

Background paper

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The Degradation of the Academic Ethic: Teaching, Research, and Self Regulation*

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Abstract

There is increasing evidence that the academic ethic – the environment of social controls and norms by which the profession regulates academic standards -- has been degraded over time

An underlying cause of this degradation is the emergence of a culture of “hollowed collegiality” in many universities. The strong incentives for research, the tradition of specialization, and contemporary interpretations of academic freedom encourage many faculty members with regard teaching and student learning to work in isolation and to avoid the necessary activities of professional communication and coordination that will help improve academic standards.

There are emerging examples of how professional self-regulation could be renewed through more effective processes of academic governance. These include collegially designed and implemented processes for promoting and recognizing departmental practices in academic quality assurance, the implementation of university-wide grading standards, and in a negative case, the lack of rigorous institutional processes for approving new academic curricula.

The degradation of the academic ethic will likely become a more serious problem as market-based reforms and increased international competition alter the context for academic work. Scholars and researchers in higher education can therefore make an important contribution to renewing professional self-regulation by inquiring more deeply and objectively into the academic beliefs and governance procedures that influence the quality of teaching and student learning in higher education.

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Introduction

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address my colleagues in the Society of Research in Higher Education. Over the years I have made many visits to the United Kingdom and I have always been received with graciousness and warmth. I would like to begin my talk by expressing my very deep gratitude to all those who have extended so generously their professional courtesies to me over the years, because I think it quite possible that by my conclusion my remarks may have inspired great warmth indeed!

In composing my address for this conference I found it impossible not to reflect upon my almost thirty years as a professor in a major US research university and on the changes that have occurred over this time in higher education, both in my country and perhaps more significantly around the globe. My comments therefore come from both the head and the heart. By the head I mean my knowledge of the research and literature in our field. The heart of course is a less reliable instrument for social research, so by this I mean I also will draw upon my experience as an American academic, as a visiting professor in the UK and the Netherlands, and more recently as an external reviewer of quality assurance processes in Finland, Hong Kong, and the United States.

My focus is on the regulation of teaching and student learning, a topic with which you are perhaps overly familiar here in the UK. Because of the tremendous energy devoted to this issue in Great Britain, you may reasonably feel that a paper calling for increased professional responsibility for student learning is akin to bringing coals to Newcastle. Or even worse, bringing burning coals to Newcastle! But as I will later note, the institutional framework of rules and incentives that influences our commitments to teaching and research is changing all over the world as well as in the UK. These changes are certainly affected by government actions and by market forces. But because of the tradition of collegial governance and academic autonomy granted to universities, we still retain substantial influence over the conditions of academic work, the priorities of the academic reward system, and the social controls that shape academic behavior. Adam Smith noted this problem in the 18th century when he complained of the Oxford Professors who “make a common cause to be all very indulgent to one another, and every man to consent that his neighbor may neglect his duty provided he himself is allowed to neglect his own” (quoted in Kerr, 1994, p. 9). If our institutional framework has structural faults we must also accept some responsibility for creating them, for neglecting to notice them, or for making inadequate efforts to correct them (Thompson, 1987).

It is important that we study and critique the negative effects of market forces as well as misplaced government efforts at academic regulation on the university. But it is equally if not more important for the continuance of the university as we know it that we look systematically and critically at our own professional behavior – at our structures of university self-governance, at our processes for peer review, and at our underlying academic beliefs. If we are to insist, and I believe we must insist, on the need for academic autonomy, then we also must offer convincing evidence to each other and to the larger public that our collegial processes for the maintenance of academic standards are vigorous and valid.

In the remarks to follow therefore I will explore the degradation of the academic ethic, which I believe places at risk our fundamental social contract with society.

Regulation

First let me explore the meaning of the term regulation as it applies to academic work. Professors have always had a strong antipathy to external regulation of their activity. The visceral emotions of this were brought home to me on my first professional visit to the UK in the summer of 1981 when I participated in a higher education conference at the University of Lancaster. I recall taking my seat at the conference banquet only to be taken aback by a chorus of scornful shouts and calls of “shame,” which were directed at our speaker for the evening, a representative of the then Department for Education and Science. My surprise at the anger expressed by my British colleagues perhaps says something about the differing relationships at that time between the national government and the universities in our two countries. In the US, the federal government has traditionally had so little to do with the conduct of universities that if a representative of our Department of Education were to speak at an academic conference, she more likely would be greeted by an empty room than by a chorus of derision. But my fear that evening in 1981 that events might get out of hand was immediately calmed by the reactions of my tablemates, all of whom happened to be from Australia. They pointed out that academic demonstrations in the UK were unlikely to rise beyond verbal abuse. By contrast they noted that in their country a comparable demonstration would have led to the throwing of chairs and beer bottles.

