**Accountability in the Arts and Sciences: Image and Reality**

**Stanley N. Katz, President, ACLS**

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I understand that one size, as in hosiery, does not fit all. I will be talking about "higher education" as though there was such an entity. The fact that the CCAS is a very broad umbrella might suggest that that is true, but I don't think so. Higher education in the United States is, more importantly, a system of systems, each of which responds to different publics. There is no "general public" for higher education any more than there is a "general reader" for a particular book. Our messages must be tailored to our publics, just as our specific educational programs must be tailored to their publics. Nevertheless, if you will grant me that all of us are involved in an undertaking with the American people to educate a democratic citizenry, it still makes sense to speak in general terms.

My task today, which I foolishly accepted last spring, is to speak of the public accountability of the arts and sciences colleges. I understand the term to mean those institutions, or parts of institutions, which are composed predominantly of arts and sciences departments rather than professional schools -- those institutions or parts of institutions which have the double aim of imparting the specialized knowledge of the arts and sciences fields and which, cumulatively, are the expression of the liberal arts tradition in American university education. It is the liberal arts function which I want to stress this morning, for I believe that our most important public mission, and our best public arguments, flow from our stewardship of liberal education.

I am not naive enough to believe that most deans of arts and sciences think of themselves as keepers of the flame of liberal education. I know that your daily tasks of keeping the departments afloat, and fueled, are necessary, urgent and exhausting. But I am sure that you are constantly aware, in more than bureaucratic ways, of the distinction between what the arts and sciences departments are about, and the purposes of the professional schools with which you are surrounded, and competing. The most obvious distinction is that you are primarily responsible for undergraduate education and for the training of those who will be the future teachers of undergraduates, graduate students. If this is the essential task, then the distinctive character of the education you are administering should be the concern which underlies your more mundane obligations.

My argument is that the distinctive character of arts and sciences education is liberal education. We could argue a long time over the precise meaning of the phrase. The complexity of that argument was laid out by Bruce Kimball several years ago in his wonderful book, *Orators and Philosophers: A history of liberal education*, which has recently been republished in an expanded edition by the College Board. I will say only that I think we all agree on the broad rudiments of liberal education as that part of the undergraduate experience which aims at educating the student broadly, preparing him for democratic citizenship, and enabling her to use her intellect as a tool of individual liberation. It means, in the context of arts and sciences deanship, the obligation to regard the purpose of undergraduate education as a whole, rather than as the sum of courses and requirements. But I think too many of us have lost sight of the integrative character of liberal education in our universities.

In the United States, liberal education has always had several functions. The **first**, and most important, has been simply acquainting students with the intellectual context necessary to understand the theoretical structures to which they are being introduced in college. This has traditionally meant the introduction to basic texts of the intellectual traditions of Western civilization (the humanities: Greek philosophy, the major religions, the basic history of the West, the history of thought, etc.), the major approaches to understanding society (social science) and the basics of natural science. Until fairly recently, the easy part has always been the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences, and I will return to the subject later to explain how the "culture wars" of the 1980's and early 1990's have complicated our conceptions of the humanities and social sciences. But we have always struggled to know how to introduce non-scientists to science, wavering back and forth, from exposing them to a little laboratory science, to providing alternative courses in the history and philosophy of science. Fundamental conceptions of the liberal arts in American higher education require the integration of what in Europe is called the "hard" and "soft" sciences, but too often we fail to instill in our students more than a superficial acquaintance with the physical and life sciences.

The **second** function of liberal education has been to relate the academic work of undergraduate education to the social functions of education. This focus on the non-intellectual goals of higher education may be another distinctively American approach. Apart from professionally and vocationally useful skills, we ask, what should students know to make them responsible citizens in a democracy? This social function, perhaps best articulated by John Dewey early in this century, has made the word "liberal" a double entendre: liberal in the intellectual sense described in the first function, and liberal in the political sense. Traditionally, we have tried to accomplish the social functions of liberal education through the extracurriculum. American colleges sponsor or facilitate a remarkable range of activities, most of which have no

place whatsoever in European higher education (with the partial exception of the United Kingdom): athletics, social organizations (fraternities and sororities), newspapers, clubs of all kinds (political, hobby, civic), and so forth. We assume that these activities "round out" our students in a variety of ways: mens sana et corpore sano, and that some of them, such as student government, produce specifically civic skills.

