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An Ethical Education: Community and Morality in the Multicultural University

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Introduction

Mortimer Sellers

Higher education in the United States has long provided the prototype of a self-governing profession. Lawyers, doctors, civil servants, and even business managers must earn academic and other outside approval or licensing before they can practice their trades. But the academic profession itself has remained a self-regulated guild.

This is not to say that university ethicists have not occasionally drafted codes and standards for their colleagues, just as they do for the other professions. But their focus has been on the details of individual behavior, rather than the basic purpose and assumptions of the academic enterprise. The shared premise of these essays and the exchanges that produced them is that universities will benefit from examining the ethical basis of their own fundamental policies. This requires a broader perspective than can be found in philosophy departments alone. Administrators and members of other learned professions gave the discussions leading to this volume a liberating diversity that helped participants to examine their ideas from new and unexpected perspectives.

Questions of community and diversity pervade all the essays collected here and determined the topics they address. American universities have increasingly diverse students and faculties, yet they still seek to maintain a sense of community and common purpose. This raises the four central questions in this volume: What should the aims of the universities be given their changed demography? How should the curriculum reflect these changes? Does the new environment require special treatment of campus speech? And what role should affirmative action play in promoting diversity or community in the American academy?

I. The Aims of the University

The underlying problem is set out in Nicholas Steneck's essay in Chapter 2. Steneck argues that the failure of universities to undertake serious

moral and ethical self-evaluation is not accidental but the consequence of the historical evolution of the modern research university. This reflects two related historical developments: first, the redirection of faculty time and effort from the affairs of the particular university to the affairs of international research communities; and second, the gradual transfer of decision-making authority from faculty to administrators. Both contribute to lower faculty commitment to their own institutions. Thus even the many new university ethics programs tend to ignore ethical problems that arise within academic institutions as a consequence of the actions of and decisions made by universities. Steneck proposes a concerted effort to redirect teachers' attention to the campuses on which they work, to weigh institutional values, and to raise questions about right and wrong.

J.L.A. Garcia (Chapter 3) agrees that in considering the aims of the university one must look to the mission and circumstances of the particular campus in question. But any university's chief objectives should include providing "sentimental education," to foster the formation, development, and maturation of the sensibilities and desires necessary for ethical thought. Students need opportunities to develop their commitment to truth and goodness, to discover intellectual and moral virtues, and to cultivate habits of mind that blend the two. This does not mean that the university has any special mission to attack or defend the status quo. Rather it should be open to excellence, including non-traditional forms of excellence to which we may have been blind due to prejudice or self-satisfaction. Diversification of the curriculum and faculty is important, but only insofar as it aids the quest for truth. Unkind speech should be discouraged because it hampers the development of virtues such as civility, respect, and sensitivity.

Robert Lipkin (Chapter 4) sees a fundamental conflict in universities, as in society, between traditionalists and progressives. While defenders of tradition value orthodoxy and hierarchy, their opponents prefer to test received values against the best available objections. Lipkin questions Garcia's emphasis on truth. The better test of a society's health is whether it can survive criticism. This "pragmatic" test furnishes the universities with their distinctive role, which should be to challenge the dominant culture, whatever it happens to be. When radical critique of the dominant culture prevails, the dominant culture will be reformed; when it fails, the dominant culture is maintained. Universities alone have the stability, independence, and resources to provide systematic, persistent, and progressive criticism of the dominant culture. This should not mean attempts at "value-free" inquiry in pursuit of truth, which tend to sup-

port the status quo, but rather seeking out and defending unpopular proposals for revolutionary change as well as people who would be likely to have unconventional ideas and perspectives. Multiculturalism strengthens the university's pragmatic role by introducing new voices into the discussion and testing orthodoxy with criticisms that might otherwise have been overlooked.

II. Creating the Curriculum

Inevitably, the curriculum will embody (perhaps unwittingly) the aims of the university that promulgates it. Robert Simon (Chapter 5) echoes Garcia in suggesting that this process should not be allowed to become too political. By this he does not mean that the curriculum should be "value-free," or entirely abstracted from the cultural context in which it operates, but rather that conversations about the curriculum should seek common criteria of evaluation to resolve disputes. Rationality and objectivity provide powerful tools for challenging a biased or unrepresentative curriculum. It is counterproductive for revisionists to embrace relativism and skepticism as this precludes presenting their claims for reform as justified. Reformers need criteria for evaluating claims without simply asserting values accepted by a particular group at a particular time. Reasons other than pure interest and power must be given, to move the curriculum out of the political realm into an academic ethic of inquiry. The non-political curriculum will be decided on educational rather than ideological grounds. It will be normative, but non-partisan.

Administrators play a greater role than they used to in setting university policy, and this has a direct influence on the nature of classroom education. Arthur Brown (Chapter 6) discusses the need managers have felt for measurable manifestations of academic achievement in order to make teaching more assessable and teachers more accountable. But this move to objective standards threatens professional autonomy, pluralism, and academic freedom. Nor do academic grades and tests correlate very well with future accomplishments. Brown proposes program evaluation as a substitute for the academic assessment of individual students, when administrators seek to measure the effectiveness of university departments and programs.

Kathryn Mohrman (Chapter 7) discusses the curriculum in context of American society's increasing cultural diversity. The curriculum is the practical manifestation of our ideals about the university. These require increased inclusiveness, not as a matter of compensatory justice but sim-

ply as a means of protecting the self-interest of faculty and administrators. Diversity increasingly contributes to academic excellence in research and teaching, as the interests of scholarship become broader. Diverse faculties facilitate collaborative studies, and help students develop the flexibility necessary for their future careers. While acknowledging differences, universities should also focus on what we all have in common – the intellectual process of the search for truth. This does not imply either a fixed definition of truth or a consensus about how to go about the search, but it does involve a commitment to participating in the process as openly and honestly as possible.