Of course, I was naïve as to the fundamental nature of the change then occurring in the relationship between the universities and the state in the UK, as perhaps were many of you. As a consequence of the reforms in higher education over the last decades in the UK and elsewhere the term “regulation” is now immediately interpreted within the academic community as a code word for government “command and control,” that is the imposition upon the university of external standards backed by government sanctions. But the term regulation can also be understood more broadly as all actions intended to influence social behavior valued by the public (Baldwin and Cave, 1999). It is in this sense that we have traditionally used the term within the academic community, describing collective actions designed to assure academic standards as professional self-*regulation*, obvious examples of which include the external examining system in the UK and voluntary academic accreditation in the US.

Our use of the term regulation in this manner emphasizes a crucial point about academic work. That is that academic standards in teaching and learning cannot be maintained by the actions or beliefs of individual professors alone; they also require the supportive bonds of formal structures and processes such as socialization to our academic subject, peer review of proposed new modules or courses, and external professional review of academic quality. When I use the term “academic ethic,” I am referring to this environment of social controls and norms that set the standards for academic conduct and influence our professional choices.

When confronted with arguments for new forms of university regulation, such as controlling university behavior through unbridled market competition, or regulating academic conduct through government rules and sanctions, we instinctively appeal to this broader notion of the academic ethic as a more effective means of assuring academic standards. But is the contemporary case for professional self-regulation sound? Does it reflect an accurate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the academic ethic or is it based largely upon our professional preferences? Any case that we make for academic autonomy must be based on the proven effectiveness of the academic ethic in fulfilling our professional obligations to society.

Teaching and Research

As access to higher education has come to determine the “life chances” of increasing numbers of our citizens, public concern about the proper balance between teaching and research within universities has grown. Observers in many countries have noted a “research drift” in higher education in which scarce resources and energy in all types of academic institutions are increasingly committed to research at the expense of improvements in teaching and student learning. While we may perceive this as a current concern, the causes of the problem have existed for some time. In a prescient analysis written in 1970, from which I have borrowed the title of my talk, the sociologist Robert Nisbet decried the increasing imbalance between teaching and research in the US university. Nisbet attributed this imbalance in part to the loss of deeply and widely held beliefs regarding professional obligations among the professoriate as well as to a weakening of the bonds of structure within universities supportive of these beliefs.

The relationship between teaching and research in the University sector is changing in at least two ways. First, there is increasing concern that resources intended for teaching are being used to cross-subsidize research. This is an issue of long standing in the US and was a stated concern in the recent UK White Paper (DFES, 2003). Second, there is concern that professors within subject fields are not as actively committed to improving the quality of student learning as they are to pursuing their own research agendas. How are these issues related to the degradation of the academic ethic as I have defined it, and what steps may be necessary to restore professional self-regulation so that it effectively meets our obligation to the larger society?

The Cross Subsidization of Research by Teaching

The cross subsidization of research by teaching was highlighted in a recent study of US higher education by researchers at the Rand Corporation (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman, 2002). In field studies of strategic behavior among representative institutions of higher education, the Rand researchers discovered that most US colleges and universities were actively engaged in a pursuit of academic prestige. Because prestige is earned in the university world not by what students learn but by faculty research reputation and measures of student selectivity, the pursuit of prestige was leading to an academic arms race. All types of institutions, including those most committed in the past to teaching, were investing scarce resources in lower teaching loads for faculty members, in improved research facilities, in matching funds to secure research grants, in merit-based aid for able students, and in student consumption benefits such as dormitories, eating facilities, or fiber optic computer networks designed to help attract high quality students. The Rand researchers concluded that while this pursuit of prestige markedly increased the social costs of US higher education, there was little evidence that it was improving the quality of teaching. I note that in an analysis of higher education reform in the UK Lindsay and Rodgers (1998) discovered that many UK universities have adopted resource allocation strategies remarkably similar to those identified in the “prestige-seeking” institutions studied by the Rand researchers in the US. That is, the strategies did not address the educational needs of students, but emphasized “selling” the institution to attract able students and increased investment of faculty time in research.

