On Institutional Neutrality

On November 1, 1969, the Association's Council asked that papers on the topic of institutional neutrality be published in this issue of the Bulletin. *The two articles that appear here are in compliance with the Council's desire for differing points of view on this subject.*

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Winton U. Solberg does not believe that a university as a body should take an official stand on disputed political or moral questions. He does not wish to see institutions of higher education establish orthodoxies. Dr. Solberg, professor of history at the University of Illinois, is a graduate of the University of South Dakota and received the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University. He is a member of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure and the Council.

Comments by Donald N. Koster

At the last Council meeting a major topic of debate was the forthcoming Vietnam Moratorium and what statement, if any, we were to make about it. Before the debate was many minutes old, it became apparent that the battle lines were forming. On the one hand were those who held that neither the Association nor any educational institution should take an official position on any political or moral issue. They held also that no faculty should adopt a position on such an issue because to do so would infringe on the academic freedom of individuals who were in the minority. The university, in short, must hold itself aloof from the crucial political and moral questions of the day in order to protect the right of individuals to dissent. Only on matters of strictly educational policy would they permit it to speak with a single voice.

On the other hand were those who, like myself, held that there are occasions in academic life today when political and moral issues are so inextricably tangled with issues of educational policy that faculties are not only justified but indeed obligated to take positions, particularly since not to do so may be in itself the taking of a position, that of appearing to condone if not approve the *status quo.*

Now I hope that I would be among the first to cry out against any attempt to stifle or suppress the right of an individual to dissent from a majority position. And I believe that our Association must always be concerned

Comments by Winton U. Solberg

The principle of institutional neutrality requires the university to provide a setting for the study of various ideas, however controversial, but not to espouse any kind of orthodoxy whatsoever. It obligates the university as a corporate body to refrain from official pronouncements on disputed political, moral, philosophical, and scientific issues. This principle has flourished because it is essential to the proper functioning of a genuine university, and if not destroyed out of transient or mistaken zeal it will continue to benefit society in the future as in the past.

The American university exists primarily to devise and administer educational programs. Obviously it is intimately related to the society of which it is a part, and the university inevitably acts as an agency of social reconstruction in carrying out its educational functions. Although opinions will differ as to its proper role as a generator of any kind of reform, these differences are of little moment as long as the public has confidence that the university is committed to advancing its educational purposes rather than to taking the part of a substitute church or political party.

The university has certain obligations to itself and to society in the accomplishment of its educational mission. It has a responsibility to facilitate study and discussion of vital political and moral issues in both curricular and special programs. Under the norm of institutional neutrality the academic arms of a university are entitled

to protect this right in every way that it can. Certainly when a faculty adopts a collective position on *any* matter, those who dissent should be granted the fullest opportunity to express that dissent, to have it recorded and to have it publicized through the same channels used by the majority. Not to provide such opportunity would be to encourage the tyranny of the majority over the minority. But I would suggest that academic freedom has another dimension and that we should also consider the possible infringement on it by a small minority who may seek to immobilize the majority by denying them the right to adopt a collective position on a problem of grave moment. The tyranny of the minority can be as serious an impediment to freedom as that of the majority. I ask, then, for greater flexibility than some of my colleagues would permit. To state the case briefly, a faculty must have freedom to move when it considers it vital to do so. If it moves foolishly, too bad for it; but move it must if it is to be an instrument of genuine power within the institution.

One of my old friends on the Council was bitter in his condemnation of the positions adopted recently by Harvard and Columbia faculties on the Vietnam war. Not that he opposed the positions, merely the act of taking them. He was also indignant over the Annual Meeting's resolution opposing the war taken at the Minneapolis meeting. We are, he held, now in the same class with the American Legion even though on the other side of the fence.

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Let us, however, examine the realities of the situation existing on many American campuses today. Few of our universities are free of involvement with the federal or state governments and in many, if not most, instances this involvement has been undertaken because faculties have failed to take a position but have left it to administrations or boards of trustees to do so. And so long as the university is involved with government it cannot avoid being involved in political and frequently moral issues that overlap educational policy.

For example, take the case of the university that has accepted government contracts for sponsored research by members ot its faculty in biological or chemical or psychological warfare. What issue could be more political or more moral than this while at the same time having a profound effect on the educational stance and policy of the institution? Is not a faculty indeed derelict in its duty if to make any kind of proposal aimed at effecting social change as long as it is legitimately arrived at in furthering a basic goal of higher education.

An academic institution must make its campus an intellectual center where teachers and researchers explore critical issues, and it must insure a truly open dialogue in its classrooms, laboratories, and extracurricular academic offerings. All this requires such minimum essentials as a qualified faculty, academic freedom and responsibility, and acceptance of controversy. And for the dialogue to be truly free the university must not take an official stand on the issues under discussion. Let a governing board, an administrator, or a collective faculty pronounce judgment on a disputed political or moral question and a doctrinal orthodoxy is established. This impairs the search for truth.

