

News Office  
Columbia University  
New York, New York 10027  
UNiversity 5-4000, Ext. 886

-  
John Hastings, Director

Partial Text of Remarks by Dr. Grayson Kirk,  
President of Columbia University, at Commence-  
ment Exercises at the University of Michigan,  
Ann Arbor, Michigan, Saturday, December 18, 1965.

"The University in Contemporary Society"

For nearly a thousand years institutions of higher education have existed in the Western world. Created for the most part either by the State or the Church, they were designed to prepare men for the great professions of medicine, law and theology, and they provided instruction in the arts as well. Many of the customs and practices of these early institutions of higher learning long since have been abandoned. Others, such as the wearing of academic costume, the name and ranking of various degrees and festive ceremonies for students who have completed their required work have survived. One such custom, still observed in some European universities, happily has not crossed the Atlantic. This was the practice that any person receiving a doctor's degree, and in particular one received honoris causa, was obliged in gratitude to offer a splendid dinner to all members of the faculty. You will understand, Mr. President, why I do not deplore the disappearance of this ancient custom.

In this country, from the days of earliest collegiate beginnings of higher education the final, degree-awarding ceremonies have included a speech from someone. Thus, at the first Columbia commencement in 1758, the newspapers of New York reported that the president addressed to the graduates "a solemn pathetick Exhortation . . . which could not fail of answering the most valuable

--more--



Purposes, and leaving a lasting Impression on the Minds of all the Pupils. "

I trust that the connotation of the word "pathetick" has changed over the centuries; otherwise I should be obliged to assume that the story must have been written by a student reporter.

And so, today, we are here to observe the ceremonial completion by many students of a great variety of courses of study and at all levels from the first to the highest degrees within the power of the university to confer. Because the high standards of this university are internationally recognized, today's graduates can take a justifiable pride in their accomplishments. They have earned the commendation of their friends and they have given the university the right to expect that their future careers, here or elsewhere, will bring satisfaction to their Alma Mater as well as honor to themselves. So doing, they will discharge to society the large obligation they have incurred for the opportunities which it has made available for them.

One feature of academic life which has persisted from the earliest days to the present is a certain unease or ambivalence in the relationship between universities and the society they serve. Understandably, society is apt to regard the universities which it has established and maintained at great and growing expense as instruments not only to train individuals for specific careers but also to conserve and perpetuate the basic values of the society. By transmitting these values to successive generations of students, the future will be protected. So regarded, a university is expected to serve as a shield against all forces of political subversion and disruption. Such a view of the social role of higher education is held in its most extreme form when the political structure of the



state is rigidly authoritarian. This was true of the church-dominated societies of the Middle Ages and it is equally if not even more true of communist countries today. Academic deviation from certain accepted ideological values and norms simply is not tolerated.

This view of what a university's social role ought to be has not been confined, historically speaking, to totalitarian countries. At various times and in varying degrees many so-called liberal and democratic societies have held the same position. Thus, in the middle years of the last century, the emerging universities of this country were subjected to the most violent criticism by leading clergymen who feared that university teachings of modern science would undermine the morals and the faith of the students. Henry Philip Tappan struggled against these blasts of censure here in Michigan; Andrew White had to contend against them in Cornell; when President Gilman invited T. H. Huxley to give the principal speech at the inaugural ceremonies of the Johns Hopkins University angry clerical reverberations rang across the country and Gilman wrote later that "It was several years before the black eye gained its natural color."

Even today this popular apprehension that the university may serve as a source of subversion is by no means a matter of past history. In Latin America the teaching of political science, as we know it, is almost non-existent because governments, plagued by endemic student disorders, have felt that instruction in political science might be a focal point for further trouble. Here at home the regrettable McCarthy episode of a decade ago was characterized by an outburst of bitter public criticism of even our greatest universities because, in tolerating dissent, they were believed to be in league with the enemy. And in these days



the outbreak of campus political radicalism, led by small but militant minority groups, has evoked a wave of public apprehension which is far beyond its actual significance and which, in fact, is precisely what its instigators hoped to produce.

To put the matter in another way, our people are proud of their universities. Through taxes and voluntary gifts they support them lavishly. They want their sons and daughters to attend them. They are quick to point out that no other society in the history of the world has made comparable provision for the higher education of virtually all its young people who desire the experience and give even minimal assurance that they can profit from it. But at the same time, our people still have a lingering distrust of their universities. This distrust no longer stems from a feeling that the universities are Godless institutions and therefore suspect. It no longer comes from the feeling that the universities are a sanctuary for hopelessly impractical people incapable of understanding or coping with the realities of the workaday world. But this distrust does derive from the continued popular feeling that our universities ought to be a more effective cultural shield to help safeguard our society from the schemes of those who would destroy it. Outbursts of student radicalism seem to prove to the critics that the universities are not doing a proper job of indoctrinating students in the values cherished by the society. And so, angry citizens write to university administrators demanding that summary action be taken to crush student dissent, to forbid the use of university facilities by undesirable outside speakers, and to purge the faculty of non-conformist professors.

