



“Justice, Truth and the Place of Universities”

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In 1978, Dr. Louise McBee published an article called “Higher Education: Its Responsibility for Moral Development.” In it she argued that education, including higher education, “should aim to make people good, as people and as citizens.”ⁱ The university can and ought to fulfill this responsibility in at least two ways. First, it ought to teach its students the importance of ethics or morality. Second, it should demonstrate its institutional commitment to ethics “by the faculty’s serving as a model and the institution as a laboratory for the practice of the values taught.”ⁱⁱ

Since 1978, a great deal has changed about the university’s overall goals and how it operates. But the basic issue that Dr. McBee addressed has not faded in importance. Nor have the obstacles to properly address it become any less serious.

One finds evidence of the persistence of this issue in a number of recent books. Last year, Professor Andrew Delbanco, a professor of humanities at Columbia, called attention to some of these books and the criticisms they make.ⁱⁱⁱ Two of these criticisms are especially noteworthy. First, there is the complaint that today many faculty members have a me-first attitude that is destroying a more traditional civic attitude according to which “a professor’s primary obligation is to the institution—essentially students and colleagues—and ... all else is secondary.”^{iv} For faculty members with a me-first attitude, educating undergraduates is near the bottom of their list of priorities.

A second charge is that “Arts and Sciences faculties currently display scant interest in preparing undergraduates to be democratic citizens, a task once regarded as the principal purpose of liberal education and one urgently needed at the moment in the United States.”^v

Without boring you with details, let me confess that during my time on the UGA faculty I did on occasion display a me-first attitude. It’s no consolation that I even wrote a book called *Citizenship in a Fragile World* in which I discussed education. But spilled milk, however I weep over it, is still spilled.

More constructively, I hope, let me propose at least a partial remedy for the two problems I have just mentioned. My proposal is not the same as Dr. McBee’s, but its framework closely resembles hers.

Let's begin by asking what it takes to be a good citizen. I trust that you will agree that a good citizen needs at least two habits. One is a habitual concern for truth, that is, a habitual respect for evidence. The other is a habitual concern for justice, for fairness. From another, perhaps better, standpoint, one might describe a good citizen as a person whose basic aspiration is to "live well, with others, in just institutions."^{vi} Many people wouldn't know how to put this aspiration into precise language for themselves and some of them would likely be confused about what this aspiration amounts to. But I believe that all normal people have this aspiration and would recognize it easily if it were explained.

To say that people want to live well is to say that they want to have assurances that they will have the necessities of life, e.g., food, shelter, clothing, as well as some of the amenities that make living enjoyable. Furthermore, to say that people want to live well with other people is to say at least two things. First, people generally recognize that they cannot have the necessities and amenities unless they are involved with some other people. Second, to live well with others requires that we participate with others in institutions, educational institutions, economic institutions, political institutions, etc. Every institution distributes both benefits and burdens to the people connected with them. We need burdens, e. g., taxes, to have benefits, e. g., schools, fire departments, etc. So to live well we want these benefits and burdens to be distributed justly, fairly.

The aspiration to live well with others in just institutions, then, expresses the fundamental orientation that people have to have if they are to be good citizens. By itself, though, this aspiration is not enough. Until people develop it by adopting policies and practices, the aspiration bears no fruit.

But here's the rub, As we all know, when it comes to formulating policies and practices for living well with one another, we disagree. We're unavoidably involved in politics and its arguments. As history shows, there is no seamlessly harmonious process for settling the terms of our living together. Politics is not totally a struggle. But there's no politics without some struggle. Learning to deal with disagreements in a constructive way is one of the prime tasks of citizenship. It is the indispensable prerequisite for making a positive contribution to public life, whether in the form of electoral politics or of a constructive contribution to public opinion. The university can and ought to help prepare students to do so.

At bottom, to contribute positively to public life, people have to understand why there are disagreements. They also have to learn to manage the disagreements so that they don't undercut our basic aspiration to live well with others in just institutions.

