was October 2022, when the brilliant Dr. Jenny J. Lee asked me to serve as a volunteer graduate assistant on the *General Faculty Committee on University Safety for All* to support an internal review of President Robbins' mishandling of campus safety following the tragic murder of a university professor (mentioned on page 57). After months of sifting through police reports, conducting listening

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sessions, and reconstructing what unfolded, the committee released its findings. Two months after the report was published, the faculty senate cast a NCV (29-13) against President Robbins (Rodriguez, 2023). During the following academic year, I was tapped to work with higher education luminary, Dr. Gary Rhoades, on the *General Faculty Financial Recalibration Committee* (mentioned on page 116), which was similarly tasked with exploring the organizational missteps that resulted in a $177 million financial deficit for the university (Healy, 2024; Rotkis, 2025). Although it never escalated to a No Confidence Vote, such measures were carefully considered (Rodriguez, 2024).

As a graduate student, the University of Arizona proved to be a fascinating laboratory for understanding higher education organizational leadership. By supporting two distinct faculty-senate groups, I gained relevant information about what went awry at my university that led to the ousting of President Robbins and the financial restructuring still underway at the institution today. I was exposed to ideas and conversations that fundamentally shaped my understanding of shared governance, as I witnessed faculty wield their power despite legislative measures intended to neuter their influence. Arizona is but one of many states pushing to reduce faculty power (H.B. 2735, 2024). In Texas, H.B. 580 abolishes the faculty senate, and in Tennessee, H.B. 2194 limits faculty tenure protections (Whitford, 2026). Despite such measures, faculty remain a powerful coalition that educational leaders cannot ignore.

To prepare to step into a new role as a faculty member this fall, I placed *No Confidence: When College Faculty Turn Against Their Presidents* at the top of my summer reading list. I was curious: Were the conditions at the University of Arizona relevant issues experienced at other institutions? Does a faculty NCV have teeth, or are such measures purely symbolic? What can college and university leaders do to avoid faculty sanctions? Nietzel and Ambrose expertly discuss the sticky and contentious topic of NCVs through a balanced, well-researched approach. Using a variety of illustrative examples, their work reads more like an organizational thriller – if there is such a thing – opening the closet and revealing the skeletons within our academic institutions. They expose the humbling truth about higher education leadership, shared governance, and the NCVs that have resulted in material consequences for college and university leaders. Emeritus leader Michael T. Nietzel and Educational Consultant Charles M. Ambrose have published a gripping book that elucidates the sources of power and change on campus, actualized through No Confidence Votes. This book is a must-read for those of us studying higher education leadership.

Chapters one and two set the stage by explaining the historical underpinnings of NCVs and establishing the value of the mechanism for faculty to sanction leaders for a variety of organizational blunders. I appreciate Nietzel and Ambrose's recommendation for additional empirical research on NCVs, particularly as faculty shared governance continues to erode (McNaughtan et al., 2025). Complementing chapter one's contextual overview, chapter two provides clear examples of why and how NCVs have been cast over the years. From the bold vision of NYU president Jon Sexton, who transformed the institution yet faced an NCV for disregarding faculty grievances, to Chancellor Joe Gow, whose lascivious video exploits led some to question his moral authority, for which university leaders have historically been tasked to uphold (Houlette, 2024; Pierce, 2011), this chapter provides concrete examples of

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how presidents can fast-track their way to the receiving end of an NCV. The juicy details are riveting.

Chapter three focuses on the financial issues many campuses must negotiate. While thought-provoking, the chapter neglects to fully contextualize faculty roles and experiences. For example, stating that "most faculty don't have the expertise and don't want to take the necessary time away from their teaching and research activities to grasp the ins and outs of their institutions' financial condition" (p. 76) neglects the faculty's expert authority, which is a defining feature of the collegium model (Manning, 2018). Robust faculty groups, including but not limited to faculty senates and the AAUP, suggest that faculty are indeed more informed and engaged in their institutions than the authors give credit. Additionally, I was troubled by the surface-level analysis of faculty's inability to reform tenure (p. 80) and the disregard for faculty grievances about administrative bloat as "hyperbolic" (p. 81). These legitimate tensions were not fully contextualized within the broader political and social systems routinely undermining faculty work. If the highest echelons of power are taking steps to strip faculty of their influence, we cannot then criticize faculty for speaking out against such change or blame them for not taking action to improve the systems under which those models were constructed.

Although to a lesser extent, I have a similar critique of chapter four as the chapter preceding. Relevant to shared governance, Nietzel & Ambrose discuss that "faculty feel an increasing sense of estrangement from the university and the way it's governed. As they've become more invested in their scholarly disciplines, they've grown less committed to their home institutions" (p. 95). Paying homage to a Cosmopolitan understanding of the faculty (Clark, 1963; Gouldner, 1957; Manning, 2018), a local cosmopolitan conception demonstrates that faculty can be community and institutionally focused alongside their commitment to their scholarly disciplines (Rhoades et al., 2008). To this end, the authors note that faculty take particular issue with university presidents who hire outside consulting firms. Having spent four years of my career as a consultant at such a firm, I am indeed critical. While contracting with outside entities can be valuable under specific circumstances, the greatest institutional experts are not consultants, but the wells of talent within an institution itself. Here again, expert power (Manning, 2018) is overlooked. Having engaged in two faculty senate-initiated investigations in the two years following my departure from consulting, I can confidently say that faculty are poised to handle much of the work outside firms undertake. Sourcing faculty to participate in such campus service is a considerable challenge. However, if financial resources are directed away from outside consultants and toward internal talent pools, educational leaders save on the consulting price tag and mitigate faculty grumblings associated with being excluded from campus decision-making. Reining in the ever-growing corporatization of higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) is a bonus.

Chapters five and six clearly articulate the emotional strain that accompanies leading an academic institution. It is easy to get caught up in the social vitriol and political theatre on campus. We might as well "grab a pitchfork" when we demonize university leaders and exercise an NCV. Niezel & Ambrose remind us that being a university president can be a lonely and thankless job. They encourage us to practice compassion. As a campus community, we must strive to extend grace while also holding our leaders accountable. As

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faculty, we have a responsibility to create a collaborative community and reduce hostility, which extends to our university presidents and institutional leaders. Rounding out the book, chapter six features a series of clear and transparent recommendations that are straightforward and relatively easy to implement. These include incorporating faculty members on the board, giving opportunities for faculty to provide feedback on leadership performance, and implementing stronger communication channels, all of which are in the service of preventing an NCV.

Concluding Remark

This is an important book for higher education campus community members who are interested in understanding what happens behind the doors of the president's office and within the chambers of faculty senate meetings. Faculty need to understand the power of their collective governance and recognize that the No Confidence Vote remains a relevant mechanism to evoke change within an institution. In tumultuous times, exploring strategies for greater harmony between the faculty and administration is paramount. This begins with shared governance and ends with the enduring capacity to cast a No Confidence Vote.

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