

Metropolitan University Leadership Roles During Periods of National Peril

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Abstract

The events of September 11, 2001 have reoriented communities and the universities serving them to matters of national crisis. In the wake of such tragedies, community-oriented universities potentially encounter pressures to conform their activities and speech to popular notions of patriotism. They also encounter opportunities to provide leadership in fostering public discussions of diverse responses to crises. The author considers how administrative leaders can define the institutional role in helping shape the community response to the crisis at hand, especially the role of facilitator of public discussions of government policy. Conducted well and neutrally, the university's proactive assumption of such a role vastly furthers its capacity to be a vital community partner.

During the past decade, universities have increasingly expanded their missions so as to link themselves more directly to the social environments they inhabit. Those in urban and metropolitan settings, especially, have sought to be partners in the development of the communities they serve rather than simply to be a combined major regional employer and traditional island of learning (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999; Holland 2001; Kellogg Commission 1999; Walshok 1995). Faculty expertise potentially available to the community, a rethinking of traditional faculty roles and rewards, the ability of the university to structure and facilitate large-scale service-learning projects, opportunities to collaborate with other community institutions to pursue external funding, and the increasing influence of large numbers of local university graduates in the political fortunes of their home regions have combined to make metropolitan universities forces in their local regions.

For the most part—and quite naturally—the contributions of the metropolitan university to its local community have revolved around domestic issues—economic development; racial, ethnic, and class diversity; demographic change; education; health care; crime; the environment; and so forth. While some partnerships with communities may have spawned controversy, overall the public seems to view universities as institutions without axes to grind and as acting in good faith in their application of research and commentary to community debates about issues with decidedly political implications.

As we move beyond domestic issues to matters of national crisis, especially threats to our physical safety posed by other nations or groups, community-oriented universities potentially encounter both difficulties and opportunities. The difficulties in question

flow from pressures to conform activities and speech to popular notions of patriotism. The opportunities derive from the university's capacity to provide leadership in public discussions of appropriate responses to crises. Metropolitan universities that have established themselves as integrated members of their communities face a basic choice in such a politically charged environment: (1) to limit their involvement in public discourse and, thus, to avoid endangering partnerships developed with some elements of the community, or (2) to assume the role of neutral promoter of community discussions of the implications of our responses to threats to our country and, thus, to assume a certain political risk.

In the following pages, we explore the wisdom and the challenge of choosing the second path through an examination of the role of the university in the community following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. We focus on the need for an active posture assumed by university leaders in explaining to the community what the institution can and should as well as cannot and should not do in the face of crisis. Finally, we enumerate precepts of responsible engagement of the university with the community through the facilitation of public discussions of the many aspects of the crisis at hand.

New Challenges, Post 9/11

As the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have altered the relationship of the United States with much of the rest of the world, so also have they altered the relationship of citizen to citizen in this country. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon left most citizens shaken but with a sense of renewed commitment *pro patria*. Celebrations of the American spirit, our heritage, and our freedoms have become at once more common and more serious. With the possible exception of the Red Scare in the 1950s, not since Pearl Harbor have Americans been so focused upon unity in defense of homeland (as opposed to defense of American interests abroad). Currently, as then, there is greater acceptance of limits on personal freedom as necessary to the "war effort." In this light, questions about and criticism of governmental war efforts at home and abroad generally have not been warmly entertained.

When and where might such issues be examined and debated today in a manner that is not considered by many (perhaps a majority) as unpatriotic? Since the media have a vested interest in the pursuit of news, many view their analyses of free speech and free press issues as self-serving. The only other major institution known *primarily* for its active pursuit and free exchange of ideas, the university, would seem the ideal setting for debate without backlash. Indeed, universities seemingly could provide leadership in framing such discussions neutrally. However, they clearly are not granted such license easily. A recent episode at a university graduation ceremony, described below, underscores that point and raises direct questions about the role the institution might play in actively facilitating conversation and debate about appropriate responses to national peril.

The “Unpatriotic” Commencement Address

On Saturday, December 15, 2001, Janis Besler Heaphy, publisher and president of the highly respected *Sacramento Bee*, stepped forward to deliver the keynote address at the winter commencement ceremony of California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). She did not complete the address. Instead, she was heckled, jeered, and booed until she abandoned the podium. CSUS’s president, Donald R. Gerth, was able to quiet the crowd briefly by appealing to its members kindly to accord Ms. Heaphy the respect that they would wish for themselves were they occupying the rostrum. However, as Ms. Heaphy continued, yet more heckling and stomping of feet upon metal bleachers followed unabated.