Of course faculty research activity is essential to the teaching responsibilities of universities. I cannot fulfill my obligations to teach research doctoral students at UNC unless I have an active research program. But reviews of research on student learning indicate that the correlation between research productivity and first level instruction is very small and that teaching and research appear to be more or less independent activities (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994). Alexander Astin’s (1996) studies exploring the nature of the relationship

between research and teaching in the US suggest that a strong departmental research orientation (i.e. a department whose faculty publishes many books and articles, spends a substantial amount of time on research, and attaches high personal priority to engaging in research) is negatively correlated with factors related to teaching including the number of hours spent teaching and advising, commitment to student development, and the use of active learning techniques in the classroom. In a national survey of social scientists in the US Mary Frank Fox (1992) discovered that “more productive researchers ... have less classroom contact with students, spend fewer hours preparing for courses, and consider teaching much less important than research (p. 301).” She concluded that teaching and research are not complementary activities, but different activities that are in some conflict with each other.

Perhaps the more critical consideration in the cross subsidization of research by teaching is not financial resources, but faculty time. The economist Estelle James (1986) first noted that the university department or faculty could be understood as a nonprofit labor cooperative engaged in the production of multiple products. James (1986) argued that faculty members, particularly in universities, value research over teaching, because of its intrinsic interest, because of its clear contribution to departmental reputation, and because in competitive research and labor markets, which are becoming more common around the world, time spent on research can lead to increased grant revenue and future earnings for the individual faculty member. In this context faculty members will choose to “satisfice” teaching quality -- to limit their time investment in teaching and to maximize their time investment in graduate instruction and research (Massy, 2003). In effect, faculty members act individually -- and are supported in these actions by academic policies collectively determined at the departmental level -- to shift to research activity time paid for by the government and tuition paying students principally for teaching.

National surveys of faculty activity (Fairweather, 1997) in the US over the last several decades have confirmed that the proportion of time faculty members reported spending on teaching has fallen and the proportion of time they reported spending on research had risen in all types of four-year institutions, including small liberal arts colleges. As Charles Clotfelter (1996) an economist at Duke University discovered in a detailed analysis of changes over time at representative departments at Chicago, Duke and Harvard Universities:

If the [three] institutions examined here are any indication, the period between 1977 and 1992 was one of gradual, but quite perceptible, change. Virtually without exception, average classroom teaching loads, measured in courses taught per year, decreased in the sample departments. Although these calculated loads by no means cover all aspects of teaching, they are suggestive of a significant movement away from teaching and toward research (p. 204).

Aggressive recruitment for prestigious faculty in fields such as economics has only exacerbated the problem. The chair of the Economics department at Princeton observed that there is now a “race to the bottom” in

teaching loads, as star professors are awarded with high salaries, minimal teaching obligations, and permitted to do extensive work off campus (Steinberger, 2001).

The problem of faculty time not only affects teaching, but also the practices of professional self-regulation. Any process of collective action is costly in terms of individual time. As Oscar Wilde reportedly observed, the single greatest weakness of socialism was the number of evenings it wasted. Professional processes of self-regulation such as external examining, academic accreditation, and academic audit, not to mention the university-based regulatory processes intended to assure academic standards, all require substantial amounts of faculty time, usually with minimal rewards. Clark Kerr (1994), whose recent death deprived us all of a valued seer, had also expressed concern about the observable decline of the academic ethic. Kerr noted the emergence of a “new academic culture” with less commitment to the local academic community and to citizenship obligations within it:

All over the United States, it is more difficult than it once was to get university teachers to take seriously their departmental and college responsibilities. They are more reluctant to serve on committees, and more reluctant to make time readily available when they do.... They wish to concentrate on their own affairs and not that of the institution. (p. 14).

Commitment to Improving Academic Quality in Subject Fields

The second concern about the relationship between teaching and research is the issue of the commitment to improve student learning within subject fields. Academic programs are developed, delivered, and improved in all academic systems primarily at the level of the department or faculty -- what has been called “the basic unit” (Becher and Kogan, 1992). As Tony Becher (1992), a distinguished fellow of this society, so wisely noted in developing a quality assurance system at the University of Sussex in the UK:

...the most important consideration in quality assurance must be a holistic rather than an atomistic one, namely the benefits students derive from the totality of their degree programmes, rather than the satisfactoriness or otherwise of their interactions with individual members of staff (p. 58).

