
A Question of Accountability

HERBERT R. HENGST

Education, conceived of as a basic social service involving a single class of professional workers and comprised of many specialties, is probably more diverse than any other profession. One interesting phenomenon, related in part to this diversity, is the variety of standards educators are expected to meet and maintain. Some must meet certain standards set by state law and present a certificate to this effect. Others, primarily college teachers, are expected to demonstrate their competence to the satisfaction of their peers in order to receive the sanction of employment.

Consequently, it appears reasonable to examine the question of licensure and the college teacher. However, the approach need not be in the form of a guarantee to either the profession or the public that specific standards have been met but rather in the form of an obligation to be discharged—the notion of accountability. The difference between providing a guarantee and being willing to be answerable is more than a casual one; the latter approach would seem both reasonable and practicable since it is in tune with the traditions of scholarship. The notion of *accountability* is considered in this paper as appropriate to the conditions under which academicians practice; these conditions are therefore discussed as a background for a description of the present status of accountability in the profession of college teaching.

OPER CONDITIONS FOR
ACADEMIC WORK

As a prelude to the discussion of licensure and accountability, it is necessary to sketch in broad outline the nature of proper conditions for academic work. These are designed to enhance and preserve the reliability of the

Dr. Hengst is associate professor of education, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

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instructor, which forms a common thread running through the development and systematization of higher education—indeed, of all education.

The academic condition is essentially described by the generally accepted functions of higher education: instruction, research, and service. In most instances, instruction is considered to be primary, and it has been only in the recent past that any other function has received more than a passing nod. Stated most directly, the instructional function is discharged through providing opportunities for students to encounter areas of knowledge new to them. Research, the second part of the trilogy, is conceived of in its broad sense as a disciplined inquiry, an analysis of some depth approaching an exhaustive investigation—in this sense, perhaps more aptly described by the term “scholarly activities.” The service function is most explicitly described in terms of a broad definition of the research and instructional functions and is considered as those aspects of both which have an immediate impact on satisfying the needs of today’s society. Common examples are found in university extension divisions and contract research projects.

It is the contention that these three functions are so closely related that the institution which ignores one or more fails, in that degree, to provide a complete and balanced academic condition. Similarly, the individual academician must demonstrate all three elements in his practice. The proportions may properly vary for both institutions and individuals, but each element is present, for the individual academician—the individual teacher—must reside and practice within a condition that encourages him to pursue his own convictions, examine his own hunches, pose his own questions and seek out their answers. This, then, is the purpose—the *raison d’être*—of the academic condition.

If teacher-scholars are to follow inquiry wherever it leads, as the three-part function of higher education suggests is necessary, the tradition of academic freedom must be considered. Paradoxically, this tradition is both a long-standing and a relatively recent development. The medieval university, from which American higher education is descended, functioned with autonomy. As a result, Paris and Oxford provided havens for unorthodox ideas and masters; they reached positions of real power in defense of what in this context is called the academic condition.

It was not until the twentieth century that scholars in this country did something about clarifying a position on academic freedom. The report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the American Association of University Professors, presented in 1915 and hailed as a classic statement, was the basis for subsequent statements that have since been endorsed by other significant organizations. It tied academic freedom to the requirements of the academic condition, and in this way, provided a specific point of reference in the discussion of the responsibilities of the academician. The academic condition of which we speak, then, inheres in

the warp and woof of higher education as it is commonly conceived today and presupposes a certain style of life connoted by the concept of academic freedom.

Two additional prerequisites to the academic condition can be described with some clarity. One deals with institutional elements, or those of a general nature, and the other, with those that reside within individual academicians. Although the ideal conceptualization of a college remains that of a community of scholars, reality describes it in institutional terms. In discussing prerequisites to the academic condition, therefore, all the characteristics of institutions should be considered, but in the present context, certain prerequisites dealing with institutional governance will be adequate. For instance, if the functional trilogy of an institution of higher education is to be operable within the professional life of each teacher, it is reasonable to suggest that basic policy decisions affecting the academic condition should be developed and legitimized by the faculty. Organizational patterns and administrative structures should be conceived of as agencies to facilitate the fulfillment of the three basic purposes and the enhancement of the necessary style of life.

But the institution is, after all, comprised of individuals. This is probably truer of colleges and universities than of other institutions, for it would appear that academicians are more nearly individualists than many other members of society. Without a consideration of the competencies of these individuals, the academic condition is a mere facade. Statements of such competencies approach the heart of the question of accountability. Since the individual teacher is the vehicle through which the purposes of higher education are achieved and at the same time a beneficiary of the college qua college, his status, dependent as it is upon his competence as a teacher-scholar, is of critical importance both to society and to himself.

