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Ethical Leadership in Hard Times: The Moral Demands on Universities

Whether they like it or not, universities play a role in both the creation and the allocation of economic, social and personal opportunities. They take in young people—who are for the most part by various measures already more advantaged than others—and equip them with skills and credentials and embed them in networks that give them a better chance than others to compete successfully in socially organized competitions for scarce goods. Harry Brighouse, professor of philosophy and affiliate professor of Educational Policy Studies at University of

Wisconsin, Madison, observes that through their decisions about admissions and financial aid, universities allocate individuals to positions and rewards structured by institutions outside higher education. That outside social structure is somewhat unjust and universities have little control over it. Brighouse discusses the moral demands on universities and makes a forceful argument that the efficiencies demanded by economic challenges are not the enemy of ethics or moral concerns.

MISSION

Higher education in the U.S. is characterized by great diversity of missions. But universities are not morally permitted to choose just any mission. The ethical rules which prescribe individual action are not matters of individual choice; rather, they are part of the fabric of a moral reality which, whether we like it or not (and sometimes we do not) imposes obligations and proscriptions on all of us. Similarly, the role of universities in society is bound by certain moral rules, regardless of whether universities recognize those rules or whether society itself articulates and imposes them. This is not to say they may not choose some aspect of their mission by which to distinguish themselves, but it is to say that certain values command and constrain universities regardless of the distinctive aspects of their mission.

■ The role of universities in society is bound by certain moral rules, regardless of whether universities recognize those rules and regardless of whether society itself articulates and imposes them.

■ There is not much that universities can do in our society to ensure fair equality of opportunity. Inequalities at the starting gate are deeply entrenched, and during their compulsory schooling inequalities among children from different social backgrounds continue to grow.

■ Given the role they play in conferring advantage on the already-advantaged within an unequal society, universities have duties to those who do not participate.


■ Efficiency is not an enemy of ethics. Efficiency enhances our ability to do good with whatever resources we have at our disposal and is, therefore, an important element of ethical action when it is turned to the advancement of the right mission.

WHAT SHOULD UNIVERSITIES DO FOR CURRENT STUDENTS?

Universities have many stakeholders, including employees, alumni, prospective students, current students, and third parties—that is, everyone who does not attend college. My focus here is on the values that should guide treatment of current students and of a particular subcategory of third party—that is, those who never graduate from any college, which in the United States at the current time comprises a majority of the population.

What do universities owe to their current students? One plausible account comes from Derek Bok, who maintains that our colleges are underachieving because they deliver suboptimally on the following aims for undergraduate education:

- Learning to Communicate
- Learning to Think
- Building Character
- Living with Diversity
- Preparing for a Global Society
- Acquiring Broader Interests
- Preparing for a Career¹



Our society is characterized by a great deal of unearned privilege and undeserved disadvantage; to the extent that we are able to turn unearned privilege to the benefit of those who are undeservedly disadvantaged, we have powerful reasons to do so...

Something like these seven elements describe the ideal of a liberal education reasonably well, and Bok is right that most colleges achieve these aims less well than they could—and *some* provide them much less well than they should. But students' aims for their higher education do not necessarily match Bok's. It is common for high school guidance counselors and parents to emphasize just one of these elements when pressing children to aspire to university and helping them to make choices: that is, preparing for a career. But the university's ethical obligation to students is not necessarily to give them what they want and Bok is right to demand more.

The mission of providing the liberal education Bok recommends is not achieved without a good deal of thought and effort. Students have many competing demands on their time and attention, and are subject to influences which make

it difficult for them to take up the task of becoming educated with unfettered enthusiasm. The mainstream culture that most of them inhabit at least some of the time fosters a kind of self-centered hedonism that encourages habits and behaviors (such as heavy drinking and irregular night time schedules) that make studying difficult, and which are for some students, over the long run, self-destructive. Simultaneously, our mainstream culture emphasizes the importance of material success in a competitive economy, an influence which disinclines students to gain the skills that would enable them to contribute optimally to society. Learning to think in a critical but constructive way about personal, social and political matters is not something that the mainstream culture encourages. Indeed, many students in elite universities have been imbued with a level of self-confidence—the excess self-esteem which often accompanies unearned privilege—that disinclines them to interrogate their own opinions critically. To fulfill its current student-centered mission well, the university has to look at curriculum and the quality of teaching (concerning both of which, as Bok argues, there is a great deal of room for improvement), but also at the culture of campus life and how the institution influences that culture.

