

# ***Public Talk***

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***American Institutions and Public Behavior***

## **The University and Public Behavior**

**JUDITH RODIN**

**President, University of Pennsylvania**



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It's actually with some trepidation that I do this, since many of you know so much about universities. And I hope that my comments really will merely give us the opportunity to have a very robust conversation. And I will try to say a few things that are provocative.

Don, certainly you know from your role as provost, as I do from my years as provost at Yale, that universities are very complicated places, and I think many of us would imagine ourselves being able to--and often as faculty members with horror sometimes and with interest other times--sort of fantasized what it would be to be the president of the university, and really get it right and set the university right. Well, as a faculty member who was given that opportunity, I have to tell you that one should not always--one should fear getting what one wishes for. It is a very, very complicated place.

I want to begin by talking about some issues that confronted me early in my presidency, because I think they set the stage for much of what we've been talking about. I found myself beset by calls for the university to use its very prodigious influence to condemn or shut down or sanction racist or homophobic or other forms of outrageous behavior. The university was being asked to make our students behave, to solve by executive fiat the social problems of crime or litter or drunkenness or incivility, to name only a few, and I'd like to tell you of three examples that occurred in the first six months of my presidency, unrelated incidents but incidents all that deeply offended and disturbed various members of our community.

First, many of our faculty and students were affronted by the fact that a faculty member received research funding from an outside foundation that was thought to support neo-Nazi and racist agendas. Second, there was a student's really quite scurrilous essay on Haiti, printed in a campus publication, which infuriated the Haitian community. And finally, a retrospective exhibit of Andreas Serano's photographs at our Institute of Contemporary Art which included the notorious "Piss Christ," in which the crucifix is seen submerged in the artist's urine, and clearly brought on the predictable torrent of condemnations.

The common cry in each of these incidents, and in many, many others that we all confront, was, 'Why doesn't the university stop this?' It was a heartfelt demand and at, I think, a legitimate question, but I responded negatively to most of these requests and to many others that have followed on similar issues.

Why? Not because I believe in the First Amendment, although I do, but because I believe so strongly that attempts to shut down the discourse, to civilize the debate, or even to control the sometimes outrageous behavior of students before the fact, will not bring about the kind of reasoned and reasonable exchange that we've been talking about--those exchanges that we seek. In fact, I don't think that they will even serve to protect those who seek the university's protection as a sign of respect or as a sign of acceptance.

They will not reduce the level of intolerance or incivility, and they certainly will not moderate the ideological polarizations of our politics. And in the end, I think such measures send fundamentally the wrong message, a message that reinforces the sense of powerless individuals and of monolithic institutions, of cultural orthodoxy and paternalistic authority, and of ideological conformity and political correctness.

None of these messages is compatible with the vision of free and robust expression or debate or engagement that is absolutely essential to an academic community. Tempting as the mantle of moral leadership may be, it is too often a comfortable excuse for imposing quietude and conformity, where raucous debate and energetic engagement should flourish. And I think both academic leaders and their constituencies too often feel this temptation. We've come a long way to rejecting the notion in universities of *in loco parentis*, and yet we seem to still have bred a culture within our universities and within the larger society that makes it possible and, in some ways, seem to be desirable, to transfer moral authority and responsibility from individuals to institutions and from institutions to their most powerful leaders.

Strange as it may seem, I believe that this may be an important part of the reason why our leaders and our institutions are not now held in such low esteem. We transfer the responsibility to them, and then we discover to our



dismay that our institutions and our leaders are failing, failing at what I think is the impossible task of taking responsibility for everyone else's conduct and everyone else's beliefs.

Now what can universities do? After all, universities play a very unique role in our society as the makers of new knowledge and the nurturers of new interpretations. It is our responsibility to keep relentlessly articulating the university as a marketplace of ideas. Those of us in universities have a special responsibility, I think, for exercising personal as well as institutional and social leadership. And certainly, the larger social dimension of that fact comes from the fact that universities really are microcosms of the larger society, as we all know. And so from tax policy to gays in the military, from issues of affirmative action to current concerns about self-segregation, from adapting to the Internet to urban development and crime prevention, one way or other, these and so many other social issues really do play themselves out on our campuses and must be addressed by the institution and their leaders.