It seems almost unnecessary to assert that the academician must be competent to discharge the duties inherent in the three basic functions of higher education, but this is a fact too often ignored. First, he must be a competent teacher; that is to say, he must be learned in the art and science of directing the learning of others. In addition, he must be a competent scholar and therefore a practitioner of the scholar's craft—the inquirer, the analyzer, the frontier thinker, the reporter of new phenomena, the synthesizer. And finally, he must be skillful in relating the discoveries of his work to the age in which he lives, to the society which sustains him.

Some might claim that this description represents an appeal to the medieval, or so-called complete, man. Such is not the case, however, for no hint of perfection is implied. Rather the description represents the most skilled and creative men in this or any other age, and as such, it is accurate, for that is the essential nature of the academician and the primary defense of the academic condition.

THE PRESENT STATUS
OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Persons not involved professionally in colleges frequently allege that there is no system of accountability applicable to college teachers, and in one respect, this allegation is not without foundation. There is, in fact, no formal requirement to describe a minimum level of competence for individuals who would enter college teaching nor a formal system to assess the contribution made by practicing college teachers. However, long tradition and academic requirements effectively limit the number of so-called eligible candidates, and generally rigorous employment practices require several screenings involving the exercise of professional judgment.

It is clear that professional judgment is the only viable means of controlling entry, but problems exist nonetheless both for the public and for members of the profession when no extrinsic measure of the judgment can be made. Accepted notions of justice as well as standards of intellectual inquiry seem to suggest strongly that judgment unrelated to an external standard or measure of some sort is, at worst, in danger of being suspected of capriciousness, or at best, of unsubstantiated estimation.

An examination of the present condition of professional accountability must consider briefly its nature. As suggested above, to be accountable means to be answerable: to be willing and able to explain and/or defend one's actions rationally in an independently verifiable manner. As applied to the college teacher, professional accountability means the willingness and ability to be answerable for his claimed competence as a teacher of youth and adults, a practicing scholar, and a service agent in the application of knowledge to his own age. As applied to higher education itself, accountability means the willingness of colleges and universities to be answerable to the public for their claimed special function. The latter appears to be well cared for through the accreditation process; the former, on the other hand, has not been provided for outside the unreliable supply-and-demand balance in the employment process.

The present condition of the professional accountability of college teachers, then, can best be described as *laissez faire*. There is an absence of any formal vehicle through which the individual college teacher submits himself to the questions which would make it possible for him to be answerable. It has been claimed that the rigors of doctoral study, including the several trying and detailed periods of examination, provide amply for the screening of potential college teachers. This argument can no longer stand scrutiny if, indeed, it ever could. For instance, three-quarters of those who started teaching in colleges in 1962 did not have earned doctorates.¹ But even if all of them had completed the doctorate, they still would have had

1. Maul, Ray C. *Teacher Supply and Demand in Universities, Colleges and Junior Colleges, 1961-62 and 1962-63*. Washington, D.C.: Research Division, National Education Association, 1963. p. 13.

formal preparation for only one of the basic dimensions of college teaching—scholarship; the usual doctoral program does not provide experience in or training for either the instructional or service dimension.

In view of this apparently vacuous situation, neither the public nor the academicians can have any assurance that the function of accountability, which might be expressed as scholarly responsibility, is being achieved. Whatever responsibility is assumed is exercised on the basis of individual initiative. It would be in error to imply that the assumption of responsibility by individual teacher-scholars has been infrequent and ineffective; indeed, quite the opposite is the case. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that individually assumed professional responsibility is the *only* appropriate basis for any programmed accountability. And if individuals do in fact assume responsibility for their own competence, there need be little concern about codifying and generalizing some minimal criteria which describe observable common elements of the necessary competencies.

To make such an assertion is to invite complaints directed against an allegedly unwarranted imposition of controls on the college teacher. Many academicians loudly defend the proposition that any formal set of controls compromises their work. But to equate the absence of rational and systematized standards of academic responsibility with the absence of controls is to ignore the host of informal controls that impinge upon the life of every teacher-scholar. In addition to the psychological controls inherent in each personality, the teacher is effectively controlled by the traditions of the institution through which he practices, controls operating through assignment and promotion decisions, extramural pressures, and controls imposed by the preparation program for college teachers. It is obvious that the absence of a formal program of accountability is no more a guarantor of freedom from control than is anarchy a protector of an individual's civil rights. Is there a need for a more formalized pattern of professional accountability? Perhaps many professors would respond with a resounding *no*. Some thoughtful objections are raised: because accountability implies controls, it is thought to be antagonistic to the individual and to the creative nature of the teacher-scholar's work; limitations would have a debilitating effect on the total profession; individuals who might make significant contributions could be declared ineligible by restrictive measures; no two professors could agree on an operational definition of appropriate criteria; present-day knowledge of the nature of professional competence is simply inadequate for such a task; and even if a set of meaningful criteria could be agreed upon, measurement problems preclude the practicality of their application.