Within the past decade, a new range of activities has emerged, specifically designed to build civil society-enhancing skills. The ideal of "community service," always an element in the socializing function of higher education, has taken on new life and new meaning. New campus organizations, with or without college financial support and supervision, have emerged to encourage students to work with local public schools, renovate slum housing, teach adult literacy, or aid in inner city community development. Some of this activity, and this quite new, is actually curricular, and it goes under the name of "service learning." This means that faculty (or sometimes faculty and students) develop curriculum which involves faculty-supervised (and graded) student social work in local communities. Service learning has been adopted in a great many undergraduate institutions, thus merging the first and second functions of liberal education, and providing the possibility of an entirely new understanding of the relationship of student learning and the exercise of the democratic responsibilities in higher education.

More recently, liberal education has had a **third** function, which is to provide an intellectual alternative to what has come to be seen as narrow disciplinarity. Scholars now more frequently work across disciplines (interdisciplinarity), among several disciplines (multidisciplinarity) and in disregard of disciplines, organizing their interests according to the problems they address (nondisciplinarity). Interdisciplinary approaches first appeared in the hard sciences, and they are international in scope. The sciences have been adept in moving from chemistry to biochemistry and the like, and comparable developments have taken place in the social sciences (political economy, for instance). Similarly, fields like legal history have combined two different disciplines in ways that are genuinely multidisciplinary. The problem orientation of nondisciplinarity, however, appears to have had its origins in the United States, and has had a power impact on research and teaching -- women's studies and Afro-American studies are only two of the most prominent examples. But American tertiary educational institutions are dominated administratively (and therefore fiscally) by disciplinary departments, so that the newer approaches have had to take on new (and normally temporary) organizational forms such as "programs" and "centers" They have also come to be thought of as important aspects of liberal education insofar as they work in tension with highly-focused (and therefore "illiberal") disciplinary approaches.

There are, however, serious challenges to the goals of liberal education. The first is from those who attack it as being too narrowly based on Western culture. These are the so-called "muticulturalists" who argue that to be liberal in late twentieth-century American one must take into account the social heterogeneity of the United States. The multiculturalists contend that the curriculum in a country fewer and fewer of whose people are of European origin must reflect the range of gender, ethnic and racial sources of the national population, with especial recognition of the importance of African, Asian and Hispanic origins and living traditions. This means that the traditional "Western Civilization" framework for general education must be supplanted by a more global (or at least international) approach. It also sometimes means that the professoriate should reflect the current gender, racial and ethnic identity of the United States, both in order to provide a better understanding of the cultural meaning of this diversity, and in order to connect more readily with the newly diverse student population of our colleges and universities. In a short talk I can do justice neither to the multiculturalists, nor to their antagonists (who defend the traditional Western orientation of the curriculum and oppose affirmative action in faculty hiring and student recruitment), but it is important to remind you that this conflict, sometimes called the "culture wars," has had and still has a profoundly destabilizing impact upon higher education in the United States. Indeed, the issue is no less than the very nature of "liberality" in liberal education. The "culture wars" of the past decade have also done a lot to degrade public confidence in higher education, and one of the most important questions we shall have to work out amongst ourselves is how we shall explain our changing understandings of liberal education to the populace in general.

The second, and much older, attack is the charge that that liberal education is too weak and too broad, and serves to do little more than offer baby food to young adult appetites. This critique has taken many forms, sometimes arguing simply that general education courses are poorly designed and insufficiently rigorous intellectually, and at other times contending that anything other than training in the methodologically-based disciplines is a waste of time in forming young minds. A third and related attack, though this one has not been articulated as such, has come in the past decade in reaction to the intellectual and epistemological revolution of the past generation which has called into question generally received notions of truth. The French are sometimes blamed for the alleged nihilism of deconstruction and post-structuralism, though of course the American academy has been the willing victim of the new continental epistemology. From the point of view of liberal education, however, this attack is closely related to the opposition to multiculturalism in that it argues for bounding the range of intellectual techniques college students should be exposed to. The political ramifications of the traditionalist assault and

the multiculturalist/post-structuralist defense of the transformation of liberal education were clearly the driving forces in the culture wars.