Now obviously we have some advantages that the larger society does not have; certainly the scale is often smaller, the knowledge base and level of understanding higher and the political pressures somewhat less immediate, although for those of us under the microscope, they often are quite intense. And yet for all our advantages, we share many of the common characteristics that come into play in any large society. Universities are bureaucratic; there's a great deal of inertia; often there's public deafness, demands for participation and input on the one hand, and resistance to change on the other hand.

Likewise, the same competing imperatives come into play. We question what it is we're seeking. Is it diversity? Is it openness? Is it freedom of expression? We also ask ourselves what we value. Is it efficiency, humaneness, excellence? And what is most important in universities, civic and community responsibility, fiscal responsibility, tradition? Which constituencies do we respond to--faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, the public, the media? All of these compete, really, for our attention and for our moral concurrence.

I think that there's a special problem at universities when we think about public behavior, because the issues at universities are often exacerbated by the

energy and experimentation of youth and by the libertarian freedom of the collegiate environment. They're aided and abetted by the social and economic expectations that the young may also always want to push the envelope and break new ground.

But although the strains and conflicts of society do get reproduced on campus on a smaller scale, I think they also have the opportunity to be clarified and examined quite differently. The reason for this is that our universities have intellectual strength, and because they do, and because they are worlds of ideas, our conflicts often come with reasons and with arguments, reasons and arguments that, as we've seen and talked about, really tend to get stripped away in the larger society.

One reason I didn't intervene in the situations that I talked about is that I think we can and we have to be much more closely engaged in universities with the substantive heart of an issue when it arises on a campus setting, because it's at the intellectual heart of an issue that creative resolution will arise and develop.

And so our special ability as a university is the ability to make new knowledge and generate new understandings, and with that special ability, it forces upon us the social responsibility for developing new paradigms and for thinking differently about the issues that confront us. Those pedagogically inclined among us really know these moments as what we've called the *teachable moment* on a university campus, when these issues arise, moments when the energy and passion of the conflict combine with the honesty and the skill of intellectual inquiry to open the possibility of a transformational experience, something maybe we should begin to call transformative discourse. It is what the best of us routinely do in our classrooms. It's what each of us searches for and prizes throughout our lifetimes. It's the kind of discourse that surely can change a life, but I think perhaps can also change an entire society. How we respond to and resolve campus conflicts sets up patterns that surely will change our students and influence them throughout their lives.



Of course, our students do come to us as the bearers of attitudes and as the bearers of dysfunctions that they've inherited from the society in which they've been raised, but if we do it well, we truly are in the business of incubating new citizens. We're in the business of shaping them in ways that can be at wide variance with the behavioral patterns and the attitudes that they came to us with. It doesn't always happen, but it's very, very important for us to remember that it can happen.

College at its best is exactly this kind of transformative experience, and I argue insistently that such experiences can reshape or transform our universities and maybe even our society as well. Certainly it will come as no surprise to you that in transforming our students, we're transforming our faculty members as well, and in transforming our students and ourselves, we surely have the opportunity to experiment with alternative approaches, to test and to tinker, to model the transformative experiences for the larger society.

Note that I said 'experiences' and not 'solutions.' I think that solutions really are needed, but I think they're a further time in coming, and that the beginning of the work is merely modeling the transformational experience. We tend so quickly to look for resolution. We almost did a little bit of it at lunchtime.

Let's figure out now what the end points are--struggling with outcomes as a way of engaging in the process. We are unlikely to find the perfect leader or the perfect institutional environment, and nowhere is such a vision more unrealistic, I think, than in universities, perhaps because each year at universities a significant portion of the population turns over. And so it brings with it new challenges and old challenges reborn, I think, like the locks of Medusa's hair.

