

## **Reforming the Politically Correct University**

**American Enterprise Institute**

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**Presentation by Anne D. Neal**

### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

I am most pleased to lead off the final discussion today on “What is to be Done?” Whether conscious or not on the part of the organizers, this simple title, What is to be Done?, is particularly fitting since it was also the name of a revolutionary political pamphlet written Vladimir Lenin at the end of 1901.

Lenin’s manifesto called for the formation of a revolutionary party that would direct the efforts of the working class. As Lenin saw it, if left to their own devices, workers would be merely satisfied with what they had. Only a **revolutionary party** could lead a real revolution.

At the risk of carrying this analogy too far, I would like to submit to you that my chapter, The Role of Alumni and Trustees, outlines a similar revolutionary movement. It is ACTA’s firm belief, and, **clearly** discussions today support us, that if left to their own devices, those inside the academy (notice that I resisted calling them “workers of the world”) would remain satisfied with the horrendous trends we see – declining educational standards, political agendas driving academic decisions, and continued, troubling threats to academic freedom.

If left to their own devices, academic insiders will continue to do what they have done **relentlessly** in the past, namely: circle the wagons and defend the status quo. They will defensively and proudly preside over America's higher education's slow, sure descent into the "dustbin of history." But enough of my Marxist references!

According to long-standing tradition, those outside the academy are supposed to leave well enough alone. Alumni and trustees exist for one reason – to hand over their dollars, whether its taxes, tuition or student fees.

According to long-standing tradition, **faculty and administrators are the stakeholders** in higher education. And students, parents, trustees, legislators, alumni – well, they are supposed to be boosters, no questions asked. Indeed, as the faculty see it, any **other outside input threatens** institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Now, I know some of you will say – surely, you jest! Surely, you exaggerate. And to you, I respond – not at all. Let me refer you to some recent comments made by none other than the AAUP, the AFT, and the newly formed, and suggestively named, Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the University. In recent weeks, each has published documents that unequivocally support the notion that external input regarding academic affairs is out of order, and must be challenged at every opportunity. Together, their statements combine to send the strong—if erroneous—message that the university is under "attack" (their word, not mine), and must be defended from alumni, trustees, and others at the gate.

The AAUP's new "Freedom in the Classroom" statement defends the rights of college teachers essentially to do as they please. As AAUP president Cary Nelson nicely explained, this statement is designed to empower professors to say to anyone who questions them, "You shouldn't mess with me."

Then there is the similarly defensive American Federation of Teachers, whose new statement, "Academic Freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century College and University," claims --and I quote -- that "defending academic freedom requires the defeat of government intrusion, **or any external intrusion**, (emphasis supplied) into curriculum, teaching, hiring and student assessment."

And we must not ignore the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the University -- a group spearheaded by Joan Scott, Edmund Burke, Jonathan Cole, and others -- which is circulating, as we speak, an email soliciting contributions for a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to attack external critics of academe. Quoting from their webpage:

Academic freedom means not only the right to pursue a variety of interpretations, but the maintenance of standards of truth and acceptability by one's peers. It is university faculty, not outside political groups with partisan political agendas, who are best able to judge the quality of their peers' research and teaching. This is not just a question of academic autonomy, but of the future of a democratic society. This is a time in which we need more thoughtful reflection about the world, not less.

In the abstract, a prescription for institutional autonomy makes good sense. The university should be a venue where the robust exchange of ideas takes place; where professional standards are maintained by rigorous peer review. Professors, after all, rightfully have academic freedom in exchange for a sacred trust—that they will use their freedom in teaching, research, and academic policy for valid educational ends.

But, as we have heard today, decisions in the academy are frequently made on anything *but* academic or professional grounds. Whether it's internal hiring practices, tenure review, accreditation, or even the agendas of higher education associations – the simple message is: leave the academic insiders alone.

