On Campus

A Texture of Mind and Manner

As Lee Bollinger begins his tenure as Columbia's 19th president, colleagues old and new reflect on the man and his mission.

By
Patrick Queen
|
Fall 2002

When the internationally renowned Royal Shakespeare Company was searching for a way to mount an unprecedented marathon performance of Shakespeare’s latter four history plays—including the three Henry VI plays conceived as one large play performed in four long acts—the man who made the production possible for American audiences was Lee C. Bollinger ’71L, then president of the University of Michigan.

The performances—co-produced in March 2001 by the U-M and Ann Arbor’s University Musical Society—attracted audiences from thirty states and five countries and blossomed into a three-week cultural festival that included public lectures, workshops, radio presentations, panel discussions, and demonstrations. In the end, some 75 discrete educational components supplemented the performances.

But what does producing theater have to do with leading a university? Kenneth Fischer, president of the University Musical Society, says, “When you look at the mission of the university as teaching, research, and service, Lee could see that the support of this project clearly aligned with all three. He knew that this was an important thing for a great university to be doing. By helping to produce these plays, he was enabling an entirely new way of thinking about how they could be done.” And in the process, a world-class theatrical event became the center of a cultural celebration that enriched the university curriculum even as it educated the surrounding community.

By all accounts, the arts flourished at the U-M during Bollinger's tenure; as the *Ann Arbor News* put it, "The legacy is indisputable." Ralph Williams, a U-M professor who was a key participant in the educational programs throughout the three-week festival, says, "Lee is deeply interested in the support of the arts, not simply in a considered process of developing how a university in this country can serve the wider social order through being a place where the arts are nourished—it was the will to understand that project and to enact it that determined the support."

As the arts flourished at the U-M, so did the life sciences: Bollinger initiated a $700-million campuswide effort to bring the U-M into a modern day life sciences renaissance, placing a new $100 million laboratory facility at the center of a wide network of multidisciplinary research and teaching. According to Williams, Bollinger's efforts on behalf of life sciences—and his support of the arts—stem from the same guiding principle. "There was no sort of left-handed patronization of the arts in favor of life sciences or condescending to life sciences in his love of the arts," he says. "Both of them are bound in—forgive me if the term isn't one of frequent use these days—a rather noble as well as democratic exploration of what it is to be human in a university in a democratic society."

Gerald Fischbach, M.D., Columbia's executive vice president for health and biomedical sciences, dean of the faculty of health sciences, and dean of the faculty of medicine, says that Bollinger arrives at Columbia at a critical moment. "This University has a long and distinguished tradition in biomedical sciences," he says, "and it is poised to move to an even higher level. The life sciences will play a major role in world affairs in the coming generation. It can be argued that our universities will be judged by how well they advance our understanding of the human mind and the impact that such knowledge has on the conduct of human affairs. Lee thinks broadly about the life sciences, and I know he shares this view."

David Stern, chairman of the Columbia Trustees and commissioner of the National Basketball Association, echoes the sentiment. "Lee comes with an appreciation of the complexities of managing a research institution with a hospital affiliation—which he ties together with an extraordinary commitment to undergraduate education and its centrality. So I think that Columbia really does have itself an extraordinary successor to Dr. Rupp. Our students will find him truly accessible—he's got a great sense of humor—and they will also find him intellectually adept. And they're going to find him to be a very nice person as well."

Lee Carroll Bollinger was born in Santa Rosa, California, the oldest of six children. His father, a newspaper circulation manager, moved the family to Baker, Oregon, where he became the editor, publisher, and part owner of a small city newspaper. Bollinger, the first in the extended family to go to college, went to the University of Oregon, where he majored in intellectual history and where he met his future wife, Jean Magnano. They were married shortly after graduating in 1968.

Jean Magnano Bollinger ’71TC earned a master’s in curriculum and teaching at Teachers College while Bollinger completed his law degree at Columbia (where he served as articles editor on the *Columbia Law Review*). After graduating, Bollinger clerked for Judge Wilfred Feinberg ’40C ’46L on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit and then for Chief Justice Warren Burger on the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1973 Bollinger began teaching at the U-M Law School. He became dean of the law school in 1987, provost at Dartmouth College in 1994, and president of the University of Michigan in 1997.

The Bollingers’ son, Lee, is a lawyer with degrees from the University of California, Berkeley, and the U-M Law School. Carey, their daughter, has an undergraduate degree from Harvard. Just before Bollinger became Columbia’s nineteenth president, he and his wife, Jean, attended Columbia’s commencement ceremonies, where Bollinger received an honorary degree and the two watched their daughter graduate from Columbia Law School, 31 years after her father.

Bollinger first stepped into an administrative position fifteen years ago when he became dean of the law school at Michigan, but his devotion to scholarship has never faltered. He is one of the country’s most respected authorities on the First Amendment, and, according to James Boyd White, a U-M law professor, Bollinger’s first book, *The Tolerant Society*, “is one of the half-dozen most interesting, original, and significant books on the subject in the second half of the century.” *Images of a Free Press* was published in 1991, and Bollinger’s third book, *Eternally Vigilant: Free Speech in the Modern Era*, edited with Geoffrey R. Stone, came out earlier this year. He is teaching an undergraduate course on the First Amendment this fall, just as he did throughout his tenure at Michigan.

Bollinger’s grounding as a scholar is central to his vision as a university administrator, according to White. “Lee himself has experience of deep and

sustained thought of an original kind," he says, "and that means he understands what all the rest of us are trying to do."

