May-2015

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol34/iss1/10

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Contentious Compatibility and the Common Good: The University as Servant and Critic in a Democracy

Stephen J. Nelson

On the occasion of his inauguration as president of the University of Michigan in April 1980, Harold Shapiro chose as a title for his address “Critic and Servant: The Role of the University.” His choice was apt. Critic and servant concisely captures the expectations that colleges and universities in America have borne over centuries. From the smallest liberal arts colleges to the major research universities like the institution Shapiro was about to lead, the academy in America has shouldered this burden and performed these functions.

The nation’s higher education institutions are supposed to uplift society and contribute in ways that will better the fortunes of citizens and the nation. At the same time, they are expected to criticize tradition, dogma, and the way things are done, and to advocate for necessary changes regardless of who or what might be offended in the process.

In his address, Shapiro asserted that “[t]he relationship between the modern university and society is very complex and fragile because of the university’s dual role as society’s servant and as its critic.” As a servant, its function is complicated by the fact that society’s current economic and cultural contexts are always changing. “On the other hand, the university has a fundamental responsibility to criticize society’s current arrangements and to construct, entertain, and test alternative ways of organizing society’s institutions, alternative approaches to understanding nature, and alternative visions of society’s values” (Shapiro, Tradition and Change [1987], 112).

That is a tall order. What makes it all work? How is the complexity and fragility of the university’s sway in society navigated so that the critic and servant roles can be filled? How does all this happen, particularly in a democracy that at one and the same time argues for freedom of thought, individuality, and public engagement, all the while having to maintain itself and its public with an aura of security, safety, and stability?

The pivot point for Shapiro is the place where our ideals overlap inside and outside the gates, in our colleges and universities, and in American democracy generally. This place is where Americans share fundamental principles: the use of reason, the free play of ideas and thought, and toleration of differing points of view. Shapiro believes that society’s support for the servant and critic role “has been ultimately sustained by faith in rationalism, faith in knowledge and science, and the resulting notion of human progress” (112), all features that we see repeated in any appraisal of the university’s historic foundations.

The Delicate Balance of the University in a Democracy

College presidents and other commentators have debated at length the purposes of the university in its relationship to American democracy and society. Understandably, they generally agree that the needs of democracy have to be met; that the university, whether public or private, exists in part at the pleasure of society and the state. However, within that overarching goal and expectation, a number of contentious, in some cases mutually exclusive, tensions and controversies inevitably arise.

For example, to what degree is the university an elitist institution, a gateway for those already at the top of society to secure and entrench their positions of control, power, and influence in society? Democracy and democratic values are supposed to champion the common man, equitable access, and the diversity that comes with those aspirations and beliefs. James Burrill Angell, president of the University of Michigan (1871-1909), once described the university as existing to provide an “uncommon education for the common man.” The “common man,” regular folk and citizens, presumably have a meritocratic shot at upward mobility and socioeconomic success in a democracy.
By making students better critics—thoughtful and compassionate, self-interested and public-spirited—we will better serve today’s society and the one to come.

Americans have always pursued democratic ideals in some measure and have been especially concerned about the relationship between their institutions and society. What is considered democratic today may be different from the times when Harvard was founded in the early 1600s. But the emphasis on the concept of democracy in America remains remarkably consistent throughout the centuries since its first college was founded and given the challenges that different eras presented to it.

The nation’s aspirations, especially as a democracy, have always been experimental. Harvard scholar Louis Menand captured that quest in a March 2013 piece in *The New Yorker*: “The ‘Constitution is an experiment, as all life is an experiment’... That is what Lincoln said in the Gettysburg Address; democracy is an experiment the goal of which is to keep the experiment going. The purpose of democracy is to enable people to live democratically. That’s it. Democracy is not a means to something else; there is no higher good that we’re trying as a society to attain” (71).

The academy in America is likewise an experiment, and the basis of its experiment is revealed in its relationship to the nation, to the Republic. Democracy, according to Menand, is the highest good that America can attain. Thus, as the university functions as the nation’s servant and critic, it shapes that aspiration through both its service and its criticism.

Contemporary Realities: The University Confronts Society and the State

American society confronted an unprecedented wave of revolution and clamor in the 1960s and 1970s. Some have characterized these times as new and uniquely dramatic for the academy and society; but were the 1960s that much different from previous eras?

Federal financial support for America’s colleges and universities increased significantly in the wake of World War II. Governmental involvement in terms of financial and budgetary support of the university was a new thing. These dollars came in various forms: the GI Bill; investment in science, engineering and technology spawned by the Cold War and the arms and space races; and support for capital building projects and other financial assistance, including greater aid packages for students. Increasing monetary ties between the government and the academy created complex entanglements that grew by leaps and bounds throughout the 1950s and continued into the mid-1960s.

