



A Presentation by

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**The Political
Correctness Debate:
Achieving a Balance
Between Academics
and Social
Responsibilities**

**An Address to the
University of Michigan
Senate Assembly
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Introduction

We have survived another eventful year together, which included MSA's attempt to bury student rights on the front lawn of the President's House, a "Presidential" commencement, and even a dinner with the Queen. Now that we have a rare moment to reflect, I thought it might be useful to talk with you about growing concerns I have about threats to some of the most important values on a university campus: threats to academic freedom and threats to our capacity to meet our responsibility as teachers and scholars.

Let me first assure you that I do not come with a pocketful of policy pronouncements on these topics. As usual, I am coming to you with many more questions than answers. My comments this afternoon are intended only as very preliminary thoughts about very difficult and complex issues.

A Torrent of Criticism

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that all of us in higher education are experiencing a torrent of criticism these days. Book after book and article after article have appeared in recent months. In fact, our media file of editorial and op ed pieces from prominent newspapers, journals, and magazines is now several feet thick. A few weeks ago even the President of the United States used our commencement to challenge higher education to think more seriously about its most fundamental values.

It is clear that the American research university is under attack by parents and students, by governors and state legislatures, by Congress and government bureaucrats, by media and the public-at-large. They perceive the modern university as big, self-centered, and greedy with spoiled, misbehaving students and even more spoiled faculty. They portray the

university as gouging the parents with high tuition and overcharging the government for inappropriate expenditures of research overhead. They perceive our campus as plagued by a long list of "isms," including racism, sexism, elitism, and extremism. Most recently, they have even criticized us for a deterioration in intellectual values, as manifested in several highly publicized cases of scientific fraud and the perceived lack of concern on our campuses for undergraduate education.

Most recently we have been criticized for tolerating on our campuses a particular form of extremism known as "political correctness," which attempts to impose a new brand of orthodoxy on our teaching, our scholarship, and even our speech. Those who attack the university on the political correctness issue portray it as threatening not only the quality of our educational programs but the very values which undergird the academy itself: freedom of expression and academic freedom. It is largely on this class of criticisms that I wish to focus today.

The Irony

Such scathing attacks on the American university are of rather recent origin. Throughout most of its history academia rarely had to deal with public attention, much less criticism. Historically, probably due to our medieval religious origins, universities over the centuries kept about them an aura of the sacred, a sense of being set apart from the fray of ordinary life. They were accepted and respected by society—at least when it gave our institutions any thought at all, which frankly was not all that often. The seeming paradox today is that the broad attention and criticism of academia comes at a time when the university is more deeply engaged in society and is a more critical actor affecting our economy, our culture, and our well-being than ever before.

To illustrate this growing importance of the university, let me use two quotes: the first comes from Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, who states, "In all advanced societies our future depends to an ever-increasing extent on new discoveries, expert knowledge, and highly trained people. Like it or not, universities are our principal source of all three ingredients." The second quote is provided by Erich Bloch, former director of the National Science Foundation, who notes, "The solution of virtually all of the problems with which government is concerned: health, education, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, space, economic competitiveness, and defense and national security, all depend on creating new knowledge—and hence upon the health of America's research universities."

But, then again, perhaps it is not so paradoxical that just as the university is becoming a key player in our society, it should come under attack. When you get right down to it, perhaps we are victims of our own success.

We have entered an era in which educated people and the ideas they produce have truly become the wealth of nations, and universities are clearly identified as the prime producers of that wealth. This central role means that more people today have a stake in higher education. More people want to harness it to their own ends. We have become both more visible and more vulnerable as institutions. We attract more constituents and support, but we also attract more opponents. In the process, the American university has become in the minds of many just another arena for the exercise of political power, an arena for the conflict of special interests. We have become a prime target for media attention and exploitation. We are increasingly the focus of concern of both the powerful and the powerless.

Thus, we should not be surprised by our critics or by the assaults on the academy.

Society has an increasingly vital stake in what we do and how we do it. Given the divisions in society-at-large, the tensions between tradition and change, liberty and justice, social pluralism and unity, nationalism and internationalism, it is no wonder that we find ourselves the battleground for many competing values and interests, both old and new. The more important question is whether we can survive this new attention with our missions, our freedoms, and our values intact.

There is strong evidence that, at least over the long term, the fundamental values and missions of the university are clearly of great importance to society. Otherwise, how can one explain the fact that these institutions have survived more than a millennium and today are one of the few nearly universal human social institutions found in vastly different societies in every corner of the globe. Hence, perhaps if we understand better the source of our strength, we can identify the factors that undermine it today.

What explains the power of this durable and pervasive social institution? Sir Eric Ashby points out that, whatever their flaws, "Universities are broadly accepted as the best means for social investment in human resources." Society believes in and supports the fundamental university missions of teaching and research. It entrusts to these institutions its children and its future. Our universities exist to be repositories, transmitters, and creators of human heritage. They serve as guardians and creators of that knowledge.

This mission is the glue that binds us together and accounts for our successful adaptation throughout the centuries, across so many disparate societies. Obviously, it is relatively easy to carry out our task in societies and times that are homogeneous and static, where there exists a high degree of consensus and gradual change. It is quite another thing to carry out our mission today in our own increasingly pluralis-

tic society and interdependent world, a world characterized by the revolutionary transformations in knowledge itself and in the very nature of our role.

Assaults on the Academy

Threats to academic freedom and institutional integrity are hardly new, nor are conflicts within our ranks about our direction and purpose. Over the centuries, there have been persistent struggles for the heart of the academy. There have been attacks from religious and political forces bent on capturing learning for their own purposes. The American university is no stranger to periodic ravages from zealots who would impose a particular belief or orthodoxy on scholarship and teaching. Creationism comes to mind as one example. Recently we were reminded by the Senate Assembly of the McCarthy threat in the 1950s. This was one of the disgraceful episodes in recent American history. It cautions us that when academic freedom is threatened, the stakes are high for individuals as well as for the intellectual life and integrity characterizing our institutions.