In addition, the university has certain obligations in providing experts to advise society on such crucial public issues as war or peace, arms limitation, race relations, tax policy, environmental pollution, and population control. The university must appoint to its staff only trained professionals and foster a climate of academic freedom

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that enables these experts to offer advice without fear of institutional reprisal for unpopular or unorthodox views. The public has no obligation to follow the advice given, but it has the right to expect that any professional judgment tendered by a faculty member will be unbiased by any kind of institutional pressure.

Now, however, critics challenge the traditional doctrine and arraign the academy as irresponsible and immoral for its official silence on certain great public questions. Space prevents systematic analysis of these charges, but brief comment may nevertheless be valuable. Many people say they accept the principle of institutional neutrality in normal times but not in the present crisis. Citing exceptional circumstances to justify departure from the rule, they echo the kind of argument frequently used to sanction violations of academic freedom. But what is the worth of a principle that fails when most needed?

Another argument holds that the university should generally remain silent on politics and morality, but neutrality is now impossible, both because the university has already allied itself with the "military-industrial complex" and because silence when the life of the university is at stake is itself a political act. Hence the demand that the academic "establishment" withdraw from politics while a faction of the faculty commits the institution to its own political and moral doctrines. When analyzed, how-

it fails to adopt a position on the acceptance of such contracts by its university? Or consider the matter of ROTC on campus. Is this not a political and moral issue as well as being directly tied to educational policy? Can a faculty afford to abdicate its duty to take a position on such a matter? Or the issue of permitting recruiting—military or otherwise—on campus; is this not political or moral and also bound up with academic policy? One could go on to cite perhaps a hundred other examples in which the line that separates educational questions from political or moral ones cannot be distinctly drawn. That a faculty should be barred from expressing its official view on these questions is to relegate it to a posture so neutral as to be totally ineffectual. Indeed, there seems good reason to believe that at least part of the current student disenchantment with faculties lies in their frequent inclination to adopt the role of the ostrich in the familiar fable. A head long buried becomes no head at all.

The bedrock 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* states categorically, "institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole." Although the common good is not defined, I take it to mean the general welfare or what was once known as the "common weal." If this be so, then it follows that a faculty whose "judgment is central to general educational policy" (see 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,* Section V) must take an active role in determining how

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the institution of which it is the core may best serve the common good. To do so will inevitably require a searching examination of contemporary issues that vex the total society and which can be shunned by the community of scholars only at the risk of cutting itself off from the broader community that it professes to serve. If, for example, a faculty determines that, in its judgment, the present war in Vietnam is a horrendous threat to the common good and to the pursuit of higher education in America, it has, I believe, an obligation to say so as a faculty; or if it believes the war to be a boon, it should feel equally obliged to say so.

I once had a colleague whose proudest boast was that no one of his students ever knew where he stood on any political, religious, or moral issue. Such neutrality is, I contend, equivalent to sterility and is death to education even more so when practiced by a group than by an individual.

ever, this argument turns out to be highly simplistic and in large part misleading. Moreover, two wrongs never made a right; a faculty body cannot properly demand of others in the university a restraint it refuses for itself.

The principle of institutional neutrality has been hammered out on the anvil of experience, and we know it works. Its advantages are many. First, it grows naturally and logically out of an academic institution's commitment to its legitimate educational functions.

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Second, it acknowledges that the university in its collective capacity is not equipped to decide controversial social issues. The corporate bodies of a university have no special competence for settling disputed questions that arise either within an academic discipline or in the society at large.

Third, neutrality avoids needless division of the university. The faculty is already politicized in the sense that professors differ both in their basic views and over the conduct of educational policy. But the intrusion of political or moral questions into academic deliberations weakens the capacity of faculties to cooperate in accomplishing their educational task. On this point we should learn from rather than repeat history. Fourth, society will not long support the university that makes pronouncements on complex political and moral issues that profoundly agitate the public and defy simple solution. This argument from practicality rather than principle, like it or not, must be confronted by those who believe in preservation of the university as vital to social welfare.

Fifth and most basic, the norm of neutrality is an essential safeguard of academic freedom. When the corporate bodies of a university express collective opinions on nonacademic and partisan questions, there is danger that the freedom of dissenting individuals may be impaired. Such pronouncements establish a doctrinal orthodoxy which, however subtly, tends to brand opposing opinions as unworthy of attention or as intellectually or morally inferior. The principle of neutrality assures the individual member of the academic community the unquestioned right to advance his own views. Men of conviction need not wait to receive a moral imperative from their university in order to work for a better world.