

## What Undermines What We Are For<sup>1</sup>

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The most dramatic and hence most recognized activities of the American Association of University Professors tend to highlight what the Association and its members are against. A professor who espouses an unpopular view or embarrasses an administrator is abruptly terminated and the Association investigates. Another is subjected to a miscarriage of justice of some kind, especially by being denied a fair grievance process, and the Association carefully sets the facts against the template of fair procedure. After one of these careful investigations, an institution is subjected to the indignity of being placed on the official censure list. Very often First Amendment rights are at stake, or openness and the rule of law in a free society are at issue, and we lend considerable moral force where that is sorely needed. I do not want to minimize the importance of these concerns or suggest that anyone will be paying less attention to them. The AAUP and the American professorate as a whole can be proud of their role in securing and reinforcing Constitutional rights and due process in American higher education. We can be proud that free speech in the academy is well-enough respected that its enemies try to disguise their proposals for governmental control of thought under the deceptive label, “academic bill of rights.” We can be proud that tenure—properly operationalized as a protection for scholarly inquiry, pedagogical expression, and civic participation, and not as misrepresented by some as an excuse for avoiding the messy business of terminating unsuitable occupants of professorial posts for cause when there is

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<sup>1</sup> Address to the October 28, 2006 meeting of the Tennessee Conference, American Association of University Professors, at the Vanderbilt Divinity School. Anthony J. Blasi is Professor of Sociology at Tennessee State University and 2006-08 President of the Tennessee Conference AAUP. The views expressed are his own.

cause—we can be proud that tenure properly implemented protects most full time academics in the United States and, sometimes in collective bargaining chapters, part-time academics as well. We can rejoice in the fact that more colleges and universities are being removed than added to the censure list in recent years. But my focus today is not on what we oppose or how and why we oppose it, but what we are for and what the dangers to that are, not the protections that we justly advocate but the positive program that we justly protect and the dangers to it.

One finds in the AAUP documents that the professorial status exists for the common good. It is not only our good, shared among our colleagues, though that is included for sure. It is for the good of our fellow citizens—either individually as a populace, organizationally as a community of associations and corporations, or collectively as a national society—that we are professionals and not mere employees, doctors and not mere “content providers,” role models and not mere entertainers. What is vital to the successful conduct of our profession is good for our neighbor, for the organizational environment in which that neighbor lives and works, and for the well-being of our nation. Our fellow citizens are empowered and better able to take care of themselves when we succeed in educating them. Businesses, schools, political parties, churches, and media outlets operate more intelligently and serve their clients more effectively when we succeed in making their members, staff, and officers more able, more circumspect, and more creative. Our national democracy resists the viruses of elitism, plutocracy, and demagoguery when we have succeeded in raising the consciousness and adding to the resourcefulness of the citizenry. It is for such that we work. If ever there were a setting in which Adam Smith’s model of individuals furthering

the common good when working profitably at their own trade could be applied, it is in the academy.

I propose four principles that underlie academic policies for this common good. My list of four is surely not exhaustive, but I think these four are critical in the present hour. There is a danger today of subverting these principles in order to accomplish too little in the name of higher education.

The first is the principle of **social emergence**. It holds simply that knowledge emerges in exchanges among people. It holds that this is so in two senses: first, new knowledge is created in active communities of scholars; and second, cultural and scientific heritages enter into the intellectual life of each generation as new emergent knowledge. “Emergence” suggests that a whole is quantitatively more than and qualitatively different from the accumulation of its constituent elements. Water sustains forms of life that hydrogen alone and oxygen alone cannot sustain. In the social world, we know that two children, each of whom may be perfectly peaceable and manageable when taken separately, sometimes become savage and intractable when together. Intellectual activity too bursts forth from the confines of convention and received ignorance when drawn outward from solipsisms and allowed to gallup from mind to mind. Ideas running unbridled are known as “inspiration.”

While it is obvious that the creation of new knowledge depends on such inspiration, perhaps it is less evident that appropriating a heritage from the past does so as well. To make the point, I call your attention to the difference between information and education. Information exists in accumulations. It is like many separate sounds in a cacophony. A jack-hammer, an elephant trumpeting, an auto horn, a jet, a lullaby, and a

stick snapping are all perceptible bits of information, but they do not necessarily comprise anything coherent. An education necessarily establishes the coherence of relevance structures among numerous elements. Each element adds to and changes the significance of every other element. Reading a novel changes the meaning for the individual of every other work of literature. Happening upon a scientific advance changes the relevance of many other scientific advances. This kind of development—not mere accumulation of facts but the articulation of relevances—is characteristic of education, in contradistinction to mere information. Education is thus performative, much in the way that music, even for the listener, is performative. One reconfigures one's entire conscious world, especially in its cognitive aspects, in some way when educating oneself. And because one can only educate oneself when co-present with others, because the student must perform in a social context to be educated, it is necessary to participate in an educational team. The mutual orientation and interacting among people is the necessary occasion for the educational performance.

