ACCOUNTABILITY, PRAGMATIC AIMS, AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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PREFACE

We gain understanding of our professional values through many means. In the chapters that follow, I make use of the Pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey to enlighten our current understanding of our conceptions of our professional freedoms in the university and to 21st-century calls for university and faculty accountability. Like John Dewey, I seek to understand the historical and cultural foundations of our American conceptions in order to determine their correspondence to the context of the present-day. In these pages I pursue a Pragmatic inquiry of our ideas and beliefs about authority and autonomy in the university so that we can better understand our contemporary anxieties about accountability. My goal is not to be nostalgic about the university’s defining past, the transformative period in which the American faculty and university craft their core identity. Instead, by examining significant experiences of the past I seek to determine whether our present apprehension about accountability is warranted or simply incongruous with our 21st-century conditions. As Dewey might say, perhaps because our conceptions of university authority and faculty autonomy were intended for very different conditions, they must evolve and reconstitute. We’ll see.

In the chapters that follow, I examine how accountability directives motivated by increasing corporatization of the research university and its managerial practices stands to deter higher education from enacting and fulfilling its democratic commitments. I make no distinction between the private and public research universities if only because each has a public mission, albeit with degrees of difference. My focus is on the “research university,” and though I will frequently refer to it as simply “the university,” I imply the Research I universities in the 1994 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. In this text I argue that, although accountability mandates are not inherently
The modern university is in every respect, save its legal management, a public institution with public responsibilities ... 

(John Dewey, President, American Association of University Professors, New York Times, October 11, 1915)

Early in this century American higher education has experienced increased demands for accountability from citizens and government fueled in part by political distrust. Accountability mandates have been issued due to consumer concerns about the increasing price tag of higher education and by a broader, national inclination to demand from educational institutions an empirical accounting of their functions. In primary and secondary education, this trend is exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), a federal provision that requires states to create a system of K-12 teaching and learning assessments. In American higher education, an institutionally diverse and reasonably autonomous system, these calls for accountability have come from state governments, foundations, and the general public. Accountability initiatives focused on undergraduate teaching and learning include the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Boyer Commission's “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities,” the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's “2010 Measuring Up: State by State Report,” the Pew Charitable Trust’s “National Survey of Student Engagement,” and “value-added” regional accreditation criteria and assessment measures enacted by state governments. Despite its lack of direct oversight and authority over higher education, the federal government and recent presidential administrations have also made attempts to put forward accountability directives. For example,
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To better appreciate the current tensions that arise from accountability directives and the American university's mission, it is important to first recognize the historic construction of American liberal-democratic sentiments as they apply to higher education. Particularly in the American democratic context, the ideals of liberalism and the democratic impulse for social egalitarianism inform the creation and evolution of our aims for social institutions like the university, as well as the expectations imposed on and demanded of the university by external communities—for example, government and society. These challenges to the autonomy of the university also prompt and encourage internal university authorities to create their own set of reporting procedures to appease external authority. These accountability systems imposed by internal authorities such as boards of trustees, presidents, provosts, and other administrators, can challenge faculty autonomy and, ultimately, the freedom of individual student learners.

Broadly conceived, the liberal principle of positive freedom (autonomy) has been positioned against negative freedom (external restraint and coercion) as the historic struggle in American democratic society, and accordingly in its social organizations like the university. Not surprisingly then, throughout its evolution and advancement the American university has wrestled with and responded to this tension. But as Hollinger (1996) reminds us, there is no logical or conceptual contradiction between liberal principles and democratic arrangements that can account for the tension. So what can be the source of the tension and its bearing on the university?

In the U.S., the university is rooted in liberal society's historic need to protect the principle of freedom (autonomy), whether individual, collective or
At the time of the initial professionalization of the academic field in the early 20th century, the American academic was characterized by his medieval, vocational DNA and his advancement to Humboldtian professionalism. First monastic tutors in the colonial colleges and then researcher-scholars in the university, the American university faculty evolved in conjunction with the university. Accordingly, the professionalization of both the faculty and university did not really take shape until the late 19th to early 20th centuries (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Carrying the “main burden of the college” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 28), faculty organized their professional identity as trustworthy knowledge experts in service to the public through teaching and scholarly production. As the linchpin in the American university’s social contract embedded in which are liberal values and democratic imperatives, the academic held a unique position in American society in the Transformative Era, 1870–1944 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The American academic profession, as all expert classes that are essential for the enlightenment of the public and government authorities in a democratic society, was charged with the work of the liberal-democratic public through free inquiry and knowledge transmission that is the outcome of special expertise. Their identity as self-directed and self-governing professionals developed in this era largely as a campaign conducted by “reform-minded academics” sympathetic to (and some the authors of) the “moderate Progressive movement” of the period (Schrecker, 2009, p. 522). In the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, academic leaders like John Dewey thought that the social conditions brought about by individualism and laissez-faire nation-building exacted service that employed “effective intelligence” or knowledge relevant to social concerns in order to renew liberalism and ensure democratic progress (Dewey, 1927/1946). With the unprecedented growth in graduate training and research, and the
John Dewey’s Pragmatic hope for a democratic association of professionals was dashed principally by two interconnected developments in the Transformative Era—professional specialization and institutional expansion—and their outcomes. Faculty’s quest for autonomy melded with the intensification of disciplinary specialization, resulting in a zealous autonomy that bred administrative distrust and public suspicion. University expansion amplified the attention paid by industrialists, legislators, and other segments of the public to the research function of the faculty and brought to the university values ultimately antithetical to the liberal freedoms faculty had considered necessary. To Pragmatists like Dewey, these were ironic manifestations of the faculty’s illiberal judgment (their failure to communicate their liberal purposes to the public as the condition for their professional autonomy) and the acceptance of corporate capitalist values by institutional administrators (presidents’ and trustees’ desire for unfettered growth and institutional efficiency). Dewey also recognized these forces as threats to academic freedom, arguing that the combination of the centralization of university administration, its increasing materialism, and growing faculty specialization would reduce communication between the faculty, administration and the public (Hogan & Karier, 1978–9). Limiting communication would kindle distrust and suspicion. These forces, in Dewey’s Pragmatic view, endangered “the spirit of inquiry and expression of truth” that was essential to maintain the university’s public mission (Dewey, 1902/1978, p. 65). Together with their interrelated effects, faculty’s professional specialization and institutional expansion in the Transformative Era compose the foundational context of future accountability challenges.

