

The Role of Higher Education in the 21st Century

Collaborator or Counterweight?

BY JAMES OTTAVIO CASTAGNERA

The December 8, 2000, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that an article in the *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, in which the authors had criticized the alleged behavior of Boise Cascade Corporation toward workers in its Mexican facilities, was withdrawn by the University of Denver after the corporation threatened a disparagement and defamation lawsuit.

The report is reminiscent of earlier articles in *The Chronicle* and elsewhere concerning "slap suits" against academics whose scholarship is critical of corporate interests, and other forms of corporate retaliation against universities that have taken stands against selling sweatshop

goods. As the University of Denver's acquiescence suggests, higher education's response to such corporate challenges to age-old principles of academic freedom and social justice has been uneven at best.

The 21st century is no time for faint-heartedness in higher education. Rather, this should be a time when we champion free speech and social justice, even at the risk of our own prosperity. No one else can do it.

In 1967, John Kenneth Galbraith, in *The New Industrial State*, postulated a three-legged stool on which the well-being of American society rested: Big Business, Big Government, and Big Labor. These legs kept one another in check, a sort of socio-political supplementation to the political checks and balances outlined in the Constitution. Galbraith's thesis was correct in its fundamental features. But by the 1990s, Robert Reich—in many ways Galbraith's intellectual successor at Harvard—would express his concern in *The Work of Nations* about the failure of that balance, due to the shift from a manufactur-

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ing to a services economy and the decline of organized labor.

When Galbraith was writing, in the 1950s and 1960s, labor represented one in three American workers, and a typical American CEO took home 40 times the salary of the worker on the shop floor—a sum that, when reduced by our steeply graduated income tax, amounted to only 12 times the worker's wages. By 1988, the number of unionized workers in the private sector had fallen to one in 10, and CEOs were enjoying 70 times more after-tax income than average workers.

In this brave new world, Reich concluded, the information manipulators—in his terms the “symbolic analysts”—are the dominant subspecies. Indeed, this is true even within the labor movement: The most prominent private-sector unions in America are those representing professional athletes and entertainers. Whatever happened to Cesar Chavez? Today's big name on the border is NAFTA.

A NEW ROLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Let me suggest that higher education should aim at filling the vacuum left by Big Labor in Galbraith's construct of *The New Industrial State*. Its capacity to serve as a countervailing force will rest on one or more of the following features of the contemporary university:

- Vastly increasing endowments, as we see developing at the Ivies and universities of analogous high quality and prestige;
- Expanding geographic reach via multiple campuses—for example, Penn State's 1997 upgrade of 14 of its regional campuses from two- to four-year colleges;
- Direct competition with the for-profits, such as the Uni-

versity of Phoenix, in the distance-education market, which is being more or less successfully attempted by some large universities and systems; and

- Consortia of small colleges, and/or small-college affiliations with a larger (possibly “hub”) institutions, a strategy being pursued, for instance, by a group of small Catholic colleges in eastern Pennsylvania.

This suggestion and list of features, of course, conjure memories of the critique of the “megaversity” that emerged from such works as C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite*. Admittedly, “mega” is a part of what higher education must be if it is to be a co-equal member of the triumvirate upon which 21st-century American society will rest. The small, independent college will not be able to play this role except where it is unusually well endowed or affiliated with a major religion or consortium.

If higher education is to perform the crucial task I have proposed for it in 21st-century America, it must take a page from the history of organized labor in the unions' heyday. Like Big Labor at its zenith, higher education needs to become adept at shifting from the right foot of collaboration with Big Business and Big Government to the left foot of confrontation. It must do this even at the price of lost corporate and government support, and even in the teeth of threatened litigation, when the issue is academic freedom or social justice.

Indeed, many public university systems are striving to build their alumni support and endowments so as to gain a measure of independence from the strings attached to government purses. And many church-affiliated institutions, especially Catholic

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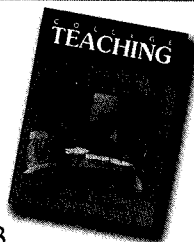
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**“Mega” is a part of what higher education must be
if it is to be a co-equal member of the triumvirate upon which
21st-century American society will rest.**

universities, are returning to their religious roots and for the first time in a long while are publicly celebrating—even marketing—their moral and doctrinal orientations.

What of the prospects of success for higher education in the sometimes-confrontational posture I am proposing? In his sweeping survey in *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years*, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto says that the monasteries that survived the Dark Ages triumphed only by being needed. They also survived by being distinct from government and the marketplace. The more that colleges and universities morph to match their for-profit competition, the more they incapacitate themselves to act as a counterweight to those other powerful forces.

In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Columbia’s Arthur Levine listed nine “inevitable changes” that colleges and universities experience in the coming decades, such as competing with “more numerous and diverse” providers of higher education. But the more readily they accept Levine’s nine changes as “inevitable” and collaborate in their coming about without carefully considering the merit of each—followed by a conscious decision to accept or oppose it—the less they will be able to function as free agents influencing American society.