Reviews of research on teaching in higher education confirm the influence of the basic unit on student learning. Students’ learning of academic content and their cognitive development are significantly associated with the pattern and sequence of the modules in which they enroll, by program requirements that integrate learning from separate modules, and by the frequency of communication and interaction among faculty members in the subject field (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Our public obligation to assure student learning is therefore reflected not only in the commitment and energy we give to our individual courses or modules of instruction, but also in our collective zeal to assure and improve academic standards at the department or subject level.

The managerial theorist Henry Mintzberg (1979) offers a description of how in the past socialization to a discipline supposedly provided the necessary regulation of academic standards in universities. Long years of training supplied future faculty members with the standardized skills and knowledge characteristic of their particular subject. Their approach to teaching, to their subject content, and to their research was influenced by these ingrained norms. As a consequence, faculty members could teach individually and independently because

the professor lecturing on physics to engineering students could successfully predict what the professor lecturing on calculus to the same students was covering. The norms of professional socialization thereby permitted faculty members to coordinate their teaching while working autonomously.

But this concurrence on standards, skills and academic content, if it ever existed, has disintegrated with the rapid expansion of academic knowledge and the emergence of multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary subjects. Surveys of faculty in the United States (Lattuca, and Stark, 1994) reveal that disciplinary norms and standards, which used to provide a basis for academic coordination, are of declining influence on faculty behavior. In many disciplines faculty members no longer easily agree on definitions of subject content, nor are they in agreement that specified sequences of learning are appropriate for students. In several disciplines, faculty members expressed the belief that the field's diversity precluded achieving a consensus on what students need to know.

A national survey of ethical beliefs about university teaching in the US by John Braxton and Alan Bayer (1999), the first relevant empirical investigation of academic ethics that I have discovered, raises further questions about the influence of academic norms.¹ The researchers discovered that the strength of professional norms with regard to responsibilities for teaching, advising and grading, obligations for the planning and design of courses, and commitments for the governance of the department and university were weakest among research universities. They also studied differences in disciplinary cultures and noted that there was greater agreement on ethical standards and their enforcement in more paradigmatic fields such as the sciences than in the social sciences and humanities. These observed differences in professional norms across disciplines have not received the attention they deserve.

Over the last several years I have been privileged to participate in academic quality reviews in Hong Kong, Finland, and the US. In all three instances the focus of the exercise was on the adequacy of institutional quality assurance processes, but we examined both institution-wide processes as well as representative departmental processes through interviews with administrators, faculty members, and representative students. Although these three countries have different academic traditions, I observed similar differences among disciplines and subject fields in each country. Departments in professional subjects such as medicine and engineering, as well as a number of the traditional sciences, were usually among the leaders in active efforts to improve student learning, while departments in the humanities and social sciences usually trailed behind and were often ignorant if not disinterested in collective processes and approaches by which they might assure academic standards.

Similar differences in disciplinary cultures have been noted in recent studies of grade inflation in US higher education (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002). Grade inflation, or more accurately grade compression in which few low marks are awarded to students, has been increasing over time in the US and is particularly prominent at the most prestigious universities such as Harvard and Yale. Concern about the inflation of marks and academic awards has also arisen in the UK (Yorke, et. al., 2002). One persistent characteristic of grade

¹ This intriguing approach to the study of academic ethics by Braxton and Bayer (1999) is worthy of replication in other countries. The study was originally published in 1999. I suspect other academics will be no more surprised than I that, although I live in an area with one of the highest concentrations of professors anywhere in the US, when I checked out the book from the University Library in the summer of 2003 the librarian had to paste a date card on the inside cover because it had never been read before.

inflation in the US is that it has occurred primarily in the social sciences and humanities and not in the sciences and mathematics. Disciplinary variation in the awarding of grades transgresses the principal of equal treatment of students that Braxton and Bayer (1999) identified in their survey as a core ethical standard among the professoriate and may also compromise the university's ability to effectively serve the public interest. For example, several studies have suggested that variations in student grading standards across subject fields is one contributor to the observed decline in enrollments in mathematics and the sciences in the US as achievement-oriented students migrate to subjects that award higher grades (Johnson, 2003). As more universities around the world link departmental funding to student enrollments and adopt modular instruction with continuous assessment, and as more higher education systems implement hierarchical degree structures in which access to second level professional degrees is dependent on first level academic performance, the pressures and incentives for faculty members to inflate grades in order to guarantee course enrollments are likely to increase. But, few US universities have in place any regulatory process for assuring that academic standards are equivalent across fields and US style accreditation does not even examine the issue of marking standards. Even in the UK, David Warren Piper's (1994) informative study of the external examining system revealed that grading profiles vary significantly and in apparently arbitrary ways from subject to subject in the same university as well as between institutions. Subsequent research in the UK (Silver and Williams, 1994) has suggested that the widespread adoption of continuous assessment and modular degrees within universities will only make more difficult the external examiners' task of validly judging the comparability of degree awards.

