



A Matter of Accountability

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Source: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Jan., 1995), pp. 31-39

Published by: American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3824844>

Accessed: 14-04-2017 05:50 UTC

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Stated Meeting Report

A Matter of Accountability

Derek Bok

Since retiring from academic administration, I have tried to make a clean break from higher education. By and large, I have succeeded reasonably well. But tonight, speaking to an academic audience in an institution much concerned with research universities, I thought that I might reflect on a problem facing all of higher education—a problem that is increasingly important to faculty, students, and the general public.

At the time I left office at Harvard, I was struck by the sharply contrasting attitudes held by people here and overseas toward universities in the United States. Abroad, our research universities were looked upon with universal admiration. They were among a diminishing number of American institutions still regarded as the best in the world. Their scientists were still winning most of the Nobel Prizes. The United States continued to be the country of choice for foreign students who wanted to study abroad. Harvard, Berkeley, Stanford, Yale, MIT, Chicago, and Princeton regularly dominated international surveys of the world's greatest universities.

Here at home, the attitudes were very different. Secretary of Education William Bennett made his reputation lambasting universities for watering down our curricula and coddling drug users. Congress attacked our financial accounting practices. The Justice Department brought suit against us for conspiring about financial aid. National magazines criticized our gargantuan tuitions. Edi-

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torial writers condemned our speech codes and made fun of our political correctness. A series of widely read books attacked our faculties for neglecting teaching and politicizing the campus.

How can we explain this paradox? Could it be that we *are* deteriorating, and the rest of the world simply doesn't know it yet? I may not be the most objective person to answer this question. Yet I am convinced that all the evidence contradicts this explanation. In fact, I can scarcely think of a problem we are accused of now—tuition increases, financial practices, political conformity—that wasn't worse twenty or thirty years ago.

Was the barrage of criticism, then, some sort of right-wing plot to discredit the bastions of liberal heresy? It is true that conservatives did write many of the most critical books. But conspiracy theories fail to explain why the books were reviewed appreciatively and read approvingly by so many who were not conservative. Clearly, some other explanation is required.

On reflection, I have concluded that a deeper problem underlies much of the dissatisfaction. My theory is the following: At a time when institutions everywhere are being held to closer scrutiny and higher standards, universities and their faculties strike many people as one of the least accountable groups in our society, and this inevitably provokes resentment—especially when some lurid act of irresponsibility reveals our frailties to an incredulous public.

Whether or not you agree with this explanation, there can hardly be much question about our lack of accountability. Except for impecunious artists and playboys of independent means, no group in this society is freer to do what it pleases than professors. Rules are scarce, and those that exist are rarely vigorously enforced. On any given day, few deans know whether their professors are away from campus, where they have gone if they are away, or how long they will be absent.

Universities too are refreshingly free of

outside constraints. They must be accredited, but that is a minimum standard. They must attract students, but students cannot play the role of informed, demanding consumers. (Harvard could deteriorate for years without suffering appreciably in its admissions.) Universities must also satisfy alumni if they are to raise the money they need, but alumni tend to be unusually loyal and mercifully ill-informed.

Here and there, of course, one does find pockets of accountability. Scientists must undergo peer review in order to gain the grants they need to continue their work. Junior faculty must earn tenure by undergoing a rigorous scrutiny by their tenured colleagues. But these are exceptions—*islands of accountability in a sea of blissful anarchy.*

This freedom lies at the heart of all we hold dear about academic life. It was the Academy's own Daniel Bell, official scholar in residence, who first enlightened me on the three principal reasons for becoming a professor: June, July, and August. But freedom is not merely personally enjoyable; it is professionally essential to the quality of the work we do, to our ability to be creative and original. That is why our liberty is not only a private thing to be furtively enjoyed but an indispensable value protected by the basic principles of higher education: academic freedom (the right to say and write as one chooses), basic research (scientific inquiry conducted without regard to its practical usefulness), and institutional autonomy (the right to be free from outside interference in making judgments on academic matters). Surely, there can be no other profession in which public virtue coincides so nicely with private pleasure.

