



Profiles in Caution

If College Presidents Don't Ask Questions about War and Civil Liberties, Who Will?

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The college campus is the natural place for open, lively debate on the important issues of the day. Robust public discourse is elemental to what higher education is all about. But what is the role of college presidents in that debate? Is it limited to merely ensuring an environment in which diverse points of view are welcomed and expressed? Or do we also have a responsibility to participate actively in the freewheeling exchange of ideas, even, on occasion, taking sides on significant issues of controversy?

The answer is not simply a matter of each president's individual tolerance—or appetite—for controversy. It goes to the heart of how we define our jobs. I believe my principal responsibility as president of Lesley University is running the place and fundraising, but the charge goes beyond that. Sometimes it also means taking a stand and speaking out.

At a recent discussion I participated in for college leaders on the "President's Role in Public Discourse," circumspection was the order of the day. My suggestion that institutional leaders have a responsibility to speak out on critical public issues provoked a strong negative response from many of the college leaders in the room.

Men and women who in their day-to-day campus decision-making and community affairs are by no means timid, unimaginative or un-opinionated, found plenty of reasons to counsel caution in dealing with broader public affairs: *If we take a stand, we will offend some people. Taking a public stand would put the campus at risk.*

It's one thing to speak out on "safe" topics like proposed changes to the federal Higher Education Act and the attendant dangers of government intrusions into the academic sphere. But what voice should we give to the abridgement of individual civil liberties under the USA Patriot Act? What about gay marriage, abortion, Enron, tax policy and health reform?

If college presidents don't ask questions about war and civil liberties, who will? If we don't speak out on such issues and act as role models for our students,

who will? Many academic leaders take the position that anything that has the potential to alienate some constituency, by definition, poses risk to the institution and should be avoided. I disagree.

One of higher education's fundamental roles is to encourage students to become actively involved in the community—in civic life. Isn't it logical then for students to expect leaders of their institutions to model that behavior? That suggests that presidents must act not only as academic leaders, but as moral leaders of the broader community as well. Doing so is fundamental to making students' educational experience—and our institutions themselves—relevant in today's world.

In an earlier era, campus leaders frequently occupied positions of societal power and influence. Think of James Bryant Conant's influence on American life that extended well beyond Harvard's walls to science policy and education reform, Yale President Kingman Brewster's challenge to the establishment's support of the Vietnam War, and the eloquent leadership of Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays against segregation.

Colleges and universities require certain basics to deliver high-quality education to students—basics like strong faculty, coherent curriculum, classrooms and student services. In the final analysis, though, it will not be just the subject knowledge and skills that our graduates leave college with that matters. It will also be the values they take away to lead lives as productive citizens. Every campus leader, by virtue of his or her position, has the capacity (and I believe, the obligation) to influence those values by example through words and deeds.

Will this occasionally get us into trouble? Perhaps so. But remember that Nelson Mandela's birth name in his tribal language means "troublemaker" or "shaker of trees." In times like these, we need all the tree shakers we can muster. At a recent Lesley University commencement, keynote speaker John Lewis, the civil rights icon and congressman from Georgia, exhorted the 3,000 members of the graduating class to "make trouble and get in the way." That is good advice for our students. It is good advice for academic leaders as well.

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