The problem thus posed goes directly to the heart, or perhaps one should say, the ethos, of a university's role in a free and democratic society. I have



spoken just now of the ambivalent attitude of society toward universities. A comparable ambivalence exists within the university with respect to society. No one within a university would question the assertion that a university is created by society and exists to serve it through teaching and research. But our universities insist that they can perform these tasks only if they can preserve a very large degree of autonomy, free from excessive intervention either by government or by any other organized group within the society they serve. This is not because universities seek a privileged position denied to other social groups and organizations. It is because universities honestly hold the view that they can perform their maximum service to a liberal and democratic society only if they are free with impunity to play the role of critic as well as that of servant.

Such a view holds that no society is ideal or perfect, that improvements can come about only if a great organization such as a university, objectively dedicated to the pursuit of truth no matter where the search may lead, is permitted to carry on its work in freedom from pressures from those who hold preconceived notions of what the ends and goals of that work should be. Only through substantial autonomy can a university effectively serve a society that regards freedom, justice and equality for all citizens as its own basic principles.

Parenthetically, let us note that in a non-free society this problem of university autonomy is presumed not to exist. In Soviet Russia, for example, it is held that while university autonomy is an obvious and necessary condition of progress in a bourgeois society, the problem really does not arise in a socialist country. The Pro-Rector of the University of Moscow recently wrote, "In socialist countries the government is not in conflict with the people, but carries out their wishes; it is their servant. Therefore, in socialist countries, State



direction of the universities does not restrict their autonomy nor hinder their free development." This, of course, is a predictable analysis of the problem if one looks at the world through the curious blinders of Communist doctrine, but it is of little help to us in our inquiry.

However, this Communist statement does raise the question of the degree of freedom which a university must have in order to make its maximum contribution to civilization. On this point I can do no better than to quote the judgment of the late Sir Hector Hetherington, formerly Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Glasgow. He said, "The claim (of universities) is not for exemption from public accountability or from the duty to explain their policies and to have due regard to informed public judgment on them. It is simply that they are likely to fulfil their high service most adequately when the directives and judgments issuing from external authority are offered but not imposed, so that Universities have a large freedom in the choice of their objectives, and of the means to be taken thereto." He added, "It is certain that whatever the formal relationship of the university to its environing authority, the greatest achievements of scholarship and science have been wrought by men who worked by themselves or in free association with others, or in universities which were in no decisive way subject to external control."

If a large degree of autonomy is to be held by our universities, then they must be prepared to justify this special position by the results they achieve. To achieve these results, they must have the highest academic standards of competence and objectivity and the requisite firmness of will to insist upon the environmental conditions that will permit them to protect and enhance these standards. Thus, and first of all, they must maintain a genuinely intellectual



climate for students and faculty alike. Despite the views of a few of our students, and even those of an occasional faculty colleague, it is not the principal role of the university to foster social agitation. Every member of an academic community has a citizen's right to speak out on any question of public policy, and no question should go unexamined because it may arouse popular criticism. But the primary purpose of the university, if it is true to its ideals and responsible in the exercise of its autonomy, is to generate light rather than heat. The search for truth is not advanced by frantic emotionalism but by patient inquiry. Members of an academic community cannot, in their public statements, entirely divorce themselves from their university associations. They hold the reputation of the university in their hands and thus should remember that objectivity is not a synonym for apathy but a basic requirement of intellectual responsibility.

What I have called the intellectual climate of a university also is affected by the extent to which its authorities permit extraneous matters to become unduly the center of attention. A university does not exist in order to provide entertainment for its students and still less for the general public. It wastes its resources and it defrauds its students of one of the most precious opportunities of their lives if it permits them to pass through their student years with a minimum of concentration upon the life of the mind and a maximum of attention to mere adolescent pleasures. The current cultural values of our society are not so high as to permit this kind of attrition and lost opportunity without serious consequences. I make no plea that our universities should enforce an ascetic life upon student members of the academic community. I ask only that we remember the primary purpose for which our universities exist. If we are



forgetful about this, our claim to autonomy becomes ineffectual in its results and therefore meaningless.

