

INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Editor's Note: Provost Gilbert R. Whitaker Jr. addressed Senate Assembly Sept. 26 in Rackham Amphitheater. The following is the text of his presentation titled "Intellectual Independence in an Era of Accountability."

In a recent issue of *Change* magazine, Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, said, "Universities enjoyed their autonomy historically as a result of their ethical conduct, and now, for the first time in American history, it may be said that they could be in the process of losing some of it for the same reason."

Though his views echo theirs to some extent, no one would place Kerr in the same camp as the numerous critics of higher education seeking to destroy the autonomy that he seeks to save. You are all familiar with our more hostile critics, for example, Thomas Sowell who writes:

'Professors who don't show up on time for class, or who have obviously not bothered to prepare a coherent lecture, or don't answer a student's questions either clearly or with civility, all need to be exposed to the light of day. So do the ideologues for whom the classroom is a place for political propaganda and the recruiting of disciples.'

or Martin Anderson, who argues:

'It has been quite a while since anyone spoke of the world of American Higher Education as a place of integrity. For good reason. Within that world, integrity is dead, having succumbed to the death of a thousand cuts. . . . The death of integrity in the heart of higher education is the root cause of the educational troubles which afflict us today.'

My goal for these remarks is to stimulate discussion about some very serious issues underlying these concerns that bear on us and our students, since, at a time when there is a vital need for considerable shared understandings about the challenges which face higher education, we find ourselves engaged in numerous disputes about lesser issues.

My title for today's remarks reflects two values, each important, each the subject of considerable controversy, and each vital to our future as an institution of distinction in the discovery, preservation, and application of knowledge. As important as these values are to our future, we have too often viewed their meaning and importance either as self-evident or as no one's business but our own.

These values are academic freedom and accountability. The phrase "intellectual freedom" or more often "academic freedom" is very important to us in the university but it is little understood or supported outside the university. Yet it has a long history and is, I believe, the determining value for the contribution of scholars to society. The freedom to carry the implications of an idea to wherever they lead us opens up the path to discovery. The freedom to challenge "received wisdom" or "common sense" is often not welcome yet it is that freedom which leads to new discoveries, to new knowledge, and to the improvement of current ways of doing things. It may not lead to ultimate "truth" because one of the implications of academic freedom is that others have the duty to challenge those new discoveries, but it is valuable in and of itself. That process—discovery, challenge, discovery—is the essence of the research mission of the University and should, I believe, permeate it at every level: faculty activities, graduate and professional studies, and undergraduate education.

But intellectual freedom is never unconstrained. There are rules which, if followed, improve the process. An example of a constraining rule is the requirement of truth-telling, that is, complete disclosure of “experimental results,” even those which don’t fully support the claims made, and fair and complete identification of the contribution of others to the process of discovery whether by prior work or by one’s students, staff, or colleagues. You can, I am sure, fill in other “rules” such as the careful protection of the rights of human subjects. Failure to understand and observe these constraints often leads to calls for additional restraints on intellectual freedom.

The first glimmers of a notion of intellectual freedom were part of the early history of universities when their mission was to prepare “men” for the clergy. Intellectual freedom became an objective for universities in order for them to avoid the intrusion of the state into the domain of the church. Although, there were many failures leading to the execution of those “academics” whose findings the state found inconvenient, over time this concept grew into one of intellectual freedom. Even in those early days, freedom from state interference did not necessarily mean freedom from the “patrons” of the universities, that is, from the elders of the church who provided the resources to sustain the academics.

This concept came into its own in the United States in the 19th century. The fostering of new ideas and new ways of thinking were derived from the Enlightenment. They were later buttressed by the social transformations of the 20th century, to the point where the traditions of tenure and academic freedom became articulated and understood as essential aspects of academic life. One of the implications of this was the realization that freedom implies responsibility. As the Harvard Law Review once defined it:

‘Academic freedom is that aspect of intellectual liberty concerned with the peculiar institutional needs of the academic community. The claim that scholars are entitled to particular immunity from ideological coercion is premised on a conception of the university as a community of scholars engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, collectively and individually, both within the classroom and without, and on the pragmatic conviction that the invaluable service rendered by the university to society can be performed only in an atmosphere entirely free from administrative, political or ecclesiastical constraints on thought in expression.’

Viewed this way, academic freedom is not a right that is lodged in an individual faculty member but a set of arrangements that are derived from the university’s obligation to society. Academic freedom is one of the preconditions for the university to perform its social function of the pursuit of knowledge. When that social function is not performed adequately, it can be, and often is, curtailed by the society around it.

