

Universities must think global

By Lee Bollinger

FT.com site; Nov 13, 2003

At the beginning of the 20th century, Nicholas Murray Butler launched his astonishing 43-year tenure as president of Columbia University by defining the modern research university. "In these modern days," he said, "the university is not apart from the activities of the world, but in them and of them. It deals with real problems and it relates itself to life as it is."

In 1902, American universities were entering a century of growth and significance that would have been unimaginable then, perhaps even to Butler. Yet he sensed that the university could not function as a private sanctuary operated for the benefit of the few admitted to it. Universities were a public trust with a role to play in world affairs. Consequently "every legitimate demand for guidance, for leadership, for expert knowledge, for trained skill, for personal service, it is the . . . duty of the university to meet". There was no place for what Butler called "academic aloofness". Scholarship had to be tied to human needs.

The world is forever changing and raising new problems. A great university, accordingly, must continually reorient itself as the world turns. My sense is that we are at a point when a significant reorientation must occur - in what we teach and research and in how we conceive of engagement with the world. The changes over the past decade - the end of the cold war, the emergence of new forms of mass communication, expansion of trade and markets, experiments with democracy, conflicts

over the deepest of human beliefs and intermixing of peoples and cultures on an unprecedented scale - all these and more have ushered in a world of baffling complexity.

Yet not enough of the extraordinary resources of our great universities are directed towards understanding these global phenomena. There are several reasons. First, so much of what one pays attention to depends on whose interests are regarded as being at stake. And we still define ourselves largely by the nation of which we are part. Universities should take a more encompassing perspective on humanity's interests. Second, many fields (economics and political science come to mind) devote too many intellectual resources to creating abstract models that are far removed from the pressing questions of the time or relevant only to particular (usually developed) societies. Third, the method of studying international issues that was developed after the second world war, largely through so-called area studies programmes, needs to be revised. The study of regions must be linked to the broader study of globalisation.

The pressing importance of issues of globalisation will, one hopes, provide a force for change. I have seen this happen in my own field. I am a scholar and teacher of the first amendment rights of freedom of speech and press. On any big law school faculty today, I would be one of more than a dozen specialists in some aspect of US constitutional law. Fifty years ago, this was not the case. A handful would teach a single course on constitutional law. But, as the era of constitutionalism flourished in the late 1950s and 1960s, expertise in constitutional law subdivided the field. This should happen in law schools and throughout

the university with the process of globalisation.

Were I teaching today, I would feel compelled to expand my focus to some of the vital global questions (what, for example, is the relationship between a free press and free markets?). But there should also be an emphasis on new global issues, as there was several decades ago with constitutional law. Typically, a law school will have only one or two faculty members who think about international trade law and policy. Yet few areas of human organisation are as significant.

As this happens, and it surely will, it is important to maintain the particular academic stance that defines the modern university and justifies its existence. Butler was right to reject "aloofness". While we cannot order a faculty to study this or that, we must nevertheless be self-critical and aware of the tendency to drift into intellectual solipsism. It is seductive to work on the most fundamental questions, but not all of us can or should do so.

Yet, by becoming too involved with contemporary issues, we risk duplicating the efforts of other actors outside the university and abandoning the vital role of trying to see the forest as well as the trees. Above all, too close an engagement risks turning the university into a partisan, debating society. It is an ideal, but one worth holding on to, that the university nurtures an intellectual character that enjoys the imaginative process of considering all perspectives on any given issue.

Thus, as we reorient our modern universities and turn our focus more towards the extraordinary happenings on the global stage, we must bear

in mind the fine line between being too much a part "of the activities of the world" and being too "aloof" from them.

The writer is president of Columbia University