So, at the end of the century, liberal education in the United States is once more in a period of transition. This should not surprise us, since one of its functions has always been to facilitate intellectual, social, political change in the academy, and another has been to readjust the relations of the academy and the larger society. Rethinking liberal education has always been the most important way in which we rethink the function of higher education.

We are all, however, conscious of an intuitive sense of the loss of public confidence in higher education. This feeling, for me, is tied to the intense attacks of the 1980s and early 1990s launched by leading national political figures. The attacks, in part those labeled the 'culture wars," were particularly severe and harsh in the humanities, and thus especially close to the bone for the American Council of Learned Societies, the national humanities and social science organization. But of course the academy took a series of hits that were less obviously political, such as those directed at alleged abuses of indirect cost recovery from the federal government. All of this turmoil occurred in a context of demands for the imposition of cost containment and institutional downsizing, with the result that it was frequently hard to distinguish the actual motivation for particular challenges to the academy.

I remember clearly, and poignantly, that the decline of academic prestige was the subject of the last luncheon I had with Ernie Boyer before his untimely death last year -- we were agreed that we could not remember another era in our lives when the academy had been held in such low esteem. But it is not so clear that our sense of the matter corresponded to actual public attitudes, unless there has been a very rapid turnaround in opinion. Just a few weeks ago, the Chronicle of Philanthropy published a survey of levels of public confidence in institutions which showed that private colleges or universities ranked highest of all categories of institutions in public regard. Public colleges or universities ranked fifth in a list of twenty-seven institutional categories. Political organizations "such as Republican or Democratic Parties" ranked dead last. Which raises the question of whether we in higher education have sufficient confidence in the broad-based public support for our endeavor.

Not that we do not have real problems, for, after all, even paranoids have enemies. As evidence of a real problem, let me mention the salvo by Candace de Russy in the October 11, 1996 *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Ms. de Russy, a "former professor of language and literature," is a Trustee of the SUNY system, and the chair of is Committee on Academic Standards. de Russy's message is, in general, that "[t]rustees should reassert more forcefully their prerogative to stand apart from the many vested interests and factions on campuses and act as independent arbiters of their institutions'

welfare," and, in particular, that academic standards are too important to be left to the faculty. Citing with approval the plans of Lynne Cheney's National Alumni Forum to organize university trustees to assert their prerogatives to control internal governance, she cites a 1994 Lou Harris poll showing a disastrous decline in public confidence in universities, and concludes that "it is those trustees who act vigorously to safeguard the public interest -- activist trustees -- who will be the most credible and effective advocates and protectors of their institutions in the years ahead." Perhaps so, and confessing that I am a trustee of Southern Methodist University, there is a good case for the reinvigoration of university trusteeship, nevertheless there is cause for worry. The situation at SUNY seems to involve a high level of politicization, as the Chancellor learned to his dismay, and we are all aware of the controversial recent behavior of some members of the Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota. There are real problems in paradise.

Not only are there problems, but though of us managing universities frequently make them worse in our efforts to persuade the public of our worth. I have in mind recent, though hardly unique, campaigns to demonstrate the economic value of higher education to its local community. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a piece entitled "In Dollars and Cents, Colleges Measure What They Contribute to Their Communities" on October 11, 1996. The lead sentence was "Once upon a time, Columbia University's status as an Ivy League institution was all it needed to sum up its importance. Now the venerable university is also pointing to the 11,529 jobs it provides." Going on, the article reports on the plethora of economic impact studies now being commissioned by universities, many of which measure "indirect impact on the economy" and employ "non-traditional measures" such as estimates of the future earnings of graduates who remain in the locality. But of course these claims for the business-like prowess of educational institutions provoke the question of why universities should be treated differently from other businesses (in taxation, for instance). And so several university officials interviewed for the story suggested that it might be better to have outsiders make the case for their economic utility. But Columbia's president, George Rupp is quoted as thinking that Columbia must make the case for itself. Can you imagine the number of revolutions per second Nicholas Murray Butler is making in his grave?

Please don't tell me that I am living on Cloud Nine, for I realize that public relations is a necessary part of university management these days. As someone who teaches cultural policy research, and who is a public advocate for the arts and humanities, I am fully aware of the tactical need to advance arguments for the economic contributions of cultural activities, even though deep down I believe that our estimates are based on a totally spurious and inaccurate quantification of the value of culture. My contention, on the contrary, is that we have not been making some of the most

effective arguments available to us in stating the case for higher education before the public.