In this chapter, I will examine the faculty’s pursuit of professional autonomy and disciplinary specialization as formative conditions of the faculty’s professional
The primary purpose of John Dewey's address to the Association of American Universities (AAU) on August 27, 1915, was to present to this organization of administrators the rationale for the foundation of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Dewey's speech to the AAU presidents focused on the "monopoly" of university authority held by university trustees which was, in his view, a breach of the university's autonomy and by extension, a threat to the university's public mission. His proposal to the university presidents in attendance emphasized the need for shared governance as a means for enacting democratic communication between institutional leaders, trustees, and faculty and the need for faculty autonomy in the selection and dismissal of faculty, both necessary conditions for the preservation of the university's liberal mission (Dewey, 1915/1979b). In Dewey's mind, at the heart of faculty's desire for greater autonomy, a share in academic policy making, and professional protections was faculty's vocational character. Because faculty represented "the teaching interests," Dewey (and other faculty) reasoned that they would find "mutual sympathy and cooperation" with university presidents. As representatives of "primarily the administrative interests" of universities, presidents had "many matters of common interest" with faculty and it stood to reason that each professional organization would be mutually supportive (p. 116).

Dewey's appeal on behalf of the newly formed AAUP was grounded in the sentiment of the era. In that moment in the modern research university's history, faculty was more concerned with the power and influence of university trustees than with presidential "administrative" power. In principle, presidential power was assumed to be reasonable in the administration and management of the university's managerial functions. Faculty's real anxiety was about the influence and tangible authority of trustees over curricular issues and the
Commenting on the higher education in the UK, sociologist Martin Trow (1994/2010) observed that conservative governments like Margaret Thatcher's had used managerialism to gain more control over universities and did so by attaching government funding to external assessments of teaching and research. Along with this accountability measure, the privatization of public assets and anti-labor-union policies also typified Thatcher's conservative policies in the 1980s. Its American ideological and historical parallel took the form of Reaganomics—deregulation, reduction of federal spending, tax reform—all playing a role in the launching of the new “Gilded Era” in the US (McHugh, 2006). For the American research university, the era was one characterized by the weakening of the academic profession and the deepening of the authority of university presidents and chief administrators, and the expanded power of new market forces (Trow, 1988). These cultural and political conditions had their formative start in the Transformative Era and matured into our 21st-century tribulations in the university—privatization, corporatization, and accountability.

In the decades between the enactment of Reagan administration policies and the cultivation of conservative politics that characterized the US in the 1980s, federal, economic, and social forces provided the nutrients for the cultivation of Transformative Era ideas in the university. Burnham (1941) noted that the origins of managerial practices are significant in part because they give us a view of their essential framework and the nature of their composition. The Progressive New Deal policies and politics of the late 1930s and 1940s made possible the “Golden Age” of American higher education. Post-World War II policies brought yet another wave of institutional expansion largely due to the increases in federal funding allocated to higher education for research (a phenomenon that
To name causes for a state of affairs is not to excuse it. Things are justified or condemned by their consequences, not by their antecedents. To discover causes is to indicate the points at which endeavor is to be directed if the situation is to be changed.

(Dewey, 1924/1976b, p. 209)

In 1924 John Dewey concerned himself with the “peculiar conditions under which higher education originated in the United States” and the challenges that faced the liberal university in that second decade of the twentieth century (Dewey, 1924/1976b, p. 205). Dewey correctly recognized that “the influence of American fetishes of size and expansion” were given primacy to the detriment of “free inquiry and teaching” (p. 206). Later in the decade, Dewey argued for a re-examination, clarification, and deepening of our understanding of democracy in order to construct the “Great Community” in which the “phantom” public would be re-empowered to actively participate in society and its continuous evolution (1927/1946).

In the spirit of Dewey’s Pragmatism, the previous pages have argued for a revisiting of the founding principles of the modern university and the academic profession in order to reassert the democratic imperatives constitutive of the mission of the university and the identity of the faculty. Like the enactments of American democracy, the university and the faculty often adapted to conditions in ways that served more immediate needs but that had harmful enduring and far-reaching effects. Our challenge now is to employ Pragmatic sensibility to new sets of problems and to find new responses to improve the American university’s and faculty’s common capacity to work against those habits that have