

ACADEMIC DUTY



DONALD KENNEDY

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❁ DUTY ❁

Donald Kennedy

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PREFACE

IN 1993, after I had left the presidency of Stanford University and rejoined the faculty, I decided to offer a seminar for doctoral students who were planning academic careers. Over the two years during which the seminar was offered, the students in it responded to (and in many cases raised) and debated a range of issues pertaining to higher education and to their own places in it. Their energy, commitment, and intellect were inspiring, and gave me confidence in the future of higher education. At the same time, their lack of familiarity with the organization of the university and with the kinds of personal and professional challenges they were likely to face was troubling. I found myself writing a series of essays on some of these: teaching and how success at teaching can be evaluated; ethical problems in reviewing the work of others; research and how it is supported; outside commitments; and even research misconduct.

Working with the students on these issues persuaded me that a broader audience of prospective academics might benefit from what we were trying to do together. That conviction was deepened by an experience during the second year in which the seminar was offered. The students decided to prepare a questionnaire for advanced doctoral candidates about their experiences and their perceived readiness for their own academic duties. The early results, from about seventy Stanford students (a sample since expanded greatly at other institutions), showed that accompanying a high level of confidence about their futures as research scholars was a disturbing

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uncertainty and confusion about teaching, institutional governance, and other dimensions of an academic career.

During that period, public concern about higher education was growing, in part because of well-publicized issues such as racial conflict, intercollegiate athletic scandals, and research misconduct, but also because of deeper misgivings about cost and quality. If the future professoriate is uncertain about the purposes and organization of the university, how can one expect that the public patrons of higher education will be more knowledgeable? And if they don't understand the university and its duty, how can they support it?

So what began as a set of notes for a class of academic aspirants metamorphosed into a book about universities. It therefore reflects some of the concerns I had about my first audience, and in response I have tried to engage future faculty members with a vision of academic duty that includes the responsibilities to put students first and to restore the values of institutional commitment and loyalty. To these was added a larger and more difficult task: to convey to a broader public some of the complexity of the modern university and the difficulty of the challenges it faces.

Although I have tried to deal candidly with some shortcomings in contemporary higher education, I hope I communicate no discouragement with the enterprise. On the contrary, I think the modern American university is a real triumph; it is, with all its shortcomings, like Churchill's democracy. The avalanche of recent alma-mater trashing in popular literature has offered little by way of serious diagnosis, and nothing at all of cure. A more positive and far more thoughtful effort, Henry Rosovsky's *The University: An Owner's Manual*, treats the way in which universities are run. My own aim is to write primarily at, about, and for members of the faculty: their central role in the institution's mission, the way they relate to its legal owners and managers, and their responsibility to students.

The theme I have chosen—academic duty—is the counterpart of academic freedom, a concept endlessly raised for discussion in the university. Little is said about duty, partly because faculty work is relatively uncodified; in a sense, universities are societies without rules. They nevertheless perform rather well, but much of what goes on behind the walls is deeply mysterious to those outside. The missing information amounts to a lesion in accountability, which I think has much to do with the rising chorus of national discontent with higher education. The best remedy is sympathetic

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understanding, and I hope the reader will have more of that at the end of this book than at the beginning.

To the future professoriate, I will say only that you are entering a life full of the most interesting challenges—and the most important mission that can be found in a modern society. The university is above all else about opportunity: the opportunity to give others the personal and intellectual platform they need to advance the culture, to preserve life, and to guarantee a sustainable human future. Could anything possibly matter more than that?

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM, ACADEMIC DUTY

THE PHRASE “academic freedom” is heard so often around colleges and universities that it has come to resemble a mantra. Though the term has only been in use since the early twentieth century, it seems as if it has always been with us. As easily understood as it is important, academic freedom refers to the insulation of professors and their institutions from political interference. It asserts the claim that in the academy more than in other domains of American life, heterodox notions and unconventional behavior deserve special protection.

At various points in the twentieth century, that kind of protection has proved essential. During the outbreak of anti-Communist sentiment in the early 1950s, committees of the Congress, especially those chaired by William Jenner in the House and Joseph McCarthy in the Senate, put great pressure on universities to fire faculty for past membership in organizations thought to be “un-American,” that is, sympathetic to Communist aims. Presidents and governing boards met that pressure with varying courage, but the tradition of academic freedom lent strength to the capacity of universities to resist it. Thus to academic men and women that tradition protects a treasured space for intellectual experiment—treasured in part because it is safe.

