A New Test of Leadership

Amherst is a far cry from Wisconsin, but professors are famously tough on presidents

In her first year as president of Amherst College, Carolyn (Biddy) Martin joins students at lunch.

By Jack Stripling

There are more than 1,000 miles between this idyllic college town and Madison, Wis., but that distance must seem even greater in Carolyn A. (Biddy) Martin’s rearview mirror.

The nearly yearlong roar of protesters in Madison, where Ms. Martin had a relatively short and rocky tenure as head of the state’s flagship campus, has been replaced with the calm that whispers through Amherst College like one of Emily Dickinson’s tamer verses.

Amherst represents a turning of the page for Ms. Martin, who six months ago traded the chancellorship of the University of Wisconsin at Madison for the presidency of an elite liberal-arts college, nestled in Dickinson’s historic hometown.

Ms. Martin came here bruised from a political battle that hinged on her efforts to separate the Madison campus from Wisconsin’s university system, and she has quickly made a tranquil home in Amherst among a small group of professors who have no need to answer questions from politicians. In leaving an unusually contentious environment, however, she has arrived at a campus that thrives on consensus, which itself will test her ability to build alliances among disparate groups.

One could argue that Ms. Martin’s move from a major public research institution to a place like Amherst represents a retreat. Gone is the need to balance the fortunes of the university she runs against the larger concerns of a statewide system. And money? That elusive resource Madison needed most is comparatively easy to come by at Amherst, where a $1.4-billion endowment underwrites the private education of a significant number of needy students.
Ms. Martin makes no secret of enjoying the company of her students. At her inaugural dinner at Amherst, she left before dessert to join a throng of students who came calling to take her to a dance party. “She really was in her element,” says a former colleague.

Ms. Martin says she came to Amherst with no illusions that its internal politics wouldn’t test her mettle just as Wisconsin’s did.

“Everyone warned me about it,” she says of the power of Amherst’s faculty. “Someone just recently told me that a former president of Dartmouth is alleged to have said: ‘Being president at Williams is a fun job. Being president at Dartmouth is a hard job. And being president of Amherst is an impossible job.’ There’s a reputation of faculty being really hard on presidents.”

A Scholar’s Scholar

Ms. Martin was an attractive candidate for the college in part because of her reputation as a scholar’s scholar. Earning a Ph.D. in German literature at Madison in 1985, she wrote her dissertation on the works of Lou Andreas-Salomé, a Russian psychoanalyst who was chummy with Freud and Nietzsche. It carried the weighty title, “The Death of God, the Crisis of Liberal Man, and the Meanings of Woman.”

She still so identifies with her life as an academic that she turns visibly squeamish, wincing when reminded that she’s been an administrator for more than 15 years. Still, she insists that she remembers what it’s like to think like a professor, which she says will help her to navigate a campus where the faculty is accustomed to getting its way.

The faculty-centric ethos at Amherst is best embodied by a powerful group of professors known as the Committee of Six. Perhaps as old as the institution itself, the elected group’s central charge is to advise the president on tenure decisions, but its reach into administrative matters large and small is the stuff of legend.

From time immemorial, the Committee of Six has met each Monday with Amherst’s president. The meetings often last three hours, and the group’s advice can kill an agenda item in its tracks or move it to the forefront, Ms. Martin says. While Amherst’s president and the dean of faculty make the final call, matters as critical as deciding which departments should receive additional faculty lines are largely left to a faculty committee, whose decisions are reviewed by the Committee of Six.

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Jeffrey B. Ferguson, a member of the Committee of Six and an associate professor of black studies and American studies, says there are times when democracy is a slow, sometimes painful, process on the campus—such as during the financial crisis of 2008, when administrators and faculty committees debated for nine months how to move forward. But the involvement of faculty is a “necessity,” he says, for ensuring that administrative decisions are made with the college’s educational mission in mind.

“Here,” Ms. Martin says, “you get what I imagine higher ed was meant to be, which is governed by the people who are doing the educating.”

The president’s stated affection for such a governance structure rings hollow with some of her old colleagues at Madison, which also prides itself on high-level faculty involvement. The executive committee of the Faculty Senate there was accustomed to meeting weekly with her predecessor, but the group “had less interaction than we would have liked” with Ms. Martin, says Judith N. Burstyn, who chaired the committee during Ms. Martin’s final year at Wisconsin.

“We were fortunate to see her once a month,” says Ms. Burstyn, a chemistry professor.

When Ms. Martin did share with the committee her plans to split Madison from the system, she swore the members to secrecy, Ms. Burstyn says, pitting the committee’s desire for transparency against the larger goals the chancellor said could be accomplished only if the details did not leak prematurely.

