

Chapter 8

Administrative Ethics in the Corporate College: Paradoxes, Dilemmas, and Contradictions

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the mission, organization, and administration of colleges and universities reflect the transformation from elite to mass to universal access institutions. Curriculum, pedagogy, academic standards, funding, and employer-employee relations have been transformed. Administration has increasingly become management in name and in nature, as the labor process of educational work mimics that of private-sector corporations. Meanwhile, the social purposes of higher education have shifted toward explicitly economic aims and away from intellectual pursuits. Colleges and universities increasingly pursue methods of technical and practical control over human and non-human nature in the interest of prosperity and progress. Academic values of open inquiry are compromised and largely eclipsed by market demands for employability skills and commercially based research. This chapter urges an ongoing critique of higher education in late capitalism, institutional governance reform, and critical interrogation of education as teachers and students address imminent and potentially catastrophic economic, ecological, and ethical problems.

BACKGROUND

“Ethics may be described as the theoretical treatment of moral phenomena.” C. D. Broad, 1946

Ethics is both a theoretical and a practical science. As theory, it seeks knowledge of good and evil (a quest that got Adam and Eve expelled from Eden). It asks what good and evil *are*. As practice, it asks what we *should do* in real-life (perhaps in order to be redeemed for asking the first question). To address either issue requires us to choose among basic assumptions and methods. Our foundational decisions

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about such choices—ontological, epistemological, methodological, and so on——will define how we make to guide our inquiries and therefore determine the answers we get.

One such choice is between materialism and idealism. Seeking safe passage between the Scylla of materialistic determinism and the Charybdis of idealistic voluntarism, we face critical decisions. Some materialists (mainly Marxists) think ethics is a class-based ideology governed by peoples' actual relations within a dominant mode of production. They often use economic or technological reductionism to explain how ethics replicates existing material conditions. Our ethics, they say, are products of our circumstances. As Marx (1859) succinctly declared: "*It is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.*"

Alternatively, some idealists (largely Platonists) think ethics seeks absolute truths that apply regardless of time, place, and circumstance. They say that "a clear definition of good is possible if ... they break away from special cases. The definition," they explain, "must have no empirical conditions to prevent it from being universally generalized" (Gill, 1970, p. 112). Like mathematicians and logicians, idealists insist that ethics exists outside, above, and prior to the material world.

Materialists tend to think that our values are *relative* and that they change, evolve and adapt to circumstances. For Marxists, they do so "dialectically" and reflect the dynamics of power relations between conflicting social classes. Contrarily, idealists regard ethical values as absolute, eternal, transcendental, and non-negotiable. For Platonists, they exist as pure "forms" that contain the timeless *essence* of all ideas and objects that can only appear in a partial, flawed, and degraded variation in the material world.

Between the two poles lie intermediary accounts ranging from Aristotelian "virtue ethics" to contemporary neo-Kantian, pragmatic, situational, evolutionary psychological, and cross-cultural anthropological theories of morality and moral development. These perplexing issues background this chapter's discussion of research questions about ethics as applied to post-secondary educational administration.

Foregrounded are the specific ethical issues that comprise the furniture on the stage of the present-day postsecondary educational theater. Some are of enduring interest. They relate to academic freedom, the search for truth, academic integrity and plagiarism, research ethics, and the social responsibilities of higher education as the curator of cultural histories and as sites of traditional scholarship, as well as the rather exciting/excited home of pure theoretical and commercialized applied research. Others are new quandaries that emerge from novel, twenty-first century circumstances. Topics such as free speech on campus, diversity in hiring, sexual harassment, bullying, the legitimacy of tenure, the employment status of precarious faculty, the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement in which the target (e.g., fossil fuel industries versus Palestinian issues) seems to matter more than the tactic and, of course, the unionization of educators that acknowledges that the employer/employee relationship is no less adversarial than the worker/boss relationship in any other setting. None of these are new, but the controversies they arouse have certainly intensified. Moreover, while they have counterparts in business, government, the military, the clergy, and so on, they are also peculiar to the academic community.

Education in general and higher education in particular carry the social responsibility of reproducing the socially sanctioned knowledge and norms required to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to social change. In the modern/postmodern society, it disseminates the sustaining ideology and the technical skills required to explore possibilities and shape social responses amidst the vast technological transformation that is redefining all aspects of life. In the process, we are called upon to interrogate the ethical framework that has shaped the organization and culture of higher education in the past, determine where its commitments to existing structures of political and economic power are no longer fit to deal with imminent social and environmental problems, and find new ways to respond to the looming—some say *existential*—crises facing us.

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