

Institutional Neutrality Is a Copout

Colleges must speak with their own true voices.

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By Rev. John I. Jenkins January 7, 2025

Among American universities these days, institutional neutrality is decidedly on the rise. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, an advocate for neutrality, now lists 25 institutions that have adopted this position, most in the last year.

There are different formulations of the position, but the oft-cited locus classicus is the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report, which says that positions on salient social or political issues can be expressed by individual students or faculty members, but that the university itself should take no "collective position," but adhere to "neutrality ... as an institution" — although it does have an obligation "actively to defend its interests and its values." Some version of that position is becoming increasingly widespread. Harvard, the nation's oldest university, adopted last May the recommendations of a faculty working group that "the university has a responsibility to speak out to protect and promote its core function ... [and] defend [its] autonomy and academic freedom when threatened," but it should not issue statements about other public matters.

The attraction of such a policy to university leaders is apparent in these troubled times. Colleges are regularly pressured to take stands on controversial issues; when they do, their statements are inevitably too strong for some, too weak for others, or just too late. And there are so many issues! A policy of neutrality frees universities from a downward spiral of controversy and conflict over statements made and unmade.

Still, there are good reasons to be troubled by the trend, which is in striking accord with the policies of corporate entities. While avoiding pronouncements on controversial social issues, an automaker, for example, does speak on matters relevant to its core function such as automobile safety, sustainable fuels, employment policies, and government regulations that affect its operations and trade. Similarly, a university may speak on the importance of academic freedom, its admissions policies, and government regulations that either support or constrain research. This parallel may seem unsurprising in that they are both large organizations focused on core operations. It gives us pause, however, when we remember that we don't send our most talented young people to General Motors or Ford for four years at a particularly formative period in their lives. We send them to college.

A noteworthy feature of both the Chicago and Harvard reports is that each grounds their rationale in an articulation of the central mission of the university. "The mission of the university is the discovery, improvement and dissemination of knowledge," the Kalven Report states. "The mission of the university," the Harvard report begins, "is to pursue truth"; through inquiries in various disciplines, "the university serves the crucial role of contributing to knowledge and transmitting it to the next generation." The university as such convenes and supports the work of experts in various disciplines, and it belongs to these experts, not the university, to express positions on salient social issues, each individual speaking from within their area of expertise. As the Kalven Report puts it, "the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic." The emphasis is on the pursuit of truth through research, writing, creative expression, and debate. Education is presumably included, in that the university is committed to the "dissemination" and "transmission" of knowledge, along with teaching the methods of inquiry in the various disciplines.

But there is no hint here of anything that might resemble moral pedagogy. The university instills only those qualities that directly serve the intellectual pursuit of truth in the various disciplines through inquiry, debate, and discovery. In an admirably clear and forthright address to incoming students at the University of Chicago, the political science professor John Mearsheimer articulated the educational purposes that accord with this understanding of the university's mission. Above all else, Mearsheimer said, the university "prizes critical thinking,"