

## **Three's a Crowd: The Value Commitments of Contemporary Higher Education**

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Every social institution must grapple with the fact that it exists at the intersection, so to speak, of some set of distinct values. A hospital, for example, must juggle economic and health concerns, and in some cases political issues. It has a responsibility to meet the health needs of its patients, to survive and if possible to prosper in its economic environment, and in cases of state hospitals to navigate the political waters as well. An art museum is in a similar position, with the difference that rather than health values it must handle aesthetic interests and commitments, which a hospital need not. Similarly a religious institution must negotiate not only economic and to one degree or another political concerns, but it must also address spiritual values. A bank is in a similar position. Its primary concern is economic and broadly corporate, but even it, and all corporate entities, must also take account of the broader political context in which their regulatory expectations are determined and enforced. Sometimes the general situation changes to such an extent that the specific character of the commitments changes. For example, in the recent financial crisis one of the policies of the U.S. government was to provide funds to large banks to keep them solvent. In some cases in order to receive such funds the banks had to turn over control of a significant proportion of their stock to the government, thus in effect being partially nationalized. Such a situation places a bank in a whole new set of political concerns and issues. Journalistic institutions are another interesting example. In the U.S. print journalism in particular represents a striking illustration of a case in which one set of values has nearly completely dominated the others. Even major newspapers are regularly criticized for sacrificing journalistic for commercial values. All the more striking is the fact that in so doing they have not been able to prosper as journalistic institutions and are closing down in alarming numbers.

National differences can also be relevant. Both U.S. and Russian institutions, to mention two large-scale examples, have political and economic sets of values with

which they must function, but they may differ quite a bit. For example, the economic and political environments in which a major museum must function are different in Russia and in the U.S., at least in many respects, and therefore the specific details of the commitments and responsibilities of the museums differ. Russian museums rely to a greater extent on state funding while American museums tend to rely for their survival on philanthropy. In general, though, whatever the differences in details, the general situation is comparable in any nation and for any social institution. They all must deal with the intersection of a set of values.

Higher education is not an exception to this generalization. In fact, we may define higher education in any country as that social institution that resides at the confluence of academic, political and economic values. By “academic” values I mean here expectations of advanced teaching, scholarship and research, and whatever those activities require, where the emphasis on its advanced mission distinguishes higher education from lower level schooling. We may understand political values as those expectations and their resulting commitments that arise from the political arena, which is to say the application and exercise of state power, and from social contexts generally. And we may understand economic values as referring to principles and practices, both organizational and fiscal, which characterize corporations and the commercial world as a whole.

Many academic people, primarily teaching and research staff, or what in English is called the professoriate, assume that the university is an academic institution and that the other pressures on it, primarily the political and the economic, represent alien forces that should be avoided whenever possible. The point I would like to urge in these remarks is that such a view of the university is a mistake. In making a case for that claim I would like to make three points: 1) political and economic values are not extrinsic to the university; 2) the three sets of values need not but often do come into conflict, and special care is required when handling such conflicts; and 3) the overall health of the university as an academic institution requires that a balance be maintained among the intersecting values that characterize it. We will consider each point in turn.

## **1 The Trinitarian Character of the University**

I apologize for the theological sound of this phrase, but it makes an important point. I have said that the professoriate is mistaken to think of the university as consisting of or committed to academic values alone. The reason it is a mistake to think this way is that the three kinds of values – academic, political and economic –

are so much intertwined that they are in effect mutually constitutive. The character of the political values is itself determined by the relation in which those values stand to the economic, and vice versa. The same is true for the university's academic values. Each of these sets of values is determined by its relations with the others so that it is impossible to untangle them without each being changed considerably. The prevailing political principles and practices would be quite different if they were not related to a specific set of economic conditions, histories and practices. This point is expressed when people say that a free society is one that requires a free market, or when other people say that a free society requires protection from the depredations inflicted on us by the free market. Whichever side of this debate one prefers, both sides recognize that the political and the economic determine one another. That complex relationship is only multiplied when one adds academic values to the mix. In contemporary universities the academic values, while not reducible to the political or economic, are nevertheless conditioned by them such that they are determined by their relations to them. Thus we have, for example, the "marketplace of ideas," a phrase that would never have been used in a feudal economic environment. The same is true for "academic freedom," a concept that would not resonate at all in a medieval European or Arab university or in many environments in which a religious body or a totalitarian government exercised political power. If the political and economic values were other than they are, so too would be the academic. This means that those values that we regard as definitive of the university are conditioned by our political and economic environment.

