

# Characteristics of a Community of Learning

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## Introduction

During the last fifty years American higher education has become, by most measures, a remarkable success. New campuses have been built, enrollments have exploded, and the nation's greatest research universities have become world class. Women, minorities, and older students have enrolled in larger numbers, making the nation's campuses



intellectually richer and culturally more diverse. However, strains and tensions associated with change have also become apparent in campus life. Recently a group of college presidents described what they termed "the declining quality of life on campus" as follows: "We have growing racial tensions on the campus, and more crime. The spirit of community seems diminished and there is frustration about how the university should respond." The president of a large public university confessed: "I've been around a long time and frankly I'm more concerned today than in the sixties. Back then, you could meet with critics and confront problems head on. Today, there seems to be a lot of tension just below the surface that could explode anytime."

It was in this climate that The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in cooperation with the American Council on Education, launched a study of campus life. Throughout their year-long investigation—one that included literature review, campus visits, and a (1989) survey of 500 college and university presidents—it was clear that most colleges and universities in the nation were essentially in good health and well managed. But it also found that student apathy, alcohol abuse, racial and ethnic divisions, and acts of incivility weaken the integrity of many institutions and limit their ability to function as vital communities of learning. Administrators are understandably concerned about these problems, but they are also ambivalent about how to respond. There was a time when college leaders felt responsible, not only for the nurturing of the students' intellectual life, but for the guardianship of their morality as well. The problem today is that no theory of campus governance has replaced the rigid structure of the past. Few would argue for a return to those days when colleges arbitrarily imposed a list of "dos" and "don'ts" on students. But many are now asking:

- Where does the responsibility of the college begin and end?
- Where is the balance between students' rights and institutional concerns?
- How can the spirit of community in higher education be strengthened?

In response to these challenges, the Foundation organized its report around six essential principles or characteristics that capture the essence of both the social and academic dimensions of campus life and provide a framework within which vital community of learning can be built.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Ernest L. Boyer, *In Search of Community*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education (Washington, DC, January 10, 1990) and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.

## **A Purposeful Community**

A college or university is, above all, a purposeful community, a place where the intellectual life is central and where faculty and students work together to strengthen teaching and learning.



An institution of higher education is, by definition, a place for learning. However this is often undermined in colleges and universities today. Students report that social life and jobs are higher priorities than academic pursuits. Getting credentialed is often more important than obtaining an education, and “getting by” is viewed as “good enough.” Rigorous preparation, scholarly excellence and serious commitment to the academic life may be characteristic of only a tiny fraction of students today.

The 1989 faculty survey revealed that two-thirds of today’s professors believe their students are not academically well-prepared; over 60 percent said they are teaching undergraduates what they should have learned in high school; 55 percent said undergraduates are “doing just enough to get by.”

On many campuses, quality teaching is less rewarded than publications, research, and the acquisition of grants and contracts. As a result, faculty members are discouraged from devoting time to classroom preparation and advising/mentoring undergraduate students. However, teachers are in the position to be the most effective leaders in creating a common ground of intellectual commitment and in encouraging active student participation. It is in the classroom where a learning community begins, although it should pervade all aspects of campus life—residence halls, departments, and student activities. A college is, above all, a purposeful community, a place where teaching and learning matter most. If academic concerns are not vitally sustained, if faculty and students do not join in a common intellectual quest, then all the talk about strengthening community in higher education is simply a diversion.

## **An Open Community**

A college or university, at its best, is an open, honest community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.

Colleges and universities confront two sometimes-competing issues that are at the very center of collegiate life. On the one hand, they must maintain an absolute commitment to the free expression of ideas while also assuring that the use of language is neither deceptive nor abusive. Maintaining the balance is not easy. One of the most troublesome findings of the 1989 survey was the growing inclination among some students to use words, not as the key to understanding, but as weapons of assault in the form of racial, ethnic, and sexual slurs.

The problem appears to be most difficult for larger institutions where more than 60 percent of the presidents identified “sexual harassment” and about half listed “racial harassment” as problems. Further, when presidents were asked what would improve campus life, 86 percent of those at large universities said “new and revised statements on civility and respect for others.”





However there is another side. A college or university is, by definition, a place for the free expression of ideas, even when the opinions seem to be outrageous. Therefore, any effort to restrict speech by regulation, regardless of intent, is unacceptable. The University must not engage in censorship so as to make ideas safe for students; its role is to prepare students so that they are safe for ideas.

But protecting speech in all its forms does not mean remaining passive-especially when the boundaries of honesty and decency have been crossed. Rather, the university should define high standards for itself and denounce the violation of those standards in clear, unequivocal terms.

### **A Just Community**

A college or university is a just community, a place where the dignity of all individuals is affirmed and where equality of opportunity is vigorously pursued.