Alumni and trustees are discouraged from questioning the status quo. Boards and presidents commonly exercise little or no oversight of curricular matters on the grounds that they fall outside their appropriate purview. Meanwhile, there is mounting evidence of declines in accountability, rigor, and quality. And despite growing public concern, these issues have languished -- unaddressed by academics themselves. [ACTA survey; ignored]

[The federal accreditation process has exacerbated the problem. While accreditors are charged with guaranteeing academic quality, there is ample evidence that these teams of faculty and academic insiders have used their

power to apply intrusive, prescriptive—and often ideological—standards that infringe on institutional autonomy and trustee governance.<sup>1</sup> ]

Until recently, resources for trustees have reinforced the notion that governance is an essentially passive exercise. Until ACTA was formed, only one other national organization—the Association of Governing Boards --focused on academic governance. And, it is notable that the AGB, despite its name, reaches trustees through presidents who “sign up” their boards for membership. As one trustee explained to *Inside Higher Ed*, “[T]he overwhelming message of AGB is for trustees to cheerlead for the campus administration.” The AGB has even gone so far as to criticize “activist trustees,” suggesting that “[a]ctivism means insisting on sources of information independent from that provided by the chief executive.”<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, forces are building that make the go along-get along culture ripe for reform. During the past decade, limited state budget resources, spiraling costs, and mounting concerns about graduates’ lack of basic skills have prompted a demand for accountability. Meanwhile, scandals surrounding such figures as Ward Churchill and Larry Summers have raised public awareness of how politicized higher education has become. In response, the public is ever more vocal about quality and costs and ever more receptive to dynamic change.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Why Accreditation Doesn’t Work and What Policymakers Can Do About It: A Policy Paper of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni,” July 2007; George C. Leef and Roxana D. Burris, *Can College Accreditation Live up to Its Promise?* Washington: American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Richard T. Ingram, “Are You an Activist Trustee?” *Annual Report*, Washington: Association of Governing Boards (1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Public Agenda’s *Squeeze Play* poll, the AAUP’s “Americans’ Views of Political Bias in the Academy and Academic Freedom” poll, and Zogby Interactive’s poll of public perceptions of faculty, available at: <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1334>.

A recent source of pressure has come from the blue-ribbon commission convened in 2005 by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings.

Pressure has also come from Capitol Hill. While the Sarbanes-Oxley Act does not apply to nonprofits, the Senate Finance Committee has spent the past several years analyzing whether nonprofits merit similar rules. Bad press about corrupt student loan practices, presidential malfeasance, and excess compensation have drawn increasing attention to the challenges of higher ed trusteeship. Each new scandal underscores how urgently college and university boards need to get their houses in order.

**If we are to reform the politically correct university, the bottom line is clear: alumni and trustees must take notice and take action.**

So, to return to the defining question. What is to be Done? I would like to answer that alumni and trustees across the country have launched a long-overdue campaign to reclaim their rightful place as higher ed stakeholders and to demand the same kind of transparency and accountability from higher ed that we would demand of any other enterprise of its size and importance.

Examples of our success are mounting. The SUNY board reformed its curriculum, adding requirements in American history and other key subjects. The University of Colorado board – after availing him due process – courageously fired Ward Churchill in the face of shocking academic malfeasance. Faculty –with donor support - at Hamilton, Princeton, Brown and elsewhere have been creating exciting new programs to enrich the intellectual lives of students.

In a democratic society, experts who wish to exclude others from decision-making must prove that their goals will be better achieved if decisions are left to a select few. The academy has failed to offer such proof. And as problems continue unaddressed, even those *within the academy*, including former Harvard president Derek Bok, former Harvard dean Harry Lewis, and former Yale dean Donald Kagan, have begun to call out for alumni and trustee support.

[“Universities were never truly ivory towers,” Lewis writes. “They are privileged with independence and public support because they serve society. Thus public scrutiny is appropriate and important.”<sup>4</sup>]

“As things stand now,” Donald Kagan writes, “no president appears capable of taming the imperial faculty; almost none is willing to try; and no one else from inside the world of the universities or infected by its self-serving culture is likely to stand up and say ‘enough,’ or to be followed by anyone if he does. Salvation, if it is to come at all, will have to come from without.”<sup>5</sup>

Whether academic insiders will admit it or not, higher education’s runaway costs, inadequate curricula, political correctness, and unethical behavior have everything to do with the closed and clubby mindset of most higher education leaders. That mindset must change.

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Kagan, “As Goes Harvard,” *Commentary*, September 2006. Available at: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/printArticle.cfm?id=10108>.

Universities receive special privileges such as subsidies and tax exemptions on the condition that they serve the public good. The trust we place in them entails both extraordinary rights and heavy responsibilities. Ideally, faculty and administrators will take the initiative to make sure they fulfill that duty, but, failing that, trustees and alumni must – and will continue even more strongly – to help them do so.

Far from being an “attack” on the academic enterprise, recent cases of alumni and trustee activism have, in fact, been in defense of it. These friends of the academy have come to save universities from themselves. Colleges should pay attention.