Unfortunately, threats to academic inquiry are alive and well in our world today. Indeed, in some societies, universities have been closed, faculty and students have been jailed or killed, and libraries have been burned. Why? Well, the answer seems obvious. Free inquiry simply cannot be tolerated by tyrants or ideological zealots or mobs.

But, of course, not all threats to the academy are so obviously malicious. In fact, even well-intentioned bureaucrats and citizens sometimes have a hard time dealing with the freedom that characterizes our institutions. Many of the threats we experience today are motivated by the best of intentions. Often they are no more obviously ominous than a new

regulation to achieve a laudable goal or even an incentive to stimulate the right behavior promulgated by a Washington, Lansing (or Fleming Building) bureaucrat, myopically focused on a short-term goal and mindless of the longer-term erosion of intellectual and institutional autonomy that may result. Examples of such efforts abound:

1. A governor reacting to public fears of rising colleges costs with an ill-conceived guaranteed tuition plan that threatens institutional quality.
2. The efforts of a state legislature to protect civil rights by mandating curriculum requirements, thereby usurping the rights and responsibilities of faculties.
3. The efforts of a Congress to extend first amendment protections to private universities, thereby threatening the autonomy of private education.

But, by and large, over the longer term academic freedom has survived and evolved because of the value of our role in society and because of the courage of scholars the world over who guard autonomy and freedom, who resist tyrants, and who uphold free scholarly inquiry. Eventually they win society's understanding, however grudging, because society has long ago learned that if it wishes to educate its young to be civilized citizens of the world and to advance learning to serve its interests, then it must grant freedoms to scholars and their institutions.

But we can never be complacent about our autonomy and our freedoms. Our compact with society is a delicate one. Like all liberties, freedom of inquiry requires eternal vigilance to maintain. Excesses and violations invite intervention from external authorities. We must not

abuse academic freedoms or take them for granted. What is at stake here is not just the loss of our particular institutional freedoms and values but the erosion of one of humanity's finest institutional achievements. Therefore, we must constantly be alert to threats to the values of our institutions from the right and from the left—from outside our walls, but also from within.

Who are the Critics?

The issues raised by our critics are varied, difficult, and complex. Some are easily dismissed, but others have important things to tell us. In any case, we cannot ignore these criticisms, they will not go away. Rather, the best approach is to consider thoughtfully, respond selectively, and accept our accountability and responsibility to engage in public debate about what we do and what we want to become.

Our critics represent a startlingly broad range of ideological views; many are influential opinion-makers and prominent intellectuals, and their strongly critical stance reflects a growing and damaging gap dividing them from scholars in the academy. But we also cannot ignore the fact that there are a growing number of concerned faculty, students, and educational leaders who are equally concerned that we are losing touch with ourselves and our most fundamental missions, teaching and research.

The Political Correctness Debate

Our critics assail us for imposing a new orthodoxy, a single standard of "political correctness." The target of their concerns is broad. It ranges from efforts to diversify the traditional curriculum to affirmative action efforts to build a more inclusive institution to more philosophical issues, such as the balance between relativism and absolutism.

Of course, a good many of those who criticize political correctness are extremists and polemicists, who have their own political and opportunistic agenda. Indeed, much of what is being written on this issue is incredibly superficial, factually incorrect, and wildly overstated. Some of it is pure opportunism—ideological guerilla warfare. Some of it represents just another chapter in the contemporary media debasement of public discourse about important social issues through hype, sound bite simplification, and pandering to fads and base prejudices. Some of these folks are always on the lookout for a sensational new lightning rod for public dissatisfaction and frustration. This time around it is the university that is taking the heat.

So too, part of this anti-PC agenda is familiar, old-fashioned reactionary stuff. It represents a resort to the polemic to try to stop the greater inclusiveness of people and ideas, to hold on to the status quo at whatever price, to protect unearned privilege.

But we also have to face the painful truth that the critics of the politically correct do not lack examples of destructive, even ludicrous, extremism and zealotry on our campuses in recent years—indeed, even at times on this campus! Political correctness is real. The left does have a tendency toward intolerance and extremism. Proponents of politically correct views have taken strongly ideological stances and in some cases have attempted to constrain or eliminate entirely the expression of opposing viewpoints.

While such foolish or destructive behavior is by no means rampant on our college campuses, those instances that have occurred have seriously undermined important academic values and served as a lightning rod for critical attention. It is important that we heed the basic message of those who criticize this new form of extremism on our campuses. What these critics are saying is that we have lost touch with our

most fundamental missions and values, and this has struck a deep vein of public discontent with academia. Since the real issue concerns our commitment to our own values as teachers and scholars, it is on values that we must stand and debate.

What Exactly Do the Critics Charge?

The term “political correctness” is just a code word for a range of concerns about the university.

The Insistence on “Correct” Language

On our campuses many have argued that, as a supposedly civil and increasingly diverse community, we must strive to be aware of the preferences and sensitivities of those who have suffered from past exclusion and discrimination. However, it is one thing to encourage people to be sensitive and considerate, and quite another to require this behavior.

The critics maintain that censoring speech, allowing or disallowing particular words or phrases, however well-intentioned, can have effects that range from damaging to foolish. There is a kind of sententious self-righteousness about much of the language policing that occurs on campuses, and this turns people off more than it persuades them.

Sensitivity Training

As a civil community, should we not try to be more sensitive to one another? Isn't it reasonable that as we become more inclusive, we should learn more about one another and learn skills that will help us to work and live together?

But here again, it is one thing to educate and quite another to impose a single "orthodox" point of view upon our students, faculty, and staff. As teachers and employers the critics argue that we can require certain standards of civil behavior, but we cannot require "right" thinking without compromising our own values.

