

FREEDOM—AND RESPONSIBILITY



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A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY'S successful relationship with the community at large depends primarily on how it fulfills its unique role in the creation, transmission, and application of knowledge. But today, the university's constituencies are multiple and dissimilar. The relevant publics of a university's agricultural program, for example, include governmental organizations at the international, national, state and local levels; agricultural producers; agricultural and supportive industries; professional and commercial associations; the rural community; and the consuming public. These groupings of citizens often have disparate goals and expectations. An obvious potential source of difficulty involves the different priorities assigned to university functions by the various parties in the relationship. Moreover, a creative and distinguished scientist's concept of how, and under what conditions, he can best serve society might well be unlike the views of some of the university's constituents or its administrators.

To perform its primary functions effectively, a university must operate under a unique set of values and conditions. Its reason for being dictates a special environment. It is in the business of developing new knowledge, of developing in its students the capacity for independent and objective thinking as well as training them in occupational skills; and of serving its supporting public in the many areas of its total knowledge and research endeavors. It is a place of search and discovery, of trial and error, of experimentation and exploration, of questioning old values and "unquestioned" facts.

To be effective in the role, the university must be given a degree of freedom and autonomy, and economic support by the society it serves. The distinctive quality of the university environment and the integrity of the intellectual enterprise depend on insulation from partisan pressures or any attempt by a group or individual to use the university as an instrument of special interests. In short, there must be freedom to engage in objective examination of any issue, and there must be rational debate on the results. Inexorably coupled with this in-

sulation is also an *obligation* to engage in impartial examination and discussion. As in most public and private institutions of great size there are times, albeit rare, when some individuals in the university become so engrossed in their enthusiasms that they lose their sense of perspective and capacity for dispassionate inquiry and debate. This is only evidence that a university is a human rather than a spiritual institution.

These traditional academic conditions of autonomy and freedom were not achieved to provide special privileges for the university's scholars, but to ensure the quality and effectiveness of those scholars as sources of new knowledge, and the full disclosure and transmission of that knowledge. And that is the other side of the coin. If the university's performance of its specialized tasks does not meet the highest standards of excellence, if it yields to external or internal pressures from special interest groups, if it uses its prerogatives for ends other than the special purposes which justify them, it will jeopardize the independence and public support required.

The university's ability to serve the community can be diminished by erosion of confidence in public agencies and institutions. Because it is free and open and insulated from partisan pressures, it is in some ways more vulnerable than other public institutions. There are now increasing demands on public funds, increasing demands for new criteria to determine how the university can best serve society, new moves to increase control and accountability, and there are real questions as to the university's responsibilities to society and the community's rights to university services.

It is not a time for complacency. It is a time for members of the university community to use their full responsibilities to merit and maintain public confidence and support. It is important to assure the continuity as well as the creativity of the university for a society that increasingly depends on the growth and application of knowledge. It is important to improve the credibility and legitimacy of the university, because the free interplay of ideas is indispensable to the health of a free society.