The proportion of the audience and the extent to which students (1,000 in number), as opposed to their families and friends in attendance (perhaps as many as 16,000), engaged in the heckling remain in debate. However, it is clear that the participants were sufficiently numerous, loud, and uncontested to determine the outcome: Ms. Heaphy completed only three-quarters of her remarks. Posted later in their entirety by both CSUS and the *Bee*, those remarks are easily summarized:

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have awakened a tremendous sense of patriotism and pride in the United States. However, our response to terrorism brings with it the responsibility to be vigilant regarding protection of our civil liberties in the name of security. The Bush Administration, in its war on terrorism, has expanded the government’s powers of surveillance, arrest, and detention, and potentially has encouraged “racial profiling.” The Bush Administration also has attempted to manipulate the press and television news organizations into delaying publication and even suppressing stories whose topics range from the texts of Osama Bin Laden’s videotaped remarks to the movement of special operations forces in Afghanistan. Freedom of the press is crucial to the flow of information necessary to a free society. That information enables graduates to play an active role in our democratic society, to ask hard questions and to develop and express informed opinions.

The heckling incident received national news coverage and was the subject of numerous editorials. In the days following the commencement ceremony, CSUS and the *Sacramento Bee* received literally hundreds of letters, phone calls, and emails regarding it. Two-thirds were critical of Ms. Heaphy’s speech. The *Bee* published many of the emails, to its credit, in rough proportion to the actual mix of negative and positive comments.

Those who supported Ms. Heaphy argued that she should have been afforded the courtesy of civility at least until she had completed her address. Many agreed with the substance of what she said and noted that it was time that someone spoke up. Others observed that the current political climate is reminiscent of that in which Japanese

Americans suffered during World War II. Some labeled the hecklers as “morons willing to forfeit their own freedoms.”

Ms. Heaphy’s critics contended that commencement ceremonies call for congratulatory and motivating speeches, not the espousal of “political agendas” (“Save it for demonstrations at the Capitol!”). In truth, many of the participants were first-generation college students whose graduation was celebrated by them as monumental. As one writer noted, “Our graduation was not the place for this.... This was our day, nobody else’s.” Others labeled Ms. Heaphy’s speech divisive “liberal drivel,” a cheap partisan shot at a President who needs our support in time of national peril. She was characterized as unpatriotic, and worse: “Attempting to stir up discontent against one’s government during times of war is an offense against the state. It’s called sedition.”

The dust now settled somewhat, it is obvious that Ms. Heaphy could have made life immensely easier for many had she chosen simply to offer congratulations. In fairness, however, she was not out of line in choosing to pursue a controversial topic if, indeed, she perceived it as such prior to delivering her speech. While most graduation speeches congratulate students on a job well done and send them forth to prosper responsibly, speeches that examine and criticize policy occur with frequency. In fairness too, it is doubtful that a champion of the Bush Administration’s current policy regarding terrorism or the economy would have attracted many catcalls. The critical comments directed at Ms. Heaphy during and after her address made clear that many people were genuinely upset by *what* she had said, not simply the occasion upon which she had chosen to say it. Importantly, it was also very apparent that they were upset with the university for granting institutional permission to her to say it.

Disruption and Free Speech in the Academy

Conflicting viewpoints are common within universities though, as a number of editorialists and email writers to the Bee noted ironically that contemporary departures from civility more often are directed at speakers espousing “politically incorrect” positions about domestic issues. The academy permits, theoretically, free expression of opinions and tolerates conflict as potentially healthy. We correctly observe that we would accomplish little in the way of collective critical exchange were disruption and bullies the norm. Nonetheless, there are no hard and fast rules by which to convert theory to practice. We have developed gentlemen’s *agreements* by which, ordinarily, we manage point and counterpoint discussions. In the classroom, instructors keep order so that all might have their turns. In forums, we agree more often than not to let the speakers speak and to question or criticize *ex post facto*. But it is also clear that we do not always adhere to these agreements. Speeches have been and continue to be disrupted in a number of venues on campus.

In practice, if not in theory, universities have recognized disruption as acceptable when conducted by true believers whose passion regarding a subject cannot be contained and whose numbers exceed a handful; lone disrupters usually are most unwelcome. This is

the case even when disruption appears planned in advance rather than occurring spontaneously. Instead of silencing dissenters, we are more likely to seek to prolong the debate—over days, sometimes weeks. We schedule forums (usually in numbers beyond the dissenters' ability to fully disrupt) until we are assured that everyone has had a chance to speak and to listen. In short, in many situations we honor disruption in the moment as free speech and seek to balance it in other ways.