Harassment Codes

In a similar vein critics assail codes or policies that prohibit racial and sexual harassment. This particular criticism raises very difficult and volatile issues about which there is strongly divided opinion. There is no denying the potential for abuse of such policies any more than we can deny the abuses that led to the codes in the first place. Such harassment and intimidation cannot be understood outside of the historical framework of violence and fear that has surrounded racial prejudice and discrimination. What is merely intimidating to a majority of the population can be experienced as a threat of violence by those who have been victimized by discrimination.

Since the University of Michigan has been frequently—and usually incorrectly—portrayed as a case study in such anti-PC attacks on "speech codes," it seems appropriate to examine in more depth the University's experience in this area. Michigan, like many universities across the country, had experienced a new level of racial tension in the late 1980s. However, in sharp contrast to most other universities, the University of Michigan was somewhat more at risk because it had operated for a number of years without any general disciplinary code capable of dealing with student misconduct.

For that reason, when racial tensions intensified in 1987, then interim president Robben Fleming believed it necessary to put in place at least that component of a more general

student disciplinary policy dealing with harassment. He chose to develop the policy through an open and accessible consultative process, but as this process wore along, Fleming's original proposal was broadened and distorted. Further, the policy was subsequently misapplied, both by those with the best of intentions—albeit with an inadequate understanding of academic values—as well as with those with other agendas. In subsequent court tests, the policy—or rather the bureaucratic framework surrounding it—was found to be unconstitutional and was thrown out.

In anticipation of this court action, just prior to assuming the presidency, I asked General Counsel Elsa Cole to draft a far narrower harassment policy based on the “fighting words” principle that would clearly stand the First Amendment test. Hence, when the original policy was voided by court action, I was prepared to use my presidential powers under Regents Bylaw 2.01 to put into place this narrower policy, which I believed to be necessary in lieu of a more general student disciplinary code. This restricted policy was accepted by free speech groups, including the ACLU. Quite similar “fighting words” policies have since been adopted by over one hundred other universities.

This restricted policy remains in effect today as it does on many other university campuses. However, at Michigan we have chosen to continue to label it as a “interim policy” because we believe we must continually monitor the policy to see how well it is working and whether it continues to be needed.

More generally, the issue before us today is whether we should have such a specific harassment policy in the first place. It is my belief that if the University of Michigan were to come into line with all other universities by developing and implementing a more general statement of student rights and responsibilities,

then such a specific harassment policy would probably be unnecessary. Any such policy specifically focused on harassment is, by definition, complex, since it requires some sophistication in achieving the appropriate balance between individual freedoms and community responsibility.

As we learned with from the Fleming policy, broad and open-ended policies can have chilling effects on a campus, particularly when enforced by students and faculty who are generally untutored in the complexities of first amendment issues or academic values. Over the longer term it is clear that the far better way to deal with harassment on campus is to return to our primary role as educators. Indeed, as Benno Schmidt, President of Yale, has pointed out, "The oldest lesson in the history of freedom of expression is that offensive, erroneous, and obnoxious speech is the price of freedom." We should rather strive to act as individuals to raise the standard of civility and mutual respect on our campuses so that we do not need to rely on legislation, litigation, or policies aimed at enforcing common decency and mutual respect.

Required Courses on Diversity

Many campuses have concluded that it is both reasonable and even imperative that our students—and, of course, we ourselves—be educated about the culture and experience of other groups in our own pluralistic society and in an increasingly interdependent world. They believe it critical that all of us understand in some comparative perspective more about the nature of group relations and interactions in a world that is rampant with divisions of race, class, caste, belief, and nationality—divisions that affect all of us and threaten our very existence as a society.

At the same time, however, there are many and various ways to provide education

about diversity. The critics would question whether academics can in good conscience require students to take any course that presents a single orthodox view of a subject. Like many other important curriculum issues, these must be openly and widely debated. Fortunately, at Michigan we have a well-established framework for these faculty discussions. The recent debate which occurred in our College of Literature, Science, and the Arts was a model of the civility and intellectual seriousness that should surround such discussions and demonstrates that we can discuss these matters and make progress.

Intimidation of Professors

Critics have charged campuses with a new form of intolerance in which professors who teach “incorrect” subjects or do research in “incorrect” areas are intimidated by extremist groups. Clearly, it is important to challenge ideas with which we disagree, but can we ever tolerate intimidating attacks on those with whom we differ? To our discredit, intimidation and reckless charges seem to have been accepted by many of us at times on this campus, students and faculty alike, as appropriate behavior. Perhaps in a more subtle form this intimidation includes attempts, however well-meaning, to impose a test of political orthodoxy in grading or hiring and professional advancement decisions.

It is clear that we in academia have no business in silencing any view or any person. The test of an idea must be on its merits, not who propounds it or whether we like it, or agree with it or not.

Censorship of Campus Speakers or Groups and Individuals

Some on our campuses have argued that given all of the potential for conflict and sensitivity, certain people or views should be declared off-limits, that certain controversial speakers should not be invited at all or at least should be prevented from being heard. Many on our campuses today seem to feel that free speech is for them, but not for those with whom they disagree. We have seen all too much of this even at Michigan in the last several years. I think of regular attempts to shout down Regents' meetings or to prevent the Chief Justice of the United States from teaching a class at our Law School or preventing the former Ambassador of the United Nations to speak at a political science colloquium. There is a certain irony to this behavior, since the surest way to call attention to individuals is to attempt to disrupt or prevent their presence on a university campus.

Curriculum Correctness

Universities are pilloried from the right and the left by radical traditionalists and by radical radicals about curriculum reform. Some would confine our curriculum to a fixed and narrow set of "great books" that represent the great traditions of western civilization. Others would disallow any work by "DWEMs"—dead white European males.

Is it wrong to adapt our teaching to include a broader range of experience and expression from across time and around the world? Clearly, we must prepare our students to live in a world in which the majority of people come from very different backgrounds and beliefs. But does this have to mean that we abandon or denigrate the learning that is the foundation of our tradition? After all, many of our most profound concepts are derived from

the heritage provided by western civilization: our faith in rationalism, in knowledge and science, and the notion of human progress itself.