If that is the case, then it makes little sense to understand the university as solely an academic institution that must struggle with extrinsic and alien political and economic forces in order to survive. The university is an academic institution not because it is characterized only or primarily by academic values, but because of the unique set of values that constitutes it. In a similar way a hospital is not solely a health institution and an art museum is not purely an aesthetic institution. The university is an academic institution because academic values are one of values that intersect where the university resides. The set of values as a whole differs from all others, thus rendering the university a distinct kind of social institution.

Thus it is a mistake to think, as many academic people in the U.S. do, of the university as an "ivory tower," an institution that resides at some remove from the rest of society. The rest of society is not and cannot be held at a distance from the university because the rest of society is part of what constitutes it. When I say that "academic people" make this mistake I am thinking primarily about teaching and research staff. University administrators in the U.S. tend to make a very different mistake. They too often think not only that universities are political and economic

institutions, but they go further in thinking that the academic dimension of the university is reducible to the political and especially the economic. In this spirit many administrators bring to bear on the university financial and managerial practices from the corporate sector. They will, for example, apply cost-benefit analyses of academic programs to determine their value, or make use of corporate motivational mechanisms for academic staff, or insist on efficiency as the key factor in determining class size, teaching load etc., or put into use corporate language and categories when referring to a university's constituency, so that students become customers and the university becomes a purveyor of a product or a service.

Such practices and tendencies are a mistake because they fail to take account of the fact that because academic values are a distinct strand in the broader set of values with which the university must operate, the university is therefore a distinctive type of institution that cannot be treated as if it were a corporation any more than a hospital, museum or religious institution can be treated as if they were simply or primarily corporations. In one fails to understand this fact then, among other problems, one faces the likelihood that when the academic needs and values of the university do not sit comfortably with the others the problem will not be properly understood.

This introduces for us the second general point I would like to make, which concerns what happens when values collide.

## **II Conflicts of Values**

We have said that the three strands of values that intersect in the contemporary university generally live comfortably with one another. If this were not true then universities would be unmanageable and would not survive. Not only have they survived but they are among the most important institutions in any developed society. So clearly they can be managed. But there are occasions in which, either because of general changes in a society or because of a specific event, the values collide, and in those cases one must be very careful.

We can look to the case already mentioned of the galloping "corporatization" of the university, especially in the U.S., as an example of a conflict generated by broader social changes. As our societies have commercialized themselves more and more over the last several centuries we have reached a point where we begin to think of virtually everything in market terms. That process has finally reached the university as students and their families are described as customers, as staff

members are urged to provide better “customer service,” as programs and academic departments are increasingly judged on their capacity to generate income, and as the defining characteristics of a university are referred to as its “brand.”

The problem is that commercialization to such a great extent conflicts with the academic values of the university. For example, there is a wide difference between a student and a customer. A customer, for example in a department store, pays for a product and receives it. The store and the customer have no responsibilities toward one another except to interact honestly and in compliance with relevant laws. The store must not misrepresent its product or secretly replace it with something inferior, and the customer must not use a stolen credit card or pay with counterfeit currency. Beyond that, the store has no responsibility to the customer to offer a specific product and the customer has no responsibility to the store to do anything in particular with the product.

A university’s relation to a student is quite different. First, in most cases a student must compete even to enroll. Once enrolled, having paid tuition or accepted the terms of a scholarship, the student does not receive a product or even a service. The student receives an opportunity and assumes certain responsibilities. The university also assumes responsibilities. For example, if the university’s mission is to provide an education in geology, then it has a responsibility to provide instruction in geology suitable to the level and expectations of the students and the society. Similarly, if a university has as its mission to provide a liberal education, then it has a responsibility to make available the academic programs and other conditions that enable a strong liberal education. If we weigh the interaction of students and their instructors, or the importance of certain academic disciplines, against these standards we can easily get a far different picture than if we weigh them against consumer oriented commercial standards. An advanced course in geology may enroll few students and therefore be unprofitable, but necessary nevertheless because of the academic values that permeate the university. Or it may be inefficient for an instructor to spend an hour or two with one student, but it may be exactly what the student needs academically at that point. Because the university must take seriously its academic values, and because a student is not a customer, it may be that the instructor has a responsibility to do the least efficient thing in such a case. Examples of this sort can be multiplied many times.