Ms. Martin stands by her decision not to telegraph the plan, saying it was politically necessary to keep under wraps. She now concedes, however, that the damage done to her relationships with system officials and some lawmakers would have hampered her greatly had she stayed in Wisconsin.

“I really do feel that, had I stayed, I would not have been able to push things any further,” she says. “I didn’t think that would be good for the university, and I didn’t think that would be good for me, either. I just don’t have the kind of personality that would allow me to draw a big salary and feel I’m just coasting.”

Ms. Martin earned $452,271 at Madison in 2009-10. Amherst’s tax forms do not yet reflect her compensation at Amherst, but her predecessor, Anthony W. Marx, earned $582,457 in 2009, the latest available records show.

Landing ‘Biddy’

It was early April when a subgroup of Amherst’s presidential-search committee met with Ms. Martin, a high-profile candidate keeping a decidedly low profile. Largely out of the loop were her friends in Madison, where the university’s political agenda was now on life support.

That meeting, in Washington, happened later than Jide J. Zeitlin, chairman of Amherst’s Board of Trustees and head of the search committee, had wanted. Mr. Zeitlin had pushed for the meeting to happen weeks before. But Ms. Martin had made a promise she was unwilling to break—to the men’s basketball team.

As a graduate of Madison, Ms. Martin had a passion for Badger sports resembling that of a die-hard alumnus rather than a chancellor playing the part of cheerleader-in-chief. She had grown tight with members of the team, whom she had promised to accompany
to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament if they made it that far. The Badgers did, and Ms. Martin kept her word. Amherst would have to wait.

In Washington, Martha M. Umphrey, a search-committee member and professor of law, jurisprudence, and social thought at Amherst, said she and others at the meeting were struck by the ease with which Ms. Martin made the case for liberal-arts education. It is a case Amherst and other similar institutions increasingly have to make, as students, parents, and lawmakers begin to question the value of a college education.

Amherst faculty are likely to view anything that looks like “job training” for students as a cheapening of the broader mission of building better human beings, and the college sought a leader who could advocate for its tradition-bound style of education.

As a student of humanities, Ms. Martin views herself as a product of the liberal arts. In a recent letter to faculty, students, and staff, she said she was “increasingly perplexed” by the numerous occasions upon which she has been asked to explain why she would leave a research institution for a small college. Making her case once more, she described Amherst as a place where teaching is approached as “an art,” and students are encouraged to engage in deep and creative self-exploration.

Having grown up in the rural South, Ms. Martin suggested that the liberal-arts style of education “freed me as a young person to take my distance from the prejudices and constraints with which I was raised, giving me the opportunity to pursue my own thoughts.”

Ms. Martin’s scholarship, which often explores matters of human identity, strikes what seems a personal chord. She is one of the few openly gay college presidents in the nation, and her curriculum vitae reads like a years-long effort to unlock the mysteries of sexuality, gender, and feminism.

While Ms. Martin’s scholarly credentials were not in doubt, Amherst’s search committee was interested in what her political battles at Wisconsin, where she was chancellor for three years, said about her toughness.

“She carried herself with great poise through that whole thing, and she stuck to her guns, which matters in a leader,” Ms. Umphrey said. “She did what she thought was right. Now, I can’t assess myself whether it was the best thing or the right thing for the state of Wisconsin. What we saw was a leader who was able to clearly articulate and persuade people of a pretty radical idea.”

The committee was also keen to learn whether Ms. Martin was truly interested in the prospect of leading Amherst or simply seeking sanctuary.

“We didn’t want to be a rebound relationship,” said Ms. Umphrey, who added that the faculty had too much “ego” to approve of any candidate who was not head over heels for Amherst.

Don M. Randel, who was provost at Cornell University when Ms. Martin was an associate dean there, was among the small group of people with whom Ms. Martin discussed the Amherst job before she took it. He told her the college was a great fit for a person like her, who sees herself as a teacher and a scholar. While he could not gauge whether her mind was made up, Mr. Randel concluded that his former colleague was not running away from anything.

“She’s not a quitter,” says Mr. Randel, who is president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and a former president of the University of Chicago. “She has this wonderfully engaging smile and great sense of humor, but she’s also tough-minded.”

**SMALL but DIVERSE**

If higher education is the business of shaping lives, there is no question that Amherst does it on a smaller scale than a public research institution does. What sets the college apart, however, is the lives it chooses to shape. The red-brick architecture and white columns that dominate Amherst’s landscape belie the fact that the college is far more diverse than many of its peer institutions.

“You look around here, and the iconic symbols of privilege and wealth are here. It looks like the kind of place that the WASPs would go to years ago,” says Tom Parker, dean of admissions and financial aid. “It’s not a gritty urban campus. It’s beautiful, it’s manicured, and it’s easy to say that’s not a place where a Hispanic kid from El Paso or a black kid from Brooklyn is going to go.”