Hanna Gray, President of the University of Chicago, has noted that arguments about the curriculum are really just a way to criticize the present and consider what the future should be. The faculty is charged with this awesome responsibility, and it is their duty to pursue this challenge openly and reasonably.

Ethnic and Gender Studies

Critics question the development of new academic programs such as ethnic and gender studies. Of course, a truly vigorous and rigorous scholarly institution will always give rise to new fields, new ideas and insights, and new paradigms. Indeed, that is one of the points of the research university. Fortunately, if traditional and rigorous academic standards are used, excesses or deficiencies that develop in any new fields will be put to the test of scrutiny and rational debate. From this perspective new ideas or fields are no more of a threat than entrenched ones. Neither should be exempt from the time-honored test of whether they are intellectually worthwhile, whether they help us to understand better ourselves and our world.

Affirmative Action

Much of the criticism aimed at political correctness is really aimed at affirmative action programs in our institutions. Critics claim that affirmative action actually promotes increasing segregation, balkanization, and separate and unequal education services. These programs are seen as undemocratic, divisive, and ultimately a disservice to those whom they are meant to serve. The key here is the concern raised about "preferential treatment" of groups who have

historically been subjected to discrimination.

Let me note here that I am on record with my firm support for the strategic effort the University of Michigan has made to build a multicultural learning community, which is known as the Michigan Mandate. I believe the goals we have established for the University are critical for our future and for the future of our society. The Michigan Mandate clearly does not establish quotas, propose preferential treatment, nor does it lower standards. Quite the contrary, I believe it to be a key element in our quest for excellence.

The purpose and supporting arguments for the Michigan Mandate are familiar to you, and I will not go into them now. I would note, however, that the primary aim of the Michigan Mandate is not affirmative action in the traditional sense, but rather it is to enhance the quality of our collective intellectual enterprise, while seeking to serve all the members of our society.

Nevertheless, I do think it is important to state unequivocally that we must continue to debate both the merits of the Michigan Mandate and the means for achieving its goal. In a university no subject can be declared off-limits. I believe that we have nothing to hide or be ashamed of in the Michigan Mandate. On the contrary, I am quite proud of what we have accomplished in its first three years. I believe that it will stand against the critics. But I also think we will benefit greatly from a discussion of the Mandate, its underlying philosophy, and its methods. If there is a better way to achieve our goals, a more effective or a more just way for us to proceed, then we need to talk about it.

What is the Political Correctness Debate Really About?

As we consider these issues, it becomes apparent that an important part of the criticism and counter-criticism is about the direction of social and institutional change. Much of it is about the struggle for greater inclusiveness, for more openness to ideas and people. Much of it is about the intellectual challenge of what some call the new "age of knowledge," which characterizes our time. We must not become overly reactive to what is superficial or transitory or opportunistic in the criticism at the expense of the more important continuing debate concerning fundamental issues of our future and a renewal of our mission and a response to change.

Today, our universities are attempting to deal with some of the most painful, persistent, and intractable problems in human experience. For example, in our efforts to deal with racism and sexism, we are attempting to deal with centuries of prejudice and discrimination that have robbed the world of precious cultural wisdom, human talent, and leadership. We are attempting as well to ride out an intellectual revolution, trying to incorporate comparative and international perspective in experiences into our intellectual framework. We are scrambling to keep up with the breathtaking advances in knowledge that are transforming the academy and our society.

To address the intellectual and practical issues of our time we must be open to new paradigms, new theories, new combinations of knowledge. While many in society may prefer to ignore or deny that changes are taking place, as teachers and scholars we cannot responsibly do so. This will put the university in the sometimes uncomfortable position of being a vanguard of change. In many ways, the intensified criticism swirling about universities these days may be in part a manifestation of the age-old

practice of blaming the messenger for the message. Indeed, some in our society may actually hold us responsible for social change. And in a sense, I suppose, they are right. After all, we are educating our students for a changing world and we are producing the knowledge that drives change.

Little wonder then that some are threatened and that many are unsure and concerned. Little wonder that with our growing influence on society, we have become an arena of special interest conflict. We are riding the tiger of a profound transformation of our society. What is the old Chinese expression? "May you live in interesting times." Well, here we are and the going can definitely get rough. But we do have the means to stay the course, if we have the will.

The Importance of Academic Values During a Time of Change

Students and scholars must be able to do their work in an atmosphere of tolerance. Indeed, scholarship will flourish only if members of the academic community do their best to remain open to new or opposing ideas and to evaluate them on their merits. Academics thrive on difficult debate, on the conflict of ideas. After all, that is their business. Even in the most placid of times and places, scholarship and teaching are highly contentious. By its very nature, scholarship challenges prevailing truths, myths, and pieties. Through time we have found that the free expression of ideas, however unorthodox, eccentric, grotesque, or even abhorrent, is the only sure way to truth.

Given the frequently conflictual nature of our calling, we have had to develop ways of dealing with conflict. These are based on reason and a striving for objectivity. We have the traditions, values, methods and principles we need to meet the challenge of debate about our

future. We can rationally reflect on the criticisms and, through debate and attention, discover if they reveal to us some real problems. The more difficult and passionate the conflicting ideas we need to discuss, the more critically important it is that we agree to respect our core values: freedom of expression and reasoned inquiry.

If we wish to be a genuine academic community in which people can work together with civility and mutual respect, then we have to practice these virtues in our daily lives and model them for our students. To protect our freedoms we have to accept certain responsibilities. We are accountable to society; and, if we violate our own values, we can be certain that there are many always ready and eager to step in and apply their own rules and restrictions.

Academic freedom is the core value that supports our role in society. Without it we cannot freely search for truth in teaching and research, much less act as a critic of society. It becomes our mainstay as we consider together the future of our University.