In practice such freedom extends further, permitting unusually creative people to lead unusually creative lives. Indeed, academic freedom connotes loose structure and minimal interference. There are no time clocks and

few regulations about the direction of effort or even about the locations at which it is to take place. So distinct is the academy from other workplaces that we have developed an informal vocabulary to describe its separation: we call it the ivory tower, and we call everything else the real world.

Academic freedom has a counterpart, academic duty, that is much more seldom used. Democratic societies such as ours regard these two as opposite sides of the same coin. John Gardner put it well when he said, of the symmetry between individual freedom and communitarian obligation, "Liberty and duty, freedom and responsibility: that's the deal."

That, indeed, is the deal. Why, then, when we talk so freely about academic freedom, does academic duty sound so much less idiomatic? The difference lies at the heart of an important paradox. On the one hand, higher education in America has never been stronger or more successful. It serves more people, and better, than it ever has. It sets an international standard that brings students here from all over. It supports the strongest university-based research system in the world. And it is thought by many to be an innovation incubator essential to national economic progress. Yet public criticism of higher education has become increasingly more strident. The assault comes from various sources, Left as well as Right. It sounds a variety of themes: the failure of science and policy studies to provide answers we desperately need (why isn't AIDS a thing of the past, and why is K-12 education in bad shape?); inadequacies in the quality of undergraduate instruction (why can't Susie's calculus teacher speak English as well as Susie can?); failure to respond adequately to economic stringency (corporations everywhere are downsizing; why isn't productivity in higher education improving?). The attacks are being felt, and morale in the academy is as low as those inside it can remember.

The evidence suggests a kind of dissonance between the purposes our society foresees for the university and the way the university sees itself. For although the freedoms necessary for teaching and scholarly work are understood and reasonably well accepted, the counterbalancing obligations are vague and even obscure. Put baldly, there is confusion about what is owed: by the university to society, by faculty to students, by administrators to both. Academic freedom is a widely shared value; academic duty, which ought to count for as much, is mysterious.

It is no less a mystery within the walls of the ivory tower. Little is said about duty to new faculty members; little is to be found in the academic

literature about the nature of faculty responsibilities. It is part of the tradition of freedom, perhaps, that in higher education there are no job descriptions, no annual performance evaluations. But one result is that expectations of the professoriate are murky, and public understanding murkier still.

As a result, people outside the academy have few criteria by which to judge it, leading quite naturally to the suspicion that there is simply too much freedom and too little direction. Perhaps as a consequence, *accountability* is a word increasingly linked with higher education: the public wants to know more about how the store is being minded and is less satisfied with reassuring statements about product quality.

Despite the doubts that are surfacing today, more Americans are receiving college educations than ever before. Universities and colleges, and their faculties and even their leaders, continue to enjoy solid respect in comparison with other institutions and other professions. More people are paying more to educate their children (or, increasingly, themselves!). The value of postsecondary education, measured in incremental lifetime earnings, rose during the 1980s to create the largest gap in history between those who are college-educated and those who are not.

Higher education today is challenged to fulfill a new and staggering burden. Always expected to make young people more skilled, more cultured, and more thoughtful, it now is seen as the motive power for regional economic improvement and even for international competitiveness. It is looked to for research underlying everything from better health care to military preparedness. And we are disappointed if it does not provide us with cultural inspiration and, on weekends, athletic entertainment.

Higher education, in short, is woven into our lives. We depend on it for all sorts of things, and we want to believe in it. When it fails us, we become disappointed; and when it costs too much, we become angry. What is this extraordinary institution that matters so much, and how did it come to be all these different things?

The American system of higher education is full of paradoxes. For some, "college" is a place of memory: it is where one grew up, learned about life, fell in love, and, perhaps, first thought great thoughts. For others it is a locus for economic aspiration, where one first confronts the hard task of preparing for a profession. For still others it is a center for national intellectual life, a place where our culture develops new shoots. And of course

in many of us these different portraits are all mixed together, with other, more subtle elements added. Our perceptions of what institutions of higher education are thus depend on our personal experience as well as on a more detached vision of how society should work and what we want our children to have.