TRUTH-TELLING IN THE INFOTAINMENT AGE

As David Halberstam observed in *The Next Century*, America is more than ever an “entertainment-driven society.” A telling example is the contrast between the media coverage of the Vietnam War and the coverage of the Gulf War some two decades later. Stanley Karnow wrote of the 1968 Tet offensive, “After years of viewing the war on television, Americans at home had become accustomed to a familiar pattern of images.... The screen often portrayed human agony in scenes of the wounded and dying on both sides.... [M]ostly it transmitted the grueling reality of the struggle... punctuated periodically by moments of horror.”

By contrast, the Gulf War was quick, high-tech, and portrayed on American television as if it were a video game. Satellite photos were combined with simulations to feed American viewers sanitized images, depicting no more real blood and pain than a quick game of “Space Invaders.”

Thus, barbarism passed beyond the merely banal to the visually alluring. The film industry has responded to, and in turn reinforced, its audience’s fascination with the visually unusual and compelling. From George Lucas’s breakthrough *Star Wars* films of the 1970s and 1980s to *The Perfect Storm* last year, special effects—and, increasingly, computer-generated visuals—are at the heart of most blockbuster hits. If it can be imagined, it can be depicted.

This power is potentially hazardous. Severo Ornstein, writing in the journal *Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility*, points out, “Today the art of simulation has

developed to the point that it has become necessary to identify television simulations as artificial, so we won’t think we are seeing the real thing.... When employed for political purposes, illusion becomes diabolical and deception becomes downright dangerous.”

If higher education must differentiate itself from business and government in order to serve as a counterweight to them, one of the fundamental ways it must do so is in adhering to a strict code of truth-seeking and truth-telling. Even if particular institutions of higher learning are unwilling to take unpopular stands on controversial issues, they must share consensus on this code or run the risk of abrogating their claims to being genuine educational institutions. Are we not entitled to expect a higher level of integrity from our universities than we anticipate when we turn on our TVs?

This expectation of integrity means that when universities use the power of technology to lie as governments and businesses do, it seems more scandalous. Witness the University of Wisconsin’s embarrassment when it was “exposed” in a *Chronicle* article on Nov. 24, 2000:

The cover of its new admissions brochure displayed a photograph of happy U.W. students attending a football game at their home stadium—a photograph that turned out to have been doctored. The original picture contained no black faces, but U.W. officials had desperately wanted their admissions materials to reflect a diverse student body. So, using photo-design software, the director of university publications and the director of undergraduate admissions simply asked their staff to add one.

Coming now full circle, let us consider in greater depth the University of Denver’s decision to withdraw an article previously published in one of its law reviews, when faced with a major corporation’s threat to sue. Let us begin by agreeing, if we can, that the remedy for bad speech is more speech. And let us assume—purely for argument’s sake—that the censored article is inaccurate, or even that it is defamatory. What ought the university to have done, or offered to do, in the face of Boise Cascade’s threatened legal action? Let us compare what it did do to what Cornell University did when faced with a similar situation.

In 1998, Professor Kate L. Bronfenbrenner of Cornell’s School of Industrial Relations was sued by Beverly Enterprises, Inc., one of the nation’s largest nursing home chains. Beverly accused the professor of lying about the company’s labor relations record to members of Congress and in her published scholarship. Bronfenbrenner reportedly told Democratic Congressmen at a town hall meeting that Beverly had a “long-established record of egregious labor-law violations in the context of union-organizing campaigns.” The corporation sued her for defamation. Cornell hired attorneys and successfully defended the suit on its faculty member’s behalf.

In the wake of *Beverly Enterprises, Inc. vs. Bronfenbrenner*,

In current searches for college presidents, it seems that the absence of the initials "PhD" after the candidate's name is not necessarily an impediment if the fund-raising record is substantial.

faculty around the country were understandably concerned that "slap suits" would become more common. At Rider University, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) came to the negotiating table in summer 1999 with a proposal aimed at ensuring that the university would defend any faculty member who was named in any such "slap suit." The university, to its credit, agreed to a new provision in the collective bargaining agreement that will provide such protection, and then obtained the appropriate insurance to cover any such claims.

In short, my contention—which I hope is shared by the great majority of my readers—is that a university must do at a minimum two things to think of itself as a real university: seek the truth and defend those who try to tell the truth under the institution's auspices. Absent a strict adherence to these two baseline principles, an institution *ceases* to be a university, no matter how many sports teams it fields, how many academic programs it offers, or how many campus amenities its students enjoy. The institution may be an information purveyor or a training school or a research center, but it has forfeited the right to call itself a university.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVISM IN THE NEW CENTURY

Now comes the hard part, where I expect that many of my readers and I will part company. For I argue that the two baseline principles outlined above are only that: credentials that qualify an institution to call itself a university. But while a labor union must fairly and vigorously represent its members, a great union will also put its resources at risk in order to organize unrepresented workers. A great university likewise will reach out and actively oppose injustice.

