

# Choosing Justice Over Excellence

by STANLEY N. KATZ

**Chronicle of Higher Education**

**From the issue dated May 17, 2002**

*(posted with permission from the publisher)*

---

When I started teaching in universities in the late 1950s, it was impossible not to be aware of the fact that both one's job as a teacher and one's place of employment were immediately involved with questions of worldly justice. There were negative reasons, quite obvious to a young liberal, some of whose teachers had recently been pilloried by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, and who, himself, had been asked to sign a state loyalty oath before beginning to teach, and who would soon be caught up in struggles over the war in Vietnam. But there were many more positive reasons, highlighted by the civil-rights movement and the women's movement. The struggles for the establishment of departments of African-American and women's studies were couched in terms of justice, as were the profound tensions accompanying the democratization and diversification of student bodies and faculties.

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, however, "justice" has seldom been the principal term of reference for campus debate, and I think that universities are the poorer for that. So I want to put the question: What would it mean, in 2002, to be a just university?

There are two ways to approach the question. First, we can ask what it would mean for the processes and practices within a university to take place justly. Examples of what scholars call "procedural justice" are regularly reported in *The Chronicle*. They have to do with issues like avoiding discrimination in hiring and promotion, ensuring that researchers do not conduct experiments on human subjects without informing them of the risks, and other processes meant to guarantee that universities maintain the same minimal standards of justice that all other social institutions in civilized societies uphold. Indeed, I believe that universities should be held to a higher standard than corporations and perhaps even governments. As Harold Shapiro, Princeton's former president, once put it: "One aspect of a student's moral education lies not in the curriculum but in the behavior of the faculty, staff, and administration and in the policies of the institution."

Consider two recent examples of controversies over procedural justice from that perspective. At several universities, my own among them, students have staged

protests to urge their administrations to treat the lowest-paid employees better. Similarly, students have called for their institutions to refrain from selling clothing made in sweatshops abroad. Admittedly, selling clothing and employing nonacademic workers are not central to what universities do in the same way that teaching and research are, but they are things that universities should do justly nonetheless.

A second way of looking at what makes a university just is to ask further, What sorts of things would it be just for a university to do in pursuit of its basic mission? Or, as Aristotle might have put it, What would it mean to do justly those things that are inherent in the very nature of a university? That is a question about "substantive justice." It is far harder to answer, and university leaders have done little to encourage faculty members and students to consider it.

The path most often taken leads to the sorts of things that societies need done if they are to survive and prosper and progress; it suggests that the proper role of a just university is, insofar as it is capable, to carry out or help to achieve those social goals. Society needs a strong economy; let universities give people the skills to build it and make the technological advances to expand it. Society needs to cure diseases; let universities investigate their causes and find cures for them. Society needs affordable energy; let universities discover how to provide it. And so forth.

Speaking at a 1988 panel on the role of education in keeping the United States competitive, Frances D. Ferguson, president of Vassar College, put it bluntly: "A liberal-arts education emphasizes the creative thinking needed to produce new technologies and marketing strategies, the global perspective that explains the cultural differences costing America its competitive edge, and the ethical responsibility that will help companies produce products to meet human needs." That kind of utilitarian understanding of a just university does not necessarily imply that universities alone can provide society with all of its needs or solve all of its problems. Many things are simply beyond their capacities, and what they cannot do, they should not be accused of being unjust for not doing. Universities cannot, at the moment, come up with programs to end poverty or cure AIDS.

Nonetheless, a university will be a minimally just one to the extent that it does what it can to serve its society. And, on the whole, universities have accepted that assessment of their role.

Such an assessment, however, can become a double-edged sword. It may resonate with legislators and donors, but it also, by putting so much emphasis on an economic perspective, seems to devalue arguments that education should be supported because of its value to students or to the wider culture -- something of value in and of itself. As Arthur M. Cohen has observed in his book *The Shaping of American Higher*

*Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), "Many scholars have contended that higher education is more than an engine of economic activity, that it is the home of ideas, the archive of a people's culture. But those arguments have few friends in the legislatures."