Certain implications come with this performative nature of education. There needs to be respect, lest the vital processes are stifled; education is not enhanced by a demeaning of either student or professor. There needs to be privacy; to isolate an experiment intended to elicit learning from its pedagogical setting or to take a newly-considered idea out of context is a social violation. There needs to be the small society of the learning environment, large enough to reach a threshold of sufficient interaction but small enough to avoid the phenomenon of the mass society of isolates. There needs to be at least one confident scholar—hopefully the professor—who is comfortable with intellectual experimentation in the topic at hand and sufficiently familiar with it for such

experimentation to proceed. There needs to be freedom to venture beyond a course outline, because education, as opposed to information, precipitates the reconfiguration of the *whole* cognitive world. I would submit that education is imperiled by too much institutional control, too much pre-established accountability and reportage, too massive an institutional presence, and too much pressure to stick to a textbook or to an overly-detailed course syllabus.

A second principle is **diversity**. I am not referring primarily to the presence of different identity groups in a learning context, though that may well enhance the diversity that I have in mind. I am referring to the fact that in the learning situation a number of persons, including the professor, each endowed with a cognitive world that has developed through life experiences, through other educational involvements, and through specialized studies, is being made present to a number of other cognitive worlds. Diversity in this sense suggests that there is an encounter of cognitive worlds, and more importantly an apprehending and appreciation of such worlds, so that every one of them is itself reconfigured in some way. One's presuppositions are examined anew and adjusted because one has placed them into view for reconsideration by oneself and because the gravity of others' presuppositions causes realignments, as it were, in one's own planetary system.

I need not go on at length about diversity in this sense, since it is implicit in the principle of social emergence just described. But I want to call attention to the implications of this principle. Education as performative exercise will be different in each and every performance. It is therefore endangered, not enhanced, by demands for that magic common syllabus that is to be optimal for every combination of persons and every

occasion of interaction in the educational experience. It is endangered, not enhanced, by the bureaucratic insistence on a common text. It is endangered, not enhanced, by imposing learning objectives, specific outcome expectations, and what some semi-literate strategic planner decided should be called “competencies.” One of the greatest threats to our national security and vitality is the employment of the multiple-choice exam for a whole field, along with the temptation to use one or more of its scores as a criterion for gate-keeping purposes. My dear colleagues, we need scholars who ask new questions, not pedants who answer prepackaged old ones. We need the next generations to have a wide-ranging competence, not a standard repertory of narrow “competencies.” We need future colleagues skilled at using varied resources to great advantage, not citation-crazed true believers in one text. We need syllabi that enable students to tap into what their professor and fellow students can best bring forth, not ones that sacrifice richness on the altar of uniformity. I admit to being out-of-step with the movement to force the general education experience into a strait-jacket of listed competencies and learning objectives—usually phrased in the future tense, like the ten biblical commandments. But *is it not the purpose* of an education to enable the next generation to step out under the power of its own inspiration, guided by the light of its own best insight? If we are not ourselves out of step, how can we help others to step out, break ranks, and overcome the facistic lock-step formations of ignorance, imitation, and intimidation?

A third principle is **subsidiarity**. Subsidiarity is allowing a smaller, more local group of persons engaged in an endeavor, freedom from interference—and providing support for what it needs to attain its legitimate ends. In the academy, it is the department, program, or even classroom group that is to be promoted and favored by the

higher levels of organizational hierarchy. The point of it all is what happens among the researchers and among the teachers and learners, not what happens in the elite office suites. I grant that higher authority may sometimes need to intervene where the work of the academy is not being done well or not being done at all. But as someone who has been working in higher education for thirty-five years, I have seen precious few instances where this has actually happened. Either non-performance was evident and higher authorities did nothing, or higher authorities intervened for corrupt or self-serving reasons and made the scholarly and educational performance less than it would otherwise have been. In one instance a politician's spouse was foisted on my department, in another it was a dean's spouse. In still a third, a tarot card reader was retained as a social scientist over the objections of the faculty members in the field. In a fourth, a mentally-ill alcoholic was parachuted in, after an appropriation dried up for a do-nothing state job. We all know of cases where favorably recommended academics were denied tenure or terminated prior to the tenure decision year, only to take up employment at a more prestigious institution the next year. One can only question the wisdom of such personnel decisions; were they made in order to make room for an unemployable croney? And those teacher-of-the-year awards—all ye who enter here, give up all hope. Is it so radical an idea that the recommendations of the informed and competent people who are well-placed to make evaluations be followed, unless there is compelling evidence of error and bias?