Williams calls it "a texture of mind and manner which are enormously important. I saw when he was being considered as president and then had become president a report from one of the New York newspapers that noticed a sort of reticence or reservation of manner. This is true in its own way, but it's enormously valuable in combination with a sort of disciplined restlessness and curiosity of mind. The two of them working together mean that he doesn't become unfocused or frenetic in what he goes about. On the other hand, the support of the whole round of intellectual endeavors is never pro forma."

Take, for example, his decision last July to postpone appointing a dean for the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism—a move that aroused controversy on campus and in the press. In an e-mail message sent to students, faculty, and staff of the School, Bollinger wrote, "There is a yawning gulf between the various visions of what a modern school of journalism ought to be, and it is unwise for the University to expect a new dean to lead us out of this conflict and into a new direction. There ought to be a greater sense of shared understanding within the University of where we hope to go before we embrace a new dean."

Though many were surprised by the announcement, David Klatell, acting dean of the Journalism School, was not. "It was not a sudden decision," says Klatell, who has served for three years as academic dean of the School. "It flowed from an awful lot of thought and an awful lot of study. I was very impressed by the calm, steadfast way he went about gathering the information. He clearly is the kind of guy who wants to learn as much as he can before acting—and who likes to learn it firsthand."

Rebecca Blank, dean of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at U-M, points out that Bollinger had a similar guiding influence on the development of her school. "Lee is a visionary," she says. "I often felt that he was always one step ahead of me. He looks forward toward new possibilities—and many of them come to pass because of his vision. It was a delight to work with someone who was able to anticipate more for my school than I often dared anticipate myself."

Williams sums up by bringing up a characteristic in Bollinger he considers "centrally important: He wants to make it possible to aim at the very best. This is a matter of asking for, respecting, and imagining the truly excellent."

One of Bollinger's first acts as president is a case in point. In collaboration with former president George Rupp, he recruited and appointed Jeffrey Sachs, one of the world's most important and influential economists, to head the Columbia Earth Institute. It would be difficult to imagine someone more perfectly suited to the role. As Provost Jonathan Cole puts it, "While deeply knowledgeable in his own field of development economics, Jeffrey also knows the languages of the sciences, and the many other disciplines in public health and medicine—enabling him to initiate collaborations that transcend narrow disciplinary lines and that produce important new knowledge that can help solve some of the most vexing problems that we face in today's world."

Sachs's influence on the world stage has been profound. He has advised governments in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Asia, and Africa, and last winter he was appointed special advisor to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. He is also a consultant on the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which aim to cut worldwide poverty in half by 2015.

The breadth of vision and expertise inherent in Sachs's leadership resonate deeply with the mission of the Earth Institute, a powerhouse of multidisciplinary collaboration in research and teaching, and the combination creates a powerful synergy between Columbia and the ambitious United Nations efforts around the world. In short, the appointment epitomizes Bollinger's vision of what a great University can achieve.

"Lee has a full engagement in ensuring that the great American universities play their appropriate role in the world at large," says Sachs, "contributing to global knowledge, problem solving within and across societies, and toleration and understanding among cultures. As a scientist would describe it, his leadership operates 'at every scale,' from the individual to the global. He has an incredibly deft and inspiring touch when working with individual faculty and students, and he has a superb record of bridging disparate units of a major university into fruitful collaboration—a talent that my colleagues and I at the Earth Institute will especially prize. I am absolutely thrilled that I will have the chance to work closely with Lee in engaging Columbia University's fabulous strengths to contribute with vigor and creativity to our global society."

Hilary Ballon, chair of Columbia's Department of Art History and Archaeology, says, "Lee has a vision of higher education and the role it plays in individual

lives—expanding opportunity, addressing important questions about the world we live in—and that is increasingly rare and extraordinarily important."

In a speech to the Association of Arts Presenters last January, Bollinger said, "Universities are often conceived of as concerned principally with the search for truth. That's overstated, I believe. Universities, at their best, are also concerned with enhancing our awareness, our consciousness, of what we don't know, of our massive ignorance, of the mystery of life."

In a similar vein, Bollinger has suggested that universities are—or ought to be—concerned with providing an educational environment in which a student may grow beyond his individual experience by seeing the world through the eyes of classmates who have led lives very different from his.

Bollinger's support of racial and ethnic diversity on American campuses became a matter of national attention in 1997 when lawsuits were filed against the U-M's affirmative action admissions policies. Bollinger reacted by mounting what's considered the best and most comprehensive legal defense that has ever been raised against the attack on affirmative action. He also devoted himself to the cause of educating broader society about the issue and enlisting the outspoken support of public figures such as former President Gerald Ford and corporations such as General Motors. Since 1997 he has become one of the country's most prominent and eloquent voices in defense of diversity in higher education.

When Fischbach is asked to point to a defining characteristic in Bollinger, he doesn't hesitate. "Lee has a spectacular combination of academic and administrative qualities. What I appreciate the most about him is that he is principled and he is honest. His visions about our academic mission and about diversity are based on an obvious commitment to doing what is right. One feels confident in dealing with him, because one knows that there are no hidden agendas."

During the Royal Shakespeare Company's three-week stay in Ann Arbor, Williams taught a course on Shakespeare's first history tetralogy and invited several of the actors from the company to come in and talk with the students. "The discussion was enormously fruitful in a number of ways," he says, "but one of them I observed was that it demystified excellence. The students got to see the actors and talk with them about their studies, the course of their career, the starving period, the self-doubt period—and you could see in the students' eyes as the discussion went on the

growing sense that if they worked hard, studied hard, had some real ability and focused on it over the years, they just might achieve that, too. The students were able then to imagine excellence and to imagine being excellent.

“It’s that sort of thing that Lee made possible through virtually every part of university life he touched. There was a sense that one could and should achieve truly remarkable things.”

Read more from
Patrick Queen

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from
Patrick Queen