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Academic Duty by Donald Kennedy: A review by Cody Arvidson, University of North Texas

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The debate regarding the role of faculty in various aspects of higher education has expanded throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. Several publications sought to expose the need for faculty to change, to accept the mission of their profession as inclusive of teaching, mentoring, and developing not only their graduate students but also undergraduate students. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, among others, published several studies and treatises hoping to inspire national debate and effect change in academia. Perhaps the efforts of those preceding Kennedy have not fully succeeded in igniting the revolution because they failed to give character and life to academia and its faculty. Kennedy depicts academia as a world with richness and life. Examples and anecdotes enlighten the reader and elicit understanding about the integrity and duty of academia. Kennedy writes this intriguing insider dossier to the emerging professoriate, the contingent of academia most likely to excitedly invigorate faculty with academic revolution.

Kennedy has written a series of essays related the theme of academic duty for his classes about the professoriate taught to doctoral students and aspiring professors. Those essays have emerged as Academic Duty, due to his awareness that the subject matter could be of use to a broader population. Kennedy states the evolution of this manuscript best in the Preface: “So what began as a set of notes for a class of academic aspirants metamorphosed into a book about universities” (p. vii).

Kennedy takes great care to consider many elements of the professoriate about which future faculty need to be aware. The author seems to write for an audience with which he is very familiar and intimate. His candor and depth are quite appealing and engrossing to the reader. While reading the text, one feels invited to be a member of a small and prestigious club. It is
hard to believe that Kennedy is conferring these words of wisdom for
the whole of academia because the content is quite applicable for both
faculty and administration. As state earlier, Kennedy writes about the
complement to academic freedom, academic duty. He argues that academic
freedom garners much press and enthusiasm, but academic duty is
overlooked at best.

Academic Duty
is composed of ten highly readable chapters, each representing an
element of the whole theme. The chapters epitomize the breadth of
knowledge needed by the successful aspirant for the professoriate.
Additionally, the chapters are sandwiched in between the equally
revealing “Preface” and “Acknowledgements.”

The first chapter
juxtaposes academic duty with academic freedom. This introduction to
academic duty prepares the reader for the remainder of the book by
providing an overview of the issues and duties faced by faculty. The
importance of public as well as media perceptions of higher education
is introduced in this chapter. The public mistrust of the ivory tower
and the outrages for change exemplify the vulnerability of the
institution and it’s credibility. The trend toward more accountability
within higher education has led to openness when problems with
“scientific fraud, racial disharmony, commercial greed, or unacceptable
sexual conduct” (p. 17) arise. The chapter concludes by examining more
fully responsibility and duty, as well as the role of ethics in the
fulfillment of responsibilities.

Chapter two engages the
reader with a brief general overview of the differences in types of
higher education institutions as well as a historically supported
description of the faculty culture of today. The author does portray a
scenario of competition and elitism among faculty. However, he also
encourages “new minted scholars” (p. 51) to pursue jobs in the academic
marketplace, with extended footnotes about the reality of the market
place today. Finally, Kennedy urges institutional honesty both to
prospective doctoral students and new faculty hires.

In chapter three,
Kennedy addresses the very purpose of the faculty, teaching. What being
a teacher (i.e., communicator, coach, mentor, role model) means is
considered. The expectations of the faculty regarding teaching as well
as of the general public are contrasted. Faculty has very different
expectations about its rights versus the public and perhaps
administration’s expectations about its responsibilities. Further, an
extended discussion about the inconsistencies in evaluation methods for
faculty teaching enlightens the reader about the faculty’s expectations to evaluate outcomes versus processes. Kennedy calls for faculty to embrace teaching as a form of scholarship and to actively train doctoral students to teach, not only information but also transferable thinking skills. Kennedy discusses the obsolete grading curve, grade inflation, appropriate testing methods, student centered learning, academic honesty and honor codes, advisor roles, and the innovative nature of teaching.

“To Mentor” is a short chapter. Here, Kennedy emphasizes mentoring as a sub-set of teaching that is often overlooked, but is nonetheless critical to the future professoriate. Mentoring is the relationship between the student and professor that extends beyond classrooms into laboratories and publications. He argues that appropriate credit, authorship, and collaboration with students will prepare them for their academic careers. Awfully real cases are presented to illustrate the necessity of mentors to critically care for their protégés. Kennedy sums up the heart of mentoring as “represent[ing] the highest form of academic duty, but…also embody[ing] the greatest risk of failure” (p. 116).

Chapter five defines what it means for faculty “To Serve the University.” Service ranges from broad public obligations, such as consulting and legislative lobbying, to the less visible obligations on campus, such as departmental governance. Kennedy discusses the dichotomy between the faculty as mere employee versus managerial decision maker. Ultimately, faculty controls the vast majority of the decisions about itself, the institution, the students, and the character of academic culture. Tenure and its future, which would seem in question, are considered in depth. A greater understanding of the purpose of tenure as well as its underbelly is gleaned through the discussion. It seems as though Kennedy is ultimately encouraging faculty to embrace its range of service-oriented duties. A poignant example of how service on a campus committee enabled one professor to contribute significant research to his specific discipline summed up the holistic nature of service to the university.