Well, there's no end to the challenges, but there is a process of change, and it's our responsibility to foster that change. But I believe absolutely, fervently, that change will not occur if academic leaders and their institutions use their authority to arbitrate the public conversation and arbitrarily set the norms of public conduct. Positive change can only occur where there's an openness to new ideas and new possibilities, where robust engagement teaches by argu-

ment and by example, rather than by dictum or domination. The best cure for old and dysfunctional patterns of behavior is not prohibition, but the positive attraction of new and better modes of discourse and interaction, and it is the academic community which should be the hotbed of such new proposals and possibilities.

Doing so requires, actually, very little. It requires only that we bring to bear our enormous intellectual and scholarly resources. If we fail to bring that insight and expertise into play, we fail to live up to all of our own rhetoric about the importance of research and teaching and service.

So, confronted early in my presidency with demands for the university to lead, or really for me to rule, I hoped instead to find a new model of leadership, a new style of leadership, at least for myself, a style that would take better advantage of the university's unique capacity to produce and disseminate knowledge. I thought, 'There has to be a better way to offer and demonstrate moral leadership than by imitating a 600-pound elephant squashing out or drowning out whatever behaviors or opinions it dislikes.'

Yet as so many things, when we start talking about public behavior, and when we talk about, as we have, the quality of public discourse, we quickly discover another way in which the college and university environment unfortunately mirrors the society at large. Take any contemporary issue on campus--incivility and intolerance, self-segregation; I've already mentioned sexual and racial harassment, political correctness, misconduct in research--in every case, the reality of the situation in dispute may often be quite different, not only from how it's portrayed in the media, but also may be very different from the exaggerations and misrepresentations and polemicized renderings that are energizing one or sometimes both sides to a conflict. The real complexity and the accurate representation of facts and opinions often gets quite distorted.

It was this very situation that led this commission over a year ago to really call for a more reasoned and reasonable public discourse, one in which real expertise and authority have an appropriate place, one in which leaders offer new possibilities to their constituencies, and one in which minds and opinions might actually be changed. If my experiences at Penn and at Yale have



taught me anything, it's that the foremost task of institutional leadership is to stimulate this kind of robust and productive conversation, and never to shut down the conversation before it starts.

To create and sustain a discourse on our campus requires several things. First, we've got to learn to tolerate the intolerable. It is the antithesis to political correctness. Hearing the hateful is an absolute precondition to changing it. When faced with the hateful, with the disagreeable, with the offensive, we really can only eradicate it or we only have a chance to try to eradicate it if we expose it to the light of day, to open discussion and debate.

When Penn's Haitian students were doubly offended, first at the scurrilous magazine article itself and then by my refusal to condemn and shut down the magazine, my office instead worked with their faculty advisers to have a series of seminars with experts across a wide variety of opinions and political spectra with regard to this issue. This was a dialogue that all of the parties were quite reluctant at first to engage in. Each side smoldered in the sublime righteousness of its own position: from the point of view of the Haitian students, the demand for respect and accuracy, and from the point of view of the student magazine, obviously, the freedom of the press.

But there was an extensive public dialogue, well-attended, difficult, feisty. It took several months to arrange. But in the end, those who were most doubtful about the activity actually became the major public proponents of the approach. It's hard work creating and sustaining dialogue, but I think in universities, in particular, there's no substitute for relentless engagement. We have to engage. We have to encourage others to engage. And when our energy and patience wanes, we have to re-engage anew. When others get up and stomp and leave the table, we've got to help them to re-engage, because one of the responsibilities of universities is to demonstrate, and demonstrate concretely, over and over again, that no matter how divided and bitter the situation, engagement with one another, even with our enemies, is both possible and the only road towards greater comity.





How can this be done? We're certainly going to have much opportunity to talk about it, but I will, as Richard did, give you a few suggestions as I've been thinking about the issues recently.