For me, the larger and more important point, one Cohen hints at but doesn't fully develop, is that American higher education has gone too far in the direction of such "functional justice," if you will permit me to call it that. The most powerful recent critique of this trend is the late Bill Readings's brilliant and eccentric book, *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

Readings begins by arguing that "the wider social role of the university as an institution is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within Society nor what the exact nature of that society." His basic argument is that the university has become "a transnational bureaucratic corporation." As a result, those disciplines -- the humanities, in particular -- that do not have a direct economic benefit no longer seem central. Excellence becomes a matter to be judged by market capitalism. And achieving and maintaining excellence depends on an ever-expanding market.

It would be easy to reject Readings as a radical critic of Western higher education, but I think he is fundamentally correct in his identification of the problematic character of what he calls "the University of Excellence." For me, as for Readings, the problem is one of reconceiving the university "once the story of liberal education has lost its organizing center."

Another approach to fulfilling the obligation of the university to substantive justice, then, is quite different. It asks, What is it that a university does, and should do, best? Many of those who prefer to phrase the question this way explicitly reject the idea that a university should serve its community in anything like a direct, utilitarian way. Trying to do so, they say, inevitably seduces higher education into trying to be all things to all people.

Some of the most forceful critiques in this camp came out of the 1970s. In *The Concept of a University* (University of California Press, 1973), Kenneth R. Minogue warned of "preparing a Procrustean bed for the luckless object of our thought." In a later essay, "Universities Since 1900," the late Edward Shils denounced as a dangerous mistake trying to be always "more pleasing and accommodating to the external world, or more preoccupied with changing or abolishing the condition of the external society." Both writers were reacting to what they took to be the perversion of the fundamental role of the university by antiwar and social activists, those supporting the diversification of everything in higher education and advocating the conversion of the university to a self-conscious promoter of radical social change.

For some of those writing in the bygone days of student activism, the real issue was what it would mean to be a good university -- not good in Readings's sense of utilitarian excellence, but good or virtuous in the Greek philosophical sense of fulfilling the inherent purpose of the institution. For Shils, academic goodness was "improving the stock of ordered knowledge and rational judgment." For Minogue, "in the academic world, the only relevant criterion is that of truth or falsity."

For both, in essence, universities had to centrally concern themselves with the things the doing of which led to their being derisively called "ivory towers" -- teaching and conducting research for the sake of passing on what was already known and, then, disinterestedly learning more. The philosopher John Rawls has observed: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought." But for academic conservatives, Rawls is wrong: Truth and its pursuit are the first (and possibly the only) virtues for universities.

I am aware, of course, that I have caricatured these two approaches to the question of substantive justice and the university. Sophisticated defenders of either position will concede something to those holding the other position, and all would probably accept that universities should meet those standards of procedural justice I outlined earlier.

But it still behooves us to ask, What are we to make of the broad divergence in approaches? We could split the difference, and I would hazard the guess that most educators take some such position. That the just university is one that plays some role in serving its society seems self-evidently right. Universities have always understood that justice demands that they must perform a variety of socially beneficial tasks. At the same time, when universities have refused to discharge some alleged social responsibility -- like undertaking classified research for the government or training ROTC students -- they have generally argued that doing otherwise would be at odds with a specific institutional sense of substantive justice.

Nevertheless, universities -- especially research universities -- can do only so much in the name of justice before they cease to be universities and become something else. There are some demands made of universities, typically in the name of someone's version of social justice, that, if fully satisfied, would either deform the shape of the institution and distort its mission, or expose it to political reaction and ultimately render it incapable of serving society at all. We all acknowledge that, even if we disagree as to which requested social actions are institutionally inappropriate. My own sense is that asking my university to condemn a national war that I personally oppose is asking too much. Universities must tread the fine line between the giving of themselves that makes them just, and the reserving of themselves that keeps them universities.

But there is another approach to the question of the just university. It has to do with students, but not with student demands for the university to be more just -- in either the procedural or the substantive sense.

When we think about research universities today, we commonly focus on research more than teaching, on graduate more than undergraduate instruction. That, I think, is one of the consequences of the University of Excellence. Julie A. Reuben, in *The Making of the Modern University* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), makes the point that higher education in America, in its transition from offering the moral education of 19th-century colleges to meeting the scientific-utilitarian demands of the 20th century, lost its commitment to the place of moral values in the education of undergraduates. She argues that separation of morality and knowledge in the university's structure makes the separation of facts and values in intellectual life seem right and natural.

