

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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JAMES KEENAN, S.J., is the Canisius Chair, director of the Jesuit Institute and director of the Gabelli Presidential Scholars Program at Boston College. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** following his presentation about his new book, *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*.

HEVELONE: Why do you think that university ethics has been ignored for so long?

KEENAN: In order to explain how I became interested in university ethics, I have to back up and talk about the sex abuse crisis in Boston as a priest.

As a priest, you would hear rumors, but, you never knew the details. You never knew anything like rape or sexual assault or anything like that. You heard people saying that someone said something stupid to a younger person. But the people who knew, knew how bad things were. So there was a certain way that we were in our ‘clerical tower’ – to borrow the idea of an ‘ivory tower’ from the university. Anyway, we had our blinders on.

Both the church and the university have a deep arrogance to them. The professoriate could use some humility. The clergy need some humility. The fact that there hasn’t been any sustained examination of the university is an indication of the arrogance of the university.

Why did it take some guy to write a book in 2015 about the universities to say there’re some problems here? Everybody reads about sexual assault on campuses. Everybody knows about binge drinking on campuses. Everybody knows that there are these

racist-themed parties going on. It seems you should ask another question. Academics are intellectuals, who should be asking a question or two.

It strikes me that there needs to be a greater self-examination that happens. I



don’t think that many organizations do a lot of self-examinations.

My book is such a rare bird in part because I had another experience in another institution – in the clergy. I began to realize that I should have the same awakening about the university that I had about the church. I also live in a community where I had three colleagues – John Paris, Ken Himes and David Hollenbach – all noted ethicists. I

simply said, do you notice these things? This community of ethicists kept egging me on to keep pursuing this line of thought.

Also we live in Boston, which is a university town. So we know about things. I follow suicides on campuses and the underreporting of suicides. I’m not saying that the university is causing that particular issue, but it’s an indication of the lack of transparency and of the problematic issues that are on a campus.

In terms of arrogance, I have that whole big spiel in the book about the professoriate being a bunch of isolated people. The university is the most autonomous of all structures. Because I’m so committed to the university, I really hope my book is followed by lots of books like this. I may be a pioneer, but I welcome lots of public voices. I don’t want to be the isolated professor.

HEVELONE: Are academics free enough to follow with other books?

KEENAN: Well, that’s funny. I have an endowed chair. I’m not literally untouchable. I have been subject to so many critiques in the past – that’s made me stronger to be able to say what I say. I’m a faculty member who takes seriously my academic freedom, like others.

Here at BC, I can think of about 30 people who could do this – from Ray Madoff and Robin Fleming to Juliet Schor and Mary Crane. Notice I’m mentioning women, but it would be good to see some men jumping into the fray. I’m sure more women will get into this, because women recognize these issues more than men, and men are comfortable with their blinders. It’ll be interesting to see how this pans out in the future, whether there’s any significant group of male professors who agree with me. After all, my argument is that this is what men created.

HEVELONE: There are few horizontal places of accountability for tenured faculty. In fact, as a graduate student here I had a professor say, “You don’t have to fill out those student evaluations. I haven’t looked at them in 20 years.” But having been an adjunct myself, I have worked with people who say, “I have to give good grades to my students. I have to succumb to pressure, because their pleasure is what my job is contingent upon. I’m a customer service person.” That disparity between the tenured faculty and the horizontal accountability versus the adjunct faculty is tremendous.

KEENAN: I actually think that the bigger question underneath it is grading. I would like to figure out what grading is really about. Like at Yale Divinity, for instance, they have high pass, pass, fail – something like that – three grades. I like those three grades. That’s enough. What else are we doing? My letters of recommendation that I write for students are not based on grades. It’s on performance. And people reading my letters want to read, did she do a good paper? If so, what was it on? Because they’ll be interested to see what type of imagination and capacity this student has. They want to know, did the person do well on exams? That’s all. They want to get a sense of the person.

I’d love to know, did Abelard, in the twelfth century, give out grades? Did Lombard give out grades? Did Aquinas give out grades? Aristotle didn’t give out grades as he was sitting in Athens. And yet, if you start talking about grades, you start talking about why can’t we quantify this?

All of a sudden, some anxieties about output are really there. But we don’t look at anything else. We don’t refuse tenure to faculty members who are not available for their students.

