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 Editorial

Ethics in Troubled Waters

In one of the less pleasant aftermaths of Watergate, the country is now awash in a wave of neopuritanism, and it has—for better or worse—discovered ethical issues in virtually every aspect of private and public conduct. This new ethical consciousness raising has inevitably produced its share of winners and losers but on balance has no doubt created a more open and questioning atmosphere for the conduct of the nation's business. Unfortunately, it has also given rise to a new wave of cynicism about the motivations of even the most public-spirited citizens and institutions, and such costs may at times exceed the improvements that were intended (see page 53).

High public principles are thus no longer automatically presumed to be in the public good. What seem to some to be high principles may strike others as mere smoke screens for the exercise of vested interests, or worse, vehicles to cover up less acceptable behavior. The new reformists have undoubtedly created a public atmosphere more breathable than that during the stonewalling of the Nixon years. Nonetheless, it seems that the cure on occasion may be worse than the disease. Tarring with broad strokes has never been a particularly clean exercise in good public judgment.

Drawing such delicate lines between the selective failures of the few without destroying the reputations of entire institutions becomes particularly important when one looks at the ethical behavior of higher education. It is already suffering its spate of troubles without being unfairly accused of massive moral failure. Nonetheless, it must be asked just how much ethical standards are likely to suffer in a time of serious economic troubles.

The evidence lies on both sides of the ledger: The vast majority of academic professionals continue to conduct themselves with high professional responsibility. But in the struggle for institutional survival, integrity could soon be severely threatened. The recruitment and holding of a sufficient number of students, the necessity of cutting costs, often mercilessly, and the satisfying of certain external demands on colleges and universities all lend themselves to tempting compromises and questionable practices that require serious monitoring. To suggest that the very raising of such issues damages an already beleaguered army is to evade the public responsibilities that simply come with the territory.

In a forthcoming collection of essays, *Disorders in Higher Education*, Roy E. Lickleder of Rutgers describes some of the ethical dimensions of the new market system in which the student is king: It 'results in administrators pressuring faculty to 'give them what they want,' whether this involves less complex readings, vocational programs, credit for life experience, or impressive sounding new programs empty of significant academic content. A few schools are reputed to have experimented, for example, with turning over curriculum decisions to public relations firms. This concern for short-range student desires is reflected also in the distribution of courses within the school, as popular departments are allowed to maintain their current level while unpopular ones are cut back. One result is pressure to inflate grades to encourage students to take your courses; another is the development of more 'relevant' courses when relevance exacts an exorbitant price from content.'

These are not the only worrisome signs. Students

now cheat widely on examinations; they default on their student loans; and they steal books from libraries in appalling numbers. Faculty also engage in questionable practices, not only vis-à-vis their students but also in the pursuit of their professional responsibilities. And seen against the prospect of steadily declining net faculty incomes, as compared with those in other occupations, temptations toward ethical shortcuts are likely to increase.

It is thus all the more significant that the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education has now chosen to release a new report on ethical conduct in higher education, *Fair Practices in Higher Education: Rights and Responsibilities of Students and Their Colleges in a Period of Intensified Competition for Enrollments* (Jossey-Bass, \$7.95). The Council may well have had some doubt as to the wisdom of dealing with such a delicate subject, but its commendable decision to do so is likely to help prevent even more questionable practices in the future. It should be welcomed and seen for the constructive intentions it implies.

While the overall contributions of higher education to public service are unquestioned, says the Council, it is nevertheless concerned with certain negative aspects of higher education's general conduct, particularly as it affects students. It lists these, among others, as:

- A significant and apparently increasing amount of cheating by students on academic assignments.
- A substantial misuse by students of public financial aid.
- Theft and destruction by students of valuable property, most specifically library books and journals.
- Inflation of grades by faculty members.
- Competitive awarding of academic credits by some departments and by some institutions for insufficient and inadequate academic work.
- Inflated and misleading advertising by some institutions in the search for students.

