Should University Presidents Have a Voice in Public Affairs?

Robert A. Scott

Abstract

During a period replete with falsehoods and misrepresentations expressed by prominent individuals, celebrities, and elected officials, who is to speak for truth? Who is to support scientific knowledge and the role of ethics, law, and science in guiding policy development? In the past, university presidents spoke out for truth and justice. This article explores why such voices are needed—yet might be silent today.

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Friends ask, "Where is the moral outrage when science advisors are scorned and health safety rules are rolled back, and when systems for government accountability are removed?" They point to the absence of university presidents in debates about public policy, especially when changes in policy expose the public to danger from air, food, and water pollution, or cause threats to student and faculty rights. These same people often refer to the late Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame University, as a voice of moral courage when chairman of the Civil Rights Commission.

Some remember campus presidents protesting the war in Vietnam and apartheid in South Africa, or advocating for affirmative action in the United States. "Where are such voices now?" they ask. Where are the voices in support of public schools, gun safety measures, alternatives to fossil fuels? Where are the speeches and newspaper columns about unequal access to education and healthcare, about the millions of homeless children in the richest country in the world?

Are these times different? Are contemporary campus presidents different in moral authority from those in the past? The university is a moral institution whose purpose is to add to the welfare of society. It is chartered by the state and one of its missions is to teach and develop an ethical perspective among its students. While morality is about right and wrong, ethics is often concerned with one "right" or correct action compared to another one.

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The role of the university is not only to create new knowledge and curate the history of society. Its mission also includes that of "critic." Institutional leaders can ask "Why" and "Why not?" following analysis and testing of data in an attempt to develop knowledge and foster wisdom.

The University President as Chief Mission Officer

However, a major change has taken place in the role of the university president over the past few decades. More seem to take seriously the title of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a title not emphasized in Hesburgh's time. Words matter. What are the duties associated with CEOs? We think of scale and scope of operations, money and markets, people as employees, prices, and profits. But Hesburgh and others like him acted as "Chief Mission

Officers" (CMOs), even if they did not use the title. He and others focused on the mission and purpose of the institution as a moral enterprise for the public good.

I prefer the title Chief Mission Officer. It designates a campus leader who does not ignore money and markets, but who honors the purpose and heritage of the institution. For the CMO, history holds lessons. This includes reminding faculty, staff, students, and trustees of the ethical choices made in the past. Such choices have included expanding admissions and educational opportunity, introducing curricular choices beyond the Western canon, avoiding investments in cigarettes, beer, and liquor, and shunning political speakers wanting to use the campus as a platform.

CMOs are advocates for free speech and academic freedom. When they speak on a topic of moral or ethical concern, they are careful to encourage an exchange of ideas, even those opposite to their own. They also understand that "liberty" means freedom with responsibility as citizens, not freedom from societal obligations, compassion, common decency, and government.

A frequent quote in university mission statements and lofty speeches is that "the truth shall make you free." While the sentiment is from the Bible's New Testament, the idea of "truth" is common to most religious traditions. But what is truth? The Bible quote requires faith and submission to a mystery. This is not the truth of a college or university. That truth is based on facts, not opinion, and evidence, not epiphany.

The Campus President's Role

For the CMO, there is a difference between speaking for oneself and speaking for the institution. Institutions should not express policy positions unless they are taken in proper order by the institution's governing board. Therefore, a campus leader should not speak on behalf of the university regarding investment policy, for example, unless it is board policy. A president's stance can be made known within the confines of the board where he or she can argue for a change in institutional policy.

This is not to say that the president or vice chancellor is mute outside the boardroom, however. He or she can argue for academic freedom, social justice, world peace, and the freedom of speech for faculty, staff, and students. He or she can underscore the need to provide educational opportunities and distinguish opinion from fact. He or she can call for truths based on facts rather than on feelings, superstitions, or political posturing.

Some presidents hesitate to speak on policy issues because they feel that they will be "damned if they do and damned if they don't," as one told me while discussing this topic. They are fearful of upsetting trustees, donors, alumni, and elected officials who hold other views. They are concerned about retribution that could threaten government aid and even the institution's tax status. For this reason, I think it is better to advocate for an ethical perspective rather than simply criticize a policy. Presidents need to create bridges to understanding rather than deepening the divide. The president can promote civility by demonstrating that one can disagree without being disagreeable.

The current political climate in the United States adds to presidential caution. Conservative politicians, journalists, and commentators criticize higher education for being too "liberal." They say that they do not trust universities. They charge that campuses claim to promote free speech but do not support conservative speakers

Guardians of the Ethical Perspective

As Chief Mission Officers, university leaders have an obligation to remind the campus and broader community about compassion and the ethical perspective. The "teachable moment" in a controversy is not an opportunity to lecture but to ask about the justness of policies and actions. Is it just to provide inadequate support for public schools? Is it just to outsource prisons and nursing homes to companies that will put profit ahead of healthcare? Is it just to use war instead of diplomacy as the first act of government? These are the ethical questions of "Why" and "Why not?"

Especially today, we need the voices of those leading universities to speak out about falsehoods, injustice, and abrogation of the rule of law. University presidents must regain the mantle of Chief Mission Officer, remind their communities of the importance of history, encourage debate and respect for others, and be models in the use of an ethical perspective. ◢

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Originally published in a slightly longer version and reprinted by permission of Oxford Magazine, *No. 421, Fifth Week, Trinity Term, 2020.*