This is not the view of most universities today. Just as many unions have long since circled their wagons, emphasizing preservation of existing power bases over the organization of new constituencies, so too have many—perhaps most—universities taken the path of cautious conservatism. Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame University, wrote in the February 2 issue of *The Chronicle*,

When I was a college president, I often spoke out on national issues, even when they didn't pertain to academic life. Yet nowadays, I don't find many college presidents commenting on such issues on the front page of *The New York Times* or in any of the country's other major news outlets. Once upon a time chief executives in higher education talked to the press about military policy in the same breath as the Constitutional amendment for the 18-year-olds' vote, but I wonder whether we hear them taking stands on similar topics now.

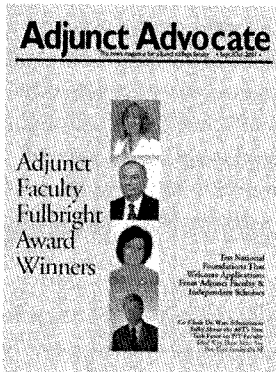
Father Hesburgh cites a recent American Council on Education (ACE) report, which concluded, "[T]he vast majority of Americans rarely hear college presidents comment on issues of national importance, and when they do, they believe institutional needs rather than those of the students or the wider community drive such comments." He offers several reasons why this has happened. Among them is "that presidents must play an ever-larger role in raising money for their institutions—and often from supporters who have strong views on what presidents should or shouldn't say to the press."

Today colleges feel free to draw their CEOs from the ranks of development officers, a practice that to my knowledge was almost unheard of even two decades ago. In current searches for college presidents, it seems that the absence of the initials "PhD" after the candidate's name is not necessarily an impediment if the fund-raising record is substantial.

Our students, too, have for the most part been quiet since the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s. The 1980s witnessed a rush to law and business schools for JDs and MBAs, then on to the M&A (merger and acquisition) practices of the nation's big accounting, law, and investment banking firms. During the latter half of the 1990s, undergraduates couldn't wait—and sometimes didn't—to establish their own dot-com business ventures.

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But as the last decade of the last century of the old millennium came to a close, there were stirrings in at least some of our student bodies. Students at universities across the country became energized—at least temporarily—by the anti-sweatshop movement. Initial corporate responses to these new stirrings of student unrest included withdrawals of sports sponsorships. But these punitive reactions were rapidly replaced by the formation of the Fair Labor Association, an anti-sweatshop consortium consisting of such major manufacturers as Nike and Reebok and some 140 institutions of higher learning.

The Fair Labor Association may be compared by critics to the company unions that proliferated in the early part of the 20th century, before they were outlawed by the 1936 passage of the National Labor Relations Act. The Worker Rights Consortium, a more militant anti-sweatshop organization, operates independently, and—perhaps not surprisingly—has come under fire from corporate members of the Fair Labor Association. Said a Nike spokesman of the consortium recently, “It’s just parachuting into a country, conducting a few interviews, and writing a report in a few days. Thorough monitoring involves culling through records, matching up pay stubs, getting a sense of the local practices and culture. There is a lot more involved in auditing and monitoring than what that report represents.”

The important point for my purposes here is not whether the Fair Labor Association or the Worker Rights Consortium has got it right about any particular allegation of sweatshop abuses. What matters here is that the two groups appear to be engaged in dialogue and debate about the truth behind such labor-abuse accusations. This is precisely the sort of conversation that is denied to higher education’s constituencies when a corporation threatens to sue or to withdraw sponsorship and the targeted institution bows to the threat.

Slowly but surely, however, at least some of America’s several thousand institutions of higher education are manifesting a willingness to use their virtual global reach to identify and help address the inequities that proliferate beyond their campus boundaries.

The record to date suggests that such initiatives are not nearly as risky as some may fear. Just as American companies in the 1940s and 1950s reached accommodations with organized labor because they needed the workers represented by those unions, so too does the quick creation of the Fair Labor Association suggest a recognition among apparel manufacturers like Nike and Reebok that they need big-time college athletics. By extension, corporations need our graduates, our scientists, our consultants—in short, our knowledge. Knowledge is capital. As such, it affords us leverage.

Does higher education possess the collective will to exercise that leverage? I do not know. But let me suggest that many big issues of our times cry out for us to demonstrate that will. Father Hesburgh points to affirmative action and “developing education programs that seek to improve the status of women—especially in Asia, South America, and Africa, where many are second-class citizens”—as issues he would address, were he still a university CEO. Women’s rights, affirmative action, and the anti-sweatshop movement can all be characterized as battles in a global struggle to end the exploitation of

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human beings. Environmentalism, community outreach, and health research are related issues on which higher education could also speak out.

A key question in my view is, How will higher education use its global reach and knowledge capital, particularly as those have been enhanced by communication technology, in the 21st century?

To date, the discourse has been a self-referential one, centered on the displacement of traditional classroom teaching by distance learning. To borrow the words of the ACE report, it has focused on “institutional needs rather than those of...the wider community.” Much less discussed is the potential for the Internet to make American higher education a force for fair play and human dignity in the international arena. Global reach brings with it global responsibilities. Knowledge is not only capital—it is power. Whether that power will be focused upon the narrow concerns of individual institutions or combined for the good of “the wider community” is a defining choice for higher education.