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But we will look at their record of publishing and their course evaluations. We haven’t really thought through what performance is, because we’ve not had a community that is looking. My point is before we have norms, let’s have a culture of ethics. We would need to have lots of conversations about how we mark performance, if we had a culture of ethics.

Hopefully, if we do what I’m suggesting, we will rethink grades. And this question of satisfaction by the student could be considered less comparing a

97 to a 94, and more of a generic way of saying it was a high pass, it was a pass, or it was a failure.

HEVELONE: What type of steps do you take to begin to create the culture of ethics? And what do you do to institute it in a more pragmatic way at the university?

KEENAN: When I finished the book, my editor, Sarah Stanton said, “I love your book. I’ve been with you the whole time, but it needs more bang at the end.” That’s when I wrote, “If I were president of a university.” Those are baby steps that I’m talking about.

When Ruth Simmons at Brown University set up the committee to look at slavery, she knew that this would rock Brown, its benefactors, its board, its faculty, its alumni – all of the different stakeholders of Brown University. Therefore it had to be taken with great seriousness, and she did by having the convocation. She acknowledged it.

It would be good for us to do that. At BC, on March 16, there’s a conference on big data. There’s somebody in computer science, in economics, there are people in psychology and biology. I’ve been starting to have conversations with these people as partners for this event.

It will be good, because what we’re going to ask are questions about the research that our faculty does. Does it do anything to enhance the common good? Or does it just enhance your portfolio? To what extent is the research of the professoriate connected to the mission of a school? That’s a deep ethical question.

Before you want to put in norms, you want to at least say why you’re doing this. And that’s what we’re aiming at. This is a groundbreaking type of event. So we’ll see what happens.

HEVELONE: How does academic freedom play into that too?

KEENAN: Academic freedom already has limits when researchers have to provide an IRB [institutional review board]. The university does not want its faculty investigating persons without protecting those persons, so they have IRBs. There's one little break that happens. Some universities sign off on research projects that are looking for endorsements so that they can get funding for it. Again, going back to the role of the professoriate – a little bit of humility could go a long way.

HEVELONE: I would like to turn back to the commodification of the university just for a minute. What you're saying about grades certainly plays into that, but what else can we do? BC is a nonprofit, yet there is so much money involved in this university and in all universities.

KEENAN: There are some things that we are learning. It's just that, because the university is siloed so much, lessons learned in one place are not taught elsewhere. For instance, the admissions office has to deal with legacy applications. Maybe a family has four generations of people coming to a university, and now they're expecting their fifth to come here.

The university has really changed significantly. Admissions doesn't automatically open the door. They've realized that they can't keep doing that. They've figured out some algorithm for doing this – and I don't know what on earth it is. My point is that admissions has looked at it and it has refused entitlement. Commodification is deeply about entitlement.

It's the same with development. For years, development was taking gifts that had deep strings attached. Of course, a number of universities returned gifts because they didn't want the strings that were attached to them. Advancement and development have learned some lessons about entitlement too.



It would be nice if those two major departments at a university could communicate something else to the rest of the university about commodification. This is why I want to have a conference in April 2017, so that we're thinking beyond this to say that there are resources within the university, if we were to start engaging it. That's what ethics is about. Ethics is about community building. No community – no ethics. One of the key steps to creating a culture of ethics is building up your community.

What I'm interested in is getting discussion underway. I want a culture of ethics. I want people saying, "But is this ethical?" I want people to have the language of commodification. I'd like them to have the language of sexual assault. I would like them to have the language of binge drinking. I would like faculty to realize that maybe one of the reasons why their students are sleeping in class is because they were arrested last night.

There's a certain way that our faculty have been wearing blinders, and our administrators have been wearing muzzles. There's a variety of ways that communication across the university hasn't happened. There's really no need for community if we don't want to talk

to one another. We need to change these things.

The greater desire to bring in CEOs who have no experience in universities, who are alienating and aggressive, is part of the problem. It goes back to commodification. You search out a president whose legacy is going to be that he is going to change your numbers, you're going after commodification, and you deserve what you get.

HEVELONE: What specific issues drew your attention to the university?