Here we should take care not to look to the law for our understanding of the importance of academic freedom. To be sure, academic freedom is supported by constitutional rights such as those embodied in the first amendment—at least for public universities. But, as Dean Lee Bollinger has noted, “Academic freedom is a value that exists independent of the law.” Hence, legal definitions and protections, though important, are not the bedrock of academic freedom. It is too precious a concept to leave to lawyers and politicians. Only we in the academy, as faculty, can ultimately define and defend it.

The concept of academic freedom is a relatively recent one. It was introduced less than a century ago when the role of the modern university broadened beyond simply teaching

and research to encompass a responsibility for criticizing society's current arrangements. In this sense then, the concept of academic freedom has become a defining ingredient of the modern university. It reflects our belief in the power of intellectual discovery and in the application of reason, inquiry, and criticism. We have accepted that the most significant underlying social value of academic freedom is the time-tested proposition that free inquiry is the best road to truth.

But, as Harold Shapiro noted when he was president of the University, academic freedom is never absolute. It is instead one of many values that must co-exist in an increasingly complex world. Moreover, the phrase "academic freedom" suggests at once too much and too little. On the one hand, it proposes the possibility that teaching and research can be free of constraints. On the other hand, it fails to acknowledge the ever-present limits on those activities that result from other values that we hold, such as restrictions of time and resources, professional ethics, established procedures and paradigms, and the scientific method itself.

Academic freedom is, in a sense, a compact between society and the university. It is a matter of trust, an actual bond easily breached by opportunists or the well-intentioned. It is a compact not for short-term benefits and immediate payoffs, such as cures for disease or economic development. Indeed, we make a profound mistake if we suggest this is its rationale. Rather, academic freedom is much more long term and fundamental. It rests on society's need for learning, on the proposition that the deeper quality of life is benefitted by the pursuit of learning. Therefore, threats to academic freedom are threats to our essence, whatever their origin.

And herein, in my view, lies the real threat to a university posed by the contentious debate over political correctness. I believe that

higher education in America is paying dearly for the views of extremists from both the "PC" and the "anti-PC" camp. As usual, when extremists are at work, truth and principle become the first victims. The university today is facing difficult issues and difficult choices. Polemics obscure the real and important issues with which we must deal, and create a climate in which it is increasingly difficult to discuss and debate openly critical issues before us. So-called PCers trivialize and obscure fundamental issues and too often try to impose their rigid orthodoxies through intimidation. On the other hand, anti-PCers take advantage of these extremists by trying to intimidate us from coping with fundamental issues. In a very real sense, those who criticize political correctness in the defense of academic freedom, frequently do so in such a way that intimidates and threatens the very freedoms of which they claim to be so supportive.

Hence, it is my belief that both sides in the debate over political correctness frequently take extreme positions that undermine the climate and the values necessary for rational discussion. Superficial polemics and orthodoxies on both sides obscure the real issues we ought to be discussing and debating openly and vigorously among ourselves and within larger society.

Factors Undermining the Values of the University

Hence, the real question is whether the current debate over political correctness has threatened our capacity to debate serious issues. Our traditions and freedoms allow us to take on the toughest questions. The issue is not whether we can debate difficult issues; the issue is rather whether we have the courage to take them on. Today many factors are undermining our ability to debate openly. These factors provide fuel for our critics, bringing down on us ridicule and even contempt. They are undermining our

sense of community and in the long term can lead to a loss of our freedoms.

Let me mention some of these concerns to you, although I caution you that I regard these comments as very preliminary thoughts on the matter:

Conformity

With all of the hoopla over the excesses of political-correctness extremism, it is easy to overlook the most persistent and insidious threat of all to free inquiry. It is conformity. As our colleague, Dean Lee Bollinger, has pointed out, "It is common to think of threats to academic freedom as something that needs to be protected from internal or external official interference or sanctions. On the other hand, academic freedom can be inhibited by very subtle interventions, by the atmosphere in which people work, think, and teach." Significantly, Bollinger points to conformity as a subtle but insidious threat: "Little actions here and there, insignificant in themselves, may together add up to a feeling that the better course is to conform to avoid risks in research and teaching."

First and foremost, we must resist pressures to conformity—whether political, economic, cultural, or ideological—in the whole range of university activities, from teaching to admissions to hiring to advancement. The real concern is intellectual conformity and ideas, and here I would include the conformity imposed by disciplinary rigidity.

Conformity can be fostered by the desire to please external masters—civic, commercial, media. But conformity can also be generated internally by the erosion of common values of free inquiry, through politicization, zealotry, discrimination, rigid orthodoxy, and unthinking adherence to the status quo for its own sake in order to protect privilege.

Politicization

As Benno Schmidt has noted, universities have become saturated with politics, often of a fiercely partisan kind. They have become the anvil on which young people and old beat out their resentments of the incompleteness of life.

Hence, some of the most critical threats to the academy are coming from the increasingly non- or anti-rational methods that are used to influence institutional purposes and directions. Often, with the best of intentions, all aspects of the academy have become fair political game. Students and faculty, frustrated at their inability to affect national reform policy through traditional political activity, have abandoned it and turned inward instead to make universities an arena of intense political conflict. In pursuit of good ideals, all aspects of the academy were seen to be fair political targets for revolutionary change. No area of university life was left untouched.

Of course, such politicization of the academy is as American as apple pie. But seldom has it been so prominent within the academy as in recent years. Much of the politicization that now threatens the academy is an aftermath of the activism of the 1960s. While this era is rightly credited with raising critical issues and ushering in needed reforms, it also introduced some naive or pernicious notions that are proving hard to live with. Instead of applying reason to debate issues, it has become acceptable to politicize all discussion. Flawed Marxist theories have been applied to reduce all intellectual questions to overly simplistic expressions of power. Of course, there is value in looking at issues of power in the academy. But scholars should be free to express their views and their ideologies openly. What is not acceptable is the attempt to impose these views and ideologies on the institution itself by political means, whether it is through intimidation, derision, shouting, or disrespect for views

and rights of others.

