Community and Autonomy: What We Must Protect in the Academy

Zelda F. Gamson
Zelda F. Gamson is senior associate, New England Resource Center for Higher Education, University of Massachusetts-Boston. Tel/fax: (508) 645-3169. E-mail: <gamson@umbsky.cc.umb.edu>.

Not so very long ago, saying that colleges and universities need to change was a radical notion. But nowadays, everyone is for changing higher education. Look at the healthcare industry, we have been told again and again in the United States. Why can't higher education restructure like healthcare? Thank heavens we resisted the urge, since there is growing recognition that the changes in the healthcare system have led to high levels of patient and physician dissatisfaction, increasing bureaucratization and the sway of insurance companies and private companies, and at the same time decreasing quality of care. A professor is sometimes described as someone who talks in other people's sleep. Maybe my teacher, David Riesman, has been talking in my sleep lately, telling me to remember his countercyclical teaching—to be suspicious when a lot of people are jumping on the bandwagon for virtue.

So I am suspicious of a lot of people who are talking about changing higher education today. Why? Because I think their kind of change will destroy the most important aspects of higher education, while perhaps marginally improving other things they, like advocates of change in the healthcare system, have been pushing—like increasing accountability and lowering costs. What are the most important aspects of higher education that we should not change? I can capture them in two words: community and autonomy. While community and autonomy are sometimes seen as opposites, I see both as necessary to maintaining the integrity of the academy. I use the terms to describe collective aspects of higher education rather than individual characteristics.

By *community* I mean relationships among and between the students, faculty, staff, and administrators that support them in their work and reinforce the fact that they are part of a worthy common endeavor that goes beyond their individual needs and interests. These communities overlap and intertwine—within institutions, disciplines, professions, and student groups. Community can be sustained by face-to-face interaction or through mediated interaction over the Internet, telephone, in scholarly papers, and through common projects. Academic communities can be enhanced and augmented by the inclusion of nonacademic groups, such as grassroots leaders, politicians, and artists. Note the appropriateness of including nonacademics in academic communities.

When I bring in the idea of *autonomy* as central to what we should not change in higher education, I am not talking about the ivory tower divorced from the larger society and its problems. For me autonomy means the ability of institutions—and particularly of the faculty—to carry out the primary mission of higher education in a democracy. That mission is to educate (not just train, as politicians and others urge) the general population for intelligent participation in the public realm and to contribute to the understanding (not just of knowledge, as urged by those who think of education as the marketing of ideas) of how physical, aesthetic, political, and social worlds work. The autonomy of higher education is worth defending because the mission is worth protecting and fighting for.

If someone comes along proposing a change in an institution, public policy, or ways of doing business, I suggest that we all ask whether it will preserve or enhance community and the autonomy of the academy. If the answer to the question is not yes, we should resist the change and fight it tooth and nail. Community and autonomy in higher education are worth defending. We in higher education should hold our heads high and tell the healthcare industry, politicians, bureaucrats, and the media that they might try being more like us! ■

Note: This essay is based on the author's acceptance speech for the Leadership Award of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1999.

On the Europeanization of Higher Education

Helmut de Rudder
Helmut de Rudder is on the faculty at the University of Lüneburg, Germany. Address: Universität Lüneburg, Institut für Schul- und Hochschulforschung, 21332 Lüneburg, Germany. E-mail <derudder@uni-lueneburg.de>.

Following a long period of expansion and structural reforms of national systems after World War II, higher education in Europe has been undergoing considerable changes in the 1980s and 1990s. Some countries are going in similar directions, others are following quite different national policies. Beginning in the 1950s up until the European Union (EU), under the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, and including the euro as a common currency of 11 countries and the reunification of Europe after 1989, the development of European integration is affecting and challenging higher education in Europe in many ways. These developments raise the question whether it is justified to speak of a Europeanization of