Russian universities are not in quite the same situation as American universities, to continue with the same set of illustrations, but the general condition is the same. Like most European universities, those in Russia have for centuries taken for granted that the state will support them and their students to whatever extent is necessary. That understanding is cracking and has been cracking for some years.

One of the reasons for the Bologna process has been to rein in the costs of university education and reduce the burden on the participating states. As state funding becomes harder to get, choices must be made, and one of the choices made in the context of Bologna is to offer a shorter, usually three year, initial degree. One can argue, and many have, that the economically motivated decision to limit bachelor's programs to three years is inconsistent with academic values, and even with the needs of the broader society. The choice made in Russian universities to confront insufficient funding has been to increase the number of commercial programs and the tuition paying students enrolled in them. Furthermore, faculties and deans in many universities have become increasingly entrepreneurial in their efforts to locate funding to renovate their buildings, provide adequate salaries, offer services to students, and so forth. In some cases, no doubt, the entrepreneurship of clever deans can far outstrip the academic needs for which it was originally sanctioned, and in such cases universities run into new conflicts between their economic and academic values.

It is easy simply to say that there are cases in which the university must honor its academic values even if they conflict with the economic, but doing so can be difficult. Smaller classes and smaller faculty-student ratios are academically desirable, but often economically impossible. If the funding is not there then something else must be done. The important thing for an academic administrator and policy maker to understand at that point is that in order to minimize the damage done in such cases it is critical to be aware of the values that are at stake. If an administrator eliminates a French language department in order to save money, even if in fact he did what needed to be done, he ought not to be proud of it, because such a decision comes at a great academic cost. Unfortunately many administrators are proud of themselves when they make such decisions, and in such cases they are simply making it clear that they do not understand the character of the institutions for which they have responsibility.

Conflicts are not always over money. Some of the most tense difficulties that arise in American universities are over conflicts between academic and political values. During the late 1940s and 1950s, for example, some universities in the U.S. fired teaching staff who were suspected of being involved in some way with communism, or who refused to cooperate with morally and legally questionable investigations into such things by a Congressional committee. Similar things, and worse, happened in the Soviet Union, though for other reasons. Another sort of example common in the U.S. concerns the presence at many universities of Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs, which are military programs oriented to university students. Many American universities refuse to allow them on the grounds that military policies, and often broader political policies that the

military is obliged to implement, are inconsistent with the academic values to which universities should be committed.

In some times and places the examples can be complex and fascinating. Contemporary Turkey is such a case. Until recently the universities were supervised by a Higher Education Board (YÖK) that was staunchly secular and Kemalist in its orientation, and which insisted that universities enforce that secularism. Thus, for example, women were not permitted to wear head scarves in classes and in some cases on university grounds. In recent years, the Islamist AK Party has gained power, entirely legitimately, and it is now slowly trying to undo some, perhaps all, of the secular commitments of the universities. This is such a complex conflict that it raises the question of the very definition of academic values for Turkish higher education.

To offer another example, in 2005 an American scholar named Ward Churchill, then a professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, gave a talk at a conference in a small college in New York State in which he made remarks that drew public attention to an article he had written the day after the events of September 11, 2001. In that article, "On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," Churchill referred to the people who were killed that day as "little Eichmanns."<sup>[1]</sup> That remark caused a firestorm of very public protest. Eventually, after investigation of Churchill by the university and amid a range of charges of fraud against him, he was fired by the University of Colorado in 2007. Many people, primarily though not exclusively outside of academia, were so offended by Churchill's comment, in most cases without understanding what he meant, that the university determined it simply could not tolerate him or what he had said. Here is a striking case of a conflict between academic freedom and broader public sensibilities, political and social.

