

# On Institutional Faithfulness

*John B. Bennett*

It is a mistake for academics to comment critically at a comfortable distance on things like last year's Firestone-Ford debacle—as though our own house were sufficiently in order. As facts of corporate misrepresentation and deception by manufacturers of cars and tires become public, we academics fall into our accustomed roles of providing analysis and criticism in support of honesty and the common weal. These are important roles, they need to be played, and academics know how to play them. But it would be more gracious and honest—and our voices would likely have more impact—were we also to attend to some issues of our own misrepresentation.

I

We already rely far too heavily upon graduate assistants and adjunct faculty to do the teaching, informal advising, and practical oversight of the curriculum that—when done really well—require full-time faculty. And things will get worse as our institutional trends head in the wrong direction—reflecting more, not less, use of part-time faculty. Other serious challenges include providing appropriate service to surrounding communities, cooperating with contiguous institutions of secondary and higher learning to improve the education provided, addressing multicultural and global issues in more sensible and responsible ways, and containing costs in order to make higher education more affordable.

However, it is the rush of many institutions into distance delivery of education that I wish to discuss, for many seem more interested in seeking increased revenue streams than in facilitating learning. Of course, these are rather simple-minded and hardly mutually exclusive alternatives. But as has been observed, “if institutions were truly concerned with using distance education to enrich collegiate learning experiences, Internet-based learning, we expect, would look much different from what we've seen thus far.”<sup>1</sup>

Some of these institutions will argue the prudence of diversifying their ‘product line.’ And there is merit to this argument as well. But it presupposes, I suggest, that institutions are sufficiently faithful to their reason for being—

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the promotion, protection, and extension of learning. Within this framework, what requires close scrutiny is the relationship in quality between educational experiences offered traditionally and those provided at a distance. Assuring that the latter are at least as good as the former becomes more difficult as the university becomes more complex.

Years ago, Clark Kerr celebrated rather than lamented the ambiguity of what he declared had become the multiversity. In his eyes, the large research institutions incorporated “competing visions of true purpose, each relating to a different layer of history, a different web of forces.” As a consequence, he concluded, “the university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity be partially at war with itself.” Yet, for Kerr and others, this lack of a common center is welcomed, not deplored.

Instead of urging universities to seek, nurture, and be faithful to a common center and object of conviction and value that would hold them together, advocates of the postmodern institution appear to have concluded that serious fragmentation is both inevitable and acceptable. Indeed, Kerr contended that “a university anywhere can aim to be no higher than to be as British as possible for the sake of the undergraduates, as German as possible for the sake of the graduates and research personnel, as American as possible for the sake of the public at large—and as confused as possible for the sake of the preservation of the whole uneasy balance.”<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this celebration of confusion that is troubling, for the clarity of educational institutional missions has continued to deteriorate since Kerr wrote. A college or university, like any other moral enterprise, ought to be recognized and known for its reliability and constancy of character—not excused for its confusion and inconsistency. Perhaps Kerr was simply more explicit than others have been willing to be. But what we see in much of the rush toward distance delivery is a disregard for communicating and upholding with their publics exactly what the ‘new’ institutions now are. Nor do these institutions speak to how they will maintain in their distance education ventures their faithfulness to the promotion, protection, and extension of learning—or how they will keep these new ventures congruent with the more traditional education programs for which they are known.<sup>3</sup>

This is especially the case with those colleges and universities that are abandoning their traditional nonprofit status in portions of their teaching activities. As they attend to profits and not merely revenues, they inevitably sow confusion among their constituencies and create potentially enormous conflicts of interest. Ironically, it was scarcely more than a decade ago that many of these same traditional institutions looked with barely disguised disdain at proprietary postsecondary institutions. Their message was clear: student learning takes a distant—and unacceptable—second place to profits at these institutions. Now, quite suddenly, to search for profits is regarded as a sign of institutional vitality.

This is not an issue of the ‘purity’ of institutions of higher education. It is rather one of their constancy of character, of preserving and carrying on the best of the past while meeting the challenges and opportunities of the present and the future. The constancy of their character turns on their continuing to serve the common good through honoring the covenants made to promote, protect, and extend learning. Rushing to create for-profit arrangements—especially when there are alternatives—seems out of character, not in it. There *are* alternatives, for many of these institutions have access to considerable reserves and endowments—even while they are pleading their need for new capital.<sup>4</sup>

Educators should be asking much more vigorous questions about whose good is really being served in these new for-profit educational environments. Of course, this question has been raised about faculty in traditional not-for-profit educational institutions. However, the question more often concerns selected individuals than institutions as a whole. Not-for-profit institutions have traditionally considered maximizing economic performance to be an extraneous goal, directing attention and effort away from increase of learning. Their traditional aim and covenant with stakeholders is to increase learning, not wealth. And even when an occasional traditional institution would generate significant operating ‘surpluses,’ these monies would be available to fund improved educational activity—through additional personnel, investment in technology, or other capital expenses.