Today we in higher education are hearing from our “patrons”—call them customers, clients, constituents, or supporters—concerns about accountability. These concerns are multidimensional in nature, arising from perceived conflicts of interest, conflicts of commitment, and failures to hold ourselves to high standards in those activities for which we accept or seek societal support such as scholarship and undergraduate education. Graduate education is also being challenged.

It is always comforting to say that our critics are wrong and if the administration would only inform them adequately that they are wrong, they would understand and go away. Indeed, administrators from the faculty ranks do spend considerable energy in explaining the merits of intellectual freedom to the patrons of higher education, as well as the importance of what we do, and sometimes we even have some success. Administrative buffering of scholarly activity from the constant slings and arrows from outside the academy is very important but generally unappreciated work. Henry Rosovsky, former Dean of Harvard College described this activity as “... a major responsibility of academic administrators. They face the difficult, nearly impossible assignment of maintaining the delicate balance between outside pressures and internal ideals.”

If we are to do our jobs, though, we must accept the fact that maintaining this balance between outside pressures and internal ideals is a two-way street. We must also be willing to explain to scholars the demands for accountability that come from our patrons. That is no less important and no less difficult than explaining the importance of intellectual freedom to our patrons.

I believe that broader faculty awareness of the reasons behind the calls for accountability from those we serve is essential for restoring the confidence of our patrons in the value and the quality of our work. However, faculty understanding of these reasons without appropriate action will not prevent further intrusions into the realm of intellectual freedom.

Last fall I addressed you on another set of value issues that are related to today's issues. I spoke then about free speech in an academic community but also the need for respect for others. I also called on this body and the community to address (in other arenas) the issues I raised and I was pleased to see that many such discussions of fundamental academic values took place in a variety of forums last year. I would be remiss if I did not suggest the need to continue that dialogue because our own informed self-discipline is considerably more valuable to the process of openly challenging ideas than is the "code," which was suspended last fall. I am not asking that it be reinstated.

Today these value issues have taken on an even more vital aspect. We are told that we must have conflict of interest policies in place very shortly or suffer the loss of support from two important patrons—the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. These two agencies or patrons fund a great deal of the nation's scientific research as well as our own. Their call for policies dealing with conflicts of interest did not come because of perceived strengths in faculty self-discipline in scholarship; quite the contrary. Other supporters or patrons are calling for increased attention to issues of accountability as well. The governments of several states have interjected such considerations into their relationships with public universities, for example.

It is difficult, indeed I think impossible, to argue that we are not or should not be accountable. Those who supply our patronage are free to withdraw it and do, in fact, withdraw support when they are not satisfied with our performance. I believe that we must be accountable to them as an institution and as individual faculty and administrators.

The challenge of effective accountability is to have the issues formed and articulated by those who best understand the processes and the issues. However, having said that, I don't believe that our saying "trust me" to those outside the University is sufficient. We must, in fact, confront the challenges that we face by affirming to ourselves and the outside world that we are serious and that we accept responsibility for self-governance in the fullest sense. Thus, I believe that in order to maintain the trust of external patrons, we must assure ourselves that we are neither individually nor collectively engaged either in conflicts of interest or conflicts of commitment.

Because we are most knowledgeable about the nature of intellectual work, we are best positioned to address the accountability issues that society is raising. Failure to do so and to do so credibly will inevitably result in someone else doing it for us. Moreover, we have duties to our colleagues and to our students. Failure to meet our obligations in either of these realms will result in dispirited interactions with them and will, ultimately, weaken the University as an academic community.

The proposition that we monitor ourselves is one that does not win universal approval even within the University. Indeed, sometimes we are accused by others of behaving in a way that makes it impossible for any one person or unit to acknowledge failure to exercise accountability. But, as Thomas Paine reminded us, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom most ... must undergo the fatigues of supporting it."

What does this suggest about our responsibility? While we have many dedicated faculty members who labor long and hard on behalf of their students and whose efforts may go unheralded except by a few, we have a few colleagues who do not meet their teaching obligation as adequately as one would like. I receive letters from parents who complain that their upper-class son or daughter can find no one to guide an honors thesis. I have received complaints from graduate students about faculty members who have kept their dissertation chapters for 18 months or more. I have had to meet with a colleague who was only willing to teach class on a single day of the week, a day of his own choosing. I have been informed of a colleague who opted not to assign any written work or examinations in a course but gave all his students As. These ways of behaving are not appropriate or responsible and it is salutary that we acknowledge this.

