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Comment: Richard C. Snyder

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Discussant

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President Levi has said some very important things on this ceremonial occasion. I hope all those interested in the future health of higher education will give his paper the systematic attention it deserves. If taken seriously, his provocative analysis and recommendations could have far-reaching consequences.

I share with both President Levi and Vice President Smith their deep concern over the integrity of the university, over the functional boundary between the university and its environment, over the excessive (and often inappropriate) demands upon universities, and over the dangers inherent in a partisan role for the university in the various power struggles which occur outside its gates.

However, I wish to raise several questions regarding the relationship between the way this set of concerns is expressed and prescriptive implications which might flow from it. In so doing, I make no attribution of positions to President Levi and Vice President Smith which they did not or would not take.

I.

The concerns noted above derive, in essence, from diversion of scarce resources, dilution of energy and purpose, or outright subversion with respect to the university’s fundamental values and functions, however the latter are defined. There are things the university does well (e.g., teaching and research), and some it does badly, and it ought to stick to the former. There is an extremely important line to be drawn here, though clear and workable criteria widely shared by members of the university community have been difficult to come by. This may be the heart of the problem of maintaining the integrity of the institution. Intellectual discipline and substance are certainly germane, but I wonder if saying the university is “not good at practical things” may not be misleading and counter-productive at this moment in time. Given the present “popularity of irrationality”—admittedly a source of danger to certain values the university stands for—and a culture which has been markedly pragmatic, many who attack higher education do so on grounds of its impracticality, i.e., much of what is done on the campus is useless or unimportant. Student complaints of irrelevance reinforce the image of the intellectual way of life as a frivolous luxury.

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Neither Dr. Levi or Dr. Smith would argue that the functional division of labor between the university and the society ought be so defined as to place ideas, rationality, theory, and thinking on one side of a line and their opposites on the other. Nor would they deny that the university’s educational and research pursuits have something to do with contemporary problems. If society had an accurate view of what goes on in the university—what advanced learning, inquiry, disciplined self-criticism, and evaluation of ideas are really about and what pertinent knowledge of human nature and the physical world are available,—then the flat statement that the university ought not to help solve the world’s problems might be less open to serious misunderstanding.

In addition to deciding what kinds of activities constitute the core of the university’s mission and what kinds of involvement in the larger community are legitimate extensions of the university’s capabilities, two other questions are worthy of consideration: (1) does the university have a vested interest in, or any responsibility for, the way its values are perceived and treated in society? and (2) can the university protect its integrity (while asking for substantial public support) solely by employing negative criteria to exclude items from its agenda?

The point becomes even more crucial if one asserts that the university ought to be a critic, not a “doer.” I personally believe that the subjection of the prevailing social and political order to continuous, rigorous, impartial criticism, and the preservation of the autonomy of rational inquiry are among the highly significant (and largely unfinished) results of the Enlightenment. I also believe that as complex societies have evolved over the past 200 years, institutions of higher learning are indispensable to the effective discharge of these functions. However, if the university wishes to be taken seriously as a constructive, dispassionate critic, what are the necessary bases of public understanding, acceptance, and credibility? I venture to suggest at least three. First, it must have a firm grasp of the basic phenomena, problems, and situations of action of the institutions, organizations, and programs it criticizes. Second, the university must be more sensitive to the unintended consequences of its activities for the power struggles mentioned earlier. Third, the university must be more explicit about the bases of its criticism, in particular the relationship of the substance of criticism to the processes through which it is generated.

Rapid, manifold, and as yet imperfectly understood changes in the university’s operating milieu may compel a thorough review of the boundary issue to the end that the university’s value commitments are matched by its capacity to adapt constructively. Obviously this requirement characterizes all major institutions and organizations, but the problem of the university may be uniquely difficult and less familiar. The three suggestions offered above imply a more effective set of communication links between the uni-
versity and society, and very possibly a new set of mutual understandings. If the university is to study the world according to its own purposes and procedures, the image of impracticality, combined with the lack of widespread comprehension concerning its intellectual aims and processes, could stand as formidable barriers to the pursuit of truth and the establishment of firm grounds for criticism. Public distrust of, and ambivalence toward, research may be directly related to a failure to convey an appreciation of the practical importance of systematic knowledge. Paying more attention to the unintended consequences of education, research, and criticism does not and should not put on the university total responsibility for all such consequences. Nonetheless, an apparent unwillingness to diagnose and counteract misperceptions of the impact of university activities risks exactly the kind of inappropriate demands and attacks it now suffers. That the issues and choices involved in clarifying this relationship, in maintaining a delicate balance between objectivity and partisanship, and in protecting simultaneously research and criticism, are highly complex goes without saying, but the stakes seem inversely related to the amount of attention paid thus far.