RAWLS' FAIR EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

John Rawls' theory of justice is a useful starting point for thinking about what universities should do. Inquiries about justice in higher education typically pay a great deal of attention to admissions and access. Concern focuses on treating prospective students fairly, ensuring something like what Rawls dubs "fair equality of opportunity" among prospective students so that no one has worse access to a high quality university education just because of the social circumstances of their family.² Access matters, and it matters for a number of reasons including the principle of equal opportunity. But two things are worth bearing in mind.

First, there is not much that universities can do to ensure fair equality of opportunity in our society. Inequalities at the starting gate are deeply entrenched, and during their compulsory schooling years inequalities among children from different social backgrounds continue to grow, so that at the point of application proportionately fewer children from lower social backgrounds are prepared for entry to college at all, much less to elite colleges, than are those from more advantaged backgrounds. Universities can go to great lengths to accommodate those who are ready to succeed, but however much of that they do they cannot assure fair equality of opportunity.³

The second thing to notice is that fair equality of opportunity is not *all* there is to justice—indeed, it is not necessarily an *overriding* part of justice. John Rawls’ second principle of justice (of which the principle of fair equality of opportunity is a part) is a good starting point for discussions of justice:

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that a) they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle) and b) attached to offices and positions open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.⁴

Which principles we should focus on in any particular circumstances depends on how well-realized each is, how much weight they have, and how cost effectively we can produce gains with respect to each principle.⁵

This does not mean that we should *abandon* concern with fairness in access—far from it. But it is important to look *beyond* access to other features of the university that implicate justice. In particular, because universities inevitably play a role in securing some benefits for those who attend them (who mainly come from more advantaged rather than less advantaged sectors of society) and use large government subsidies to do so, it is worth thinking about the moral stance universities should take to third parties and, especially, the category of people who never attend universities in the first place.

One of the benefits of higher education is the enhanced competitiveness for the unequally distributed desirable positions and the unequally distributed goods that attach to them that the higher education credential provides. Does this benefit harm others? There is no single answer to this question. Like most educational institutions, universities do at least two quite different things: they educate—that is, they teach information and skills, and help to develop personal traits; and they credential—that is, they certify to future employers and other educational institutions that the student is worthy of consideration for employment or admission.

Insofar as they are *educating*, universities are adding to the world’s pool of human capital, which can be used to the advantage of the person gaining it and to the advantage of all. This can, but does not necessarily, benefit society as a whole and, in particular, those who do not participate in higher education. Insofar as universities produce skilled doctors, nurses, and teachers who take positions in which they work with people who do not or may not otherwise participate in higher education, they benefit them. Insofar as they produce more effective *and humane* businesspeople and managers, scientists and technicians who develop and adapt quality-of-life enhancing technologies, lawyers who defend the members of disadvantaged communities, and ethical police officers, universities

benefit the less advantaged. But when the skills that the university helps people develop are used for self-interested purposes which do not have substantial positive externalities, the education they provide does not benefit non-participants. Further, insofar as universities simply provide credentials they do not add to the pool of human capital; they merely advantage the credentialed person relative to competitors for valued positions and the goods that accompany them.

So, given the role they play in conferring advantage on the already-advantaged within an unequal society, universities have duties to those who do not participate. This is a key aspect of what is often called the public service mission of the university.

If I had more time I would argue that production of benefits to the less advantaged is an extremely weighty value, more weighty than the duties universities have to prospective and current students, alumni and employees. Our society is characterized by a great deal of unearned privilege and undeserved disadvantage; to the extent that we are able to turn unearned privilege to the benefit of those who are undeservedly disadvantaged, we have powerful reasons to do so, both in our roles within institutions and in our personal decisions. My guess is that most elite universities could do more than they currently do to benefit non-participants, and do less than they ought to. But even leaders who are not convinced that this value is as weighty as I think it is might still want to look for measures they can take to advance it which do not detract from the duties they have to the other moral stakeholders.

CAREER GUIDANCE AND ADVICE

In seeking to advance the ability of the university to serve those who do not directly use it, leaders must look for leverage points where the interests of other stakeholders might simultaneously be well served. My guess is that career guidance is one such leverage point.

Here’s a simple model of how career advice and guidance currently work: A university has a set of counseling services, which are fairly unintrusive; counselors give advice when sought, using the preferences of the students and, to some extent, the prejudices of the counselor, as the basis of the advice. Most faculty (in secular institutions) take a *laissez-faire* approach, the one exception being the attempt to recruit students who are especially talented in their field to graduate school. An alternative model, which some faculty certainly fit (but most do not), is a kind of moralizing directiveness; that is, quite deliberately elevating particular career choices while denigrating others. A different model, which might be most appropriate, is a nudging approach, in which the faculty member deliberately incorporates some discussion of career


possibilities into lecture and discussions with students, and prods students to think about particular options that are either intrinsically valuable or might suit a particular student.