The same, I believe, is true of some of the recent foundation-funded attempts to articulate the correct path to salvation for higher education. The most recent example to come to mind is the report of the Pew Higher Education Roundtable and the California Higher Education Policy Center, published as the November, 1996 special issue of the Pew Roundtable's *Policy Perspectives*. The report is based on the assumption that "many . . . of the basic presumptions that underlie both the operation and financing of [American higher education] are in flux," and that those of us in this room are "living in an earthquake zone," so that we need to learn how to build "the kind of flexible institutions, public policies and approaches to funding that will allow higher education to flourish in the face of uncertainty." (p.1) I suspect that we would all agree that we are living in interesting times, and the report has a perceptive analysis of the alterations in the educational landscape, though mostly those that relate to the economics of higher education. Following the formulation of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, the report emphasizes that the critical questions for educational policy makers are: who pays? who benefits? who should pay?

The Pew report assumes that some of the worst problems are of our own making, due to "a set of institutional attitudes and practices that have placed higher education even further back in the queue for public funding," due the public's sense that there is a "'disconnect' between higher education and the world without -- a perception that higher education as an enterprise is neither willing nor able to become efficient and responsive." (p.4) There are attacks on our neglect of undergraduate education, loss of faith in research, and "a further eroding of the willingness to regard universities and colleges as repositories of ideas." (p.5) The report sensibly urges us to shape our own future, "to posit a future that engages the commitment of all stakeholders -- legislators, business leaders, institutions and their faculty, parents, students, and the general public -- to sustain a system of higher education that is characterized both by quality and broad accessibility." (pp.5-6) to do this, we are told, we should reaffirm "the principles that have shaped the American academy, and made it important to society writ large:"

> that education is a means to personal improvement and social mobility; that inclusive rather than exclusive systems of education offer the greatest return on societal investment; and that choice -- of institution as well as course of study -- is itself an important guarantor of educational quality and instructional innovation. (p.6)

And the Pew report concludes with a series of very general recommendations for the macro problems afflicting higher education, including the resegregation of research in

research universities, the development of partnerships across the sector, the tying of evaluation (of all kinds) to the measurement of outcomes. What they all share is the metaphor which shapes the Pew report, namely, that higher education is a business in need of restructuring. The final sentences urge us to accept that:

> The market will come to play an increasingly important, perhaps even dominant role in determining the nature and range of learning experiences that colleges and universities provide, and the kinds and quantity of research they supply. But markets can also be shaped, by creating more knowledgeable consumers, by regulating practices and customs, and by providing subsidies that guarantee equal access to the goods and services a public market supplies. (p10)

I do not necessarily disagree with many of the specific observations and even recommendations of the Pew report, but, at best, I don't think they take us very far, and, at worst, they acquiesce to a vision of higher education which I find educationally repellent. Of course we need public funding and public support, but I believe that, in the long run, such support will come as a response to improvements in the character and quality of our two interrelated "products," which are the education of the individual student and the creation of new knowledge through research. We may be businesses in form, but not in substance, and we need to keep that distinction clear. We need to save our souls, not to get our bodies into shape.

I have only recently returned from a conference held in Budapest to discuss the possibilities for liberal undergraduate education in East Central Europe, a region struggling to recover from the ravages of forty years of brutalizing socialist domination of higher education. The problems of "transition" from communism to democracy and the free market society (two distinctive conceptions not sometimes confused for one another) are complex, and nowhere more so than in higher education. One problem receiving urgent attention is the repair of the almost impenetrable wall between research and teaching which the Soviets imposed on the region. Another, which is just beginning to emerge, is the question of the applicability of American-style liberal education in a region which has never experienced anything like it.

I will resist the temptation to go on at length about the conference, except to report to you the most striking statement of advocacy for the applicability of liberal education, delivered by the distinguished classical philologist from Poland, Jerzy Axer. Professor Axer, who has begun a small and highly successful liberal education unit focusing on interdisciplinary studies at Warsaw University. His speech was entitled "What is liberal education? Can it support both freedom and equality? Is it for everybody?"