A second condition which a university must insist upon if it is to achieve its greatest utility is that its autonomy must include the right to refuse many new opportunities. In these days when our universities suddenly have become the focus of so much public attention, they are in danger of being overloaded with responsibilities. They are asked to lend their best faculty talent for public service; they are urged to help build up new universities in the developing countries; they are invited to undertake large new research projects at times in distant parts of the world; they are requested to administer new national prizes and awards; they are supposed to fill out endless questionnaires ranging from the number of square feet of floor space for each instructor to the sexual habits of their students. In registering this complaint I am not proposing to found a Society for the Preservation of the Ivory Tower. (In any event the acronym is not felicitous.) But I do feel that we must keep in mind that the primary purposes of a university, which are teaching and research, can be lost from sight -- and to the impairment of society -- if it makes too great an effort to be all things to all men.

Because university men are generally humane in their sympathies and far-ranging in their interests, they find it difficult to resist new opportunities and urgent pleas for help, particularly from the newer and developing countries. But unless the university is merely to serve as a hiring hall, it can respond positively only in a limited number of cases without injuring its own teaching or the conduct of its own research programs. Similarly, I feel that, except in unusual circumstances, the grant of extended periods of leave for faculty men



for non-university service is an act of administrative irresponsibility with respect to the legitimate needs of students in one's own university.

A third condition for the effective employment of university autonomy is that of constant attention to the quality of teaching. In recent years our better secondary schools have greatly up-graded the quality and range of their instruction. Many of these bright, well-prepared young people come to a college or university and find introductory courses that were originally planned for students with a much lower level of accomplishment. The resulting disillusionment can do lasting damage to the development of a student's intellectual interests. Because of the veritable explosion of knowledge in our time, a teacher who gives a course substantially as he gave it a dozen years ago has at best a doubtful place in a modern university. If, as is usually the case, such a teacher enjoys tenure, then the university unfortunately may not invite him to seek other employment more in keeping with the modesty of his talents, but it can, and should, do everything in its power to urge him to improve the quality of his work. Students clamor a great deal in these days about their rights. Some of their demands are absurd but they do have one unassailable right, which is the right to good teaching -- and this is not always enjoyed in any university however eminent.

Finally, if a university is to justify its autonomy it must be able somehow to give its students more than technical training; it must give them, in and through the intellectual climate of which I have spoken earlier, that priceless quality of discrimination and good taste which is the hallmark of the educated man or woman. Nearly four hundred years ago, in his essay "On Presumption", Montaigne observed that "Education has taught us the definitions, divisions and



partitions of virtue, like the surnames and branches of a genealogy, without any further concern to form between us and virtue any familiar relationship and intimate acquaintance." Today, if I choose to use the term, "good taste," rather than virtue it is because the latter is perhaps less broadly meaningful in our day. But the thrust of the meaning is the same. It is that an educated person has learned to prefer beauty to ugliness, that he rejects those elements of shoddiness and vulgarity that are all too prevalent in our society, that he has achieved a poise that prevents him from being driven by the perplexities and confusions of the moment either into panic or black despair.

If a man has been educated to have this quality of taste he will not be content to live in a world in which clichés are substituted for thought, a world in which black is always black and white is always white. This does not mean that he will be condemned to the agony of eternal indecision; it does mean that, while he will search as hard as he can for truth, he will recognize that final truth always is elusive, and that decision in human affairs must be made by fallible men of whom he will be one.

Manifestly it would be wrong to say that every so-called university in this country exemplifies in its relationship to society these ideals which I have been discussing. Among the many hundreds which bear this honored name, a few stand out. It is greatly to the credit of the people of this state that they have supported a university that long ago took its place in this elect group of leader-universities. For more than a hundred years the University of Michigan has grown steadily in the high quality and the range of its services to its students, the state, the nation and the world. Those who today acquire permanent membership in what is truly a Great Society should be mindful of the privilege they have.



Almost precisely a hundred and thirteen years ago, on the twenty-first of December, 1852, Henry Philip Tappan was inaugurated as the President of this institution. He concluded his address by saying,

"This young University, shall we not carry it forward to perfection? Is not the ambition worthy of a free and independent people which would make it one of the great Universities of the world, where all knowledges are to be found, where great and good men are to be reared up, and whence shall go forth the light and law of universal education?"

His oratory may have an old-fashioned ring but his values were sound and his goals, now a century later, have been achieved by the great institution he helped to build. In our day we must set for ourselves new and even higher goals of university service for a society that bears little resemblance to that of a hundred years ago. But whatever these new goals may be, they will be achieved if our universities keep ever in mind that their autonomy must be matched by their sense of high responsibility. Each supports the other, and the two together are our best assurance that our universities will continue to be an effective base for steady progress toward the enlightened society that is our greatest goal and the ultimate justification of all our hopes and our efforts.