Social Control and Communication

If academic self-regulation as I have suggested is flawed, how can it best be renewed? In discussions with policy makers in a number of countries about means of assuring academic standards, I have always emphasized what we have learned from evaluation studies of the new forms of external quality assurance adopted in the UK, Europe, and Asia. The most consistent finding is that processes such as Academic Audit and Subject Assessments have increased the amount of discussion among faculty members at the department and university level about teaching and student learning (Dill, 2000). When they discover that the primary measurable effect of these policies is to increase conversations among professors, the policy makers have generally been underwhelmed. On the contrary, I believe that communication is the very heart of the matter. Increased interaction and communication is the essential condition for effective professional self-regulation and our best hope to sustain our responsibility to society for effective teaching and student learning.

In field research at the departmental level in US universities Bill Massy and his colleagues (Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck, 1994) suggest why this is the case. They uncovered a pattern of "hollowed collegiality" in which departments nominally appear to act collectively, but avoid those specific collaborative activities that might lead to real quality improvements in academic programs. For example, faculty members readily reported informal meetings to share research findings, collective procedures for determining faculty promotion and tenure, and consensus decision making on what particular courses should be offered each term and who should teach them. But:

Despite these trappings of collegiality, respondents told us they seldom led to the more substantial discussions necessary to improve undergraduate education, or to the sense of collective responsibility needed to make departmental efforts more effective. These vestiges of collegiality serve faculty convenience but dodge fundamental questions of task. This is

especially the case, and is regrettable, with respect to student learning: collegiality remains thwarted with regard to faculty engagement with issues of curricular structure, pedagogical alternatives, and student assessment (Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck, 1994, p. 19).

Similarly, in his survey of the UK external examining system, Warren Piper noted the lack of discussion about marking standards among faculty members teaching in multidisciplinary or joint courses, which even in the late 1980s represented over 30% of degrees in the university sector. As he commented:

There are some compelling suggestions of the lack of contact among departments Many of the respondents pointed to the need for staff from different disciplines to plan multidisciplinary courses jointly and to get beyond the approach of simply combining lists of subjects to be covered (p. 158).

A major contributor to this observed pattern of professorial isolation are contemporary professorial commitments to specialization and prevailing academic beliefs about academic freedom and autonomy. Faculty members not only do much of their teaching alone, but because academic sub-fields are defined quite narrowly, many faculty members find it almost impossible to discuss their teaching with one another. In a comprehensive analysis of the professional ideal in America, Bruce Kimball (1992) documents the shift over the 20th century from the belief in service to the public to the active pursuit of individual income and prestige. Reflecting on the academic profession Kimball (1992) asks whether increasing academic specialization has been used “to deflect criticisms of professionals’ power and prestige by disguising their self interest?”(p. 314).

In addition collective efforts at improving student learning are frequently frustrated by assertions of academic freedom. But does this assertion of autonomy in individual teaching serve the public interest or private needs? Marvin Lazerson, (1997) suggests that academic freedom in the US has over time been misinterpreted to mean that individual faculty members have an unchallenged right to determine the content of their courses:

What professors did inside the classroom had to be defended against external threats...The defense of academic freedom had the effect of making the classroom a “private” domain – as faculty responses to student evaluations often made clear. Any questions about what happened in the classroom, even whether students were learning anything, were viewed as threats to the faculty member’s liberty. The transactions of the classroom, teaching and learning, needed to be excluded from serious observation and contention (Lazerson, 1997, p. 21).

Similarly, Lee Schulman (1993) has observed that unlike academic research, teaching has come to be treated as private rather than community property. In research and scholarship, Schulman notes, academics are members of active communities: “communities of conversation, communities of evaluation, communities in

which we gather with others in our invisible colleges to exchange our findings, our methods, and our excuses” (Shulman, 1993, p. 6). In contrast, faculty members symbolically close the classroom door and conduct teaching as a solitary activity. The timid application of effective peer review to teaching and as I will later argue to academic content, which is observable throughout most of the world, is likely traceable to this unexamined assertion of academic freedom. As former Dean Henry Rosovsky of Harvard has argued: “Academic freedom does not absolve colleagues or administrators from assuming responsibility for what are essentially matters of procedure, management, good order – and above all else – legitimate student needs” (Rosovsky and Ameer, 1998, p. 150).