All this seems too good to be true, yet we have managed to maintain ourselves in this happy state for over half a century. For several decades, universities were too small, too inexpensive, too insignificant to attract much attention. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, we became much more important. In those

expansive decades, however, universities were widely perceived to have dedicated themselves to two vast efforts of great importance to the public: first, opening access to returning GIs, baby boomers, women, and minorities; and second, building the greatest research establishment in the world. These virtuous pursuits were widely applauded and helped to shield us from criticism.

Today we still educate everyone who applies, and we still lead the world in science. But these accomplishments have become old news, taken for granted, too familiar to stir the nation's blood. Meanwhile, the country has changed. America is struggling with slower growth and global competition. All our institutions are under pressure to renew themselves, raise the quality of their product, demonstrate value added. Companies must be reorganized, governments reinvented, schools restructured.

In this stressful atmosphere, as governments pour billions into higher education, universities seem irritatingly complacent—reluctant to change, to tighten up, to lift their standards. They may be no freer than artists and playboys. But artists and playboys don't cost huge sums of money or render services on which society depends. And that makes all the difference.

Conceivably, the clamor of public criticism will die down. Indeed, the stream of hostile books and articles and lawsuits already seems to have abated, at least temporarily. But the attacks have left a residue. Public confidence in universities has dropped significantly in the last few years and is now at an all-time low.

Society is also beginning to respond in menacing ways. Florida has imposed a mandatory nine-hour teaching load on the faculty of all public universities. Tom Hayden of the California legislature is investigating San Diego professors to discover whether they are fulfilling their teaching obligations. Tennessee has resorted to mandatory testing of students to see how much they have learned. In Washington there is much talk of relating

research more closely to national needs and assessing the results.

These intrusions seem dangerous. Naturally, we resist. Nobel laureates warn of the imminent decline of American science. Universities stonewall state efforts to measure how much students learn, arguing that the tests proposed by the state trivialize education. Educators echo Whitney Griswold's classic complaint that they are being forced to spend so much time justifying what they are doing that they no longer have time to do what they are justifying.

Deep down, outsiders know that our institutions are complicated and that their methods are crude. As a result, we often win our skirmishes with the lawmakers and the regulators. The important question is whether we can expect to win the war, whether we should even try. Is it tenable to continue, decade after decade, with so few rules and so little accountability?

There are several reasons why it may *not* be possible. For both universities and faculty members, the temptations to stray from our primary mission are constantly growing stronger. For professors, opportunities to consult, travel, go to conferences, and make money are greater than ever. In these circumstances, who will enforce the rules? University administrators are reluctant to intervene. After all, they are trying to attract and retain outstanding professors, not to irritate them by trying to police their behavior. Besides, what authority do administrators have? The ultimate power lies in those who are hardest to replace, and they are not the presidents and deans. Besides, administrators are in an awkward position to complain, as they are more and more intrigued by new opportunities for universities to engage in commercial ventures of their own.

There is evidence that these temptations are already taking their toll. The number of professors who have become millionaires has risen sharply. The number with consulting firms and businesses on the side has likewise

increased. Universities too are undertaking more dubious practices—investing in professors' businesses, broadcasting courses with commercial sponsors, signing research contracts with industry that include restrictions on publication or collaboration—not to mention the widely publicized excesses of big-time athletics.

These outside ventures are not without cost, and the warning signs are quite visible. Teaching loads have gradually diminished at leading universities, and office hours have decreased. According to Clark Kerr, dean of all university administrators, "All over the United States, it is more difficult than it once was to get university teachers to take seriously their departmental and college responsibilities."