A fourth principle is **academic integrity**. According to this principle, students should be promoted through the levels of study on the basis of performance. This may sound basic, but I must ask why administrators in Tennessee retain the prerogative of

changing grades that professors assign. It is as if the mere business of assessing student progress and faithfully recording it as assessed is unimportant to the general quality of higher education in the state. I must ask why administrators and even legislators make gross changes in graduation requirements without faculty endorsement—not “input,” endorsement. With the advance of technology and the expansion of perspectives and skills needed to master an increasingly expansive and complex world, powerful people with big titles keep witting down the parameters of the educational experience—not to mention the perpetual penchant for budget cuts.

According to the principle of academic integrity, initial appointments should be based on candidates’ promise and record in teaching and productivity in the relevant professional field. But we all know of instances where department heads and deans with lesser scholarly credentials discourage applicants with greater credentials, by making offers with sub-par levels of compensation. It is as if the quality of what happens under the guise of creating knowledge and teaching does not matter. According to the principle of academic integrity, tenure should be granted on the basis of performance. But we all know of academic lifers, tenured colleagues who do not perform—ones who cultivate high student “evaluations” by giving many high grades, who have never published anything (or have never engaged in the comparable form of professional activity for some fields), or who cannot be given any major responsibility because that would guarantee disaster. It is as though what happens in the classroom is simply unimportant, and professional performance and getting things done are less germane to the business of higher education than somebody’s own self looking good against a backdrop of less than mediocrity—what I like to call the “tallest building in Wichita syndrome.” The principle

of academic integrity calls for promotions on the basis of value to the advancement of intellectual pursuits. It seems to me that too much weight is being placed, instead, on how much grant money is brought in and how blatantly professors fain enthusiasm for the various ridiculous fads that sweep through executive retreats every summer.

The current fads feature resource-consuming schemes of data-collection for purposes of something called accountability. To hold people accountable always sounds good, but I must point out that these schemes are long on counting and short on responsibility. We have layers of administration mandating all kinds of data collection, in an amateurish imitation of what scientists do, and none of the data collected are subjected to any inquiry into their validity. The reason is that they need not be valid since they are not being used for anything anyway. There are no courses of action to which one or another result in all this research leads. The flurry of activity does make it look like all the layers of administrators are needed for something, however. This does not come without cost. Not only does the multiplication of administrative layers increase the chorus that voices unconcern for the common good, suspicion of emergence, and hostility toward subsidiarity, but the chasing after fads leads to the frittering away of scarce resources without concern for what would be called for by integrity. What would the poor devils who pay the taxes and tuition say if they knew what the real proportion of it is that goes to the hours administrators, department heads, and even faculty and students must devote to the myriad pointless outcomes assessments, evaluations, drafting of mission statements, strategic planning, justifications for requisitions, work-load forms, management by objectives proposals, annual reviews, formulations of goals, progress reports, rationales, and the like. Spending time on such stuff is tantamount to being

absent in place! Their shear costs—when they can be unmasked in the budgets—rival the amount of resources devoted to instruction. It would be one thing if some good were to come from all this, but it actually undermines research, teaching, and learning.

And are we made at all more responsible for all this? I have been working in higher education since 1973; not since 1978 has anyone ever sat in a class of mine to ascertain whether I actually do what I am paid to do. But I spend hours filling out forms affirming that I do it!

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I have undoubtedly thrown too many daggers to leave the Tennessee higher educational establishment with a feeling of equanimity over these brief remarks. In defense, however, I must point out that the substance, if not always the tone, of what I have outlined is positive. If the profession and the organizational apparatus associated with it are to promote the common good, we need allow for, even cultivate, social emergence in the research and educational settings. We need cognitive diversity. We should have subsidiarity. We must have integrity. Why should we even have to mention such basics? Well, if not we, who?