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University and Community

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The terms "university" and "community" have an uneasy and shifting relationship to one another. At one extreme, the university has been thought to be the ideal community—the model community for a larger, usually national, community. Here reason prevails, communication is direct and transparent, and the young are educated to be good citizens and know how to behave. By extension, literally and figuratively, the university in this view can teach others how to build similar communities with similar virtues and in the process cure a broad range of ills that afflict modern society. At another extreme, the university has been accused of aiding and abetting—in the aftermath of the late sixties—the breakdown of precisely those notions of community that have justified the university's existence as the model for the larger national, or indeed supranational, community. Here there is no respect for the sacred texts and symbols that are presumed to undergird community, all is relative, and the whole enterprise, furthermore, costs too much.

Of course, there are many more than two positions, and these two come in a variety of flavors. But it is important to note that these two positions are readily collapsed onto one another, for the second subscribes to the first in principle but simply locates it in some idealized past. The argument, then, is about history at least as much as it is about the present state of affairs. This history can certainly be profitably studied, and such study is likely to lead to the conclusion that the ideal university shared by these two positions never really existed. In any case, if we are concerned with what actually to do about the university in relation to society, culture, and community at the end of the twentieth century, we can perhaps afford to set to one side the argument about history, however interesting that might be. Never mind Humboldt and Newman for now, let alone what it was like when the university's leading critics were undergraduates. How are we doing now and what are our options?

Bill Readings (on whom I will draw throughout this paper) puts the matter bluntly in the concluding chapter of his *The University in Ruins* (1996), titled "The Community of Dissensus": "Anyone who has spent any time at all in a University knows that it is not a model community, that few communities

are more petty and vicious than University faculties…And yet the story persists. The University is supposed to be the potential model for free and rational discussion, a site where the community is founded in the sharing of a commitment to an abstraction, whether that abstraction is the object of a tradition or of a rational contract" (pp. 180-81). Dominick LaCapra points out (in "The University in Ruins?," 1998) that in Readings the leftist critique merges with the critique of the neoconservatives, and that Readings "is himself so marked by the ideal of the university of culture that he is unable to inquire into the extent to which it was always a phantasm…" (p. 39). But that does not make Readings's remark on the university as model community wrong, and that remark suggests that before worrying about the university's ability to develop communities outside of itself, and before worrying even about whether university students too often contentiously self-segregate, as has often been lamented, we should think some about how university faculties and administrations behave and what bearing this might have on what our students and society at large might learn from us. We should think some about the position of parents in all of this, too.

The dominant feature of the culture of the university is the set of disciplines that it embodies and the relationships of these disciplines to one another. This is one of the respects in which the university is sometimes said to be a community of communities. But this set has its own history, and, as Gerald Graff observes, it is "a history of conflict" (*Professing Literature*, 1987, quoted in LaCapra, p. 49; see also Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 1992): "A university is a curious accretion of historical conflicts that it has systematically forgotten. Each of its divisions reflects a history of ideological conflicts that is just as important as what is taught within the divisions yet is prevented from being foregrounded by the divisions themselves." This suggests, at a minimum, that if universities have something to teach about community building, it is not something based on the demonstrated willingness of rational people to put aside their differences and get along with one another for the common good. But it might be something even more important if we would let it be, namely the ability to articulate and negotiate our differences. This would require many of both the university's apologists and its critics to become less

fearful of our differences and instead come to terms with their inevitability and irreducibility.

The character of individual disciplines and the degree to which each both constitutes and forms part of a community has its internal and external aspects. Internally, a discipline, or rather a university department that represents one, is most likely to behave like a community if it has a collective challenge or objective that is clearly beyond the ability of any single individual to meet—that is, when in some sense prosperity if not survival for both the individual and the community depends on the ability of the individuals to function as a community. A good example is the large physics department that operates an accelerator. There are leaders, to be sure. But no one person can claim the credit for the scientific results. Papers are published with tens of coauthors. And these departments must even figure out how to decide on tenure for people who have only functioned as part of a collective enterprise and whose individual contribution is not always easy to isolate. Disciplines or departments in which individual accomplishment predominates over collaborative effort are likely to exhibit different behaviors in the academic and nonacademic spheres.

The study of the humanities has largely been a very solitary activity even when there has been some measure of agreement about what ought to be studied and by what method. Simultaneously, the humanities have usually been thought to bear the primary responsibility for transmitting those ideas and values that define the model community, especially as some of the social sciences attempted more and more to emulate the natural sciences in method and degrees of specialization. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the humanities are the subjects of the harshest criticism for the failure of the university to model community. As both subject and method in the humanities were challenged to broaden, the self-image of these fields threatened to dissolve and with it some of the behaviors that might be thought to be essential to community. As LaCapra observes, “the fragility of disciplinary definitions often breeds intolerance and a penchant for ostracism in those who desire a secure professional identity and identity-forming disciplines at any price” (p. 46). Fields that have more nearly resisted pressures on their self-definition

may give the impression of being, in LaCapra's phrase, "complacently intolerant."