The third suggestion is a reminder that the mounting of social and political criticism, in the sense I am sure is intended by Dr. Levi unaccompanied by an explanation of how the university's intellectual rules and norms may differ significantly from those employed by other agencies, is an invitation to rejection of criticism, not on grounds of informed choice, but on grounds of perceived identity with any unacceptable criticism from other sources, or on grounds of irresponsibility. Surely the absence of general public awareness of the rules and processes for arriving at valid or persuasive conclusions weakens the university's claim to be a respected critic.

The foregoing is intended only to query whether the boundary issue also includes the university's high priority interest in public understanding and support of its value commitments, and whether these are likely given an arbitrarily restricted or ambiguous conception of how its "involvement" is to be defined.

II.

Dr. Levi's interesting suggestion that professional schools should take lead in re-creating the liberal arts deserves serious discussion. As one means of justifying this conclusion, let me risk several flat assertions and ask that the reader tolerate for the moment a lack of supporting evidence while testing the statements by his own knowledge or experience.

1. For the most part, and with important exceptions, higher education has become prolonged, ritualized, overspecialized, fragmented, and lacking in significant focus from the standpoint of the individual learner, of new
social roles and leadership skills which are needed, and of the kind of public citizenship a complex, self-determined society depends on.

2. Undergraduate study outside of professional programs is increasingly marked by the specialized disciplinary major and by continued deterioration of the sometime aspiration for general education in the United States.

3. Discipline-based departments are manned in the main by scholar-teachers who owe allegiance to professions, majors tend to be exposed to a curriculum modeled closely on graduate programs, and the tension or conflict between major and non-major course offerings remains unresolved.

4. The usual collection of required and elective courses does not appear to produce (a) an integrated set of learning experiences, (b) generalized or generalizable knowledge usable in changing contexts, (c) basic intellectual capabilities independent of particular fields and slow to obsolesce. Hence, the likelihood of certain key attributes being widely shared among graduates is diminished.

5. The social organization of the contemporary university encourages and rewards specialization—the division and subdivision of areas of concern—which makes it difficult if not impossible for future teachers, lawyers, doctors, administrators, and the like to find introductions to cognate disciplines especially adapted to their needs.

6. As nonprofessional curricula become increasingly professionalized (in the sense mentioned under 3 above), professional schools seem to be “liberalizing” their curricula, i.e., preparation programs tend to be less narrowly specialized and therefore partially dependent on competences not normally found among their own faculty members or on courses which are inter- or non-disciplinary.

7. Despite (6), the “liberal arts” are still considered peripheral to professional education, partly because the so-called knowledge explosion has resulted in more curriculum content, and liberal arts faculties still look down on professional schools as primarily vocational, as not properly academic, and as a-theoretical. (This stereotype operates in reverse: professional school faculties may perceive their liberal arts colleagues as “purists,” as too abstract or theoretical in orientation, and as “unrealistic”).

8. On balance, the professional schools may be more open to meaningful re-evaluation of educational purposes and programs than the liberal arts, partly because the former have practising constituencies who provide some feedback, and partly because of the impact of multiple social change on the institutional and organizational roles for which the professional schools prepare. (Except for the correlation of nonprofessional degrees with occupational income and of grades with job performance, bases of evaluation of the efficacy of undergraduate liberal arts instruction are virtually non-existent.)
9. While student dissatisfaction with education undoubtedly exists within professional schools, questions concerning “relevance” (regardless of how well-founded) are raised most frequently and most loudly in the liberal arts.

10. The really vexing problems which confront us—educational, moral, social, political, and technological—do not lie squarely within the domain of any one academic discipline or department, and accordingly faculties and administrators find it difficult to re-direct the university’s intellectual resources toward these problems. On the other hand, it is difficult to find a sector of professional education not profoundly and immediately affected by change and the new situations which flow from it.

To the extent such statements—stimulated by Dr. Levi though not attributable to him—are tenable, one might argue that professional schools have the largest stake in the kind of common, general, disciplined, and focussed education I understand him to be advocating. In the context of the older liberal arts ideal, the qualities felt to mark the educated individual transcended disciplines qua disciplines. Rigorous pursuit of objective truth (Dr. Levi’s phrase) was not assumed to imply a random walk through various specialized sectors of the curriculum. The emphasis was on intellectual processes applicable to pervasive, non-disciplinary concerns. Moreover, a “common training for public citizens” (also Dr. Levi’s phrase) seems to entail a set of learning experiences designed to induce certain habits of thought as well as an awareness of enduring problems, situations, questions, and choices which epitomize social life. Such components are (again in terms of the liberal arts ideal) deemed important enough to society to take priority over (but not exclude) individual interests and vocational needs. Fragmented curricula and specialization are unlikely to produce those shared characteristics upon which enlightened citizenship depends.

