

**Service & Society Conference—Columbia University,
Lerner Hall, October 2, 2010
Trustees, ROTC, and the University
By Anne D. Neal**

Well, here I am between you and lunch, and I've been given 30 minutes to discuss THE UNIVERSITY.

Who wouldn't leap at such an opportunity! Seriously, let me thank Learned Foote and John McClelland and the Service & Society organizers for pulling together this most timely conference. Obviously, there is much in the news these days on this topic, and it is wonderful to have an opportunity to have this discussion today.

Before I begin, first let me tell you a bit about my organization. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni is a non-profit, non-partisan educational organization founded in 1995 with a network of 10,000 trustees as well as alumni from your institution and hundreds of others around the country.

For my brief time with you, I am going to address a topic that seems otherwise missing on today's agenda—namely the role of the University—and by that I mean the relative role of trustees, administrators, and faculty—in bringing Service—and for today's purposes, I mean ROTC service—back to campus. ACTA has been addressing the issue of service since our founding—and we believe that trustees have an obligation to ensure that college students have the opportunity to serve our country and society through military service.

How good it is to hear from Dean Moody-Adams that Columbia supports this conference. But let me suggest that we need more than verbal support for this conference and philosophical questions. What is needed at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Brown, and Chicago, and other schools that do not currently have ROTC on campus is a vigorous and immediate effort to pave the way for ROTC's official recognition.

Let me be clear up front: My intention today is not to debate DADT. The truth is that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," imposed on the military by Congress, is irrelevant to the question of an appropriate policy toward ROTC on college campuses. The Solomon Amendment is what binds colleges and universities—and they violate it at the risk of their federal funding.ⁱ

My argument is more than a moral or even a legal argument. It is also a fiduciary one. Our colleges and universities have an obligation to recognize ROTC on campus. Today I call upon the trustees of elite schools—right now, today, immediately—to support the return of on-campus ROTC.

We all know that it takes time to change things on campus. While not a Columbia graduate, Woodrow Wilson surely understood the challenges when he compared making change in a university to moving a graveyard. And it is why ACTA wrote to trustees at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Tufts, Brown and Stanford on June 23 with an urgent request.

Let me read excerpts from our letter to the chairman of the Columbia board of trustees and to all other members of the board:

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Given clear indications that “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” is on its way out, the primary stated objection to ROTC’s return on campus is being removed. It therefore appears to be an opportune time for the board to address this important issue.

In the past, faculty and administrators have suggested that the decision to have an ROTC presence on campus belongs to them. While their input and opinion are surely essential on academic concerns, it is the board that has ultimate oversight of matters concerning student life and welfare.

ROTC’s exclusion from campus has surely disadvantaged those students who have chosen to explore military careers and must travel many miles off campus to do so. The lack of a campus presence has also rendered it difficult for students to learn more about ROTC.

We, of course, understand that restoring ROTC entails both administrative and academic challenges, especially with regard to managing ROTC’s place within the regular academic life of the university. But, that is why it is vital to act now. ...

We are concerned about the increasing divide between the military and civil society, which we believe is at least partially attributable to the barring of ROTC programs from many university campuses. We, therefore, urge the board immediately to communicate the value and desirability of restoring ROTC to campus, and to call upon the administration and faculty to study the matter and report, within a reasonable timeframe, on how this might be accomplished.

Now—it has been four months since that letter was sent—and we have yet to hear from the chairman or the president—or anyone. Since some of you are likely in attendance, I would hope that you would go on record today. *Now is the time for trustees to take the steps necessary to recognize this student choice on campus.*

This is not an excessive or unreasonable request. All we are asking is that institutional leaders—the trustees who are legally responsible for their institutions’ financial and academic health—plan ahead to make on-campus ROTC a reality.

Now some would argue that trustees have no right to act on this matter, that these decisions are the right and responsibility of the faculty. I know that the Senate here at Columbia is busy polling the sentiment of the students and that the students themselves have taken surveys of student interest in ROTC over many years.

But while faculty input and opinion are essential on academic concerns, at the end of the day, the board has ultimate oversight of matters concerning student life and welfare. It is up to the board to outline the institution’s intent to give students choices and, I might add, to ease their financial

burden—something that the University otherwise touts so strongly. It takes no courage to hide behind the faculty and Congress. It takes real leadership to step up and announce your intention to do the right thing.

So stand up, trustees! If you truly want to give students the choice to serve, there is no time to wait. When I last looked, Harvard did not poll faculty and students before allowing the Spartacus League to operate as an authorized student group on campus. The trustees and administration at Columbia did not poll faculty or students to determine whether music groups or student publications should be allowed to operate on campus.

The Dean's comments today are laudatory. President Faust's announcement that she would like to regularize Harvard's relationship with the military is likewise a good first step. But the fact remains: universities are not where they need to be. Boards should be voting on this issue—on the record. They can oppose "Don't Ask, Don't Tell;" they can call for its repeal. But, the bottom line is they should recognize ROTC as an on-campus student activity.

ACTA is in no way challenging campus' prerogatives to define their own anti-discrimination policies (so long as they comply with federal law). Nor do we dispute in any way the faculty's purview over academic matters. But institutions cannot expect to take federal dollars—in the megamillions—for grants and contracts and then pick and choose which federal laws they will obey. Regardless of when—or whether—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is repealed, there is a clear legal directive in the Solomon Amendment that applies to ROTC. Trustees should know that, and should factor this into their thinking about why they should immediately go on record in support of on-campus ROTC.

At that point, the board can then ask that faculty and administrators move expeditiously to study the academic aspects of ROTC and report, within a reasonable time frame—I would suggest by the end of the academic year—on how the integration of ROTC into campus life might best be accomplished.