We have so many different ideas about higher education because the institutions themselves are heterogeneous. There are more than three thousand four-year institutions of higher education in this country. Some grant every possible kind of degree: professional doctorates in law and medicine, higher academic degrees such as the familiar Ph.D. and the less familiar Doctor of Musical Arts, and bachelor's degrees in everything from art history to zoology. Small, highly experimental colleges with a few hundred students exist side-by-side with huge state institutions of more than fifty thousand students. There are evangelical colleges, Catholic colleges, and aggressively nondenominational colleges. Some are "land-grant" institutions—state universities established following the Morrill Act in 1862, and responsible among many other things for agricultural research and extension; some are city colleges supported municipally. Some are strictly technical, others are committed to arts and letters, still others are so comprehensive that they leave out almost nothing. Some, by virtue of location and tradition, serve few minority students; others, like the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, are explicitly intended to serve such students.

No license is required to found and run a college. To be taken seriously, however, an institution of higher education must be accredited. Having accreditation means that an institution is operating within the established criteria of a voluntary accrediting association, and that compliance is checked through regular visits by committees of academics from other institutions.

Fully accredited institutions have formed consortia to pursue collective purposes. A suggestion of their extraordinary heterogeneity can be gotten from the names of these associations, most of which were located in a large building at One Dupont Circle in Washington, a location convenient for occasional visits to congressional or administration figures who need advice about American colleges and universities. The most prestigious is the Association of American Universities (AAU), a group of about sixty research universities whose members grant nearly three-quarters of all U.S. professional doctoral degrees. Private institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and MIT belong; so do the great state universities like Michigan, California,

and Illinois. The American Council on Education (ACE), a much larger organization, is an umbrella for institutions of all kinds, as is the American Association for Higher Education. NASULGC, one of the world's more unfortunate acronyms, stands for the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. It includes the top land-grant state institutions that would also be AAU members, and others (Oregon State and Kansas State, for example) that would not. The Association of State Colleges and Universities takes in the comprehensive public institutions that are generally non-Ph.D.-granting: the California State University system, and Bowling Green and Kent State in Ohio, would be examples. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities serves the private sector, from AAU members down to very small liberal arts colleges. Community colleges have a vigorous association as well.

Given this vast array of institutions, it is small wonder that the public has so many different perceptions of higher education. It is difficult for people to wrap a simple, unified set of values around CalTech, Montana State, the City University of New York, and Mount Saint Mary's. The ambivalence with which Americans have always viewed higher education also helps to explain these varied perceptions: on the one hand, higher education is seen as a valued avenue for upward social mobility, but on the other hand it appears elitist, "stuck-up." In the romance of higher education, Frank Merriwell and Horatio Alger accomplish a kind of fusion. Yet there is an ingrained, populist suspicion of too much learning. Its early reflections are found in the cartoon images of the absent-minded professor and the haughty student who cannot converse with ordinary people. This suspicion is part of contemporary folklore: of the college baseball player thrown into the major leagues, Casey Stengel says, "Say he's educated, and he can't throw strikes. Then you don't leave him in there too long." Even those of us who are devoted to environmental biology can recognize a hint of this theme in Louis Agassiz's famous aphorism "Study Nature, Not Books."

That higher learning is, in our national tradition, at once admired and suspect helps to explain the contemporary paradox that higher education is more successful than it has ever been yet at the same time subject to extraordinarily intense critical scrutiny. The successes are easily summarized. Universities in the United States attract students from all over the world for graduate and professional study, and American parents are now preparing their sons and daughters for the college admissions race with

such formidable zeal that a cottage industry of consultants and tutoring services has grown up to help them. But the criticisms are complex and multiple, and their nature and severity need close examination if we are to understand this apparent failure of academic duty.

Tuitions are too high; racial tension is leading to segregation; faculty aren't paying attention to undergraduates; universities and colleges are loosely managed, soft on sexual harassment, and unable to deal with what appears to be an epidemic of research misconduct; athletic scandals and campus drinking are out of hand; political correctness is an epidemic. And that's just the short list.