It is curious how little discussion occurs on campuses regarding the issues that seem to be troubling the outside world. After all, the questions the public is asking are not unreasonable, however misguided some of the proposed remedies may be. It is not unreasonable to ask whether universities should have some effective means of preventing professors from spending unconscionable amounts of time in outside pursuits. It is not unreasonable to ask why undergraduates should be taught by graduate students who have received no prior training as teachers and sometimes cannot even speak understandable English. It is not unreasonable to ask whether a serious effort should be made to discover how much students are learning, bearing in mind that no human institution has ever progressed very fast without some way of evaluating how well it is performing its central tasks.

Because we think too little about these issues, we are poorly prepared to deal with them when they arise. For example, what are the rules on outside activity? One day per week, you may say. But is this one day in seven or one plus weekends? Does the rule apply to conferences and professional meetings or just to money-making pursuits? In fact, no

one knows—and no one asks. When I conducted a survey on these questions among my colleagues at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, I found widely varying answers, even by professors of the same institution.

To take another example, should we make a careful assessment of whether the large sums required to use technology in our teaching are truly helping our students to learn more? The answer seems obvious, yet we repeatedly finance such ventures with little careful evaluation of the results.

What are the limits of academic freedom when professors indoctrinate students or teach things that clearly aren't true? Can we stop them from teaching? Remove them from required courses? Cut back their salary increases?

To mention one final illustration, in a world in which so much of what we do has commercial value: What is there in a university that is *not* for sale? An institution that can't answer this question doesn't know what it really stands for. Yet the commercial temptations are everywhere, and they are everywhere gaining ground. We say we won't sell paintings. But will we rent them to corporations on a long-term basis? We say we don't sell places in our entering class. But will we admit that fantastic point guard with substandard grades, who just might take us to the Final Four and gain us a share of those lucrative TV revenues?

Being unprepared for such questions, universities respond all too often by doing nothing until adverse publicity or outside investigation causes embarrassment and forces them to act. By that time it is often too late, and the university's credibility is suspect.

This lack of preparation is not only unprofessional; it is also dangerous to our health. The pressures for accountability will not diminish. If we do not keep our house in order, others will eventually do it for us. One need not cite only the examples of Florida and Tennessee. In England, with Mrs. Thatcher's

help, tenure has been abolished; student evaluations are mandatory at universities; outside reviews of each department must be conducted to decide what size government grant it should receive. And as you can imagine, whether or not the quality is improving, the volume of paperwork has certainly increased.

Closer to home, only in the past fifteen years, other learned professions have had their precious autonomy invaded in ways that many practitioners deeply regret. With medical costs continuing to spiral out of control, doctors have been subjected to closer scrutiny by insurance companies and employers, who question their judgment and subject them to massive amounts of paperwork to justify their decisions. Lawyers in large firms must now account for each small slice of time they charge their clients, and their bills are examined by clients with much greater care than before. Small wonder that morale in these professions has deteriorated along with the esteem of the public.

This is hardly the fate we would wish for our profession. We still possess the priceless privilege of being able to study what we want, in the way we want, with minimal interference. We need not give up this freedom, nor should we. But we would be fooling ourselves to believe that we can continue as we are without inviting more and more intrusion from a public justly concerned with making sure that its investments are worth the cost and that the freedom we possess is not abused.

The question now is whether we can summon the will to develop appropriate rules and safeguards and methods of evaluating ourselves in ways that maintain proper standards but do not trivialize the quality of what we do or subject us to needless red tape. In other words, can we find creative ways to turn the public's desire for accountability from a problem into an opportunity? One can hardly be optimistic about the outcome. It is not just that the problems are complicated;

summoning the will to act is even more difficult. As William James once said, “No priesthood ever reformed itself.”

And yet, what a wonderful accomplishment it would be, in this age of cynicism, to demonstrate that universities *can* be responsible, self-governing institutions—what a legacy to leave to our successors. As I reflect on years of watching over a truly precious and wonderful institution, I do believe that meeting this challenge and preserving our freedom would do more to preserve and enhance the quality of higher education than all the brave new academic programs and technological adventures that enthusiasts describe in picturing the university of the twenty-first century. I very much hope that universities and their faculties will prove themselves equal to the task.