Affirming justice is one of the most urgent obligations higher education-and the nation-now confront. Injustice takes many forms. Even though progress has been made, many groups still encounter prejudice on campus-ranging from tenure problems to harassment. At colleges, both large and small, there is evidence of demeaning attitudes toward women, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and other racial, religious and ethnic groups.

If the nation's colleges and universities are to be just communities, prejudice in all its forms must be challenged and every college should develop a comprehensive plan to strengthen pluralism, within a community of learning. Inequality may be rooted in society at large. But it still falls on higher education to have an unequivocal commitment to social justice. The goal must be for equality for all.

### **A Disciplined Community**

A college or university is a disciplined community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.

There was a time when women's dorms were locked, there were rigid study hours, chapel attendance was mandatory, and the lights were out at eleven o'clock sharp on weekends. During the 1960's, college students across the nation revolted, ending the policy of *in loco parentis*. Administrators are no longer "parents", but many are now asking: What are the standards by which student conduct should be judged, especially if that behavior is personally and socially destructive? Asked to name their most serious concern, college presidents in the 1989 survey were most likely to name substance abuse, especially alcohol.

Alcohol has always been a part of campus life. Still, a disciplined community means caring for one's health, as well as obeying the laws of the land. If alcohol use is illegal for those under twenty-one, colleges should support the law rather than ignore it. Students need models of courage, not equivocation.



College and university presidents were also concerned about increased crime. Almost one-third of those at liberal arts colleges report “theft” a problem; at the larger institutions, two-thirds of the presidents consider it a problem.

A lack of discipline reflected in “excessive noise and disruptiveness in campus residences,” was reported by 65 percent of the liberal arts college presidents as a problem. And concerns about the standards of fraternity life were especially acute. Fraternities and other student organizations can be constructive forces. But institutions



of higher learning simply cannot tolerate prejudicial or disruptive conduct. Organizations that do not demonstrate a commitment to civility have no place in campus life.

Problems notwithstanding, it was impressive that almost all of the colleges and universities surveyed are trying to confront these issues; they deserve more credit than the headlines would suggest. Ninety percent of the nation’s colleges and universities have alcohol education

and prevention programs; more than 70 percent have special task forces on substance abuse, and almost everywhere there are seminars on crime prevention. Chaplains and campus religious centers provide support. Students are helping to shape new codes of conduct. No one wants to return to the days of rigid regulations. But institutions of higher learning need standards, not just in academic matters but in non-academic matters as well.

### **A Caring Community**

A college or university is a caring community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.

Caring is, in fact, the key to everything because while colleges should be purposeful, open, just, and disciplined—the unique characteristics that will make these objectives work, the glue that holds it all together, is the way the members of the community relate to one another.

Today’s students cherish their independence. They are pleased that *in loco parentis* has been abolished, but they still need to feel that they belong. One student captured this ambivalence when she said, “We don’t want the university to be involved in our lives, but we would like someone to be concerned or occasionally about our lives.”

Students form their own groups or communities to overcome anonymity of the campus, just as they have always done. These communities-within-community are essential, but not sufficient. Now, more than ever, students must connect with the institution as a whole. The university must take the initiative for community building, without a return to the rigidities of regulation. Indeed, when presidents were asked what should be done to improve campus life, two-thirds said “more interaction between faculty and students”; well over 90 percent said that strengthening community was important at their institution.

### **A Celebrative Community**

A college or university is a celebrative community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.

If community in higher education is important-and almost all campus leaders agree that it is-colleges should sustain a keen sense of their own heritage and traditions. Rites, ceremonies, and celebrations unite the campus and give students a sense of belonging to something worthwhile and enduring. Celebrations, if meaningfully designed, sustain the vitality of campuses. The challenge is to instill all rituals and ceremonies with real significance-and fun as well. Such activities keep memories alive and sustain a sense of community. Community must not only be created but continually recreated, since from a quarter to a half of the undergraduates are new each fall. Without traditions, rituals, and celebrations, continuity could easily be lost.

### **Conclusion**

These six principles/characteristics of a civil learning environment are all familiar. They can be found, to some degree, on almost every campus in the country. Taken together and continuously affirmed, they can provide a useful framework for the building of community in higher education.

Many of the issues faced by colleges and universities reach far beyond the campus. America seems to be increasingly divided, racial tensions seem to be increasing, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and self-indulgence is celebrated, while service is undervalued. However, when all is said and done people do need one another. No one can make it alone. If colleges and universities cannot find common goals, if higher education cannot overcome the intellectual and social separations that so diminish the quality of life on campus, what can be expected from society at large? But, if purposefulness, openness, justice, discipline, caring, and celebrativeness can become hallmarks of campus life, not only will the integrity of higher education be affirmed, but perhaps renewal of the nation can also be realized.