Derek Bok points to the fact that smart young students with a public service ethic, as well as those who just don't know what to do with their lives, go to law school:

For students who begin their legal training hoping to fight for social justice, law school can be a sobering experience. While there, they learn a number of hard truths. Jobs fighting for the environment or civil liberties are very scarce. Defending the poor and powerless turns out to pay remarkably little and often to consist of work that many regard as repetitive and dull. As public interest jobs seem less promising (and law school debts continue to mount), most of these idealistic students end by persuading themselves that a large corporate law firm is the best course to pursue, even though many of them find the specialties practiced in these firms, such as corporate law, tax law, and real estate law, both uninteresting and unchallenging.

Imagine the social value that would be produced if some of these students were, instead, going into teaching or social work, and eventually leading school districts and social service providers.

My guess is that even the nudging model would be uncomfortable for many faculty members, who often eschew both paternalism and perfectionism. This reaction is misplaced for two reasons. First, college students are young and inexperienced—they rightly value good advice from a variety of sources, and faculty members who have thoughtful and well-informed perspectives do nothing wrong by presenting them in nudging, as opposed to indoctrinatory, ways. Second, the laissez-faire approach does not enable students to make well-informed decisions free from undue influence. Rather, it leaves them vulnerable to the influences of the current status order, one which reflects a somewhat unjust social order and exercises its influence in a way that frequently bypasses the rational scrutiny of the students. Faculty members are intrinsically implicated in this web of influence when they decide whether to write letters of recommendation, what to write in them, and what conversations to have or not have with students, as well as how to present themselves before students and how to treat students who have already made career-path-affecting choices about what major to declare.



...leaders need to look for internal resources to enhance faculty skills and, ideally, create situations in which different parts of the university can be symbiotic. My guess is that within my own university there are not only plenty of people with expertise that they would be willing to share, but that the supply of that expertise could be matched to demand.

IS EFFICIENCY THE ENEMY OF ETHICS?

There's a tendency to think of efficiency as a value to be weighed against values that guide the mission of the institution. This is natural if you think of efficiency as a kind of resource constraint—but still wrongheaded. If you think of efficiency, more properly, as the demand to do what you do as well as you can within whatever resource constraint you face, then it *serves*, rather than conflicts with, the values of the institution. Resource constraints are unavoidable: they exist in good times as well as in bad, it is just that in good times we tend to be more relaxed about what we do with the resources at hand, and therefore tend not to feel constrained. But if the mission is a good one, it is just as unethical to be relaxed about resource constraints in good times as it is in bad times. In times of financial stringency, though, for employees it is especially important to be more efficient, because otherwise the stress of financial uncertainty is compounded by the stress of working harder without clear gains.

Efficiency is a moral value that serves the other values of the institution. It is not, however, unconditionally valuable. Leaders should not simply seek efficiency in what their institutions *currently do*; the ethical demand is to seek efficiency in what you *ought to be doing*.

My entirely amateur guess is that most elite universities could be more efficient at what they do *and* more efficient at what they *ought to be doing*. My less amateur guess is that efficiency gains are quite hard to achieve in universities because faculty, while they do not have much power to change the institution, have a great deal of power to prevent it from changing—and meaningful changes, especially those that reach into the classroom, require not just faculty assent but also their somewhat enthusiastic cooperation. Most faculty members probably think, rightly, that they are working very hard and, with perhaps less justification, that they are experts in what they do. They typically spend a good deal of time refining their research skills, but much less time refining their teaching skills, and less time still learning how to do service and

administrative work more effectively. In my experience faculty members have considerable capacity for believing things about what makes for effective teaching, without any real evidence. They resist non-research-related professional development and, in fact, professional development of any kind, unless its impetus comes from them as individuals. They also tend to resist anything they perceive as an effort to direct their research from the outside. Finally, they tend to see “efficiency” as an enemy of academic values. Of course, these are only tendencies, and some academics are more open than others to change. My guess is that there is considerable variation across disciplines, but that these tendencies are embedded in the culture of academia and present considerable barriers to change.

Winning the enthusiasm of faculty members for efficiency improvements takes skillful leadership. The language of “efficiency,” because it is anathema, however wrongly, to so many faculty, should probably give way to the language of “effectiveness.” The most promising approach may be to identify defects that are not grounded in the inadequacies of faculty members, but are grounded in the practices and traditions of the institution. Some defects that are easy to identify include: faculty meetings, because no one has training in how to run an effective meeting; research mentoring, because we tend to have an individualistic view of research and because once someone has tenure such mentoring is regarded as paternalistic (not to say rude); teaching, because we do not have common standards and common assessments, or well-established and effective practices for peer-mentoring and mutual observation. Finally, on a more practical level, every faculty member has a cell phone, but most universities continue to pay for landlines and voicemail systems rather than pay small stipends for using personal phones.