The new for-profit environment, however—often one dominantly, if not exclusively, served through learning distributed through technology—threatens to direct institution-wide energies to generating profits at the expense of the tuition-paying student. These profits may then be distributed to stockholders or owners rather than reserved to improve future educational activity. In these arrangements, the learning interests and needs of the student will always stand in tension with the profit interests and needs of the investor. Counter arguments must not be allowed to obscure this danger.

Of course, many traditional institutions have long had unrelated business income on which they have paid taxes. This income includes profits from operations of the institutionally owned radio station as it sells advertisements, or property that the institution rents out for commercial purposes, etc. The income is from activities not centrally related to the mission and business of the institution—providing education through supporting teaching, learning, and scholarship. By contrast, however, profits from the new entities will be those coming from activities that rest precisely in the central mission and business of the institution—that is, activities that are essential, not tangential, to who and what the institution is.

Nor is this new subsidiary at all similar to the traditional institutional practice of treating one program as a cash cow in order to subsidize the financial needs of another. Surplus revenues remain within the traditional institution

in order to improve educational programs. The only relevant issues relate to the distribution of revenues. It is not a case of distributing some funds within the institution and others outside. The question about whose good is being served is the familiar one of whether the convenience of the instructor is being served at the expense of student learning. It is not the new issue we now face of the good of the investor versus that of the student.

Unlike higher education, other professions such as medicine and law have traditionally been practiced in for-profit organizations. But tensions in those professions between serving the good of the client and that of the practitioner are both long-standing and increasing.<sup>5</sup> In response to those tensions, codes of ethics have been developed and emphasized, and pro bono work has been one customary way of seeking a balance. Higher education, however, has no traditions of industry-wide codes of ethics or pro bono work. It is weak as well on other marks of a profession, such as requirements for continuing education.

For-profit institutions of higher education do not present a challenge of being truthful in the quite literal sense, for instance, that characterizes submission of false data to ratings publications. The parent bodies of for-profit subsidiaries have the larger truth-telling challenge of presenting to the public a unified story of fidelity to underlying covenants. This, I suggest, is a challenge indeed. For they must seek donors to the institution even as they search for investors. The old spiel to potential donors that their gifts are investments in the future of the institution must be nuanced and separated from the new spiel to potential investors. Legislators and local tax agencies and communities must somehow be instructed on why the tax-exempt status of the institution should be continued. And students must be assured that it is promotion of their good, not that of investors, that is the uncompromised objective of the institution.

## II

Institutions of higher education must be faithful to their fundamental purpose: promoting, protecting, and extending learning—the learning of our students, our colleagues, the broader public, and ourselves. The tools are teaching, research and publication, and other forms of service.

Sometimes being faithful as institutions means being truthful and assuring the public that our actions, and our reports of them, are congruent with our fundamental purposes, that our means are appropriate to our ends. We should not dilute our substance with untruths. Lies undermine the fabric of human community. They rarely result in physical loss of life, but they do diminish the richness of our lives and our ability to trust one another. The last place they should appear is at colleges and universities.

At other times, being faithful as institutions means looking closely at the appropriateness of our institutional and organizational structures. The con-

cept of covenant returns us to an essential characteristic of an authentic institution of higher education. For this institution is marked by a commitment to the common good that includes the welfare of the student. New initiatives, such as for-profit subsidiaries, must be assessed. Do they contribute to the faithfulness and truthfulness of higher education?

### Notes

1. Van Weigel, "E-Learning and the Tradeoff Between Richness and Reach in Higher Education," *Change* (September/October, 2000), 10-15, quoted 12.
2. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, fourth edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7, 14.
3. For concern about the interest of these 'new' universities in fulfilling the traditional broader functions of civic socialization, promotion of social mobility, and unfettered scholarship and debate, see Frank Newman, "Saving Higher Education's Soul," *Change* (September/October 2000), 16-23.
4. Consider that for-profit subsidiaries have already been created by such institutions as Columbia, Cornell, Duke, and New York University.
5. William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1995).

**In November 2001, our local affiliate sent us this description of "Theory & Practice of Teaching Writing in K-12," a course for teachers in training at California State University, San Marcos.**

This course will focus on teaching writing in K-12. We will explore current theories of composing, process, and assessment. We will also discuss debates in literacy studies and writing instruction as they intersect and/or collide with postcolonial theories, feminist theories, queer theories, critical race studies, disability studies, and cultural studies. Some of the specific issues that we will engage with include the institutionalization of linguistic and cultural vocabularies in writing, the teaching of grammar, the politics of language and form, the relationship between these pedagogical issues and their political contexts (English Only legislation, anti-Affirmative Action campaigns, US-centrism in writing pedagogy and theory, etc.), and reading and writing in "Spanglish" and "Black English." Part of the work of the course will involve generating anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and anti-nationalistic pedagogies for writing instruction.