

# *The Imperative of Transforming the Professoriate*

*by Samuel Goldman*

**T**he university is a special place. And there is no greater challenge to the professoriate today than the continuing development of this “specialness.”

Yet the unique nature of the academy is increasingly threatened. New models of higher education are taking shape, more in response to events than to intelligent forethought. Many of the traditions, values, and contributions we have come to take for granted—academic freedom, shared governance, knowledge production—are slowly disappearing in the interests of “modernizing” or “corporatizing” the university.

At the same time, public expectations for the university have become more demanding. Universities find themselves pressured to reach more and more diverse populations of students and to adapt what the academy does to the “real world of work.”

The desire to accommodate ever larger numbers of students, some

who previously might not have attended college or university, and to make the university more “workplace oriented” has measurably increased the emphasis on vocational training at both public and private universities

In this new environment, many modern day universities try to sell themselves by adopting everyday analogies from the business world. Students become “customers,” faculty are labeled “employees,” and the campus is anywhere a classroom can be scheduled with enough customers to cover expenses and leave a little extra for profit.

Untested cyberlearning, meanwhile, is rapidly replacing traditional learning formats, removing students from “in-person” academic contact.

In many ways, university learning is increasingly served up fast-food style. Students—or, rather, customers—move past a learning window, gulp down some information, and move on. In-depth

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learning, intellectual integrity, and the like are all sacrificed to the expediency of market demands and delivery systems.

The university, traditionally, has aimed to convey knowledge and values and to chronicle and expound on the past. Through the university, societies interpret the present, to successfully engage the future.

**M**oving higher education from this universe of thought, substance, and critical thinking to the far narrower world of employability may well be the new mission shared by university managers. But, for those serious about the special place of the university in American society, this employability vision is a tableau of disaster.

Those of us who care about the university would do well to become actively engaged in addressing the critical issue of how to adapt the university to the rapidly changing realities of the 21st century, *without* losing historic purpose and perspective. For faculty, that means, above all, actively engaging in efforts to transform the university.

It is not surprising, given the intense pressure on universities to become more "market oriented," that a great deal of energy is going into refashioning the university into a quasi-corporate entity whose

primary output will be measured by the bottom line of how many graduates can successfully enter the work force and immediately contribute to the economic output of our society.

Well-trained workers are, of course, essential to the American economy. And universities, especially those that are publicly funded, certainly need to prepare graduates to enter the "real" world.

But producing workers measured by bottom-line economics will not yield the well-educated labor force the nation needs and apparently desires. Many employers today are already decrying the quality of students universities are graduating into the work "real" world. These graduates, employers complain, cannot adequately communicate, think critically, conceptualize ideas, or exercise sound ethical and moral judgments.

What the American business community—and society as a whole—needs in the 21st century is intellectual capital relevant to our developing knowledge economy, something universities are uniquely suited to provide.

Who better than the university can prepare young men and women to understand and appreciate the sciences, the arts, and the humanities or to be able to engage in intelligent discourse and activity about the events that shape our future? Who

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better to motivate our next generation to become the life-long learners the knowledge economy demands?

Universities could be providing this unique service. Instead, they seem to be reactively speeding into frontiers that will change what it means to be a university.

The need to remain relevant in what has become a fiercely competitive market for students and financial support, of course, must be addressed. But let us be cautious about the price paid and compromises made.

The following propositions are important guides:

**1. The corporatization of the university is counter-productive to the ethos of the university.**

Over recent decades, corporate-type boards and administrators have captured an inordinate amount of control over universities, shifting them to the bottom-line mentality of America's corporate world.

This shift helps explain the increasing acceptance of productivity measures that have little relevance to the intellectual thrust of university learning.

Universities must never shy away from establishing and following measures of productivity and quality. But these should be measures that are consistent with the university—not the corporate world—mission.

**2. Academic freedom cannot be compromised. Yet this freedom, so essential to scholars, is slowly slipping away, much to the detriment of the university in particular and to society in general.**

Behind this erosion is, first, the rising dependency on external funding, especially in the science and technology fields. Too many researchers are capitulating to the self-serving demands of donors.

The second factor is the growing percentage of part-time faculty, now approaching 40 percent at comprehensive universities. This reliance on part-timers is eroding the base upon which strong faculty voices must rest.

A continuation of this trend may well lead to the disappearance of academic freedom on campuses across the United States, a loss that may be seen as a prelude to the loss of individual freedom in our broader society.