III. Campus Speech

The search for truth also informs Andrew Altman's evaluation of the universities' recent restrictions on hate speech (Chapter 8). Altman defends such restrictions, so long as they conform to certain widely accepted ethical principles. Some forms of hate speech involve treating persons as morally inferior or subordinate. Such "speech acts" work to subordinate others, whether or not they accompany other nonverbal acts. Demeaning epithets, by denigrating the victim's standing in the moral universe, are the verbal instruments of subordination, marking others as inferior. This violates a widely accepted moral principle positing the moral equality of persons. Which is not to say that enforcing moral equality always justifies violating individual liberty: restricting speech may silence true or useful opinions. But demeaning epithets do not advance the search for truth. Argument and eloquence are powerless to counteract them because they cannot repair or erase the fact that someone has been treated as a moral subordinate.

Anthony Appiah (Chapter 9) also links the role of the university in teaching, researching, and disseminating the truth to its standing as a moral community. Universities depend upon rational discourse and the shared assessment of evidence and reasons with a minimum or partiality and prejudice. They find the truth by testing it against contrary views. Libertarian concerns also favor free speech when it does not harm others and takes place in the public sphere. This consideration also extends to expressive action. Like speech, action should not be limited simply because it will cause outrage. Policing the outraged is preferable to banning expressions that are outrageous.

Randy Barnett (Chapter 10) compares free speech in American Universities to principles developed in the public sphere through judicial

interpretation of the First Amendment. One line of reasoning considers the value of free speech in promoting public understanding of truth. Another stresses the harm institutionalized coercion can do, leading at times to error and abuse. Like the state, universities are bureaucratic, hierarchical, and large enough to be subject to frequent error and abuse. But they also stand *in loco parentis*, and have a legitimate interest in guiding the ideas of their members. Barnett suggests that university communities may limit improper speech, without coercion, by acting collectively to express disapproval of expressions that violate civility and accepted canons of discourse.

Thomas Simon (Chapter 11) sees a positive value in outrageous speech when it serves to counter the effects of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia. Attempts to curb hate speech may privilege sophisticated racists at the expense of subordinated minorities. Simon challenges opponents of social oppression to attack it directly, not allowing themselves to be distracted by deplorable but less fundamental incidents of hate speech. Thus hate speech regulation should be evaluated only in the context of the broader battle against group subjugation. Fine distinctions between crude epithets and reasoned discourse, as advanced by Altman and Appiah, may disadvantage the very groups they were meant to protect. Simon suggests that universities concentrate less on regulating hate speech and more on removing structural supports for racism such as employment practices, investment decisions, and the prejudices of the wider community.

IV. Affirmative Action

Many institutions of higher education have embraced affirmative action as a weapon against racism and a means of protecting multicultural diversity. Mark Tushnet (Chapter 12) suggests that this raises important questions about classroom teaching. Teachers run two risks: they may not change their pedagogy enough, in the face of changed demographics, or they may change it in the wrong way. Tushnet calls these two reactions the pathology of resistance and the pathology of intellectual collapse. Affirmative action leads to student bodies with widely varied backgrounds and teachers should take this into account in structuring their courses. Different cultural references will be necessary to make points in class. Different sorts of intellectual abilities will have to be recognized and cultivated. Teachers should rework their classes in order to better serve their new students.

Sharon Rush (Chapter 13) sees affirmative action as creating tensions between women and men, people of color and whites, and insiders and outsiders. Nonetheless, she considers affirmative action to be justified by the inroads it makes into the hegemonic power of traditionally privileged groups. Affirmative action remedies past discrimination, promotes diversity, and provides services to underrepresented minorities by giving their leaders access to the academy. To worry, as some do, about the "innocent white victims" of affirmative action obscures the real harm done to people of color and women by past discrimination as well as its continuing effects. Moreover, rejected white male applicants retain their many other privileges. Rush advocates a positive definition of affirmative action that would recognize the importance of "investing" in women and people of color, who will soon make up a majority of workers in our society. Affirmative action can advance equal citizenship and participation only if we remove the stigma associated with affirmative action policies and their beneficiaries. Diversity must be taken into account, and protected. "Colorblindness" hurts people of color and is socially defeating.

Robert Fullinwider (Chapter 14) also supports affirmative action and proposes techniques for changing the attitudes of the displaced majority. Nonetheless, Fullinwider suggests that some public defenses of affirmative action may be counterproductive. Nothing is gained, he argues, by denying that those harmed by affirmative action are "innocent victims." Rather than let the costs of undoing our national history of discrimination fall on the backs of a few more or less randomly-placed individuals, proponents of affirmative action should promote policies that spread costs equally across society. Nor should affirmative action be presented as a matter of "desert." Affirmative action serves social goals, and those who fail to benefit are not "undeserving," simply poorly placed. Making it a question of personal merit creates unnecessary conflicts. When community-wide cost-sharing is not possible, those who do bear the cost will do so more cheerfully if they are not told that they deserve their fate. To see oneself as sacrificing as a citizen for the common good is much more palatable than to suffer as a white male for the corporate sins of a displaced elite.

Examining the ethical basis of university policies brings to light some of the unexamined assumptions that drive academic decision-making. Many of these seem inappropriate in an era of increased cultural pluralism, and student and faculty diversity. But despite their diverse perspectives, the contributors to this volume found consensus on several fundamental questions of academic ethics. All valued discourse and the

search, if not always for "truth," at least for a shared understanding to serve as the basis for a sense of academic community and common purpose.

Diversity may be valuable and inevitable as part of our common search for truth and social justice, but the common goal remains to give diversity meaning and maintain the community and good will that make rational discourse possible.