And yet they do. Fewer than half of Amherst’s students are white, and 11 percent of them are black, according to 2009 federal data, the most recent available. By comparison, more than three-quarters of Madison’s students are white, although its larger enrollment means that it serves far more students of every ethnic background.

Proportionally, Amherst also serves a greater percentage of financially needy students than Madison or Cornell University, where Ms. Martin was provost from 2000 to 2008. In 2009-10, nearly one in five of Amherst’s students received Pell Grants, which along with institutional aid help to cover the college’s more than $40,000 in annual tuition and fees.

Ms. Martin shares the view of many Amherst faculty, who say one challenge is to develop courses that account for the varied levels of preparation among students, some of whom are described by faculty as “hyper-prepared” and others who come to campus without a working knowledge of calculus and without plenty of Advanced Placement courses under their belts.

Moreover, some Amherst students say they still see a social divide along ethnic lines on the campus, and Ms. Martin says breaking down any such barriers is crucial.
“I’ve never been on a campus as diverse as this one,” she says. “So the question is: Are we doing everything we can to take advantage of it?”

There is no limit to what Amherst will spend to recruit needy students, Mr. Parker says. “You’re not going to believe this, but we don’t have a budget for doing these things. We do what we want to do. That is one hell of a luxury, and I’m very, very aware of it.”

Ms. Martin has something in common with Amherst’s students of humble roots. As she grew up outside of Lynchburg, Va., there was little expectation she would attend college at all, much less run one. Her shared identity with students may partially explain the rise of a pro-“Biddy” camp at Wisconsin that seems to be emerging at Amherst as well.

“There’s even Facebook groups that say, ‘We love Biddy,’” says Henry Rivera, a Hispanic freshman from Miami.

Amherst students say it is not uncommon to see Ms. Martin chatting it up with an undergraduate in the cafeteria or along the rolling green hills of the campus here in central Massachusetts. Indeed, she often seems to prefer their company to that of her colleagues.

On the night before her inauguration, Ms. Martin attended a fancy dinner at the center of campus among trustees and faculty. As dessert was being served, a throng of students came calling for her to join them at a dance party, recalls David R. Harris, an old friend of Ms. Martin’s who attended the dinner. She left with the students and did not return to her own celebration.

“She really was in her element,” says Mr. Harris, senior associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell.

A liberal-arts education “freed me as a young person, … giving me the opportunity to pursue my own thoughts.”

Ms. Martin’s common touch extends to Twitter, where she is prolific and followed by more than 5,000 people, including a significant number of Wisconsin students who just can’t seem to let go of their former chancellor. Her tweets are often congratulatory messages for sports teams at Amherst, but she does not shy away from continuing to praise her dear Badgers’ athletics successes.

For all of the criticism she has encountered in her career, none seems to bother Ms. Martin more than the notion that her affection for students was a put-on. That is why, she says, she was so troubled by a recent column in The Badger Herald, a Wisconsin student newspaper.

“To some extent, Martin exerted a disturbingly savvy PR influence that created some skeptics, including me,” wrote Ryan Rainey, the managing editor.

That public-relations savvy, he explained in an interview with The Chronicle, included Ms. Martin’s social ease with students and her decision as president to grant a couple of snow days, which thrilled students accustomed to braving the kind of weather that would derail campuses in more-hospitable climates.

Dozens of people forwarded Mr. Rainey’s column to Ms. Martin, who shook her head when asked what she made of it. While Mr. Rainey spends much of the article explaining why he has come to believe his former chancellor was “earnest” all along, Ms. Martin just can’t get past the fact that this was ever in doubt.

“In my entire life, the one thing I think I’ve never been accused of is being disingenuous,” she said. “So this was especially strange to me. I don’t know what higher ed is supposed to be about if not the pleasure in helping the next generation thrive, and feeling the benefits of their youth and their vitality. So it’s a shame in higher ed if leaders can’t be more involved with students without being suspect.”

Implicit in Ms. Martin’s reaction is the realization that, somewhere along the way, the model of college president as mentor, scholar, and even friend has largely been lost, particularly at larger public institutions.

But time has had a way of moving more slowly at Amherst, and the college sought out a leader who would appreciate, as one professor put it, an educational approach that is “ancient, deep, and human.” Ms. Martin seems quite comfortable in such a place, which she says she wouldn’t change … much.

“It’s going to be a big challenge to figure out what the right balance is between the traditions that Amherst represents and the ways in which it needs to modernize,” she says. “But I feel a real commitment to ensuring that Amherst continues to represent something that might be impossible to have in a lot of higher ed.”