In addition, tensions between the university and the state heightened alarmingly in the 1960s. The triggers of these tensions were essential American issues, arguments about the fundamental exercise of democracy—the Vietnam War, racial discrimination and civil rights, equality and equal opportunity, women’s rights—and they were debated in the public square, on and off campus.

To a great degree, the loudest of these debates took place on campus, and how they were handled in the Ivory Towers across the country became a focus of media inquiry and popular discussion. The debates came in the form of protest, demonstrations, and teach-ins. Often, these events had the veneer of academic inquiry, but in many cases they were single-sided manifestos designed to promote one point of view against the government, its policies, and its ties to the corporate and industrial complex (especially those that were instrumental to the military and to the war effort). In this unmistakable time of crisis, lines were drawn between the academy and the nation and sides were taken. In some Americans’ minds, universities had become sites of disturbing radicalism, ironically protected by the same governments that sustained them.

As a result, crucial differences developed in the relationship of the Ivory Tower to the surrounding society and nation in the 1960s. Even in this environment and with these pressures at its gates, the university was still applauded by many and encouraged in its role as servant: producer of engineers and
scientists who would help America win the Cold War and the Space Race; educators of the next generation of lawyers and corporate leaders. At the same time, Americans outside the academy had little tolerance for those in the university who criticized and opposed the government, especially on issues of the war and race, and for permitting transgressions against the norms of social and cultural life in the form of unchecked carousing among students.

The passage of time since the mid-1970s has resolved few if any of the problems spawned by the 1960s. Today, the politics of the American university are more coarse, more tense, and more polarized than ever before. In the academy, numerous issues kicked off in the 1960s have persisted as problems and a search for common ground is in danger of failing.

These issues include affirmative action and matters of equity and access; diversity; continual reductions in federal and state support and its financial implications, even as U.S. citizens demand increasing control and influence; escalating expenses and tuition increases; battles over curriculum; an increasingly complicated and interlocking nexus of government, corporate and business interests, and the degree of control they exert; and finally, the challenge of upholding the ideals of liberty, free speech and academic freedom.

Today, these controversies and unsolved issues are debated in a polarized and overwrought climate by a set of players who engage each other in a death grip. Informing all of these issues is the continuing ideological struggle between Left and Right, liberals and conservatives, those who use academic issues as proxy battles for their agendas outside the gates of the academy.

Acknowledging these threats, Columbia professor Andrew Delbanco proposes an antidote to these forces that, he argues, would remake the university into something fundamentally better than its current form. In essence, he argues, we must rebalance and reintegrate the twin roles of critic and servant that universities have ascribed to for so long. His formula is simple: “A college should not be a haven from worldly contention, but a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life, and where they discover that self-interest need not be at odds with concern for one another.” In other words, by making students better critics—thoughtful and compassionate, self-interested and public-spirited—we will better serve today’s society and the one to come. If that vision can be pulled off, as he maintains, the dividends could be profound: “We owe it to posterity to preserve and protect this institution. Democracy depends on it” (Delbanco, College, [2012], 171).

It has been about six decades since the university in America became a modern battleground of ideological controversy. The tribalism of those debates weakened the democratic foundations of the academy and the nation. They provide object lessons for those of us who care about the university in America. There are two of them.

One is that the university must be increasingly vigilant not to morph into simply one more political or social tool that can easily be pushed or appropriated by forces either within or outside its gates. The other is that only by sustaining vigilance against those forces can the university uphold its fundamental principles and stature.

John Kemeny, president of Dartmouth College from 1970 to 1981, often preached about a university that would fulfill this mission as critic and servant. Throughout his tenure, he delivered insightful messages in annual opening convocation addresses. One of those talks came in the fall of 1978. Do not “listen to the siren song of simplistic solutions,” he admonished students, faculty, and the Dartmouth community. “The world is complex, the world is frustrating, the world is very fascinating—take it as it is, do not live in a fantasy world.” As a citizen of the university and American society, he said, “Face the problems the world presents to you. And, above all, use your years at Dartmouth to prepare yourself for that day when you can help make this a better world” (Kemeny, Dartmouth Convocation Address, 1978).

In public utterances only three years apart, Kemeny and Shapiro, presidential voices in the Ivory Tower, did much to reclaim the territory of the university in America and its dual roles as servant and critic. In doing so, they followed in a long tradition of thinking that links the health of American democracy to the proper functioning of its universities. Those who have followed and will follow in their footsteps must do likewise.