The institution of tenure may be claimed as a reason not to confront faculty with these issues, but to do so is a misuse of tenure. Tenure was never intended to protect faculty who were not meeting their responsibilities. If we allow our colleagues to use tenure in this way, we run the risk of losing one of our most precious assets. Accountability for our actions as scholars and teachers is in our long-term interest as an academic community.

How might we respond to these challenges? Several possibilities occur to me. One alternative would be to place more emphasis in “codes of conduct” for the academy. But the professions of law and medicine are seeing their codes disintegrate in the face of more regulation. Another alternative would be for there to be an increase in the adversarial relationship between faculty and administration. Other institutions have played out this scenario and it is not clear that either the working environment or the need for accountability has been improved thereby. The adversarial or labor relations approach to self-discipline in the university seems to me to inevitably focus our attention more and more on “rights and privileges” and especially on “rights and privileges” far removed from the vital need for intellectual freedom, which is the touchstone of the highest aspirations of most of us. Unless we devote our attention to the issues of accountability, we will lose more and more of the intellectual freedom, which is the heart and soul of our scholarship. It is also the source of renewal that enriches our teaching, and it is, I believe, the essential element for serving the needs of our patrons best.

Another approach advocated by many is that we become much less “democratic” in our governance procedures and that the administration enforce accountability. I, for one, would not know how to do that and furthermore it seems to me to be only another way of expressing the labor relations approach to governance in the university. Again, I know of no examples where this approach works for greatness in academic institutions.

It behooves us to seek ways together, as an academic community, to be sure we are accepting the responsibilities as well as the rights that academic freedom and tenure bestow upon us. Failure to do so may result, or has already resulted, in a loss in the national standings of higher education. Moreover, if we don’t monitor our own activities more appropriately, our cherished autonomy may be threatened as well.

We face an era of change in higher education: change in the demographics of our faculty, students, and staff; change in the needs of the society that supports us; change in the knowledge base that increases the complexity of scholarship; change in the technology that supports our scholarship and teaching; and change in the financing of our institutions. These rapid and far-reaching changes call for more flexibility in the ability of our institutions to respond as well as the need for more timely response. How do we deal with these challenges yet avoid unproductive and indeed counter-productive confrontations around many issues which are less fundamental to our activities than the twin issues of intellectual freedom and accountability? I believe that we need to lower the level of our rhetoric but increase the seriousness of the subjects of our discourse.

We are, after all, a group of individuals who take pride in our inventiveness in our scholarly endeavors and

also in our commitment to learning, and most of us have considerable pride in our University and its future. These ingredients are a necessary condition for problem-solving and are the basis for continuing dialogue so long as we address the right issues. I was very heartened by the very productive conversations that took place in the recent retreat of deans, officers, and executive committee members. The discussion among us in that retreat was characterized by trust, by civility, and by focused discussion of important topics such as faculty roles throughout their careers, undergraduate education, and the structure and governance of the University. Indeed, I felt that the faculty in the several different groups that I interacted with that morning actually seemed to believe that the administration has the best interests of the institution and its people in mind as it goes about its work, that we would consult extensively as appropriate and, where necessary, we would take rapid actions with less extensive consultation. They also seemed to believe that we would not intrude into their intellectual freedom and indicated a very positive concern for accountability both personally and institutionally. I am hopeful that there will be similar conversations with the Senate Assembly at their retreat later this fall.

Donald Kennedy, in an intriguing article in the Fall 1993 issue of *Daedalus*, an issue devoted to the American research university, suggests three paradigms of institutional development in the face of dramatic change. If his classification is correct, I ask you to consider the approach that might best fit Michigan. Kennedy divides institutions of higher education into three categories:

'The first group of institutions will drift into decisions through the familiar model of peripheral control; distributed faculty responses will essentially set the agenda. In a second group, dramatic new coalitions will be formed between unusually effective leaders and their faculties. These institutions will be the first responders. In a third group, change will come about because trustees and administration recognize—relatively late in the course of the externally-generated crisis—that something must be done. They will take a firm grip, and exert powerful central authority to enforce changes. Because this kind of response is politically possible under conditions of extreme duress, it will occur much later than the second.'

My hope is that Michigan will be among the group of institutions whose faculty and administration work together to deal with the challenges of change. Boldness in facing it head-on will reduce the danger of loss of intellectual freedom precisely because such responsiveness will validate our sense of accountability with our patrons. Moreover, it will do so in a way that builds support externally while simultaneously increasing excitement and vigor internally. I invite the members of Senate Assembly to join the administration not only in dialogue but in seeking those positive future-oriented actions. If we are successful in combining our efforts, it will entice the best faculty and colleagues to join with us in a new era, where the guiding value of intellectual freedom functions as our welcome beacon to the future.

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