Linked to the older concept of a liberal education was, of course, general education—indeed the two terms have been used interchangeably. It is often inferred, if not stated openly, that the opposite of specialization is a kind of educational amorphism. To many, “general” connotes either abstract elements (presumably not anchored to reality) or a miscellany of subjects to be sampled superficially, the result being a smattering of knowledge or ignorance. But general can mean, and I think does mean, within the earlier definition of a liberal education, widely applicable and common to many objects of study, i.e., generalizable knowledge and disciplined intellectual processes usable in different learning situations.

An implication of Dr. Levi’s thesis is that the common training he referred to ought to be shared by professionals and nonprofessionals alike, and that the liberal arts constitute the best preprofessional preparation. This is not a new notion, of course, but if it has never been implemented
to anyone's satisfaction, some reasons must be sought in the demise of the liberal arts ideal. However, a much larger implication may be that a good professional education, as he would define it, is in the present circumstances of higher education alluded to above, also the best general education.

III.

Having agreed that the re-creation of the liberal arts via professional education is an idea well worth exploring, let me try to link the argument to the boundary problem discussed earlier.

It may be that professional schools, for reasons rooted in the multiple effects of rapid social change on the functioning of institutions and organizations manned by their trainees, and in the obsolescence of specialized knowledge, are moving toward a concept of a generalist-specialist. Prior to full-time professional programs, the generalist component would be well-served by a revitalized and updated liberal arts preparation. But as an integral part of professional programs, a generalist component might be anchored to a broader and deeper grasp of the institutional realm graduates will practice in, and to the larger societal context within which institutions and organizations have their meaning and impact. In the wake of unprecedented social change have come value conflicts, uncertainties, and new problems which challenge prescribed roles, undermine assumptions about established patterns of behavior, disturb expert-client relationships, and obscure the relationship between knowledge and action. One result of all this may be to call into question prevailing norms of vocational specialization.

If one accepts, tentatively, the possible need for a general education of professionals, then there is additional reason for assuming that professional schools have a strong vested interest in putting together in coherent fashion the fragments and packages of knowledge which are presently distributed on a departmental or disciplinary basis. As professional schools face inward in searching for the building blocks of a generalist-oriented curriculum, they find a limited and somewhat motley array. As professional schools face outward in their capacity as specialized teachers, researchers, and critics, they often find problems and situations to which the university's capabilities are ill-fitted if indeed they fit at all. Both interfaces imply extensive reorganization of knowledge.

Given this inside/outside squeeze, I believe professional schools will find it necessary to devote increasing resources to the task of integrating the contributions of various disciplines according to their own needs. I doubt very much that relevant nonprofessional divisions of the university can or will be motivated quickly enough or on a sufficient scale to be of substantial help.
This situation is linked to the boundary issue raised at the beginning of the Symposium. As things now stand, we do not know exactly what the university can best contribute to the larger community simply because the latter's storehouse of knowledge and capabilities have not been systematically evaluated, re-packaged, translated, or otherwise rendered usable under conditions which combine applicability and conformance to its intellectual standards. It would be foolish to underestimate the difficulties inherent in an imposing mix of unresolved problems and significant choices. In a period of educational change and re-assessment, alternative strategies for relating the university to society more effectively are not yet specifiable, and there are things we need to know before intelligent policies can be formulated.

I suggest that professional schools be explicitly recognized as the most fruitful laboratory the university has for re-assessing the boundary problem. If, on the one hand, the university's integrity is at stake, and if, on the other hand, the university can neither escape nor control its operating environment, then the attendant dilemmas and conflicts ought to be examined on the university's own terms, i.e., by employing its own intellectual skills according to its own rules.

If the professional school faces in two directions might it then be conceived as a half-way house or as a clinical interface between the community and the values, resources and activities which uniquely define higher education? Professional education cannot (and in my judgment, should not) avoid either the conflicts or opportunities of its bridging location. There is nothing simple or easy in this position, particularly during a time of crisis. The mix referred to above embraces the nature and function of faculty research, the fit between preparation and future roles, situations, and problems professionals are likely to face, the blending of realism with formal learning, creative responses to the needs of practitioners (e.g., continuing education), ways of coping with the obsolescence of knowledge, and so on.

Instead of being a burden, these factors might be viewed as ingredients for systematic explorations and experiments with the boundary problem on behalf of the university as a whole.