End of Academic Freedom

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This book is premised upon the assumption that the core purpose of universities is to create, preserve, transmit, validate, and find new applications for knowledge. It is written in the perspective of critical university studies, in which university governance processes should take ideas and discourse about ideas seriously, far more seriously than they are often taken within many of today’s universities, since doing so is the key to achieving this purpose. Specifically, we assert that the best way for universities to take ideas seriously, and so to best achieve their purpose, is to consciously recognize and conserve the entire range of available ideas. Through the current emphasis upon factors such as student headcounts, increased efficiency and job creation are undoubtedly important, far more is at stake in universities than only these factors.

From this premise, we deduce insights and arguments about academic freedom, as well as factors such as control and monitoring of the market place of ideas, the structure of information flows within universities, the role of language in university governance, and relationships between administrators, faculty members, and students. We identify impediments to achieving the core purpose of universities, including the idea vetting systems of authoritarianism, corporatism, illiberalism, supernaturalism, and political correctness. We elucidate how these impediments inhibit successful achievement of the core purpose of the university. In response to these impediments we prescribe relatively autonomous universities characterized by openness, transparency, dissent, and the maintenance of balance between conflicting perspectives, values, and interests.
A Guiding Principle in the Book

• First comes ideas, then thoughts, then the organization of those thoughts into concepts and words and plans, then the transformation of those plans into reality

• The beginning of the realities we affect, you see, is in the imagination, followed by the language, followed by the reality
The Idea ("Core Purpose") of the University

• Create, preserve, transmit, validate, find new applications for knowledge

• Transmit knowledge that prepares students:
  – for a job
  – to learn to learn for the next job, and the job thereafter, and the job thereafter, etc.
  – to cultivate and enrich life after work through learning to appreciate the fine arts, literature, and humanities, and
  – to participate meaningfully as leaders in our complex, democratic society.
How might this core purpose be most effectively achieved?

• The Idea Variation Hypothesis

• The rate of increase in the creation, preservation, transmission, validation, and application of knowledge at any time is equal to the variation in the available pool of ideas at that time (i.e. intellectual diversity)

• Answer: consciously conserve the entire range of ideas in the storehouse of knowledge
The Design and Conduct of Universities

• How should universities be designed and conducted to optimally conserve the entire range of ideas?

• Analyzed in book using principles of cybernetics (the science of organization, information flows, and control)

• Short answer: *Shared governance is not the only reason* the American university became globally preeminent. But it was a major factor. Why?

• Professors are best-positioned to make academic decisions
The Obliteration of Purpose

• Threats to achieving this purpose include corporatism, authoritarianism, political correctness, supernaturalism and illiberalism

• Corporatism tends to make students commodities and links performance to various easy-to-quantify if short-sighted and often-misleading indicators (e.g. enrollment and graduation rates, national rankings) as well as various skin deep metrics (workloads, publication and citation rates)

• As a result, shared governance is quickly eroding, and the administrative dominance of the university is on the rise
Prescription

• Active shared governance in which the faculty creates, directs, controls and delivers the curriculum (and sets academic standards) and the administration provides the scaffolding and support necessary to do so

• Focus primarily on quality in terms of meeting the university’s core purpose, not on secondary values such as prestige

• Understand and respect academic freedom (be willing and ready to dissent)

• Consciously conserve entire range of ideas