

The Issues

(...at least as seen by Washington, the media, and the public at large...)

Financial Integrity:

- Rising costs of education (particularly tuition)
- "Price-fixing" (financial aid, tuition)
- Inappropriate use of federal funds (Dingell, Stanford)
- Greed, waste, duplication

The Moral Climate on Campus:

- "Isms"...racism, sexism, homophobia...elitism and extremism
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Crime on campus
- Absence of faculty accountability (conflict of interest,...)
- Corruption in college sports

Intellectual Integrity:

- Inadequate attention to undergraduate education
- Preoccupation with "useless" research
- Scientific fraud (Baltimore, cold fusion...)
- "Political correctness" debate

The Irony:

"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."
(Derek Bok)

"The solution of virtually all the problems with which government is concerned: health, education, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, space, economic competitiveness, and defense and national security depends upon creating new knowledge, and hence, upon the health of America's research universities." (Erich Bloch)

The Real Issue:

The fundamental problem here is the degree to which the universities have allowed others to set the agenda, to determine both the focus and the nature of the debate concerning the role of higher education. It is clear that as long as we allow others to determine and control the agenda, we will continue to find ourselves on the defensive, responding to first one negative issue and then another. This continued siege of the academy will continue to erode public confidence and trust in the American university, at just that moment in our history in which we become even more dependent on these institutions.

It seems clear that higher education must take steps to regain control of the agenda, to begin to control the public debate, changing or reshaping context of the debate to achieve a more positive emphasis. Key will be a well-conceived campaign to turn the nation's attention to what higher education is really all about: educating the young people of our nation for the challenges ahead, doing the research that will determine our prosperity and quality of life, and providing the leadership necessary for our nation in a rapidly changing world.

The basic approach should probably include the following elements

- i) To first take some highly visible actions to respond to some of the criticisms and concerns--since they do contain some truth, and our public credibility requires demonstrating that we take criticism quite seriously. Here, however, we need to choose the battlefield quite carefully, responding only to a few of the more critical issues, and neutralizing others of less relevance or importance.
- ii) At the same time, we need to launch a parallel effort to push several positive themes relating to how the university is needed by our society in the 1990s and beyond. Examples might include: the education pipeline, economic competitiveness, and health care.
- iii) We need to take steps to build more permanent structures or organizations capable to continuing this effort for the long term. For example, at the national level, it is clear that the One Dupont Circle associations (AAU, NASULGC, ACE) must be completely overhauled. In the meantime, perhaps other smaller coalitions of institutions--such as the Big Ten--will have to carry the load...