The university, because of its growing visibility, its importance, and its vulnerability has become the battleground for national political issues over which it has little or no influence or control. The debate about important questions of human rights and justice and other critical moral and political issues is important. But it is also important to recognize the limits on what the university can and cannot do. Further, when the institution focuses on those things over which it has little control, it is distracted from doing what is right and what it is possible for it to accomplish.

As Derek Bok noted in his recent paper,

“Universities are not very good at passing collective judgements on political issues in the outside world. Their decisions often reflect the strong convictions of strategically placed minorities—whether they be trustees or activist groups—rather than informed judgement of the entire community.” Bok goes on to note that, “Perhaps the greatest danger in exerting political pressure is the risk of sacrificing academic independence. Universities can hardly claim the right to be free from external pressure if they insist on launching campaigns to force outside organizations to behave as their students and faculties think best. Generations of effort to secure autonomy would be placed in jeopardy.”

The Means to an End

The nature of both the issues and the activities surrounding political correctness also reveals a deep confusion about the relationship of ends and means. Some have come to accept the ancient and dreadfully pernicious idea that a

just end justifies any means used to achieve it. For some debate has become not the free exchange of ideas but rather a political contest in which victory goes to the largest or most militant group, the one best able to exploit media attention or mobilize political constituents or capable of silencing the opposition through intimidation.

Indoctrination and Propagandizing

While no one should challenge an individual's right to express a particular point of view, it has long been an academic tradition that these are labeled as such. In fact, one of the safeguards for academic freedom has been the principle that academics ideally will conduct their teaching and research free from bias. This has been a standard that may be difficult to achieve, but nevertheless it is one that we all agree to strive for. When we fail to honor the idea of a fair hearing for all sides of intellectual issues and instead attempt to indoctrinate or propagandize students in the classroom, we betray fundamental professional responsibilities. Once scholarship becomes politicized, once it becomes a partisan issue, an arena for political activism, we undermine a principal argument for academic freedom.

Whatever our personal views on issues before our society, we simply cannot allow the classroom to become a place for propaganda or indoctrination. This is a serious violation of student rights, and it undermines the credibility of the entire academic profession. It is one thing to express one's own views and label them as such, while noting the existence of opposing views. It is quite another to endorse political positions and open the classroom to outright propaganda.

Of course, in the end I have confidence in our students' ability to arrive at their own opinions despite misguided—though perhaps well-intentioned efforts to indoctrinate them.

Propagandizing more often than not leads to backlash, and therefore has an effect opposite to the one intended.

Intimidation

Intimidation of faculty, students, staff, and speakers is contrary to everything we stand for as scholars and as citizens. Here, I think it is important to point out that it is not only mob action in trying to silence speakers or intimidate students and faculty to which I refer. Intimidation also includes the abuse of authority and freedom in the classroom in ways that prevent or discourage participation by all with whom we disagree.

Personalization

Throughout American society and on our university campuses we appear to be losing the critical ability to distinguish between ideas and the people who hold them. Instead of focusing on the merits of ideas and proposals, we zero in on the character and personality of those who oppose our own views. This leads to acrimonious conflict, generating heat but little light on the subject at hand.

Ad hominem arguments and attacks undermine our ability to function. They betray our ideals of community. They feed a kind of paranoid hysteria that poisons the atmosphere. As President Bush noted at Michigan spring commencement, "We must conquer the temptation to assign bad motives to people who disagree with us."

If the argument we make is sound, there is no need to impugn the integrity of an opponent. Labels and stereotypes are no substitute for the hard work of intellectual exchange of people and ideas. And here I might add that the

indiscriminate charges of “isms”—sexism, racism, homophobia, and so forth—have already devalued the real force and meaning behind these terms.

Litigiousness and Regulatory Excess

Like the rest of our society we seem to be losing the ability to resolve our disputes through informal means or persuasion. Instead, we have turned increasingly to regulations and policies, litigation, and formal procedures. While it is true that in the administration we hear many complaints from faculty and others about too many policies, it is often these very same people who want policies enacted to protect or advance their own special interests. Somehow we need to renew the bonds of trust and mutual respect that make excessive regulation unnecessary.

Division and polarization are painful reminders of how far we have to go to create true communities. It is clear that our challenge is more difficult than in years past. The extraordinary demographic change of our society has brought new people into our institutions who are more deeply committed to their cultural roots. The old paradigm of assimilation simply will not work any more. The new people arriving on our campuses don't want to be melted down. Hence, we face an unusual challenge to build new types of multicultural campuses in which there is no longer a common “melting pot.” We must develop new mechanisms for living and working together.

Yet here too there are risks. Diane Ravitch has noted that on our campuses today there appear to be two competing visions of the nature of a multicultural community. One approach reflects cultural pluralism and accepts diversity as a fact. The other represents particularism and demands loyalty to a particular group.

Ravitch notes that the pluralism approach recognizes and acknowledges that our American culture has been shaped over the years by the interaction of our nation's many diverse cultural elements. Our national culture, as well as the culture of our institutions, is viewed as an evolving creation of many different groups, and over time this yields a culture that demonstrates a co-mingling of diverse groups in a common community. This is in sharp contrast to the particularist approach which seeks to attach to students strong bonds to ancestral homelands as sources of personal identity and authentic culture. While pluralists tend to promote a broader interpretation of a common American culture by first recognizing that there is a common culture—although a culture created by many groups—particularists have no interest at all in extending American culture. Indeed, they deny that a common culture even exists. They do not appeal to the common good because their idea of community is defined along racial or ethnic lines.

I agree with Ravitch that this tendency toward particularism can be very damaging to building a community on our campuses. It has spurred a separatist ethic in higher education. Students are taught to believe in racial and ethnic differences, to immerse themselves in certain truths and to champion them against skeptics. They are taught to believe, not to doubt or criticize. The essential difference between the pluralist and the particularist approach to multiculturalism is that the former actively combats ethnocentrism and the latter purposely teaches it. Yet, such ethnocentrism is the spectre that has haunted our world for centuries, leading to war, injustice, and civil conflicts, and it can tear our campuses apart as well. In a sense it subverts education and reinforces the prejudices of our inherited cultures.

