

Thoughts on No Confidence

Amitabha Bose – March 15, 2022

The views expressed here are my own, in my capacity as an individual faculty member. For stylistic reason, I have not included phrases like “In my view” or “I believe” insofar as everything written below is simply my opinion.

Votes of no confidence have different meanings and goals depending on their context. In the political context, for example in some parliamentary systems, a vote of no confidence results in the resignation of the Prime Minister. In an academic setting, a vote of no confidence directed at an individual is largely symbolic. Most times, it carries no official weight. Instead, it is intended to send a message (or perhaps plea) to a supervisory authority that the continued involvement in their current official capacity of the subject of the no confidence vote would be detrimental to the welfare of the institution. In our structure at NJIT, a Department Chair serves at the pleasure of the Dean, the Dean at the pleasure of the Provost, the Provost at the pleasure of the President, and the President at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees. These are the supervisory authorities to whom a motion of no confidence would be conveyed.

When should a vote of no confidence be conducted in an academic setting? In theory, such a vote can be called for at any time. But in practice, such a vote should only be sought if a few criteria have been met.

1. There is a sufficient verified documentation of the behavior of the individual who is the subject of the no confidence vote. This evidence should be made available to all individuals who have the right to vote on the no confidence motion.
2. The continued employment of that individual in their current capacity would have clear long-term negative implications for the institution.

In the past few months, there has been an effort to introduce to the Institute Faculty a motion of no confidence in our current president, Dr. Joel Bloom. At its February 22, 2022 meeting, the Faculty Senate rejected (9 yes, 13 no, 1 abstention) a motion to call a Special Institute Faculty Meeting for this purpose. However, our Faculty Senate Bylaws allow a motion to alternatively be brought to the floor of an Institute Faculty meeting if at least 50 faculty members sign a petition in support of that motion. I respect the process. **But I do not support the petition, nor the motion of no confidence in Dr. Bloom.**

It is healthy, indeed important, for an institution to debate the legacy of its leaders. We must learn from the past, by correcting mistakes and building on successes. Dr. Bloom’s presidency has seen its share of successes as well as failures. This is normal. With the exception of his decision to seek an off-site campus with Tatweer Misr, the actions taken by Dr. Bloom appear to be within the bounds of what one would want from a President. Could he have done better? Of course. Each one of us can always do better. But a review of his time as President will find

that NJIT is in a demonstrably better position today than 10 years ago when he was placed into office. I give him due credit as leader of our institution during this timeframe.

Moreover, the proposed motion of no confidence that was rejected by the Faculty Senate was too broad and too vague. That proposed motion of no confidence only reflected the petitioners' desire to curtail Dr. Bloom's authority until June 30, 2002, the time when he will leave his office, only a few months from now.

In 2016, the NJIT Board of Trustees amended Dr. Bloom's contract with a provision to provide Dr. Bloom with post-presidential transition employment and benefits upon the conclusion of his Presidency (<https://www5.njit.edu/boards/sites/boards/files/2016/2016-02-04-public-minutes.pdf>). According to the New Jersey Spotlight News, this includes a two-year paid post-presidential position as president emeritus¹. There are two points to be made here. First, to bestow an outgoing President with the title of Emeritus President is reasonable. Given that Dr. Bloom does not hold tenure in any academic department, it also provides a vehicle for the University to recognize his contributions to the institution. Second, in the academic setting, the title emeritus is an honorific. It is not a paid position. Indeed, it was a terrible idea, and remains one today, for the Board of Trustees to pay an outgoing President to be an advisor to the incoming one, a role that has been publicly mentioned several times including at the January 5, 2022 meeting where our new President was introduced. Why would a Board of Trustees handcuff its incoming President with the burden of having the outgoing one as a paid advisor? It sets a bad precedent going forward. In a normal situation, an outgoing President would gracefully leave the stage allowing the incoming President to call upon them when needed. Moreover, paying an outgoing President any amount of money to be an advisor would appear to be a waste of our limited funds, money that should be being spent on tangible initiatives or student scholarships within the institution.

What should be done instead of a no confidence vote? I would support a motion that limits the ability of an outgoing President to formally play a role in the administration of the incoming one; a motion that makes clear that the Faculty would like to see Dr. Bloom's role end with his Presidency; a motion that calls upon Dr. Bloom to voluntarily forego any paid, post-presidential role as advisor to the incoming President. Instead of litigating the past, we should rather be focusing on the future so that our incoming President is free to make independent decisions. Dr. Bloom has had a long and distinguished career at NJIT. He has given much to the university and appears to have been handsomely compensated in return. He should forego taking any income in the role of advisor after his retirement on June 30, 2022.

¹ (<https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2016/05/16-05-22-the-list-all-the-presidents-pay-and-perks-at-new-jersey-s-public-colleges/>; accessed March 14, 2022. At one point in time, the article links to various contracts worked, but they no longer seem to do so.