A society, after all, cannot be free for very long without free speech any more than a university can be free without academic freedom.

Given the prime university responsibility for educating a free, intelligent, and enlightened citizenry, the growth of freedom and intellectual capacity in society is directly proportionate to the successful fulfillment of the university's responsibility.

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For this reason we have to take seriously the dark scenario that seems to be playing itself out, or else one day we will awaken and find that, while we may have become expert technicians and engineers, we have lost the capacity to think, to grow, and to enjoy the wonderful idea that is freedom.

**3. Students are learners—not customers—who need to see their developing lives in relation to the evolving world around them.**

The overzealous pursuit of training for success in our technosociety is based on the false assumption that the skill trainings of the present will retain their usefulness in the future.

R.E. Herman, a strategic business futurist, writes,

Tomorrow's world of work will be characterized by rapidly changing careers, shifting relationships with employers, and many other dramatic changes in work life. In such a dynamic environment, the specialization paradigm of a university education won't work well; a liberal arts education may be much more valuable....<sup>1</sup>

"Insightful leaders," Herman notes, "now recognize that a liberal arts education prepares graduates to think more broadly, to conceptualize at a multi-disciplinary level

that's more responsive to the increasingly broad issues confronting people in all walks of life."<sup>2</sup>

**4. The devaluation of intellect and knowledge production through independent research and development dramatically reduces the contribution of the university.**

The general public has always accepted the university as a place where knowledge is produced and intellectual development fostered.

But the current press for vocational training is pushing these endeavors into the background, to the point where both are devalued at far too many universities. This situation denies what is perhaps the primary function of the university, namely, developing the life of the mind.

**T**he future is upon us with a vengeance. This may be a tired cliché, yet the message is inescapable. Our challenge is to envision possible futures and then make the desirable future happen.

What we need is a transformational process led by an engaged professoriate that does not forget its intellectual center, nor its responsibilities, while it exhibits the foresight and courage to experiment and to make needed changes.

These changes need to be grounded in an understanding of what it is that makes the university

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unique—reasoned thought, rooted in history, culture, and perspective.

The university makes its contribution by expanding knowledge, broadening the mind, developing the intellect, and, as Tierney has noted, helping us rediscover “how to speak intellectually to one another.”<sup>2</sup>

Such an understanding can only be developed through an open, ongoing, collaborative, reflective process that rethinks and reformulates assumptions, beliefs, and values in light of emerging realities.

**O**ne issue of the first order that must be addressed immediately is the board and administrative control over university decision making. Faculty are marching quietly into an unchartered future, led by boards and administrators responding opportunistically to a rather unsettled, external environment.

Shared governance in which the board, the administration, and the faculty come together as respected partners is the sine qua non of the transformation of the university.

Any discussion of shared governance must begin with academic freedom. This means, first, that colleges and universities must reverse the trend toward part-time faculty and reestablish full time faculty as the centerpiece of academic life.

There can be no shared governance, almost by definition, where

the predominant number of faculty is employed part time. Only full time, tenure track faculty have the security and time to work as equal decision makers with administrators.

Second, faculty must understand that academic freedom is not free, it must be earned and preserved. Thomas Paine once said, “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must . . . undergo the fatigue of supporting it.”

Freedom means taking responsibility for knowing the issues and speaking out, steps that faculty have not demonstrated the will to take.

The future of the university can be developed effectively, by many groups with varying perspectives working in concert, but only active, engaged faculty can make the future happen.

This future depends on how well we match the talents of the professoriate and other thinkers and, through them, engage the minds and develop the spirit of learning in those who come to the university to learn.

Hugo Sonnenschein, at his retirement from the presidency of the University of Chicago, offered a metaphor for the university:

I often think of being a university president as similar to being the conductor of an orchestra. It's the orchestra that makes the music; it's the orchestra that the

audience comes to hear. But the conductor has an important role as well; to help the orchestra understand how the music really sounds, to guide it, to integrate the sound of the individual musicians<sup>3</sup>

The gap between boards, presidents, and administrators (the conductors) and the faculty (the orchestra) needs to be bridged.

Each component has certain specific roles to play, but the ultimate success of the university will occur when all those who make up the university come together to create a unified vision of the future, inspiring each to a higher level of involvement, commitment and excellence.

One thing is clear. Boards, administrators and faculty need each other. ■

#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Herman, 2000, p.16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Tierney, 1993, p.104.

<sup>4</sup> Yoe, 2000, p.22.

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