Some fear that any standards upon which agreement could be reached would deal only with the insignificant aspects of professional competency, thus involving academicians in unending minutiae. The net result would be to demean the profession and place it on an operational level with a

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technical service. It is also argued that a formalized system providing for accountability would introduce charlatanry into the profession. If there was a set of standards, techniques would be developed to falsify them, resulting in a subverting of the academic condition. But inevitably the *coup de grace* is the status-oriented disclaimer of any responsibility to society or the public for the conduct of one's professional life. Thus argument frequently is introduced by assuming that a formalized pattern of accountability would require an inquisition by a board of lay visitors; if this were the only alternative, the argument might have validity.

The arguments raised against formalizing professional accountability seem to be directed not so much at the nature of accountability as at certain practices and procedures, and as such, they assist in making a case for rather than against it. In fact, they suggest some guidelines that might reasonably be expected to serve the interests of both the public and the profession.

Additional reasons can be given for at least considering a pattern of accountability. There is, for instance, the unsophisticated notion that one who "sups at the public trough" is beholden to the public. There is a certain justice in this position, for the act of accepting remuneration for the performance of a service is a *de facto* declaration that certain skills and talents are possessed; to hold otherwise is to operate on the ethical level of a *caveat emptor* philosophy. A stronger position is suggested in the traditional assumption of scholars that they must submit themselves to the judgment of their peers. Unfortunately, the process through which this has been accomplished in the past, the publication of one's work, has now degenerated in many instances to little more than academic status seeking. Finally, the very centrality of the educational and research functions in today's society calls for the exercise of a high level of professional accountability. The potential influence of the work of teacher-scholars on millions of individuals, on society, and on history is limitless. A mature analysis of this potential in line with the three-dimensional purpose of higher education requires that the question of accountability be raised and discussed at length and in depth.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS
OF ACADEMIC
ACCOUNTABILITY

It is not the intent of this essay to propose a specific pattern but rather to focus attention on the whole question of professional accountability. The primary characteristic of any pattern of accountability is found in its relationship to the scope of academic competence. *It should expressly provide opportunities to demonstrate one's competence in the teaching function and in scholarly activities.* In this way, provision is made for demonstrating competence in the areas for which it is claimed; there is no hint that standards must be applied in an inflexible, unthinking manner.

The accreditation process, both institutional and disciplinary, offers a pattern worth investigation. One of the hallmarks of a creditable accreditation process is that it is conducted by representatives of the academic pro-

fession. It is by design an evaluation of institutional competence by outstanding academicians, an examination by peers. This seems to make clear a second essential characteristic of a program for professional accountability. *It should be conducted by representatives of the academic profession whose competence has been established.*

One of the objectives of a program for professional accountability is the identification of an acceptable level of professional competence for the use of the general public. Although it is clear that people untrained in the art and science of the academic profession are not competent to pass judgment on the success of individual teacher-scholars, it is necessary for them to evaluate the results of professional activity. Therefore, if a program of professional accountability is to be of any assistance, it must be expressed in a vocabulary that has meaning for the general public. This makes a third characteristic clear. *Such a program must be readily communicable.* Professional jargon, which may be appropriate for communicating the elements of the program within the profession, should not be a characteristic of the pattern.

Fourth, *the pattern for professional accountability should be characterized by standards that deal with entry-level competencies.* The problem of minimums becoming maximums can be avoided in part if initial efforts toward developing a realistic pattern are focused on the process of being admitted to practice.

Finally, a fifth characteristic must be considered. *The pattern for professional accountability should provide for an endorsement of the individual.* It should take one of several forms. The endorsing body, whether it be an association of qualified and practicing teacher-scholars, an association of institutions, or an agency of a state or national government, should issue a formal statement of its findings, the form to vary with the nature of the endorsing agency. For instance, if it was an arm of government, the statement might well be a license; other agencies might issue certificates attesting to the satisfactory nature of the evaluation. It is not impossible to conceive of both being issued, the license being contingent upon professional certification. But again, without regard to specifics, an endorsement of the individual who successfully completes the pattern should be a characteristic of a program for professional accountability.

The problem of demonstrating professional accountability remains essentially one for teacher-scholars to solve. It becomes more critical as the ranks of the profession swell and the educational attainment level of the population increases. The essence of the solution will evolve from a recognition of the need for a means whereby a rational profession can bring its rational powers to bear on putting its own house in order. The question of accountability might well provide the point on which these powers can focus.