

One Coin Obverse and Reverse: Teaching and Research

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We stand now more than a decade into the national conversation about the “crisis” of higher education. At this point it is fair to say that something of a consensus has emerged around a few central principles, namely: (1) excellence in undergraduate teaching requires to be re-emphasized and deepened into a controlling norm of university community; (2) teaching and research excellence need to be envisioned as reciprocal rather than competitive; (3) shared governance must be redefined to safeguard its centrality in the face of exigent standards of public accountability; (4) demands for public accountability will increase rather than recede; and (5) colleges and universities must accommodate an environment of evolving social, economic, and technological demands without sacrificing autonomy.

In the face of this impressive and well-documented orthodoxy may not a stray, contrarian voice be raised in the defense of the ivory tower and its unchanging central mission? I hope this may be so, lest the consensus of reform refigures the details of higher education at the cost of higher education itself. That is the danger implicit in neglecting the fact that education’s central task is to address ignorance, that is a more powerful rationale than the work of assimilating to cultural expectations. At the same time and unfortunately much of the evolved consensus aims to accomplish the latter, albeit without disparaging but nonetheless imperiling the former. To take the most powerful example, Jonathan Cole’s “learning communities clearly preserve the work of addressing ignorance as an organizing conception. At the same time, however, the specific reforms grafted onto this stock do not clarify the continuing relevance of age-old concerns intrinsic to this work.

The following reflections invite reconsideration of what works and doesn’t work in higher education. That goal leads to a contrarian view of some practices that have been called into question in the general discussion of the “crisis.” I suggest that some expenditures now considered wasteful are not so, that some conceptions of discursive community actually fall short of producing one, that some organizational principles in the research university at least work to undermine the goal, and that in some respects what is familiarly regarded as intellectual arrogance is a necessary shield of inquiry.

Jean de la Fontaine defended the moral fable as “making men better.” In the fable called “Education” he described this as the work of cultivating their specific and intrinsic excellences as opposed to the work of encouraging their inclinations (which are merely responses to momentary temptations). Universities address ignorance to the same end, to cultivate specific and intrinsic excellences. For that reason, the single, unchallenged piety of higher education is the ubiquity of ignorance. Every learner presents herself as ignorance awaiting assault. The unique character of this piety is that it invites attack rather than worship. Accordingly, the discursive community it fosters will be characterized less by the saccharine characteristics of tolerance and respect for others (though these belong) than by the robust, negative values of skepticism, redundancy, and remoteness (from the urgencies of generalized desire).

Importance of the Negative Values

Although we have come to describe the university exclusively in terms of positive virtues (curiosity, intelligence, free inquiry, charity, etc), the negative values play the critical role of di-

recting its essential functions. They are the means to the ends that do, indeed, give rise to more positive virtues as their consequences.

It is skepticism about every piety – and all the prejudices with which learners enter their vocations – that produces the motivation to penetrate to the sources and true bearings of things. As such the discursive community is better fostered wherever skepticism is practiced as a right – expected – rather than as the mere force of an extraordinary personality. To that end, the university can not go too far in support of skepticism. If the United States is generally regarded as the apogee of political progress, let it be challenged by radical inquiry into its foundations. If Martin Luther King, Jr. is universally embraced as a prophet, encourage every doubt of his wisdom. These are the moments from which universities crop their glories.

Nor can such moments be so generally enjoyed without healthy doses of redundancy. For it takes different voices parsing Shakespeare to scare up meaningful discussion of the true bearings of his work. Learners must confront choices at every step of their inquiry in order seriously to feel the challenge of skepticism. Where one seminar in Shakespeare is good, two will always be better. The industrial model of reducing all processes to the fewest productive motions is inappropriate to higher education. Economies are imposed on universities by necessities. But a smarter choice is to calculate the fewer areas in which an institution can concentrate meaningful redundancies rather than to seek universal coverage of all areas of inquiry by unique iterations. Better Shakespeare done well than everything done poorly! Our current consensus drives us in the latter direction, thus universally sapping the soul of education rather than heightening the excellences that could well be differentially accomplished in different institutions.

So, too, it goes without saying that the university that is not going to serve every conceivable purpose (satisfy every putative stakeholder) – one that recognizes that to “make men better” in a few ways serves than better than the commitment merely to “serve men better” – must benefit from a shield against the pressure to indulge every popular passion. There is no better shield than remoteness. Remoteness further serves the purpose of protecting the society from the robust conversations that must characterize a properly skeptical academy. Moreover, the faculty who must engender these conversations benefit from being called to account only by them that share in their vocation and are immediately affected by it. The true learning community distinguishes among learners primarily by the length of their terms within the community. Call them customers or stakeholders if we must, but they are all really disciples, for whom a special asylum – a gilded exile – has been created.