In the final analysis, the problem at hand does not concern the appropriateness of commencement ceremonies for discussion of difficult social issues. The difficulty in Sacramento arose because this was not a standard university forum to be managed in standard university ways. Neither the graduates nor their families likely would be returning to campus for further discussion. However, what would happen were they to return? Can the university sponsor such discussions in its common format and manage the political difficulties potentially attendant to such sponsorship?

The Backlash Challenge to University Social Responsibility

In the wake of the attacks of September 11, most campuses (CSUS among them) have been exceptionally generous in the loan of faculty expertise to students and a larger audience hungry for a better understanding of the Middle East and Islam (Cox 2001). Moreover, many faculty members have made the implications of our governmental response to terrorism (i.e., domestic as well as foreign policy) the subject matter of their courses. Beyond defending the individual faculty member's right to pursue this and related topics, however, many fewer universities have proactively and systematically initiated, sponsored, or even facilitated public discussions of domestic anti-terrorist policy—the hot button that Ms. Heaphy pressed. Given the Sacramento incident, this is perhaps understandable. The lesson learned from this and other backlashes (to controversial art exhibits on campus, for example) is that tax-payer-supported public and tuition-dependent private universities are highly vulnerable to costly criticism.

In this vein, pressure clearly has been brought to bear upon universities to rein in faculty members making “unpatriotic” remarks pursuant to the September 11 terrorist attacks (Blumenstyk 2001; Wilson 2001). Some university administrations have sought to reprimand faculty members for “insensitive” comments made inside and outside the classroom (Wilson and Smallwood 2002). At one university, the administration has moved to terminate a tenured associate professor for controversial statements about terrorism, the public response to which “caused continual disruption of campus operations.” Those disruptions included negative emails and computer viruses sent to campus, difficulties in recruiting students, difficulties with external funding agencies, a decline in development revenue, threats to campus officials, and questions from Congress concerning the university's institutional values (*Dean and Provost* 2002; *Mulhauser* 2001).

Set against the problem of potential backlash are two related, very real, and very hard issues: (1) If universities shy away from *leading* (initiating, sponsoring, facilitating) discussions of such truly important national issues (ones that ultimately have implications for the freedoms now taken for granted on campuses), under the auspices of what institution might they better occur? (2) Does the university have a responsibility to *lead*, as opposed to permit in the classroom, public discussions concerning controversial social issues?

The answer to the first question is that little such dialogue will occur outside of that structured by the popular news and entertainment media and outside of events sponsored by clearly partisan organizations. The answer to the second question depends largely upon the mission of a particular university. Universities that hold to the role of “island of learning” likely will limit their sense of responsibility to permitting (indeed, defending the right of) discussion on campus by faculty, students, and staff. Some universities that have extended their missions into the community realm, metropolitan campuses in particular, may reexamine what it means to be engaged. That is, what is entailed in a commitment to assert leadership, to be responsive to the needs of the community, to engage the intellectual resources of the institution in ways that benefit both community and university, and to contribute to the cultural life and general quality of life of the region (Holland 2001)? That reexamination may well lead many campuses to embrace a role as facilitator of public discussion in line with the precept that the institution help “its students, its faculty and staff, and the citizens of the communities it serves learn how to make informed choices together, an essential skill of civic responsibility and a core competence of a civil society” (Ramaley 2001). How might such a role be accomplished responsibly?

Structuring Engagement Responsibly

It is the rare campus on which the president does not set the tone for the entire institution’s response to a major crisis, the more so when the crisis impacts both the university and the larger community. The president, via the campus web site and other media, conveys to both campus and community the institution’s shock and sorrow regarding the tragedy at hand. To the extent that the president and his or her university leadership team wishes to pursue a greater contribution in terms of community leadership, it is insufficient simply to offer the university’s services “as needed.” The leadership team must describe—in a sense, lay claim to—the role that the university intends to play (e.g., facilitator of community discussion) as the community works through and past the crisis. The case must be made explicitly that the university’s chosen direction flows from its stated mission. University leaders should make public fairly quickly a plan to accomplish the desired role and outcomes (e.g., types and frequency of university-sponsored forums).

Anticipating political backlash to the extent that the university’s plan possesses elements that some may view as problematic, university leaders should articulate directly—and sooner rather than later—the perceived dangers and difficulties that the

community might encounter in the aftermath of the crisis (e.g., racial profiling, diminished freedom of expression), and why it is important to confront them openly. Most importantly, in describing and offering to the public the safe and sacred grounds and culture of an institution that encourages tolerance, discourse, intellectual challenge, and academic freedom, a university's leaders will elucidate and reinforce its social niche beyond the education of its students. The community is being invited to utilize one of its most valuable resources in a new manner. Acceptance of the invitation will lead to recognition of the expanded potential for partnership between institution and community once the crisis at hand has passed.