The first proposal I would make is that we have got to diversify the conversation. One doesn't need to support affirmative action to recognizing that talking only to the converted breeds arrogance and absolutism and orthodoxy. We cannot only talk to those people who think the way we do. One of the prerequisites for a robust campus discourse is a diverse campus community, but we have to be vigilant in reminding ourselves that diversity takes many forms. It is ideological and political; it has to do with athletic talent vs. musical talent; it is social and geographic and gender, as well as race and ethnicity. And universities have been operating on the basis of this more complex view of diversity for a very, very long time.

Not all forms of diversification are right for all institutions or for all educational missions, but some form of diversity is essential. If we expect our students to engage in robust discourse, it's important that they experience diversity in their daily lives, not just encounter it in theory or encounter it as a part of a bureaucratic regulation. We can do it in a variety of ways--specific campus programs that have to do with residential living, campuswide reading projects. There are many methodologies that are not Draconian for really allowing our students to experience and relate to diversity.

A second recommendation is that universities must insist on engagement with the surrounding community, whatever form that community takes, whether it's rural or urban, poor and disadvantaged or affluent. Colleges and universities, I think, have never been ivory towers, but if they ever were, that certainly is the college and university of the past. We can't fulfill the mandate of social leadership that we are describing on a model of an ivory-tower institution. Community service programs, community-based undergraduate research projects, internships, to name only a few. If we don't have these kinds of programs in our universities today, then I think we fail to adequately prepare our students for how to behave and debate and be the citizens of the world that they'll inhabit.

They all have the multiple educational function of testing ideas in practical contexts, diversifying intellectual perspectives, preparing students for the world of work and the world of community. So I would argue that community involvement can no longer be an interesting sideline for our universities, but really has to be a central part of how universities see themselves going forward into the future.

Third, as I already mentioned, relentlessly--and I mean relentlessly--articulating the vision of the university and defending the image of the university as a marketplace of ideas. First, if we believe this, it provides the vision that students need in order to understand and internalize the value of civil discourse and positive behavior. It is also the case that the university is one of the few models in our society in which there is a community that really does, I hope, hold the values of civil discourse--engagement, reflection, openness to new ideas, disciplined inquiry; all of these are systematically and persistently exemplified.

If nothing else, our commission discussions to date have demonstrated the urgent need for these kinds of examples in the larger society. It means that all of us, not only faculty and university presidents, but students and trustees and others associated with universities, have to consistently articulate this vision. It means creating new opportunities for non-academics to participate in the dynamic of an academic community, and that this does serve a critical societal function that we must take on. So such things as public programs, lectures, opening our museums to the public, broadcast operations, even continuing education centers, again, must be seen now as serving more than just a peripheral institutional function in our universities.

We ought to be providing incentives to our faculty and students to participate widely outside of their formal instructional settings, because in doing so we provide models of an engaged citizen engaging in constructive and civil behavior.

Next, we have got to monitor and police our own institutional activities. This takes on considerable importance because some of these activities--intercollegiate athletics being one of them--are powerful instances of where



institutional leadership can be exercised or where it fails. These powerful influence that these activities have on our students, our alumni and the general public make this a truly crucial institutional responsibility.

Next, I think that we need to play a role in revisiting standards of professional conduct. Our professional schools have a special responsibility to examine their standards of conduct and examine the standards for discourse in their professions, with an eye not only to their internal professional roles but also with regard to their role-model effect, the behavioral impact of their modeling, on the larger society.

And finally, universities have got to be more mindful of helping other social institutions function successfully. Part of the obligation, as I've said, is imposed on us by our knowledge and our expertise, but if we take that seriously, then it's important for us to help other social institutions do their job. Again, this is part of exemplifying the kind of positive engagement that creates a more civil discourse.

And there are many, many examples; to name only a few: Boston University taking over the Boston public schools; Penn has been working to provide administrative and financial and computing and other forms of expertise to support Philadelphia's efforts to try to successfully revive itself into a flourishing municipality; Harvard and Texas and Penn, to name only a few, are offering our leaders and citizens new models for political campaigns, new models for the public policy discussion and legislative conduct. As experts, of course, we've always done some of that, but we haven't consolidated within the university the university's role to take that on, and to understand that it is central and not peripheral to the leadership responsibility of colleges and universities.