Gilding the Ivory

Most of the questions raised in the current atmosphere of crisis challenge us to defend the cost of conducting higher education in the manner it requires to be effective. Rather than to embrace cost-cutting as a principle (as opposed to a necessity), higher education needs an articulate defense of the ivory tower – one that can make manifest why even the ivory needs gilding.

To this end we begin by noticing that the defense of tenure on the basis of academic freedom fails to hit the mark. While tenure may incidentally foster a degree of candor, insofar as we mean by it to protect faculty from external accountability for opinions expressed, it concedes too much – namely, that the audience of academic discourse lies beyond the learning community. And insofar as we mean to protect faculty from one another, not only does tenure commonly fail to deliver, but it assumes a learning community in which vocation – the moral relation in which disciples stand to one another – inadequately structures their interactions.

On the other hand, where tenure represents a specific economic trade-off in which faculty opt for long-term gains over higher, short-term gains, tenure works (functionally securing a desirable remoteness and a stable community of discourse). That is, we must pay something to entice the needed, long-term members of the learning community to participate, and tenure is the price that we fittingly pay.

The economic defense of tenure presupposes, of course, that decisions here are made in the market place – at the margin – and that, accordingly, compensation ought to reflect the price pressures that prevail in the market. Thus, not only ought faculty to be enticed into the ivory tower, but that should be done by means of relatively competitive and hence, richer, compensation. As noted above, tenure is one element of that enhanced richness. Naturally, in such circumstances performance reviews (every contract has two sides) would be normal.

Similarly, if redundancy is a key value, it will follow that the cost must be accepted. While it is true that one person can teach Shakespeare to a single class of forty students, the gilding that will offer two classes of twenty students more surely serves the mission to “make men better.” It provides the means more surely to constitute the learning community. The competition of ideas within the academy is necessary apart from competition of goods within the marketplace.

Finally, the operational aspects of the university must perform consistently with the goal in view. Since the university – the learning community – is not designed as a place to repair for momentary consumption or use, thence to return to the comforts of home, it must be so built as to make it possible for people to be at home within it. Conversations that spill from class room into “living room” do so only where adequate spaces for living are maintained. It requires capital expenditures and conscious design to maintain such spaces – just as it does to assure that class rooms harbor rather than obstruct conversations.

Auxiliary resources will be no less affected. In an era in which it becomes increasingly clear that the library must benefit from clear-headed thinking to fulfill its central role in this large mission, not only must money be spent on “information technologies” that capture the function of libraries less dependent on central housing, but the evolving role of the whole library as a “special collection” will necessitate more spending. As the “circulating” function of the library migrates more and more to electronic and bookstore forums, the library will focus more and more on the unique uses that benefit from central housing. Designed interactions with specially valued text sources play a special role in higher education. More and more the entire library must serve as only smaller special collections departments have served before, intensifying the use but augmenting the costs. This gilding is part of building the tower itself.

The Future University

The learning community built on the foregoing model offers a distinctive characteristic in the context of current conversations: there emerges no viable distinction between teaching and research. Teaching and research are not merely reciprocal but identical in this model. For the particular discourse privileged in this model demands the one no less than the other. To be sure, certain “industrial,” “assembly line” approaches present in the research university are excluded from the discussion in these terms (even in equipment dependent technological areas of research and study). But that is just another way to say that research universities must avoid the category error that holds, whatever a university performs is intrinsic to the mission of a university.

When we try to identify every component activity of the university – Therbligizing – as a key to dealing with the present crisis, we end by demystifying teaching (treating it as no more

than one function among others). That is what leads us to imagine that it is separable from research. When, instead, we reason from the central mission, we gain indirectly the power to distinguish essential from non-essential activities (which is not to say that non-essential activities, from accelerators to zoospheres, are not of value). The upshot of this observation is modestly to suggest that different management principles may be appropriate for functions truly different. In the larger business organization that is the university, it may be appropriate to distinguish meaningfully the educational from the industrial endeavors. When we have done so, we will finally have arrived at a true understanding of the distinction between teaching and research in the university: obverse and reverse of the single coin, education.

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