I have already noted the research emphasizing that the amount of communication among faculty members in a department is a significant predictor of student learning. In their study of academic ethics, Braxton and Bayer (1999) also argued that effective deterrence and detection of proscribed academic behavior is more likely to occur in departments with frequent social contact. Departmental meetings, face-to-face informal interactions, and performance reviews related to teaching and student learning provide the social ties necessary for the communication, observation, and enforcement of ethical standards.

In his early work on organizations Henry Mintzberg (1979) similarly noted that as universities place greater emphasis on innovation and creativity, they will form more multidisciplinary groups. In these groups the standardization of skills and knowledge characteristic of the traditional disciplines will become a less effective mode of coordination. Traditional professional norms will need to be supplemented by what Mintzberg termed the process of “mutual adjustment,” by which he meant new mechanisms for communication among the professionals.

Finally, in a related earlier study, *Communication and Organizational Control* -- a book, which I consider a neglected classic of the organization theory literature -- the sociologist Jerald Hage (1974) provided an insightful explanation for the role communication plays in professional self-regulation. Hage conducted extensive field studies of the medical profession and concluded that traditional hierarchical methods of coordination and control are ineffective in professional settings because of the complexity of professional tasks and the need for individual autonomy. Consequently, he argued that necessary coordination must be achieved through a process of socialization that features high levels of communication and feedback about professional tasks. This communication is not vertical – as with administrators, not primarily written as in reports and procedural documents, not episodic, and does not focus on the detection or transmittal of sanctions. Rather, the communication is horizontal – with respected peers, largely verbal and face-to-face, continuous, and focuses on the exchange of information about means of improving core professional tasks.

If we compare these perspectives on the role communication and social control should play in effective professional settings with the reality of how atomistic academic life is lived within contemporary universities, we can begin to appreciate why the academic ethic is being degraded. The traditional reliance on disciplinary norms and collegial processes that accorded substantial autonomy on academic standards to departments and faculties is ill suited to the modern world of research specialization, newly formed subject fields, and international competition for scholarly prestige. If we are to sustain the self-regulation of universities, we will need to discover and implement more effective processes for collegial academic governance and the assurance of academic standards. Let me suggest what some of these processes may look like.

Professional Regulation for the New Age

First it is unlikely that reforms in professional self-regulation will occur without external pressure. Over the last several years I have had the opportunity to evaluate numerous institutional responses to external academic quality reviews. While the specifics vary, there is one constant claim in each of these reports. That is, that the university in question was making active improvements in its academic quality assurance processes, these changes were already well underway prior to the mandated external review, and the listed improvements would have occurred in due course in any event. There is a wonderfully apt expression here in the UK to describe this response -- “absolute rubbish!” The internal changes in academic quality assurance and the improvements in first level instruction that have been implemented within universities in a number of countries over the last decade simply would not have occurred without the demands posed by government-mandated external reviews. There is no greater evidence to support this claim than to examine the internal life of universities in the US where there has not been comparable government pressure for improved professional self-regulation. This “enforced self-regulation” (Baldwin and Cave, 1999) as it is termed in the literature on regulation is in my view a necessary condition for rebalancing the relationship between research and teaching. Ultimately, however, as I have suggested, the most effective regulatory processes will be those social controls designed and implemented within universities by the members of the academic profession themselves.

In my visits to numerous universities as an evaluator of quality assurance practices, I have observed a number of practices, both effective and ineffective, which suggest needed directions for change in academic governance and peer review. The impacts of these and other innovations will need to be verified through independent and objective study, but I believe these practices provide concrete illustrations of the important role communication and feedback play in effective social control in academic settings.

The most influential process I have seen for encouraging teaching and student learning at the department level occurred ironically in one of the most research-intensive institutions I have visited. Within this university the academic quality assurance process was not in the hands of administrators, but the responsibility of a committee of faculty members elected from across the university and consisting of respected researchers and scholars who were committed to assuring academic standards. It was this committee, not the administration, which was actively pressing each department to demonstrate the effectiveness of its processes for improving teaching and student learning. The committee required initial reports from each department on its quality assurance processes, but followed up these reports with face to face meetings with the members of each department to provide criticism and suggest needed improvements. This committee was a formal standing committee of the university, an integral part of the university governance process, with close linkages to the leading administrators. The committee had identified the academic deans as a particular problem in the improvement of academic standards because they were not actively engaging the departments to improve student learning in their budget allocations and planning processes.

