

REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE FACULTY¹

I want to share with you a concept that took shape in my mind a year ago, when the Chancellor asked me to tell the Order of the Tar Heel One Hundred how universities differ from non-universities. On that occasion I was talking to laymen and had thirty minutes. But today I am speaking to colleagues who have lived long in universities and, having eaten too much lunch, have lost some of their attentiveness, so I shall boil the message down to fundamentals and add some comments on policy which may or may not have occurred to you before. I think you will find them deserving of consideration. The universities of this country face an uncertain future, because it is questionable that exceptional institutions can survive in an industrial, bureaucratic, and egalitarian age. For that reason all of us should be clear in our minds how universities differ from non-universities and what that means for university and faculty policy.

At the heart of any university is the personal research of its faculty and advanced students and their involvement in the movement of knowledge and thought in their fields. Research is used here, for want of a better word, to cover a great variety of scientific, scholarly, and cultural work. It includes, among other things, the collection and processing of data, experiment, the sifting of research literatures, artistic creation and performance, humanist criticism, and the elaboration of theory and method. In universities, as distinct from institutions so named for reasons of courtesy, faculties have access to costly facilities, and time for research is built into their schedules. These advantages are expensive, so expensive that it is doubtful that more than sixty authentic universities exist, or can exist, in the United States. In

¹Delivered to the Faculty Club of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, January 27, 1976.

universities, therefore, teaching, service, and clinical practice are infused with the personal research of faculty and students, so that the teaching and service programs are closer to the movement of knowledge than would otherwise be possible. It is, therefore, the continuous involvement of faculties and students in research that distinguishes universities from other institutions of higher learning. Research is not an alternative to teaching but an approach or state of mind that produces teaching of a special kind. And to make such teaching available, in public universities, at reasonable cost, to all students who can profit from it, is to reinforce the democratic character of our society.

This characterization explains why, in recruiting and advancing faculty members, universities require talent and achievement in research as well as in teaching. The public needs to be told that research strengthens teaching, even at the introductory levels. Certainly no one improves his teaching by avoiding research, and the teaching that goes on in institutions that make no provision for research is not without problems and shortcomings. That is why university teachers are required to publish, perform, or exhibit their work in order to earn tenure and continue doing so in order to be advanced thereafter. Whenever university faculties ignore this principle they diminish the value of their institutions and their access to facilities that make research possible. For the same reasons advancement and salary are geared to the quality of teaching and research, as evaluated by professional peers who alone are competent to recognize quality when they see it. These evaluations are subtle and subjective. Many of them are inevitably disputable. But to substitute for quality judgments made by peers purely objective criteria such as time in rank or service is to excuse all hands from the pursuit of serious achievement and lose the carryover of that achievement into teaching and service.

All that has been said is familiar. It is repeated not to bore you but to remind you of the premises on which the public acceptance of universities is and must be established. Either the public agrees that research is central in university work and supports it, or the public settles for higher education without research and, consequently, without universities. The main problem universities now face is that their spokesmen have not acquainted the public with what universities are and why they are important. The reason for this failure is the enormous difficulty of expressing their importance in terms the public is prepared to understand and respect. This is partly because the utility of the many kinds of work we call research is often intangible or deferred and cannot be entered at cash value in a balance sheet. Yet the quality of life in every society depends on the scientific and cultural capital acquired through research; and to neglect the enlargement and renewal of that capital because it cannot be entered in a balance sheet is to diminish the American future. America has a mania for balance sheets. One of its self-limiting fixations is the belief that work not added into the bottom line of some operating statement is of no value. And since, as President Coolidge used to say, the business of America is business, this fixation is hard to shake, particularly at a time of economic constriction when every item in every budget is sharply questioned. University people therefore have a problem. It is the problem of explaining to administrators, donors, and taxpayers why the intangible, abstract, aesthetic, and deferred products of research are essential to the future of the country. It would be a good thing if every university faculty member gave this problem a few hours of concentrated, personal study and prepared himself to explain the character and value of the institutions we serve, to any audience, at any time.

During the three years I had the honor to be your chairman a large number of well-intentioned persons and agencies advanced projects intended to reform and rationalize American higher education, democratize it, or make it an instrument of social change. Reading The Chronicle of Higher Education, in which their proposals were explained, was always a dreary business. Usually their plans entailed reducing or abolishing the time allotted for research, or industrializing the teaching process, or eliminating tenure, or making salaries and promotion dependent on non-qualitative standards. The administration of the state university system of Missouri, for example, proceeded to dismember a university and distribute its parts among the other institutions, obviously unaware that the departments and schools of a university are interdependent and use a common library collection and cannot flourish in isolation from one another. The Committee for Economic Development recommended that all colleges and universities adopt managerial practices and accountability standards intended to maximize productivity, chiefly by eliminating time for research and having students taught by small faculties supplemented by machines. Recently there appeared before our own Faculty Assembly representatives of three labor unions who look forward to having the salaries, functions, and working conditions of the faculties of a state system determined by collective bargaining between a union, on the one hand, and a managerial substitute for administration, on the other, subject, of course, to the fundamentally industrial guidelines of the National Labor Relations Board. All these people mean well. Their values are those of industrial and democratic America. Their projects differ from one another and at many points conflict, but all their proposals share two common features: indifference to America's scientific and cultural needs and ignorance of the universities they want to reorganize.

That indifference and that ignorance can be overcome only by university people. University administrations and faculties need to establish in the minds

of the public a sense of the particular value of the institutions they serve. They must learn how to relate the advanced mysteries of their disciplines, however abstract, to the interests and needs of society, and to find language and symbols to explain at least the implication of these mysteries to people who necessarily find our professional literatures incomprehensible. There is a cultural gap between the universities and the rest of society. To close it will require an enormous effort. The professional isolation in which we work is the necessary consequence of the advancement of knowledge and thought in our fields, but we can now see that it has separated us from the public we serve and made it nearly impossible for them to value what we do. All the signs of the times indicate that we ought now to assume the obligation, too long neglected, of explaining our work and why we do it. It is a pleasure to say to you today that a beginning has already been made in dealing with this problem. Thirty-two of the busiest and most distinguished members of this faculty have recently accepted the task of explaining this university and its value to alumni and civic groups in North Carolina. Others of you, sooner or later, will be asked to join them. Since you can envision the difficulties of winning the attention and enthusiasm of the Lions Club at lunch, you may assume that the intellectual challenge these encounters present to our colleagues will match any challenges they may have faced in their professions.

But allow me to point out that a professor need not leave the campus to find the public he needs to address. The public is here. The students are the public of the future. They, when they leave us, should have learned through experience in study the value of the scientific and cultural capital built up in universities. They ought to understand science in the large and philosophic sense. They ought to have discovered how judgment is enlarged by humanist insights and how emotions necessary to the good health of society are nourished

by the arts. They should now be aware that the intractable problems facing America and the world will be solved only when scientific, philosophic, theoretical, and ethical breakthroughs have been made in places like this and new modes of thought, at first glance absurd, developed to cope with these difficulties. They will not, of course, learn these things through professorial propaganda, which they always recognize for what it is. They will learn them through involvement in our disciplines at a level of understanding to which only we can lead them. I therefore think we must review our courses and programs and assure ourselves that the importance of what we teach, and the way we arrive at what we teach, is as clear as the data we present and the skills we try to develop.

Thank you for allowing me to share all this with you.

George V. Taylor
Professor History
The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

January 27, 1976