The American health care system in the late 1970s was described by one observer as "doing better but feeling worse." The same could be said of higher education today. During the 1980s, for example, media accounts of racial incidents on college campuses were so common and so prominent that many Americans without direct experience assumed that constant tension among African-American, Hispanic, and white students was the rule rather than the exception. I remember being asked by visitors to the Stanford campus during this period whether all our minority students lived by choice in separate dormitories (only a tiny fraction chose ethnic "theme" houses, and these by rule were less than 50 percent minority). Often I was asked whether "they" ever talked with nonminority students. When I informed the visitors that the frequency of interracial dating approximated what one would expect on the basis of random collision, they were astonished. Television and the newspapers had led them to believe that the campus must be about to explode in a race riot. At its height, the media frenzy over race on campus caused the Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson to suggest that it might actually be a good time to shoot the messenger!

Academic misconduct is regularly billed as a common problem in university research. Sexual harassment charges, especially if they involve a faculty member, receive front-page scrutiny; that is, unless they are shown to be without foundation, in which case the exoneration appears on page seventeen. The media have promoted "political correctness" on campus into a national mantra. One analysis of media coverage shows that attention to such topics has migrated among different media venues, with extensive recycling of such past stories as the famous revision of the Stanford "Western Culture" curriculum, discussed below.¹

Even relatively narrow, rather technical matters often invite unexpected

reactions from the press. In 1994 the Academic Senate at Stanford had an extended debate about certain provisions of the grading system. For some years the university, like a number of other institutions, had allowed students to retake courses they had failed and substitute the second grade on their transcripts. In the view of some, this practice encouraged students to take courses outside their areas of confidence, to take some risks in the interest of breadth. Others felt that it permitted students to “game” the evaluation process. For some reason the policy became a symbol of grade inflation, even though in fact it contributed little to that phenomenon. The Senate decided in the end to abolish the rule and return to the earlier practice of letting every grade stand in the record. To the astonishment of the Stanford participants, who thought the matter worth arguing about but hardly earth-shaking, the action made national news. The *New York Times* greeted it with an editorial notable for its harsh and hectoring tone. At last, readers were told, the coddling of students was being stopped, and the outside world would be able to make sound judgments about their relative worth.

The *New York Times*'s position reveals one aspect of the public mistrust of higher education. Whereas those within the system generally believe that their mission is to produce graduates who can think well and work effectively, and who are able to understand, analyze, and reflect upon their culture and upon the natural world, much of the world outside sees higher education as a credentialing device: a way of estimating, for employment or other purposes, the comparative worth of individuals. Of course there are times at which these goals are not in conflict. But when they are, those who deliver education and those who are its patrons and eventual consumers suddenly find themselves at cross purposes.

This collision of values is related to the more celebrated clash over what students should learn about great works and great ideas—in particular, whether non-Western works should be added to the traditional canon of “great books.” In the 1980s a long and complicated book by the late Allan Bloom entitled *The Closing of the American Mind* ushered in a powerful conservative case against the introduction of non-Western works. Supported by the public enthusiasm of Bloom's Chicago colleague Saul Bellow, the book was widely reviewed and purchased, though perhaps less widely read. It bemoaned the lack of a program of general education based on the great works of Western culture, and occupied the intellectual right wing

of a debate that soon became both more widespread and more political. The combustible material for its spread was provided by another, earlier decision by the Stanford faculty.

That decision, made in 1987, mandated several changes in a required course for freshmen. The course itself had been through at least two previous incarnations—a trip that in itself tells us something about the history of higher education. Once called “Western Civilization,” it was basically a course in European history and culture. During tumult of the late 1960s it was discarded, only to return a decade later with the title “Western Culture.” No longer a single course, it featured several tracks: a Great Works course, a history course, a course with a science and technology emphasis, and so on. The tracks were coordinated in that all had to draw from a common reading list, which was organized rather like an old-fashioned Chinese restaurant menu. The A list contained fifteen works; the B list was much longer. The faculty responsible for a particular track had to use all the books on A and could pick from among the B list of entries. The idea, only partly successful, was to give the entire class a common core of the most significant readings, and thus stimulate conversation among students from the various tracks during dinner in the dormitories. (The kindest thing that can be said about this notion is that it is wistful; even the best and the brightest have limited appetites for thoughtful discussion during the ten-minute calorie race in the dining hall.)

The changes proposed and debated during the academic year 1987–88 were actually rather modest. They included a new title for the course (“Culture, Ideas, and Values”), an added track, new methods for focusing on issues of ethnicity and gender, and a reduction from fifteen to eight in the number of readings on the A list. The removed readings appeared on the B list, and that change occurred in response to pleading on the part of the teaching faculty that fifteen readings common to all tracks simply placed too many constraints on the design of their courses.