In the same vein, I think we shouldn't forget that the basic tasks of good educational practice in any college or university--what do we do?--creating small seminars, fostering one-on-one interactions with faculty, providing undergraduate research opportunities, venues and opportunities for discussion, cooperative laboratory work. All of these, if we think about it this way--and many more, obviously--teach the skills of civil discourse and constructive be-



havior. We should not forget that what we do in our classrooms and in our laboratories and in our seminars really demonstrate civil discourse and constructive behavior. That's not to say that we should just keep doing what we're doing well, but it would be a very good start.

In putting the creation of robust discourse at the center of our institutional values at universities, we would demonstrate the recognition and instantiate the recognition that we cannot legislate away bad behavior and incivility with codes or policies or regulations. Many of us have been attracted over the years to a regulative approach in universities, but I think they are too fine an instrument for the task of shaping social behavior, either in colleges and universities or in the larger society.

In universities, I think we have to be the ones who discover or invent other, more positive and less authoritarian means of influencing public behavior. How do we do that? By modeling adherence and respect for community norms in the broadest and most positive sense, and not in the narrow and regulative sense. And the only means we have available for doing so begins with the transformative potential of a robust conversation, set in a diverse community of many manies--what I like to call a mosaic of value differences that contribute to the whole. I have never found, in thinking about universities, the notion of a melting pot a particularly appealing one. I think universities have to be a mural or a mosaic, in which the differences stand out but work well together. The goal is not to minimize the differences but to weave them into a tapestry that is effective and works well, that really is greater than the sum of its parts.

I think diversity will create debate. It will create conflict and controversy, and the notion of that should appeal to us. It should not be something that we fear or try to suppress. As the progenitors of new knowledge, universities have the social leadership responsibility to create it and to use it and to model it.

But in thinking about what I wanted to say to you, I think I need also remind us of the cold, hard truth, which is that the public doesn't trust us the way that they used to. We haven't done a very good job of making our case to the



public, because in many ways the public has become weary of institutions that fail them and wary of false promises that someday, somehow, someone really will make it all better. Alas, we must be, I think, as Shakespeare put it, masters of our fates; 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings.'

It's so easy in these complex times to think of ourselves in colleges and universities as underlings, as victims, really, unable to move or to change the institutions and the cultural patterns that surround us, but clearly, the fault is not in our stars. University leaders can and must make a difference, and I'd like to just elaborate on a few ways that I think they can.

We can, first of all, make a profound difference by our example. Nothing is more powerful than seeing those whom we admire or respect, perhaps even those we fear, behave in ways that are worthy of emulation. We can make a difference by articulating a broad, positive set of norms of behavior and reasonable discourse, not by narrow, negative constraints. We can make a difference by making sure that clear and consistent rewards and consequences follow when norms are ignored or advanced. We can make a difference by imagining and then articulating a clear identity and a clear strategic vision for our institutions and for our society, a vision that individuals can internalize and contribute to.

We all have a need for context and direction, and such frameworks are among the most powerful constraints on our public behavior. We need to provide more such frameworks. We can make a difference by consistent implementation of our institutional visions. Certainly nothing muddies the message more than a mixed message. Clarity and consistency of expression and impression, what our colleagues the political consultants call 'staying on message' but it's really important in universities. We don't always stay on message. It's an important and often neglected virtue in university leaders.

We can make a difference by clear and aggressive leadership in response to changed circumstances. By breaking new ground and by forging new paradigms, we really can demonstrate that it is possible to envisage a better future. As we discussed last June, I think many of us believe that that is the begin-



ning of effecting fundamental change. Our colleges and universities have the capacity to stimulate and to foster the robust conversation that we all believe must be at the heart of our 21st-century communities. And so we can, by our example, promote and inculcate the civic virtues that we have talked about--the virtues of participation and cooperation and restraint. We can, by example, promote the qualities of leadership that include positive risk-taking.