The above comments pertain to the role of university leaders in structuring an institution's response to national crises generally. The crisis at issue today in most communities and on most campuses is terrorism and the nation's response to it. The form of university engagement suggested here as most pertinent to such emergencies, sponsorship of public forums, usually is easily managed within standard budgets. Other elements of decisions to play a leading role in facilitating public conversation are more complicated and can be captured within a set of precepts:

1. The problem at hand (e.g., the civil liberties implications of government efforts to promote homeland security, the meaning and forms of patriotism, the dynamics of ethnic and racial diversity) must be framed and communicated as unambiguously as possible. The objective is to avoid a free-for-all concerning appropriate scope and topic of discussion that renders the moderator's role impotent and the role of persons specifically invited to speak potentially unnecessary. In short, let the public know beforehand precisely what is to be discussed and the format of the discussion.
2. Public announcement of the discussion(s)—in whatever format—must be accomplished in a manner that underscores the institution's role as *neutral* convener of members of the public for examination of a difficult topic. Here, especially, it is vital that the university define its role proactively and clearly rather than assume that it will be apparent to observers.
3. Related to the issue of neutrality, coverage of the issues at hand must be as comprehensive, balanced, and inclusive as is possible. The pledge to sponsor multiple events (e.g., forums) with multiple speakers over as long a period as is necessary to assure that all viewpoints have been presented is essential. Many universities that have assembled faculty and other panelists to discuss aspects of contemporary political strife in the Middle East, for example, now are confronting claims of bias from groups who feel that their positions have not been addressed clearly or fully. In many cases, the tension in question may be better accommodated through multiple panels with narrower foci than through single panels with broader foci. Rarely will "debate with clear winner to be named" serve well.
4. The university desirous of playing a leadership role in stimulating a level of discussion that truly is educational must possess or assemble the expertise necessary to that

role. This is related in part to process. As noted earlier, university culture encourages critical dialogue. We know how to manage difficult conversations civilly. When our gentlepersons' agreements fail us in the immediate instance, we know how to continue a conversation over time to the point that all have had their say. It is imperative, then, that we choose personnel to conduct events in a politically charged climate who can employ our strengths in this arena to maximum advantage. To conduct its leadership role well and honestly, it is critical that the university utilize speakers, panelists, and other participants (from on and off campus) in its community events who have not only interest in, but also considerable expertise concerning the topics in question.

5. In all cases, the university must demonstrate a willingness to expand the number and types of events in question in light of reasonable but unanticipated outcomes of a particular event. Given the incident in Sacramento described above, disruption and protest clearly are potential precipitants of alterations to original plans. It is the mark of the neutral institution to underscore as its primary objective the educational outcome above all else. The chosen role in the present context is the provision of a safe and reasonably well-structured environment in which to pursue and debate ideas that have greater than academic consequence. The ideal outcome is a public sufficiently informed about the implications of government policy in a time of national crisis to shape the policy itself.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001 have occasioned a tremendous surge of patriotism within America. This call for patriotism, combined with a genuine fear of further attack, has led to pressures on citizens to support our government in all it seeks to do to protect us. Criticism of governmental efforts, particularly discussion of the long-term domestic dangers of certain policies, is viewed by many as unpatriotic. In this climate, universities—especially those that have assumed leadership roles in their communities—risk political and, potentially, financial losses through backlash against activities in some way connected to a campus and judged “unpatriotic” by a significant audience. While most universities resist pressure to tamper with faculty members' academic freedom to pursue controversial ideas within the instructional role, few have ventured to promote, as institutions, systematic exploration of the implications of government policy.

In this paper, we have argued that universities have options during this and other situations of national peril. One such option, especially for metropolitan universities whose regions identify them as active participants in discussions of public matters, is the assumption of the role of neutral promoter and facilitator of public conversation. The role fits well within the mission of most metropolitan universities. It must be engaged responsibly, however, and the political risks of failing to thoughtfully engage the role are serious. A number of precepts of successful engagement have been suggested, the sum of which is care to hold to the neutral role of convener of conversation,

to assemble appropriate expertise, and to maintain flexibility to pursue further discussion in forms not originally envisioned. Conducted well, the university's proactive movement to sponsor discussions within and for the community in times of national crisis affords it the opportunity vastly to further its role as community partner.

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