The process was entirely typical of what goes on—and should go on—in academic institutions. Two faculty committees studied the problem and made recommendations to the Senate. In five lengthy sessions, the entire Senate debated the proposals and made compromises. The ultimate resolution passed resoundingly and was enthusiastically supported by the teaching faculty in the program.

But to the surprise of many at Stanford, the debate created a national

media firestorm well before the final action of the faculty. The *Wall Street Journal*, of course, published acidic editorials. The secretary of education, William Bennett, joined the fray; he charged Stanford with having succumbed to coercion, on the grounds that minority students had protested the old program and demonstrated in support of the changes. A charge that has found its way into the academic muckraking literature asserts that at a critical point in the decision the Reverend Jesse Jackson led a group of demonstrators shouting, “Hey, hey, ho, ho . . . Western Culture’s got to go.”²

Newsweek headlined its story on the Western Culture debate “Goodnight, Socrates.” Nearly every major metropolitan newspaper in the United States commented on the subject, and on the op-ed page George Will, Charles Krauthammer, and others were weighing in against the changes while Ellen Goodman, Amy Schwartz, and others countered in favor of them.

From the president’s office, I found the campus debate an inspiring example of how academic change is—and should be—debated and eventually adopted. Surely there can be no more vital question for us than the one at stake here: what should be the common intellectual property of educated men and women? By contrast, the public discussion seemed superficial and often misleading.

Curricular change became an object of intense external concern because of a deep relationship between knowledge and values. Many of the objections to the new course, which were expressed with special vigor by the neoconservative pundits who gave it so much attention, had to do with the fear that Western beliefs and values, and not just a reading list, were being pruned. “Cultural relativism,” a phrase used by many of the critics, reflected a fear that if we give too much attention to the non-Western elements that have helped shape contemporary American culture, we will be suggesting that the values represented by them have equal status. Perhaps the most extreme form of this view came from Bernard Lewis, an emeritus professor at Princeton. In the *Wall Street Journal* he wrote: “If Western Culture does indeed go, a number of other things would go with it and others would come in their place.”³ Among the “other things” he listed slavery, the harem, and the loss of political freedom.

People want guidance in developing their own knowledge. In the early part of the twentieth century leading academic centers, including Harvard and the University of Chicago, gained much attention for publishing anthologies of Great Works for public consumption. The same zeal for pack-

aged knowledge supported a generation of door-to-door salesmen, who readily persuaded earnest parents to impoverish themselves so that their children could have the latest encyclopedia. Now the desire to Know What One Needs to Know is even more intense. We live in the information explosion, and to know that essential knowledge has finite boundaries is deeply reassuring. And so, when elements of a canon appear to be discarded, a certain insecurity sets in. We have seen it before: with Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* the unity of natural philosophy was suddenly made obsolete. The reaction from the academy and the educated public, as John Dewey has pointed out, was harsher than that from the pulpit. The need for knowledge boundaries is even more powerful now. When the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) publishes a list of Things to Know it is seized upon eagerly. And when a leading university opens the door to new kinds of knowledge in a required freshman course, it makes news—discomfiting news.

Indeed, change itself is often a source of public disaffection. Most often, it is not change in the curriculum or in educational programs that generates the concern. Rather, the concern results from the perception that the very role of the university, or the way it is being governed, or the way in which it relates to other social institutions, has been changed in some fundamental way.

Beginning in the 1970s the public view of all these relationships underwent a dramatic revision. The traditional image of the university has been that of ivory tower—a place removed from the hubbub of marketplace life in which great thoughts, even unthinkable thoughts, can be developed and argued without serious interference. Part of the price for this immunity was the very disengagement of the university from the world of commerce: the former was seen as high-minded, austere, almost seminary-like in its eschewal of profit and glory. That image was able to survive even the postwar transition into high-powered science and technology—so long as the practitioners asked little beyond support for their work and reputation within the craft.

But then several things happened. As government resources became more limited, higher education became a more aggressive claimant for its share of discretionary domestic expenditures. In the search for more research funds and more student aid, America's colleges and universities became more proficient lobbyists, and as a result lost some of the luster