Discovery is the duty discussed in chapter six. Scholarly production as a requirement of all disciplines is addressed. Kennedy examines sponsored research funding and regulation of such funding in exquisite and electrifying detail. To illustrate the significance of indirect cost estimating and accounting in government or foundation funded research, Kennedy vividly recounts the investigation of Stanford led by the Office of Naval Research beginning in 1990. Stanford was of course vilified in the press and by
the investigating congressional committee, and was in the end acquitted. Kennedy was president of Stanford during the investigations, and resigned shortly after their conclusion as a casualty of the muckraking. It is through this tale that the reader gleams the negative consequences of too much government and of the inability for even the most judicious university to manage its grants and research projects without problems under regulations and guidelines (i.e., pool accounting) that actually invite trouble. Kennedy notes additionally that regulations heaped on the universities by not only government but also corporate sponsors may fail to serve discovery because the agreements may actually inhibit academic freedom and publication. He calls, in light of the Stanford investigation, on institutions to carefully negotiate conditions for sponsorship that advance the intended discovery and to manage the resources meticulously.

If discovery is critical to scholarly work, then publishing is the next logical act. Kennedy adeptly transitions from discovery into publishing. The chapter is short and clear. Kennedy addresses peer review systems, the growth of scholarly journals, including proprietary journals, problems with methods for evaluating publication quality, and issues of authorship. Kennedy succinctly states, “For better or worse, publication is the medium by which the scholars work is distributed and judged. Thus much of a scholar’s reputation depends on what, where, and how much he or she publishes, and on how that work is received publicly by others” (p. 208).

Ultimately, as Kennedy points out, the university must be truthful if it is to teach and inspire young minds and to further academic inquiry through discovery and publication. Academic misconduct is identified as misappropriation of academic credit, “illegitimate appropriation of the ideas or expressions of another” (p. 211), and intentional “falsification of data or experimental results” (p. 211). Kennedy explores academic misconduct and its influence on higher education’s reputation at length. However, the case scenarios and real life illustrations are offered in novelistic page-turner fashion.

Chapter nine refers to reaching beyond the walls as engaging in the transfer of technology. There is no doubt that the new technology generated by faculty for purposes of improving any academic discipline will benefit the private sector. However, Kennedy urges ethical professionalism in part because of the ambiguous rules governing “a faculty member’s time and effort” (p. 242). The discussion includes intellectual property rights, consulting privileges, competition clauses, and conflict of interest.
Two very intriguing cases are presented for facilitating the reader's understanding of the complexity of the dilemma. Kennedy considers instances that influence a professor's loss of objectivity, such as financial interest and "commitment to one's own pet theory or favorite finding" (p. 262). The professoriate is encouraged to regulate its own conduct as an effort to avoid society stepping in and taking such regulation opportunities away.

In the final chapter, a call for change is made. The current structure of the academic institution was set at the end of the nineteenth century and in order to fulfill duty higher education must change with the rest of society. Kennedy predicts that "dramatic and far-reaching" (p. 266) change is on the horizon because of public outcry and the constant and changing nature of information and technology in the new economy. A number of trends and areas of emerging change are listed, including the growing differentiation between institution types, increasing awareness of duty to undergraduate students, lifelong learning, and transferability of course material to the real world. Kennedy calls for strong leadership and guidance from top administration. Finally, Kennedy closes by reminding the reader of the fundamental duty to teach, encouraging change in the preparation of the professoriate, reclamation the central mission of the university, and passion for responsiveness and innovation.

Kennedy's chapters could easily be broken into several independent articles; at the same time, the chapters also seem so interwoven. For instance, peer review systems for evaluating grant proposals, tenure applications, and publication submissions are discussed throughout the text. The reader becomes familiar in a more than cursory way with the nature of the peer review in higher education, including its strengths and shortcomings. The importance of truth in discovery and publishing is inexorably apparent as Kennedy skillfully weaves them together as separate straws of the same basket through three different chapters; each of which can be read independently. Additionally, as teaching and mentoring are also considered if only minimally in every chapter, it seems clear that Kennedy truly believes that the fundamental mission of higher education guides the professoriate, even when its influence is unsuspected. Finally, underlying each chapter is the duty to role model and to teach through behavior. A concept that surely any professor as well as student advisor can embrace.

Kennedy speaks specifically about research institutions and only briefly mentions that other types of higher education institutions exist. He speaks only
about the graduate student with no significant comment about the undergraduate student. All scenarios are about faculty, mostly in science fields, or their doctoral students. While addressing graduate students, Kennedy fails to address the student issues of other professional schools, with the exception of medical school.

Kennedy addresses only minimally the impact of technology on publishing; however, he also states that the future and role of technology and the Internet has yet to be defined. He also gives the reader with the feeling of promise for the Internet in scholarly pursuits but seems to caution that legalities about ownership and new peer review rules will eventually define scholarship by Internet.

Academic Duty is an extremely valuable text. For the novice faculty, the text provides the insider information needed to successfully navigate faculty culture and academic publishing, while considering the fundamental mission is to teach, to mentor, to educate. For the administrator and campus leader, the information provided about the inner workings of the faculty culture can be extremely helpful. Kennedy calls for leadership from the top regarding issues of academic misconduct, peer evaluations, and several other issues. It would behoove even the student affairs professional to learn about the academic side of higher education by reading Kennedy’s essays. Frankly, as an aspiring academician and as a student affairs professional, I believe that this text will become a classic and a must-read, as it defines the values of higher education and is indeed a true page-turner.