Of course, this will take time: Each campus will need to ask itself tough questions.

For example: What kind of presence do we want ROTC to have—an office, a building, a website? How will we present ROTC to students who are considering applying here—and how will we represent ROTC on our admissions page? (As an aside: How shall we make sure we don't discriminate against prospective students who are interested in ROTC—as a recent Princeton researchers showed that certain elite schools were doing.) Shall we support students already participating in ROTC by providing a discount on room and board or paying for their parking fees? Shall we invite onsite detachments from other schools? Shall we collaborate with nearby schools to host an ROTC unit? Shall we petition a service to act as a host for ROTC?

These are the kinds of policy and administrative questions that should be asked and answered by groups that are constituted to be inclusive, and provide for the airing of different perspectives. Once those questions are asked and debated, reports and recommendations should then go to the board. The bottom line: there is no time to waste.

Some argue that the idea of restoring ROTC to elite campuses is misguided—that there is not enough student interest to support on-campus training units. But that is a self-fulfilling and self-serving prophecy, issued by those who would perpetuate an unsustainable status quo. Institutions cannot rightly expect to develop the level of student interest necessary to prompt the military to develop campus programs until some sort of access is provided. Frankly, here at Columbia, where on-campus ROTC has been banned for 40 years, Columbia students have little exposure to the varied careers in national defense and security that military service has to offer. Yes, Columbia has done excellent work in welcoming back veterans. But the fact remains that Columbia's small number of ROTC students are practically invisible—and do their training at other, more hospitable universities.

Of course, faculty rightly wish to maintain control over the curriculum. Professors have legitimate concerns about offering course credit for ROTC training. But that does not give faculty the authority to decide whether ROTC should return to campus. Rather, it makes faculty responsible for determining what the academic consequences of a return of ROTC would mean. What courses will receive credit? Some? None? Should ROTC faculty be given faculty appointments? Are there ways that Columbia and other institutions might develop rigorous offerings in such fields as military history, anthropology, and game theory—a topic I will address later—that would create ROTC programs commensurate with the outstanding academic programs of our greatest universities? Now is the time to consider these questions and to examine the practices that are already in place at peer institutions such as Princeton and Penn. Their experiences with on-campus ROTC suggest that there is considerable flexibility in addressing the issue of course credit.

Princeton, for instance, hosts an on-campus army ROTC program but does not grant academic credit to the curriculum required of cadets. The University of Pennsylvania Navy ROTC program has a similar arrangement; some Penn schools offers credit for a few naval science courses, but most ROTC courses receive no credit. <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/nrotc/courses.php>. The merits of these arrangements may be debatable, but these examples show that the question of ROTC's academic status is not an insurmountable obstacle to its reestablishment on campus.

At least one elite institution is already taking steps in the direction of restoring ROTC to campus. The Stanford Faculty Senate has appointed a committee to explore the return of ROTC—and is doing so because Stanford's faculty has foresight. They understand the administrative and academic challenges that the re-introduction of ROTC will entail, and they are getting a head start.

Such planning should begin right now—here at Columbia, and likewise at other elite private institutions that don't host ROTC, but should.

I know that the military itself must make decisions regarding whether it wishes to establish ROTC on these campuses. But that fact does not obviate a board's obligation to put its institution on record—to announce that it welcomes ROTC as one way of providing students with leadership and organizational skills that will serve them through a lifetime of service, whether or not they are in uniform.

What if the board does not take action? Surely, it would then be fully appropriate for alumni and parents to write the trustees and ask that they speak up. And if they do not, these same constituencies should ask—and ask loudly—whether the trustees who oversee our elite institutions are essentially hiding, using “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” to disguise a more fundamental desire to restrict student choices with which they do not agree.

On this point, let me address why I have this concern—and raise one more area where trustee action is appropriate. While not directly related to ROTC, there is a documented and disturbing dearth of courses on military and diplomatic history in elite and major universities. At Harvard today there is not one explicitly military history course offered this year or planned in the near future in the history department. There is only one course dedicated explicitly to US foreign relations. Out of 48 history faculty members, including visiting faculty, none are explicitly focused on foreign policy, diplomatic history or military history. Of Stanford’s full time history faculty, zero are focused on diplomatic or military history. At Brown, there are no courses focused on military history, and no faculty focused on diplomatic or military history, although there is one faculty member who is “probing the politics of knowing about and interacting with birds.”

Boards of trustees—working with administrators and faculty—should consider a broader discussion of why this is the case and how it can be addressed. Universities almost universally maintain that a fundamental element of their mission is to train future citizens equipped to perform their civic roles. But in recent years, they have reduced or eliminated faculty positions devoted to political, legal, military or diplomatic history. This not only does a disservice to cadets interested in these subjects, but to all students who would like to graduate with a deeper understanding of past events.

So—where does this leave us? The imperative is clear: boards must step up to the plate. It’s time we held them accountable for ensuring students have the opportunity for genuine service in and to our society by recognizing ROTC as a student activity. When then-Senator Obama came to Columbia in 2008, he had it right: “The notion that young people ... in any university, aren’t offered the choice, the option of participating in military service ... is a mistake.” I thank you for inviting me. I look forward to further discussion today.

ⁱ The Solomon Amendment is codified in 10 USC, section 983. It specifies that an institution with “a policy or practice that either prohibits, or in effect prevents... a military department from maintaining, establishing, or operating a unit ...at that institution” of ROTC will be declared ineligible for grants and contracts from most federal agencies. (Federal student aid would not be affected by 10 USC, section 983). Speech as delivered 10-2-10 with edits