But I think we can do even more. We can also serve as models of community. In important respects, universities have really come to replace many of the other mediating and voluntary institutions that once constituted the civil society. In the size of universities, in their resources and internal dynamics and influence, modern universities have come to generate forms of community and association that weren't known in the 18th and even the early part of the 19th centuries. They participate in and serve as gateways to the wider global community with whom we often now have more in common than we do with people living on the same block, the same point I made earlier about multinational corporations.

And if we can actualize the potential of universities to define civility and community for the 21st century, I believe the universities can be truly powerful forces for the opening of a robust discourse and the changing of public culture. Universities can set the standards, help to describe the standards, train the leaders and the citizens, demonstrate the rewards and provide the inducements that really will foster the more robust and diverse and civil public discourse that we've been talking about.

Academic leaders and their institutions really can make a difference, but only if we explicitly undertake the task of building community by promoting the robust conversation that has to be at its heart. Basic academic values that we already hold, values like respecting complexity, posing substantive rather than rhetorical questions when framing a discussion, welcoming real input and participation, and holding open the possibility that we may be in error, and, of course, refraining from ad hominem arguments--these aren't only guidelines for good public discourse, but they create in modern colleges and universities a readily accessible model for workable communities. By modeling this kind of public discourse and behavior in our colleges and universi-



ties, I think we will have taken an important first step towards fulfilling our leadership responsibilities. And I'd like to conclude by commenting on five qualities that I think are essential in leading efforts to foster both higher standards of public discourse and also higher standards in education, and these qualities run through and behind everything I've said today about leaders and institutions and communities, and particularly about the responsibilities of colleges and universities. I think they're applicable, though, to the tasks of leadership across society.

The first and indispensable quality of institutional and individual leadership is courage. If we don't have the courage to lead our constituencies rather than follow them, I don't think any of the other goals that we've outlined will be possible.

Second, we really do hope that our leaders have wisdom, not only the sageness of a great thinker, but also the pragmatic ability to look beyond the short term and the immediate to the world just beyond the horizon.

I think that leaders must also be passionate. You heard resonances of this in Chris Edley's concept of relentless teaching, something that compelled me when I heard him. It takes passion to be relentless, and it takes relentlessness to remain engaged when it would be much easier to give up or give in or walk away.

Our leaders must also have, or reach out to find, that ephemeral, maybe, infinitely various quality that we call vision--the ability to see and grasp the possibility for changes that really are around us. As we discussed in June, and as I think we really all believe, people do want to do better. They really do. But they need to be shown how, and they need to learn that they're not alone in wanting to do better and in being willing to try. By offering our constituencies clearer visions of what the better future we might build together look like, we offer them something that they can subscribe to, contribute to and work towards. The uplift of a compelling vision, perhaps, is the greatest force that the power of ideas can exert in motivating and shaping and improving public behavior.



Finally, and so importantly, our leaders and our institutions must have integrity. Nothing is more corrosive of public culture than the appearance of corruption, influence peddling, dishonesty or even just a lack of authenticity. We must hold our institutions and our leaders to a higher standard. When they fail to act in accord with the best vision of their mission and purposes, I think they destroy the very fabric of our communal existence, and we talked about that this morning with regard to sports as well. It's no truer there than it is in any of the glaring episodes of misbehavior, incivility and intolerance that surround us.

If the only thing required for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing, can't we turn it around and say that it may be true for the triumph of the good over the bad that we only need to act and commit ourselves? By behaving in this way, we can influence our academic institutions, and by influencing these institutions, I think we can multiply our effectiveness a thousand-fold. We have the opportunity--indeed, we have the mandate--to create new models of engagement and new models of behavior. We have the capacity through education to change people's expectations of others and of themselves, and I believe fervently that by changing expectations we will set in motion, we can set in motion, a dynamic that really has the potential to begin to change our society.

Thank you.