

Students rule

Academic Duty

by Donald Kennedy

Harvard University Press: 1997. Pp. 310.

\$29.95, £19.95

Daniel S. Greenberg

Donald Kennedy, president of Stanford University from 1980 to 1992, sets out to prescribe for the many, long-lamented ills of academic institutions — neglect of teaching, exploitation of graduate students, discouragement of women science students, inordinate glory-seeking, and many more. But, along the way, he seems to suggest that big academic institutions are rigid, arrogant and powerful, and not likely to mend their ways.

The “academic duty” of the title refers to the obligations of teaching, mentoring, truthfulness and community service that he urges upon the professoriate. But this remarkable book, sure to stir debate in and beyond academic circles, might just as well have been titled *Requiem for Academe*. Whereas industry, government and other



Kennedy: prescription for fitter research universities.

sectors of society have responded to major economic and social changes, the big universities constitute “a portrait of conservatism, perhaps even of senescence”, he concludes.

The so-called research universities, the fount of some 60 per cent of doctoral degrees in the United States, “must be the agents of change”, because they set the standards and tone for much of higher education, Kennedy claims. But, recognizing a strong spirit of innovation in less-renowned colleges and universities, he observes: “The difficulty is that [the major institutions] are both successful and prestigious, and they lack the natural appetite for renovation and reform that characterizes the striving, transformational institutions. But unless they change, little else will.”

The problem is that the system tends to defy change, he says. Confronted with a PhD glut, “the most prestigious institutions invariably argue that it is other, less excellent institutions that should cut back production by limiting admissions”. Despite an oversupply in the biomedical fields, he points out, the National Research Council in 1994 blithely recommended maintenance of predoctoral awards for basic science at the 1993 levels. Graduate students provide inexpensive, obedient help for their tenured masters. Does this figure in the unwillingness to curb their numbers? Kennedy does not contest the possibility.

He illustrates his argument with scores of episodes derived from his long career as a highly productive biologist, commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration during the Carter administration and university president. Symbolizing the academic intransigence that he deplores is a tale told by the chemist Carl Djerassi, a Stanford colleague. Noting an absence of mentoring in his department, Djerassi proposed a questionnaire for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows on the guidance they received from their lab chiefs on such matters as record keeping and publication policy. “The departmental faculty voted not to permit the questionnaire to be circulated”, Kennedy reports. “Plainly, these subjects are uncomfortable ones. Given the faculty’s reluctance to talk about them, it is small wonder that generation after generation, we launch innocents into the world of academic mentorship.”

As often before, educational reform “is again at the centre of concerned conversation in colleges and universities”, Kennedy says. But “the results are still meagre”.

Academic Duty originated in Kennedy’s concern about the failure of academic institutions to prepare aspiring academics for their responsibilities as members of a university community. “My own aim,” he explains, “is to write primarily at, about, for members of the faculty: their central role in

the institution’s mission, the way they relate to their legal owners and managers, and their responsibility to students.”

On this last point, Kennedy is uncompromising, and extravagantly optimistic about a panacea, arguing that “improvement must entail putting students and their needs first. Once that is done, the rest falls into place: the complex challenges posed by intellectual property disputes, the tension between teaching and research, the ethical problems in faculty–student relationships, professional misconduct issues, the need for creative thinking about undergraduate education reforms — indeed, all the manifold difficulties so prominent in the growing public distrust of our academic institutions. Putting students first is a simple design principle, but it has great power.”

There can be no argument about the value of putting students first. But how this would reduce, let alone eliminate, scientific misconduct and squabbles about intellectual credits is not apparent or explained.

After his service in Washington as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration from 1977 to 1979, Kennedy began a long, successful run as president of Stanford. His resignation followed a collision in 1991 with sulphurous Congressman John Dingell, on the warpath in quest of illicit academic gorging on federal funds. *Academic Duty* could easily have excluded the grisly encounter that ensued when Dingell publicly lacerated Kennedy and Stanford for allegedly using federal research funds for entertaining, personal effects for Stanford’s presidential residence, and other purchases bound to raise taxpayers’ ire. But, in abbreviated form, Kennedy tells the complex story, emphasizing that the university was eventually exonerated of any wrongdoing, and attributing the blow-up with Dingell to the federal government’s inscrutable regulations for calculating overhead costs on research grants. “Certainly,” Kennedy concedes, “the government shouldn’t pay 23 per cent of the cost of flowers for university entertaining.”

The relevance of this episode to academic duty is distant and might have been saved for a fuller treatment by Kennedy elsewhere. The same applies to his quick reviews of several prominent cases of scientific misconduct, notably the highly publicized Gallo and so-called Baltimore cases. In taking up the issue of academic duty, Kennedy has performed a valuable service directed at rescuing our great research universities from their entrenched follies. At various points he expresses guarded optimism, but the evidence he offers does not justify optimism. □

Daniel S. Greenberg, founding editor of *Science & Government Report*, is at 3736 Kanawha Street NW, Washington DC 20015, USA.