But my concern is not just that the moral-religious purpose of higher education has all but disappeared in secular universities, since there is good and sufficient reason for them to be essentially secular. It is that the fundamental focus of the enterprise has shifted from the instruction of the young to the creation of useful knowledge.

We pay lip service to the importance of undergraduate education in research universities, but, for most faculty members, teaching undergraduates is at best still a grudging necessity and at worst a waste of research time. Too many of us are concerned primarily with the training of graduate students, and then sometimes only because we cannot do our research without them. That is, alas, what a "research" university has come to mean. True, the Boyer Commission recently reported a "sea change" in the focus on undergraduate education at research universities. But its report also criticized the lack of coordination in campus efforts to improve undergraduate teaching and noted that most faculty members still believe that their departments put more weight on research than on teaching. Nor have I been able to detect any significant change in the attitude of the dominant research universities to undergraduate education. Apart from the willingness of a few elite institutions to spend big bucks to recruit the best students, little seems to have been done to reorient research-university priorities.

But, if we look at history, we see that it need not have been so. In his inaugural address as rector of the University of St. Andrews, in 1867, John Stuart Mill asserted that there is "a tolerably general agreement about what an university is not. It is not a place of professional education." Mill believed that the "proper business of an university [is] not to tell us from authority what we ought to believe, and make us accept the belief as a duty, but to give us information and training, and help us form our own belief in a manner worthy of intelligent beings, who seek for truth at all

hazards, and demand to know all the difficulties, in order that they may be better qualified to find, or recognize, the most satisfactory mode of resolving them."

My point is this: If we are to be just in our substantive educational purposes, our first and most important responsibility is to be just in our teaching of students, especially undergraduates, and to inculcate in them the capacity to determine what, by their own lights, justice is. That used to be an essential Anglo-American tradition in higher education. And that is what the University of Excellence cannot do well. Without recovering it, I think we will fail in our basic commitment to educational justice.

The topic seems especially pointed to me at this time. I learned of the attack on the World Trade Center just after getting off a busy train in Washington. On the way down, I had reviewed my notes for a speech I was scheduled to give at a symposium celebrating the 125th anniversary of Texas A&M University, on what it means to be a just university. I had planned to begin writing on the trip back to Princeton, but I couldn't write for many days. When I walked into the parking lot at the train station in Princeton, it was eerily quiet, with so many empty cars that would remain empty when their New York commuters failed to return.

Like many of you, I am still struggling to come to terms with the meaning of 9/11. I concluded the speech I finally wrote on the just university by quoting from Albert Schweitzer's *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*. He described a deeply pessimistic mood, similar to my own just after 9/11: "Even while I was a boy at school it was clear to me that no explanation of the evil in the world could ever satisfy me; all explanations, I felt, ended in sophistries, and at bottom had no other object than to minimize our sensitivity to the world around us."

But Schweitzer moved on to a different plane altogether, a mood of thoughtful optimism: "I am confident that the spirit generated by truth is stronger than the force of circumstances. In my view no other destiny awaits mankind than that which, through its mental and spiritual disposition, it prepares for itself. Therefore I do not believe that it will have to tread the road to ruin right to the end."

I am not yet mentally or psychologically prepared to go so far. But I find that I have a pressing need to address many of the questions about justice and ultimate purposes that September 11 raised for the institutions with which I am most familiar: universities. To do less seems to default on my professional responsibilities, on my calling as a teacher. So I am trying to focus on those things for which I have some responsibility and about which I can personally do something. Writing this essay is such a thing.

The question I should like to put is whether we in the universities believe that we have a mission beyond the functional, that we need to aspire to more than Excellence. If the events of September 11 were for the nation the existential crisis that they were for me, I hope they will lead us seriously to reconsider the extent to which higher education in the 21st century may fail to achieve its highest goals if we do not aspire to substantive conceptions of university justice.

*Stanley N. Katz is director of Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies and president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies.*

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Page: B7