This is the kind of situation about which university administrators have nightmares: whether to acquiesce to public and political pressure to punish a person who enrages the community, or to defend even extremely offensive remarks as an exercise of the academic freedom that all academic people know is crucial to a thriving university? A university does of course have a responsibility to defend academic freedom as a central component of its basic academic values; but it also has a responsibility to the community of which it is a part to function within the general parameters that the community embraces. There is a good deal of flexibility in that respect, but the flexibility is not infinite. A university cannot, because it is a social and political institution, simply thumb its nose at the public. At the same time a university cannot be content to silence its scholars because they say unpopular things. No university can sustain its academic quality and reputation

if it creates a climate in which scholars are afraid to criticize received opinion. This is one of the most serious sorts of conflicts of values that a university can face.

There is of course no simple solution. If there were it would not be a difficult problem. One of the reasons problems like this arise is that the public does not fully understand that scholarship requires an environment in which it does not have to worry about public opinion. The same can be said about art, and in the United States artists occasionally run into the same kind of problem that Professor Churchill encountered, though usually outside of a university setting. One of the lessons to take from experiences like these is that universities, and arts organizations, need to do a better job helping their political and other public constituencies understand the importance of being able to express ideas, even if they are criticized and rejected by the academic or the general community, and even if that same community is paying for them.

To offer one more example, there was not long ago a controversy in the U.S. state of Georgia. Several socially conservative members of a generally socially conservative State Legislature were trying to force the state-funded university to eliminate its programs and courses in Queer Theory and Gay Studies. Those of us in the university world understand the value and legitimacy of the sociological study of homosexuality and the critical study of literature by gay writers and about gay experience. Some legislators, though, take the rather myopic view that taxpayer money, money paid in taxes by a socially conservative populace, is being used to teach about a subject matter that is abhorred by that same populace. Why, they ask, should taxpayers support such a thing? The view may be myopic, but it is understandable that the public and its representatives might ask such a question. It does little good to say in response to the legislature simply that academic freedom justifies the scholarly study of homosexuality, even if academic freedom does in fact justify it. It also does little good to say to the university community that we must do what the legislature says because it pays the bills, even though it does pay the bills, or at least some of them. The first response ignores the political dimension of the university and the second response ignores the academic. And in the end, in any case, neither response will solve the problem.

### **III A Balance of Values**

I do not think that we are justified in offering a simple formula to solve such problems as these. It will not do simply to insist that the university is justified in ignoring the public, nor will it do to insist that the public is justified in determining directly what does or does not go on in a university, nor will corporate policies and



practices strengthen universities, and it is of course impossible to ignore the economic factors and conditions in which a university must function. None of these approaches take into account the complex intersection of values that defines a university. The most we can say in general by way of advice is that university administrators must be mindful of the fact that they preside over a political as well as an economic and academic institution, and all its values must be taken into account in handling difficult conflicts.

In the end a balance among the three sets of values must be maintained, even if the emphasis may shift from one day to the next or from one problem to the next. A balance among the three sets of values is certainly able to be maintained because in fact they are in balance most of the time. When conflicts such as those we have mentioned arise, they indicate not that alien forces are trying to corrupt the university but rather that the appropriate balance has been lost. The task of an academic leader is to bring the values back into balance. That task can be more or less difficult, depending on how far out of balance things have become in any given case. When a legislature dictates to a university what its curriculum should be, or when corporate forces pressure a university to behave like a commercial enterprise, or when the professoriate thinks that it can ignore the community of which it is a part and which in some cases provides its funding, then things have become rather far out of balance, and the academic leader's task is that much more difficult than it has to be.

This fact does suggest that administrators would be wise to cultivate among their academic, economic and political constituencies, long before any particular problems arise, an understanding of the genuinely complex nature of the institution and an awareness of the differing forces at work on it. To do so, however, administrators must first understand it themselves. I should like to think that analyzing the contemporary university as the intersection of academic, economic and political values will help in that regard, wherever in the world one finds oneself.

## **REFERENCES**

1. The book developed from the original essay is Ward Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of U.S. Imperial Arrogance and Criminality*, Oakland, CA: AK Press 2003.

## **Summary**

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This is a consideration of some of the complexities of the contemporary university's relation to academic, political, and economic values and pressures. The argument is that the contemporary university, in any country, embodies these three sets of values, and the health of a university requires an ongoing balance among them. Occasional these values come into conflict, due sometimes to large scale social or economic trends, and sometimes to specific events. In such cases, university administrators face their most difficult challenges. Ideally, university administrators will make an effort at all times to help their constituencies to understand that a strong university requires a balance among these values.