There are two kinds of disagreements. First, there are fundamental or deep disagreements about what constitutes a good human life. One version of this disagreement concerns whether a good life consists in attaining pleasure, or wealth, or prestige, or something else, for example peace of mind. Another version is the disagreement about whether we should believe in God and, if so, should we look forward to an afterlife. Nobody has produced a case for any single deep view that is generally recognized as ironclad. Nor is anyone likely to do so. This kind of disagreement is not going away. Indeed, it is the kind of disagreement that has a bearing on every facet of a person's life. It affects relationships within families, with neighbors, business or professional colleagues, etc. Citizens have to figure out how to properly manage disagreements of this sort if they are going to live in peace with one another.

The second sort of disagreement relevant to public life is the kind that occurs in the course of establishing how we are to use our resources, including our own time, for cooperating with one another for the foreseeable future. In many cases, we can't just agree to disagree, as we often can in cases of deep disagreement. The practical demands of living force us to reach decisions. But, and here's the nub of the problem, whatever decision of this sort we reach, it is never the only reasonable one. There is no such thing as the single right tax policy or law code or business investment policy. History can sometimes show us that some decisions in matters like these have had disastrous consequences. But neither history nor any other available evidence can point us to a single, unquestionably best decision.

Good citizens, citizens who contribute constructively to public life, have to appreciate the differences between deep disagreements and disagreements about public policies and practices. They also have to develop an unwavering respect for evidence. That is, they have to develop a habitual concern for truth. In the case of these two sorts of disagreements, the evidence shows that in neither of them can anyone prove that any single answer is the only true answer, the only answer that the available evidence allows. This is the truth about disagreements that citizens have to acknowledge if they are to be good citizens.

The university can and ought to prepare students to be good citizens. One crucial way in which it can do so is to challenge students to think again about the opinions they hold. Every student comes to college with some set of opinions and attitudes that he or she has picked up in the course of growing up. The point of challenging their initial views is not to get them to change their views. It is to prod them to consider more carefully the evidence for and against their opinions. In other words, the point is to help students to move from more or less naively adopted opinions and attitudes to well considered convictions, convictions that they find to be supported by relevant evidence.

At UGA, one of the ways in which students are challenged is through the Civic Leaders Program. This is a voluntary program that selected students choose to participate in as an extracurricular activity. Programs like this are surely to be encouraged. But probably the best way to challenge most undergraduates' opinions is in the academic courses that they take, particularly courses in the humanities. Every undergraduate here at UGA has to take several courses that he or she chooses from among those that count as core courses. To make the challenge to their casually adopted views most effective and thoroughgoing, I would like to propose that all undergraduates, as part of their core, take a mandatory block of four courses that explicitly address issues directly bearing on citizenship. A sizeable portion of each of these courses should deal with the kinds of disagreements that affect civic life.

Of these four, one should be in philosophy, one in religion, one in literature, and one in history. The courses in philosophy and religion should show students what are the roots of the deep disagreements about what constitutes a worthy human life. For example, in philosophy they could encounter the views of Plato's Socrates and of the Stoics. In religion, they could learn the teachings of the Jewish prophets, of Jesus, and, perhaps, of the Buddha. In all these instances they would confront world views strikingly at odds with that of our present day consumer capitalism. In this process, students would also come to see why these disagreements have proven to be so intractable.

The courses in literature and history would be particularly well suited to help students see that no one can have perfect solutions to questions concerning public policies and practices. Through both fictional and historical narratives, the content of these courses could show students

that every policy or practice, no matter how well thought out, unavoidably risks having consequences that are not only unintended but also harmful. Since any policy or practice runs this risk, students can come to see that whatever their own policy preferences are, other people can always object to them without being unreasonable. To learn the lessons of these four related courses is to learn what is required to have a consistent respect for evidence, to have a habitual concern for truth. It is to learn what reasonable tolerance in public matters amounts to.

I have to admit that my proposal would not be easy to implement. Ideally, the professors who teach the block of courses that address citizenship issues should keep one another informed about what they are teaching. This kind of coordination is hard to achieve at large universities. But if preparing students for responsible citizenship is really important, then there is good reason to work hard for this kind of cooperation. And doing so would have a significant side benefit. It would encourage faculty members to cooperate in other matters as well and would thereby counteract the tendencies toward individualism and the me-first attitude that critics find so widespread.

As I mentioned at the beginning, there is a second way in which the university can and ought to try to prepare students to be good citizens. As Dr. McBee put it, the university should demonstrate its institutional commitment to good citizenship by itself being “a laboratory for the practice of the values” it teaches.