Axer explained that his program "was mostly motivated by the desire to go back to the very core of what we instinctively believed to be the natural basis of good education in civil society: what we aimed at was creating the space for individual responsibility, free choice, the right to take risks, for various talents and possibilities of their cultivation." (p.3) To accomplish this, they hoped to revive "the Res Publica Litterarum with its focus on cultivation of the artes liberales. Naturally, we wanted to go back to the Socratic poetics of dialogue, to the Aristotelian views of virtue, leadership and the function of education in establishing the identity of the individual and the community. Our aim was to lay a cornerstone of a university that would help modern society become a cultural polis, of a universitas that would be conducive to a dialogue among different generations, a dialogue which, even when conducted in the many languages of particular disciplines, does not change into a conversation of the deaf or the disaster of the Tower of Babel." (pp.3-4)

Axer and his colleagues are aware that liberal educators do not live in a world without enemies. He spoke of "the opponent whom we cannot ignore:"

> It is quite obvious to all of us that, generally, liberal education is bound to contend with the university conceived of as a technical school and that it must be a blow to the traditional bureaucratic structure in which the boundaries of specializations overlap those of the departments. But in our case, we have to face a much more powerful and much less respectable opponent.
>
> This mighty adversary is the short-sighted and conformist view of education within the free market. (p.5)

What sustains is Axer his vision of the purposes of liberal education:

> It can obviously support freedom and, in a more profound sense, equality, by which I mean the right to diversity, the right of everybody's seeking his/her own place in culture, this conception of equality being the reverse of that which for the last 50 years promised everyone the same share in everything. Viewed from this perspective, liberal education is the ideal training in qualities which became obsolete in the communist society: readiness to take risks and to accept responsibility for one's own choices; liberal education is for those who are willing to take chances. (p.7)

I hope you will understand if I say that I found one of the most inspiring educational voices I have heard in years, and that I found his message utterly and totally applicable to our situation in the United States.

I prefer religious to commercial metaphors for our educational efforts, and I think that what we need to save, as teachers or administrators, is not our individual but our communal souls. For we do indeed need to think of ourselves in relation to several different communities, but the term "the public" (much less "the consumers") does not express those relationships satisfactorily. The Puritans of the seventeenth century thought in terms of "covenant," or "contract." They imagined human beings as engaged simultaneously in two distinctive contractual relationships -- the covenant between God and the individual, and the covenant among individuals which forms the basis of the church. The salvation of souls was a matter between the individual and God, but the sanctification of the community was a matter to be determined among men. The metaphor works for us as educators, if we imagine simultaneous contracts between the student and the university, and between the universities and the society at large. Educators are not gods, nor can they save eternal souls; but educators can enable students to save themselves, and in so doing they can serve the larger society. We used to speak of university teachers as having "callings," and the very word "professor" has a specifically religious origin. The question is whether we as individuals and our universities as communities of learning can recover the sense of educational mission which we are alleged to have lost.

The Puritans made another distinction which seems applicable to our situation as educators. They distinguished between the "covenant of grace" and the "convenant of works." They meant to distinguish the possibility of salvation by the arbitrary intervention of an angry God, for which sinners could only prepare themselves though intense introspection from the chimera of salvation earned through good works. Good works, the true Puritan thought, might in some way aid in the preparation for salvation, but no quantity of good work could earn salvation. Indeed, the eighteenth century movement toward the covenant of works was a sign of the declension of the Puritan community. I think the utilitarian analyses of the problems of higher education represent a covenant of works, an attempt to pull us up by our bootstraps, when what is needed is a concerted effort to rethink our very souls and to prepare ourselves for the possibility of success. I fear that some of you will think this language foolish at best, or sacrilegious at worst, but I want to put the proposition as strongly as I can that we must try to think our way out of our educational dilemmas.

I am not so much concerned with particular definitions of liberal education as I am with commitment to its general conception. I fear that we have tended to lose sight of liberal education as the goal of arts and sciences education in an era in which we are under severe political and economic challenge, and in which we have turned to managerial models of university leadership and business models of educational organization and behavior.

Let me conclude by returning to the religious language of covenant, for I believe that we have higher obligations than balancing the university budget, though balance the budget we must. We have covenanted with our own students and with the larger society to provide education for the whole student, for the whole society. If those of you, scholars, teachers and administrators, who make up the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences, do not articulate the messages of liberal education, we will certainly fail in our calling.

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