This point deserves a brief detour. The lack of knowledge and indeed inattentiveness of university administrators to the collective processes necessary for the improvement of student learning is not uncommon in my experience. If one begins at the department level by interviewing faculty members and students about the procedures of assuring academic standards and then ascends the academic staircase to discuss what one has discovered with deans and administrators nominally responsible for the visited units, an exercise I have carried out in number of institutions and countries, one discovers a remarkable degree of administrative ignorance as to what is actually occurring in teaching and student learning within their universities. In many cases one encounters active disinterest or claims that such issues are not a part of their responsibility. In contrast, I find

that such administrators are rarely so misinformed about the research and scholarly productivity of individual faculty members and departments within their sphere of responsibility and are often actively engaged in influencing research activity. In the newly evolving world of higher education, the incentives and awards for university administrators are increasingly linked to the building of academic prestige and departmental research reputation, not to the challenging and unpopular task of improving academic standards. Comparable questions about administrative neglect and the mismatch between administrative incentives and the need for academic integrity have been raised by researchers studying the problem of scientific misconduct within US universities (Sterneck, 1999). For these reasons I strongly concur with Jerald Hage (1974) who argued that professional self regulation must rely principally on processes of peer review.

Returning to models of good practice, a second example is a university that had developed an innovative award program for academic quality assurance. The university provided a substantial cash prize to departments that could make a convincing case for the implementation of new processes that demonstratively improved academic standards. Each candidate department had to make a written case and then was visited by a committee of faculty peers who interviewed the department faculty and students and assessed the relevant evidence. The activities of the winning department were then showcased within the university as a means of encouraging the improvement of other departments. This award program is a creative response to two nagging problems for improving teaching and student learning in universities. The first is how to provide financial incentives for collective actions to improve academic standards, without punishing students in less effective departments. The second is how to encourage the transfer of teaching and learning improvements developed in one academic unit to other academic units. Transferring good practice is a substantive challenge in university settings (Dill, 1999a). Those countries that have systematically conducted subject reviews within their university sector have discovered wide variance in the quality of teaching and learning across units within the same university, which I earlier noted. These better performing units have knowledge about improving teaching and learning from which other units could learn if effective collegial processes were developed for identifying best practices and successfully transferring them among academic units. Such knowledge transfer is thwarted by established governance traditions of departmental autonomy and decentralized decision-making.

A third example is a university that had recently reformed its first-degree level programs, adopting modular instruction and continuous assessment and consequently phasing out its traditional external examiner system. Because of concerns about fairness to students as well as commitments to providing appropriate incentives for student learning, the faculty of the university established a standing committee to develop and implement university-wide marking standards. The committee established and published grade distribution guidelines for the university as a whole and monitored departmental grade distributions for each term. The department chairs of units which varied significantly from the grading guidelines were regularly called before the committee and asked to provide supporting arguments and evidence for the observed exceptions.

A fourth and final example is actually a negative case, because I have not yet observed an effective relevant process. In an experimental accreditation review of a US university, we adopted a new format of systematically reviewing the effectiveness of regulatory processes nominated by the visited institution such as its processes for assuring the quality of general education and evaluating teaching. At the end of the review the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who was coordinating our visit, asked what more might have been

done? I noted that we had not reviewed the process by which new courses or modules and new curricula were approved by the university. He gave me a quizzical look and said: “Why review that process? Everyone knows that curriculum committees have nothing to do with the quality of education.” I appreciated his candor as his observation accorded with my own experience in US universities. The process by which the academic content of newly proposed programs or individual courses or modules is reviewed is often largely procedural, more a matter of protecting academic turf than of assuring academic standards. As I previously noted, reviews of research on teaching suggest that student learning is closely associated with what may be termed the *academic coherence* of the curriculum (Dill, 1999b). That is, student content learning and cognitive development are affected by the sequencing and coordination of subject content in taught programs. Therefore efforts to improve the quality of learning outcomes will require cooperative actions by faculty members to “restructure” program curricula, to redesign course sequences and requirements, and to better coordinate their individual efforts at instruction in order to achieve greater academic coherence. In contemporary US universities the formal processes for approving new programs and courses give little or no consideration as to how the various pieces of subject content within an academic program are related or how they might be better integrated to enhance student learning.