None of this is to suggest that universities have turned out to be worse examples of community than many others. It is just that they have not turned out to be much better. Universities have their very own versions of low voter-turnout and uncivil discourse even when employing a greater-than-average density of Latinate polysyllables.

Universities are, of course, not only the products of internal forces. The structure of the disciplines and their relationships to one another respond in considerable degree to external forces. To the extent that those external forces have expressed themselves with money, universities have been quite responsive and have in consequence become the site of some of the same behaviors produced elsewhere when money is made the measure of all things. Even when professing devotion to the ideals of the university as transmitter of civic virtue and the values of community, society in the United States has most wanted universities to contribute to national economic well-being and to personal economic well-being for their graduates. Only the national defense might be said (though usually quite speciously) to have occupied anything like such a place in the nation's hopes for higher education. There really never has been any money in the civic virtue business in and of itself, and that is why disciplines that could get out of this business did and those that did not have anywhere else to go retreated into their own kinds of specialization, got paid less for teaching more, and watched their enrollments decline steadily and steeply.

Parents are more nearly the "customers" or "consumers" of higher education than are the students, at least at expensive institutions where the terms are perhaps most often invoked, and parents, too, have had a lot to do with what universities have become. Many of the behaviors for which university students are criticized are behaviors with which those students arrived at the university. Parents sometimes want the university to "make" their sons and daughters behave in ways that the parents themselves could not "make" them behave in the first seventeen years of their lives. And with all due respect for the sacrifices imposed on families by the high price of higher educa-

tion, especially private higher education, the consumerism with which higher education is often approached has contributed notably to undermining the values whose decline in universities is so often lamented.

The university's response to the consumer or market model in the allocation of its resources has become increasingly explicit and even fashionable. Yet if the leaders of universities determine that resources cannot be allocated on the basis of academic principle but only on the basis of revenue and expense, discipline by discipline, what hope is there that universities, their faculties, and their students will model any behavior or sense of community that the market itself does not produce? What does it mean to say that, because the graduates of the school of divinity or architecture do not in general become as wealthy as the graduates of the business school or the law school, the students of the former should study in shabbier quarters than the students of the latter or better still that the university should simply get out of the business of educating the former at all? What do the students and faculty learn about community from this and how will they behave with one another in consequence?

There is a great tradition of public service in American higher education. It is quite explicit in the land-grant tradition (which, to be sure, has much to do with serving economic interests), but it is widely represented in both public and private institutions. That tradition should be nourished and strengthened with all available means. It will produce notable successes as well as failures in the building of communities outside the university. It would be nice if we engaged in these activities even when government agencies and foundations did not give us money to do so. And it would be especially nice if more of our students and faculty took part and came to regard such activities as central to their own intellectual formation and vocation.

But there is more that we need to do at the heart of our universities if we wish to claim the ability or perhaps even the right to teach others about community. We must first teach one another and by that method (if not alone) teach our students. Who would dare to embark on a community-building enterprise outside the university and claim that the goal was to replicate the degree to which their own department or university functions as a

community? Who would dare to say with a straight face that the only trouble with our political institutions is that they do not exemplify community, civil discourse, and all the rest as well as the faculty of their own university?

Gerald Graff is onto part of what we could do even within and among our own disciplines. We could study and teach the very conflicts that many would have us erase or deny. This would not be to prize conflict over consensus or to lapse into a paralyzing undecidability. It would be at the very least, however, to take the disciplines as they actually are rather than to dwell, rancorously or not, on a mythology of the past. And it would prize inquiry and critical examination as central to the life of the university rather than unexamined devotion to whatever circumstances and forces beyond reason might otherwise be the sole definers of community. Let the curriculum incorporate the challenges to the disciplines from within and without rather than ignore those challenges either through the proliferation of more and more specialized offerings or through mere exclusion.

Dominick LaCapra is onto part of what we could do in evaluating our contribution to the life of the university. We could recognize the value of "critical intellectual citizenship," of contributions to "discussion and debate about issues that are not confined to one discipline or area of expertise" (p. 54). This would after all be the university's version of the kind of discussion and debate that one would hope to see prevail in society at large.

It would all have to begin, however, with each of us, as members of the university community, asking ourselves and our colleagues whether we as individuals and as colleagues exemplify, in any way that our students might actually notice, the values and behaviors that we would like to see at work in the society around us.