These thoughts about effectiveness have several implications. First, faced with the need to cut costs, leaders should resist the temptation to make across-the-board cuts and instead consider the proper mission of the institution and which parts of the institution contribute most to it. Those activities contributing most to the mission should be shielded from the worst cuts and, possibly, even shielded completely. Second, since we are in a time during which new resources are unlikely to be flowing in, leaders need to look for internal resources to enhance faculty skills and, ideally, create situations in which different parts of the university can be symbiotic. My guess is that in my own university there are not only plenty of people with expertise that they would be willing to share with others who would like to gain from it, but that the supply of that expertise could be matched to demand. Third, increased efficiency is not gained only by inducing people to do things they are not doing, but also by inducing them *not* to do some

things they are doing. Leaders must convince departments and individuals to consider opportunity costs, that not everything that they do is worth doing, and that some of it should be given up.

Efficiency is not, then, an enemy of ethics. Resource constraints prevent us from doing good in the trivial sense that if we had more real resources we would be able to do more good. Efficiency enhances our ability to do good with whatever resources we have at our disposal and is, therefore, an important element of ethical action when it is turned to the advancement of the right mission.

Do resource constraints prevent us from doing what is right? Not usually. Suppose that a very demanding moral theory, which demands us to maximize goodness, is true. What the theory demands is not that we do the impossible, but that we do the best we are capable of doing within the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In other words, both individuals and institutions are morally required to do the most good that is feasible. Resource constraints influence what is feasible, and therefore they influence what we are required to do (even by this strong theory) by limiting the opportunity set we face. Morally responsible persons (and leaders of institutions) appropriately seek to acquire more resources (using permissible means) in order better to do good, as long as they have good reason to believe they will do more good with the resources than those who would otherwise have them.

In *Mission and Money: Understanding the University*, Burton Weisbrod and his co-authors analyze the various ways that universities respond to market forces and engage in commercial and quasi-commercial activities to raise funds for their operations. Weisbrod et al. observe that “schools provide teaching and basic research even when they are unprofitable for the individual schools, and finance these mission activities through conventional businesslike revenue-generating activities.”⁶ Commercial activity, they maintain, has no fundamental place in the required mission of the university. Some of it may interfere with the mission by, for example, undermining an academic ethos among the students, or by unduly encouraging the mis-valuation of unearned privilege as merit, or, as is sometimes said about contracting out the production of merchandise, by colluding in the wrongful exploitation of disadvantaged workers. But other commercial activity may, as Weisbrod et al. argue, play a legitimate role because, in the particular economic environment the university inhabits, it generates resources for the mission and thus enables the university to do more good than it would otherwise be able to do. The university, though, must take into account as best it can the collateral effects of engaging in the activity, and evaluate the activities that the incoming funds support against the standard of what

the mission *ought to be*, as opposed to just assuming that any non-income-generating activity contributes to the right mission. I would slightly amend Zemsky, Wegner and Massy's slogan "mission-centered, market-smart" to the much less catchy "ethically-proper-mission-centered, market-smart."⁷

CONCLUSION

The moral audit offered here is only partial. Equal opportunity is not the only or even the most important aspect of justice with which universities should be concerned. Rawls' difference principle obligates universities to consider non-participants in higher education as well. These aims are not mutually exclusive. One means by which universities can both deliver better on their obligations to current students and enhance what they do for non-participants, for example, is by doing a better job of providing career guidance to their students, who as a result may be more likely to pursue work that benefits less advantaged people. Moreover, moral considerations need not be subsumed by the efficiencies demanded in these hard financial times. Indeed, efficiency is itself a moral value that undergirds and enables universities to pursue other important values as they strive to achieve their mission.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton University Press, 2005), table of contents.
- 2 See, for example, Robert Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg, *Levelling the Playing Field* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
- 3 See Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools* (Teachers College Press 2004), Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods* (University of California Press, 2003) and Valerie Lee and David Burkham, *Inequality at the Starting Gate* (EPI Press 2002) for reasons to think that inequalities have been entrenched long before college age.
- 4 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, second edition (Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 266.
- 5 See , "Political Ideals and Political Practice." *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 37-56.
- 6 Burton A. Weisbrod, Jeffrey P. Ballou, and Evelyn D. Asch, *Mission and Money* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 2.
- 7 See Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner and William Massy, *Remaking the American University* (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

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