KEENAN: The two biggest issues that first got me into this topic were sports and tuition. First it was sports. I really could not believe some of these universities use athletes for entertainment, period and nothing more. Universities use the athletes so that they become famous as a basketball school or a football school. It's a disgrace. If that's what a university does, it's really a form of indentured servitude.

By the time I got to the end of the book, I wanted people to see not the obvious but the underlying, so I wanted them to see all sorts of other issues. When I got to the end of the book, I realized I hadn't done much on sports, so I did about 20 pages on it.

I tried to show that it wasn't simply concussions. It wasn't simply a student not graduating. It was recruiting ninth grade girls for soccer teams. The lunacy of the universities' actions with regard to athletics was much bigger and much deeper. I knew at the end I would have the reader see this, and then they would rethink the question on sports.

The other question was tuition. It's yin and yang. America has three different structures. They have either high tuition research universities, private universities, and, in some states, very fine state-funded universities.

Then you can think of these community colleges, which are really suffering, more so than any of the other three types of schools, and the poor students who are going there. Then you have these for-profit bidders that are competing against them. They're going after people who are not being well served by the country because we're not providing an education for people who don't have the good fortune of getting into a good state-funded university.

The tuition question is a question that will only arise when we start taking universities seriously. Universities are now a matter of the private sector. That's part of the problem. That's why the whole adjunct faculty question is connected to it. It's part of the private sector. How did this happen? In most of the industrialized world, university education is a right and therefore a responsibility of the state. Not that all countries reach that standard well.

We'll never be able to address the question of the right to higher education until we have other models that we can work with. The model that we're working with right now is so *laissez faire* that it really leaves the most vulnerable weaker. Therein we see that the university today empowers the economic divide and actually creates more of the economic inequities than ever before.

The question of free tuition is not just a question of the university, but it's also a question about perception of it, and whether we will rip the university from being simply something in the private sector.

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HEVELONE: Connected to that is the transformation the university will go through in terms of online versus in-person services. We're at another cusp in terms of where the university is going with the technology that's available today.

KEENAN: We don't hear much about the MOOCs. That is, those mass open online classrooms, where 2000 students enroll online. They were telling us they were doing it out of a concern for educating others, but it seems like it was really a moneymaker that was not well-designed.

HEVELONE: Is there anything else you would like to add?

KEENAN: I'm waiting to see how I and others will be able to sustain this argument. That's what I'm concerned about. Will this be just a book? When does it become part of the consciousness of the American university? I'm interested in really putting that out there.

I'm also interested in having others pick this up and take it on their way. I talked to Derek Bok, the Harvard University emeritus president, he said that he was happy to see that a Jesuit and a Catholic book was raising this question, because he found that it was Catholic universities that kept the ethical question alive.

My problem at times is that Catholics just keep it Catholic. When I did this book, I decided it was not going to be Catholic. I wanted it to say everyone should be getting involved in this. So it'll be interesting to see whether it will just be Catholic universities asking this question or whether I'll be able to get into the universities of Derek Bok, Ruth Simmons, Drew Faust or Amy Gutmann at Princeton – and see whether or not they realize that they have problems. I did take hope that Faust and the question on cheating at the university finally realized that Harvard needed a culture of honor before they needed to articulate norms. I thought that was a good move. So we'll see what happens in the days ahead.

HEVELONE: The world I know is the evangelical colleges, which are facing their own chaos at the moment. I feel like they would be receptive to this type of work because there is already the greater sense of community and common purpose and a desire to undo some of that 'silo-ization' at the university.

KEENAN: There's a new phenomenon happening at our universities – at Catholic universities – and that is the growth of Muslim students.

Muslim students are coming to Catholic universities, in part because they see Catholic universities as taking their religion seriously. However, in an academic context Muslims are, just like Catholics, living in a secular society. They're not looking for a Muslim university. They're looking for a good university. But they want something that supports their religion. It will be interesting if we see some Muslim faculty and students enter into this the way Catholics are doing. Maybe that will be another group.

It will be also interesting to see Jews doing this. Jews have always had a strong ethical set of guidelines about the nature of the common good and their relationship to it. It will be interesting to see how much faith-based motivation there is to pay attention to university ethics.

HEVELONE: Maybe the faith-based institutions will be the ones that will pick up this issue. We'll see.

KEENAN: Yes, but I hope they won't be alone.

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