The Council lists other primary abuses as those occurring in financial aid, questionable off-campus programs, the admission of unqualified foreign students, inadequate support services, and inaccurate or incomplete catalogs. The Council found abundant evidence of such failures and inadequacies across wide segments of educational institutions.

Particularly useful are the report's 20 pages of specific recommendations designed to ameliorate unethical behavior. It makes specific recommendations with regard to students, institutions, and accrediting agencies, as well as governmental agencies:

- Develop on each campus a code of rights and responsibilities for community members, through the collaborative efforts of administrators, faculty, and students.
- Publish statements of the range of penalties that will be imposed for general classes of violations of institutional rights and firmly administer the penalties for infractions.

- Adopt inflation-proof grading systems similar to the one proposed at the University of California, Berkeley, which would list the average grade awarded in a course in addition to the student's own in classes larger than 10.

- Develop equitable, easily navigable, and widely publicized governance and grievance procedures.

- Consider appointing an ombudsperson.

- Voluntarily embrace the principle of full and complete disclosure and provide students with complete and accurate information on all pertinent aspects of institutional practice, including basic institutional identification and rules of governance; financial costs and student financial obligations; educational resources, process, and content; and indications of institutional effectiveness.

- Seek to resolve differences with students on campus and call upon external agencies only when on-campus remedies have been exhausted.

- Voluntarily work to eliminate institutional irresponsibility.

- Conduct a self-study on the state of rights and responsibilities on each campus with particular reference to the following problems—grade inflation, inferior off-campus programs, financial aid abuse, cheating, admission of unqualified students, inaccurate advertising, liberal award of credit, misuse of library resources, and inadequate support services.

- If problems are discovered in a self-study of rights and responsibilities, issue annual reports describing the steps that have been taken to solve them and the results of these efforts.

The fact that the ethical standards of American higher education are being responsibly addressed is further confirmed by a recent Arden House meeting on "The Integrity of Higher Education." Sixty prominent academics and nonacademics spent three days in the search for just what the ethical dimensions of higher education in a declining state are likely to be. "A certain malaise" affects higher education, the Arden House group declared. While the ethical behavior of educators may be no better or worse than that of other professionals, there are general "expectations of behavior beyond the ordinary."

Unfortunately, says the statement, "there are breaches of ethical conduct." The conferees cited "plagiarism by both teachers and students; exploitation by faculty and administrators of graduate students and teaching assistants; 'double-dipping' by academic professionals from several grant sources for the same labors performed; undisclosed selling of identical scholarly works to more than one publication; and the abject submission by institutions to groups that would deny open discourse on controversial subjects of interest to the campus community."

There are a number of reasons, the Arden House participants warned, why action is needed now. "First, professors often act as critics of society, which grants substantial protections for this function. Such criticism will be ill received if the professors' own

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house is in intellectual and moral disarray. Second, while instances of irresponsible behavior may be exceptional, the irresponsibilities of the few tarnish the good name of all. A third factor is that persistent irregularities may lead to yet greater abuses. Fourth, inaction from within will trigger greater control by public authorities. Fifth, all university and college personnel, by their practices and their conduct, may so profoundly affect the intellectual and moral development of the young that even seemingly minor departures from integrity cannot be tolerated." The group then framed a set of 32 recommendations, which it was believed would help preserve the integrity of the university.

Both the Carnegie Council and Arden House initiatives are to be welcomed for what they are.

Neither document is the consequence of any dramatic ethical embarrassment on the part of the academic establishment. These statements thoughtfully speak to the serious breaches of integrity. In some of the nation's other major institutions, appeals to integrity and the higher virtues have followed some traumatic outbreak of outrageous ethical abuse. This is obviously not the case here. The academic community can now show the rest of the country that self-regulation and a reasoned and unhysterical approach to holding to certain ethical standards is doable before an academic Watergate and is consistent with higher education's high social purposes. It is welcome news, once in a while, to find the academic community ahead of the times and leading the nation in the matter of principled conduct.

—G.W.B.