Obviously, as D. McBee also noted, the university must uphold rigorous academic standards for both its students and its faculty. Exactly what the phrase “appropriately rigorous standards” means is always in some dispute. But at the least it means no cheating or plagiarizing, no doctoring of research data, and no courses that teachers trivialize, either by being unprepared or by failing to challenge their students.

But the university can and ought to do more to demonstrate its commitment to good institutional citizenship, its habitual concern for justice. Let me mention two important issues that call for good institutional citizenship. One is the way in which the university interacts with its locale. The other is the way in which the university deals with its own employees, especially with those who are most vulnerable, who are in the weakest economic bargaining position.

UGA, like many universities, sponsors a number of worthwhile efforts to fit in well with its locale. In Athens, these efforts involve administrators, faculty, professional staff, and both graduate and undergraduate students. Furthermore, the University is involved in the new Partners for a Prosperous Athens. Nonetheless, so far as I can tell, Athens needs something more from UGA. It needs the university, through its administrators and faculty experts, to take fuller advantage of its “bully pulpit” place in the community. There are always community issues of real importance that ought to be addressed on the basis of a concern for justice as well as solid data. For example, Athens presently has a shortage of affordable housing. And, like many cities, its public schools need help of several kinds.

I do not suggest that university administrators and experts try to pressure the citizenry to accept solutions they propose. But I would urge them to use their expertise and prestige to act as honest brokers in the making and implementing public policy. They can do so by helping citizens understand the relevant information and the pluses and minuses of policies under consideration. This kind of university involvement has its costs. But the costs must be borne if the university is to be and be seen as an institution committed to justice as well as to truth.

A second way in which the university can and should show its commitment to justice is by treating all the people it employs in fair and equitable ways. The clearest test of whether it, or any institution for that matter, does so will show up in how it treats its most vulnerable members. For UGA these are primarily the people who make up its nonprofessional staff, namely its grounds keepers, food service workers, janitors, etc. Recent history has shown that more than one major American university has at times failed this test.

Regrettably, UGA itself has not yet fully passed it. The UGA Living Wage Network, in conjunction with the local Economic Justice Coalition, charged last fall that more than 2500 UGA employees earn less than \$10.50 an hour. Some beginning employees earn no more than \$8.13 an hour, or \$17,000 a year. Furthermore, some of them, by university policy, are ineligible for health benefits.

By contrast, the mayor of Athens has issued a proclamation that says in part: “I...plan to continue working with the County Commission to maintain our county government’s Good Jobs standard of employee wages above the level of \$10.50 per hour with health benefits.” So long as UGA pays a significant part of its work force substandard wages and benefits, it cannot be an example of integrity for its students. Furthermore, by its substandard compensation practices, UGA exerts pressure upon the Athens government to abandon its own commitment to compensate its employees at a decent level.

As a consequence, one is led to conclude that at present, for all the good that its other programs do, UGA fails to offer either its students or the other people of Georgia an unequivocal “institutional example of positive civic engagement.” It fails to make unmistakably clear to its students the importance of cultivating a habitual concern for justice.

In conclusion, UGA has much to be justifiably proud of. It can rightly take pride in the many programs it provides for both faculty and student engagement in projects promoting good citizenship. I do hope that my suggestions for the core curriculum in the humanities contributes in some way to a critical examination of how to make undergraduate education as effective as possible in preparing students for responsible citizenship. I also hope that I have been constructive in questioning the justness of UGA’s present compensation practices for its most vulnerable employees.

Finally, truthfulness requires me to admit that my proposals, like any proposals about public policy or practice, neither are nor can be perfect. I can only hope that they contribute positively to the search for ways to help our students prepare to be good citizens.

ⁱ Mary Louise McBee, “Higher Education: Its Responsibility for Moral Development,” National Forum, Vol. LVIII, Spring 1978, 30-33. Hereafter HER.

ⁱⁱ HER, 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Delbanco, “The Endangered University,” The New York Review of Books, Vol LII, no. 5, March 24, 2005, 19-22. Hereafter TEU.

^{iv} TEU, 20, quoting Henry Rosovsky.

^v TEU, 20, quoting Derek Bok.

^{vi} Here I paraphrase Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992,) 180. He says that the ethical aim is “to live a good life with and for others in just institutions.”