I believe that we have it within our power to create a model of a pluralistic community in which we draw on the unique talents and

strengths and backgrounds of all of our members to build mutual trust and respect, to treat all individuals equally and fairly, and to renew our collective commitment to scholarly and democratic principles and values. Yet I also realize that we must continue to debate, openly and vigorously, the kind of community we want to be. But this debate, conducted in the best traditions of academic freedom, is a challenge worthy of our finest traditions and values.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Nothing is a greater denial of our values than prejudice and discrimination. Nothing is more destructive to our freedoms and our intellectual work. Nothing is more harmful to our community and our future. It is important that we recognize here that some of the criticism of political correctness is really just a disguise for our old enemies, racial and gender exclusion. In the same way that we should stand up to extremists who trample on the values of an academic community in an effort to prevent discrimination, we should also strongly resist those who would distort the basic nature of academic freedom in order to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination on our campuses.

Self-Righteousness

An extremist does not accept compromise or tolerance of the views of others. Zealots see only the saved and the damned. Perhaps it is our puritan ethic that is apparent in our tendency to separate the saved from the damned, the correct from the incorrect, and then to try to silence or exile the latter. Extremism does not tolerate debate.

As we consider our future, it is important to remember that there are a broad range of forces driving us toward conformity that have

the capacity to infringe on academic freedom and open inquiry. For example, we should ask ourselves whether the mission of the university has become too broad. Are we trying to please too many masters and through this compromising freedom and values? Perhaps too the conformities imposed by disciplinary orthodoxies or funding agencies or administrative bias subtly operate against risk-taking and unfettered inquiry in our institution. All of these are issues deserving of further discussion.

Academic Values and Traditions

I have touched on a number of the forces at work that threaten our ability to debate important questions and undermine our teaching and research mission. These pose dangers, but we are by no means helpless in the face of them. On the contrary, we have evolved a set of traditions and values that over many centuries have attracted people to universities and commanded their loyalty and devoted service. We have educated generations of humanity to value learning, even as they prepare for vocations. Our graduates have gone forth to work in widely varied societies of diverse religious, political, and ideological orientations.

What does all this boil down to? Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt said it best in a speech he gave at Duke University in 1905 when he noted, "You stand for those things which the scholar must stand for if he is to render real and lasting service. You stand for academic freedom, for the right of private judgement, for the duty more incumbent upon the scholar than upon any other man, to tell the truth as he sees it, to claim for himself and to give to others the largest liberty in seeking after truth."

The fundamental idea here is that the application of reason to human affairs and the pursuit of truth through reasoned inquiry are the key principles upon which the university is

based. It must be characterized by a commitment to openness, to debate, and to free inquiry because it is only when ideas can be freely explored that we can hope to find truth. Mutual respect and civility and a willingness to respect and consider views of others are also needed for the conduct of teaching and research. We cannot accept those who would shout down a person or an idea or who think that opinions should be imposed on others by intimidation or that ideas should be judged by the number of their adherents rather than on whether or not they are right.

Over the centuries we have found that our objective of seeking truth and our means for seeking it have stood the test. We have not achieved perfection, but we do have a way of considering questions and problems that yields insight and lights the way to new and better questions. What binds us together then is the search for truth, the tested methods, the principles and values of scholarship. Society supports these values because universities over the centuries and around the globe have managed to teach successive generations a respect for the pursuit of truth and an ability to take up the quest themselves. Our methods and principles have succeeded in increasing our store of knowledge and our understanding. Society has accepted this and has respected the value of academic freedom that is the essential prerequisite to learning and achievement.

The most effective protection for all of academia in the face of the harsh criticisms to which we are now subjected is the integrity of our commitment to teaching and research. Our fidelity to this primary mission is our best defense against the critics. It is what we do best to serve humanity.

And in this regard one thing is certain and unchanging. We cannot perform our primary mission of teaching and research properly, we cannot produce what society most

needs from us, without the freedom to pursue truth wherever it takes us. This seems fundamental.

In this regard it is important to note that universities are frequently asked to do things which are not a part of their primary purpose. They are asked to be ideal communities. They are asked to provide those values and commitments to our students that we as parents have failed to do. Yet, as Hanna Gray has pointed out, it may well be that, with the best intention of achieving peace and compassion and in our desire to build an ideal community, we may have become distracted from the fundamental purpose of the university. We must remember that first and foremost we are a community of scholars, not an ideal community. It is a community that thrives on debate and disagreement. In particular, we must never compromise our commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of thought as the fundamental values so critical to the function of the University.

Further, again as noted by Gray, we have a great obligation: "We are responsible for handing down to future generations the freedoms we inherit intact and preferably strengthened."

Some Modest Proposals

What then can we ourselves do to protect our freedoms and our fundamental values during this period of change? Let me offer several suggestions:

1. Of course, it is essential that we develop a better understanding of and commitment to the fundamental values underlying the nature of the modern university. We must appreciate and embrace values such as academic freedom and scholarly rigor and be vigorous in our defense of these values in the face of onslaught from both the left and the right.

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2. While all speech must be allowed in a free community, it must not be allowed to go unchallenged, particularly when it contains falsehood or hatred. It is critical that we all speak out from time to time—even the president, although judiciously I hope. (In this respect, I would also note that it is equally important that we resist the “demands that the president issue a statement condemning . . .” syndrome.)

This is a particularly important responsibility of the faculty because you have been given very special stature in our society through tenure. Tenure gives you freedom to speak out, to challenge, to criticize. It is not an economic right, but rather a right designed to confer the responsibility to speak, work, and think freely. Few in our society are so protected, and yet few have such great responsibility. You are obligated to defend your views, to disagree with others, to take on the administration when you don't agree.