These examples suggest how academic self regulation might be better designed to address our professional responsibility for assuring the quality of teaching and student learning in the new academic environment. The examples also illustrate some of the practices of effective social control through communication and feedback previously introduced. These structures and processes help guide professional behavior, identify deviance, and create mutual expectations. As suggested, the good practices cited are clearly collegial, that is, they were developed and implemented by the faculty themselves. They are also continuous in that they are a permanent part of the ongoing academic governance process of the respective universities, not temporary task forces created in response to external demands. Administrators play a supporting role in these cases, but the processes clearly emphasize peer review. The processes include written reports, but they avoid the danger of empty “proceduralism” by emphasizing the active practice of professional judgment (Turner, 1999). This requires face to face communication with academic units as a means of socializing the larger faculty to expected professional norms and responsibilities. Through this communication there is also the greater possibility of disseminating information on means for improving core academic processes including the transfer of best practices developed in other academic units of the university. Similar to the external quality assurance processes that I mentioned previously, these internal university processes also place collegial pressure on each academic unit to continuously improve its academic standards.

Conclusion

The new processes of academic self-regulation I have just described may appear commonplace here in the UK where substantial institutional investments have been made in academic quality assurance over the last decade. Understandably some may feel that their universities have successfully adapted to the educational demands of the new environment and that it is now time to invest scarce energy in other challenges. I respectfully disagree. For better or worse the world is rapidly adopting academic structures that will make higher education around the globe more not less like that in the US. Taught courses, modular instruction, continuous assessment, merit-based faculty salary systems, and the competitive awarding of research grants will

likely all become more common in higher education. Many countries are now adopting the US hierarchal degree structure of first level undergraduate degrees, second level professional degrees, and third level research doctoral degrees, which will have consequences for both student and faculty attitudes toward grading and academic standards. And in this process we are already seeing the emergence of an international academic arms race based upon measures of academic prestige and faculty research reputation. We are not confronting a one-time adjustment in higher education, but an ongoing dynamic change with great significance for the balance between research and teaching.

As I have suggested, many of these changes will likely erode the remaining vestiges of the traditional academic ethic, which has in the past helped us fulfill our academic obligations to society. Increased faculty mobility will decrease the social ties within departments and universities that helped to sustain norms and academic standards. The increasing returns to research and scholarship will affect attitudes toward teaching in all institutions of higher education, as young faculty members attempt to advance professionally. I fear that individual professors, who in the past would have made substantial personal commitments to teaching, to grading with academic integrity, and to maintaining the self-regulatory processes for assuring academic standards, will look at the incentives and awards of the emerging competitive system of higher education and conclude that such commitments are now irrational. Our ability to sustain and assure academic standards will be continuously put to the test. As a consequence we all will be seeking means for renewing the academic ethic.

Scholars and researchers in our field can therefore make an important contribution to the future of the university by inquiring more deeply and objectively into the academic beliefs and governance procedures that influence the quality of teaching and student learning in higher education. We need to know more about the strengths and weaknesses of new forms of collegial governance now emerging in response to demands for greater academic accountability. We need to discover how peer review can be more effectively utilized to improve academic standards. We need to better understand the extent of the apparent differences in ethical standards between academic disciplines and fields and the causes of this variability. We need to know how academic socialization can be accomplished in a world of rapidly expanding knowledge and new subjects as well as increasing professorial mobility. We need to know when academic freedom is genuinely compromised by professional self-regulation and when such claims are bogus or conceal faculty self interest.

But let us not be naïve about the reactions to such investigations. Research into the ethical environment of universities will be disturbing. Those colleagues who applauded our attacks on managerialism, our questioning of new government regulation, and our concerns about the effects of market forces, will likely sit on their hands when we inquire into professional standards of conduct and the efficacy of self-regulatory processes. As Peter Rossi so aptly put it, “no good applied social research goes unpunished.” We can easily imagine those academic high flyers most advantaged by the changing environment of professional self-regulation muttering over their single-malt whiskey: “who will rid us of these meddlesome ethicists?”

But we should be emboldened by the responsibility of our social contract with society. The public has entrusted the academic profession with its future human capital. We have been awarded substantial professional autonomy with the expectation that we will in turn assure in an efficient and equitable manner that our students learn the knowledge, skills, and values essential to society. We must, as Bill Massy (2003) has powerfully argued in his new book on quality and productivity in higher education, honor that trust.

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