

Braun: Rutgers boards show disappointing lack of courage amid possible merger

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What the combined boards of Rutgers trustees and governors did Wednesday made no sense. Within a space of minutes, it affirmed a “set of principles” to guide their future actions and then announced it would be more than willing to compromise those principles in the face of political interference.

“I was very disappointed,” said Abram Suydam, a long-time trustee whose family dates back 400 years in the area.

As well he should have been. The moment called for an act of courage, a declaration of institutional independence, a blow struck for academic integrity in the face of political interference.

A Rutgers degree isn’t needed to know that a “principle” is a fundamental idea that should not be compromised—otherwise, it’s not a principle. It’s a preference. Pastrami over chicken salad.

What the combined boards of trustees and governors of Rutgers University did Wednesday was deliver an ambiguous, mealy-mouthed “affirmation” of its principles followed within minutes by the appointment of a committee that will meet with legislators controlled by bosses who have big interests in dismembering Rutgers. Meet and negotiate a compromise.

Some principles.

“So, we’re going to sit down with people who spend a lifetime getting their way in back-room deals,” said Suydam, one of the strongest supporters of Rutgers’ independence.

Right — and the people working for George Norcross, the political boss of South Jersey, are going to eat the Rutgers’ committee alive, spit out the bones and make a joke of Rutgers’ independence — and higher education in New Jersey.

The intent of the meeting was to show that the leadership of Rutgers would stand united against the assaults of Norcross and Gov. Chris Christie, both of whom visibly believe they can make Rowan University a “major public research university” — as Rutgers is now — by giving the former teachers’ college the Rutgers-Camden campus. As a side benefit, probably more important, Norcross’s Cooper Medical School will financially benefit from the deal.

That was the intent. But, instead of passing a resolution adopting a “set of principles” agreed to by the executive committees of both boards, the two panels, by voice votes, “affirmed” the principles but then agreed they were subject to negotiations with Norcross’s favorite legislator, Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester), an ally of Gov. Chris Christie.

The difference? A resolution needs to go back to both boards to change. If the committee negotiating a compromise with Norcross and his minions agrees to do something to violate those principles, no such vote may be necessary.

The Rutgers boards, in effect, took out the principle in the word “principle,” because principles are non-negotiable — and they want to compromise.

Gerald Harvey, the vice chairman of the governing board who, more or less, ran the meeting, tried to explain that the “principles” provided a “framework” that would “guide” the committee in its negotiations.

“Everybody here realizes how important these principles are,” he said.

Gregory Brown, a trustee who headed the recent search for a new president, said those concerned with what the combined boards did should not be. “There is no ‘hmmm’ in the idea that we are willing to negotiate,” said Brown, suggesting no one should be concerned Rutgers would fold.

Brown, the CEO of Motorola, is no lightweight. What he says deserves attention. But, when he was asked why the boards didn’t enshrine their independence in a joint resolution, all he could say was, “Oh, I don’t know.”

Want to see courage? Contemplate the difference between what the boards did and the words of Katherine Epstein, a newly hired — non-tenured — faculty member who addressed the board.

This is a woman with no protection against dismissal, speaking up against a compromise — “farcical,” she called it — already endorsed by the university president, attacking Norcross by name. A clever woman who says that, if a compromise is adopted, Rutgers-Camden will be “a RINO — Rutgers in name only.”

But here’s the thing: Epstein knows who she is. She’s got degrees from Yale and Oxford — yes, the one in England — and she will go far. She will make Rutgers proud unless Rutgers folds. Then she will go anywhere and it will be New Jersey’s loss that its boards were not brave enough to face down people like Norcross who only see higher education for what it can do for his political interests.

One Katherine Epstein is more valuable to New Jersey than a hundred George Norcrosses.