3. Let's get back to basics. Let's assume our personal responsibilities for maintaining an open and free climate for debate, for teaching, and for research. Let us each accept the responsibility for keeping to our own highest standards and values, even as we work within our community to promote them.
4. Let us distinguish between our own political views as individuals and our responsibilities as teachers and scholars. More specifically, it is our obligation as members of the academy to foster open debate and inquiry in carrying out our roles, to

protect open inquiry in the classroom and the laboratory, and to reject all attempts to impose a single ideological perspective.

5. Let us restore some balance, some humor, some civility to community life. It is about time that we turned down the thermostat, that we chilled out, that we lightened up a bit. Not that the questions that we consider are not important. In fact, it is because they are so important that it is essential that we rid ourselves of self-righteousness and moral snobbery.

Derek Bok provides an interesting illustration of this when he contrasts the claim of left-wing professors that they are attempting to "transform the hegemonic cultural forms of the wider society and the academy into a social movement of intellectuals intent on reclaiming and reconstructing democratic values," with the conservatives' claim that "behind the transformations contemplated by the proponents of feminism, deconstruction, and the rest is a blueprint for a radical social transformation that would revolutionize every aspect of social and political life." It is these exaggerated intellectual skirmishes that are so quickly grasped by the media and garnished with accounts of oft-told episodes of intolerance and ideological warfare on our campuses. Of course, the ultimate risk in these overheated struggles is that they will undermine confidence in the academic enterprise itself. Humor is a small and a welcome signal of objectivity. It is the enemy of the pomposity that afflicts us and charges the atmosphere.

As far as I know, no one of us has a monopoly on truth or correctness. (If anyone does, please come and see me. I need your help.) Hence, I think a bit of humility would be very welcome throughout our community.

6. We should avoid looking for the expedient solution and instead look for the right thing to do. I think this advice applies to all of us, as faculty, students, staff, and administrators. We must try to stick to our basic mission and values. I realize this is easier said than done. We aren't dealing with simple questions but rather with conflicting views about what is right. But there must be a consciousness that what we do today has a lasting impact on our University and, through it, can influence higher education more broadly. The actions of each and every one of us counts when it comes to building an academic community.
7. The best defenders of academic freedom and integrity are the faculty themselves. Hence, it is important that you as faculty take a personal responsibility for sustaining our freedoms. You must encourage open and vigorous debate. You must engage and commit to education where our freedoms and values are concerned.

It is important that you exemplify these values in your own teaching and research. No lesson you teach your students will be more important than the example you set yourself for open, fair, and rational discussion.

8. I hope we can work together to educate and renew our understanding of and commitment to academic values and standards. There are few higher institutional priorities than stimulating broad-based consideration of these values.

Here at Michigan we have a long and proud record of respecting academic freedom. This has been due in large part to strong faculty leadership over the years. Let me say in this respect that I am very encouraged by the recent action of the Senate Assembly to promote the adoption of the Statement of Values and the Tenants of Membership in the Academic Community. (See Appendix.) This is an important step forward toward a renewal of academic values. In the coming year I hope we will find ways to use this statement to draw our community together through discussion and education. This is a good beginning.

There are other avenues for debate in the works for the year ahead. The annual Senate Assembly lecture on academic freedom is an ideal opportunity. We also hope to have various symposia and visiting lectures on the subject throughout the year.

In summary, I believe it is time that we opened up the doors and windows around here and got this debate out in the open. We must not leave the debate over academic values to the courts, the media, the politicians, ideologues, or cranks with an axe to grind. Rather, let us do what we do best. Let us consider the issues and arguments and subject all sides to rigorous scrutiny, unafraid, and unfettered, but also with a sense of civility, humility, and mutual respect.

Concluding Remarks

Shapiro has stressed that the relationship between the modern university and society is a very complex and fragile one because of the

university's dual role as both a servant and a critic of society. Society has granted us exceptional privileges to perform these roles. Yet, as I told our graduates at commencement, when much has been given to us, much will be expected in return.

Ours is a good life, full of freedom to think and work according to our individual talent and vision, but it is not without a price. Its price is the adherence to values and the courage to apply and defend them. When we misuse or abuse our freedoms or fail to defend them, society will hold us accountable.

We have set for ourselves high standards, and we will be held to them. When we stray from them, the price will be an erosion of public confidence and support. In the long term this can spell the loss of hard-won freedoms, which once lost will be hard to regain.

We represent among our faculty, students, and staff a tremendous range of views, opinions, and beliefs. This is by design. This is how we admit students, this is how we hire faculty, and this should be how we behave! As individuals we should feel free to express and promote these viewpoints.

We cannot be all things to all people. We cannot solve all of society's problems. What we can and must do is to be true to ourselves and to our mission and values. If we do this, then we will preserve our freedoms and serve our society in the best way that we can. This is the highest and best road to public respect, confidence, and support. This must be the answer to our critics.

Appendix

Fundamental Tenets of Membership in the University Community

The University of Michigan is a community devoted to learning. Members of our community advance, preserve, and transmit knowledge through study, teaching, artistic expression, research, and scholarship. As a public university, we have a special obligation to serve the public interest.

All who join the University community gain important rights and privileges and accept equally important responsibilities. We believe in free expression, free inquiry, intellectual honesty, and respect for the rights and dignity of others. We respect the autonomy of each person's conscience in matters of conviction, religious faith, and political belief. We affirm the importance of maintaining high standards of academic and professional integrity. In defining the rights we enjoy and the responsibilities we bear, we must keep those basic principles in mind.

All members of the University have civil rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Because the search for knowledge is our most fundamental purpose, the University has an especially strong commitment to preserve and protect freedom of thought and expression. Reasoned dissent plays a vital role in the search for truth; and academic freedom, including the right to express unpopular views, is a cherished tradition of universities everywhere. All members of the University have a right to express their own views and hear the views of others expressed, but they must also take responsibility for according the same rights to others. We seek a University whose members may express themselves vigorously while protecting and respecting the rights of others to learn, to do research, and to carry out the essential functions of the University free from interference or obstruction.