

9-23-1982

## A Terrible Business

Richard Warch  
*Lawrence University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses\\_president](https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president)

Part of the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

### Recommended Citation

Warch, Richard, "A Terrible Business" (1982). *Presidential Addresses*. 3.  
[https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses\\_president/3](https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president/3)

This Convocation is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Addresses by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact [colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu](mailto:colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu).

"A TERRIBLE BUSINESS"

Several weeks ago, in my request to faculty for annual reports, I quoted a passage from Richard Merrill's recent book, Teaching Values in College. The theme of that book, more than the title of this address, reveals the broad topic I want to raise with you this morning. The source of my title will become apparent in a few moments. For now, let me simply say the the broad topic has to do with issues of integrity, truth, and values in higher education.

The immediate provocation for this speech was a conversation with Dean Lauter in which he remarked on the increasing number of cases heard by the Lawrence Honor Council in recent years. In fact, the number of cases has doubled from 1971-72 to 1981-82. That observation, of course, could be made about American colleges and universities generally and is graphically illustrated by an episode two years ago at the University of Maryland. As students prepared to use the multiple exits to leave a large examination room, all doors but one were closed and locked. As the students filed out the remaining exit, they were stopped for an i.d. check designed to ferret out "ringers" who had taken the exam for other students. The Maryland sting operation rounded up several such ringers and constituted the university's most dramatic response to what had become a serious epidemic of cheating.

The Maryland case was but a dramatic instance of what has become a pervasive phenomenon in higher education. In the 1950's, Tom Lehrer earned fame and fortune on his witty lyrics, "plagiarize, plagiarize, let no one's work evade your eyes" but in the 1980's this is no longer a

laughing business. In various surveys taken in 1980, one-third of the students at Princeton, Dartmouth, Amherst, and Johns Hopkins admitted to cheating at least once and two-thirds of the undergraduates at Stanford confessed to plagiarizing papers. On some campuses, students have broken into computer files to alter grades while off campus a new service industry has emerged to sell pre-written term papers on a wide variety of topics. One such company, currently under investigation by the U.S. Postal Service, had over 10,000 essays for sale and advertised them in college newspapers as "a solution at last to the student's term paper problems."

These forms of dishonesty have, at the same time, been accompanied by other, no less serious episodes. The theft and/or destruction of books has reached such proportions that some large institutions are suffering losses in the millions of dollars annually. In our community, similar behavior appeared to occur with alarming frequency last year with books taken from both the library and from students at Downer or in the halls.

Undergraduates are not the only culprits here. It was recently reported that the man nominated to be the state education commissioner in New Jersey had turned in a 121-page doctoral thesis, 66 pages of which were lifted verbatim from seven sources with no attribution or acknowledgment. To make matters even more ludicrous, the man defended the practice by labeling his graduate program "experimental" and referring to his dissertation as a "major departure from a strictly scholarly approach." It surely merits that assessment, as well as a few others. Like deceitful.

Blatant deceit of this sort has occurred in the upper reaches of academe as well. In a celebrated case that began in 1979, it was determined after an extensive scientific audit that two Yale professors had plagiarized

a research paper; further investigation uncovered the fact that one of them had engaged in fudging, fabrication, and widespread destruction of laboratory data. To date, eleven papers have been retracted from the scientific literature; two hitherto promising and productive careers in science have been aborted.

These examples are distressing enough, but what is equally appalling is the way in which people have responded to this wrong-doing. Students have rationalized their cheating by referring to the pressures of a tight job market, of graduate school admission standards, or family expectations of achievement. Academic professionals make similar claims, with one of the Yale researchers claiming that his actions "were done in the midst of significant pressure to publish these data as fast as possible so as to obtain priority." Fabrication and plagiarism were employed in order to achieve recognition and results.

What we have, in large part, is a situation in which the motivation and justification for intellectual accomplishment are extrinsic to the academic enterprise itself. The enterprise itself is not perceived as inherently worthwhile and honorable but is seen merely to be a means to some other ends. And it is in service to or out of fear of those other ends that individuals seem prepared to cheat. If plagiarizing a paper will elevate my grade, enhance my GPA, raise my class rank, and thereby improve my credentials for some post-graduate position, then plagiarize I will. There is, of course, a lazy version of this same instinct which accepts cheating--by copying a paper or even buying one--simply because it is easier than working on one's own.

The result is a cavalier and utilitarian view of honesty. When ulterior motives prevail or when the opportunity to cut corners

arises, the activity of the moment--be it a paper, an examination, or an experiment--loses its absolute and inherent meaning and takes on a relative one. It is shaped not by a set of values pertaining to the activity, but by its relationship to some other desideratum.

This situation perhaps should distress us more than it surprises us. For the extent to which intellectual activity is perceived to have no intrinsic worth, to the extent to which higher education is viewed simply and solely as a path to some job, the values embedded in intellectual activity and academic inquiry will be ignored or denigrated. The problem, I believe, is not that students don't understand the provisions of the Honor Code, but that they have not been led to appreciate the fundamental nature of what we do in the university.

Writing in 1968, Douglas Heath expressed this nature well. "Intellectual activity," he argued, "requires honesty, objectivity, openness to alternatives, flexibility, humility, respect for dissenting views, and so on. Associated with intellectual activity is an ethic about what is appropriate intellectual activity. A person who fabricates or distorts information, consciously ignores contradictory data, plagiarizes the work of others, and interprets information to fit some purpose other than truth loses the trust and respect of others. A liberal education must educate for the ethic of truth if it is not to produce intellectual psychopaths."

The ethic of truth is, by its very nature and essence, a demanding and embracing ethic. It is the ethic which gives rise to the principle of academic freedom. And at Lawrence, it is the ethic from which our Honor Code is derived. The Honor Code expresses our communal commitment to the academic virtue of the ethic of truth; the Code does not create

that commitment but only embodies it. Ideally, we should pledge allegiance to that Code and to the ethic for which it stands. Unhappily, however, students too often misunderstand the Honor Code as simply a set of rules and procedures for writing papers, conducting experiments, and taking tests. Thus, students often fail to connect the nature of a violation to the larger principle that is at stake. To fail to cite sources or to paraphrase another's argument without giving proper acknowledgment is not just to transgress some arcane technical procedure invented by fusty intellectuals. It is to damage the very spirit, purpose, and value of intellectual inquiry. Hence, plagiarism, cheating, and deception do not merely violate the Honor Code, but they destroy the integrity of the community. The Honor Code, then, is not only an institutional device; it represents a personal requirement and responsibility for the community's well-being.

Our concern with Honor Code violations is legitimate, but we must not give in to the simple seduction of assuming that the problem is merely one of student deceit in response to ulterior motives or so-called academic pressure. The problem here may have other sources, among them the failure of colleges and universities to be more explicit and forward in proclaiming and enacting the larger purposes of their enterprise.

Let me try to elaborate that potentially obscure and complex statement. Fundamentally, the root question that informs higher education has to do with what it means to be human. The claims of and for such education--especially liberal education--often transcend, even disregard, the curricular structure of colleges and universities. Here are a few examples: to wit, Herbert Spencer: "Education has for its object the formation of character"; to wit, William Mather Lewis: "Education is not concerned primarily with intellectual luxuries, but with elements which make the individual a valuable member

of society"; to wit, the Lawrence catalogue of 1934: "The ultimate purpose [of Lawrence] is the establishment and improvement of standards--standards of thought and expression, of taste and interest, of character and ethics, of health and sane living."

These statements, and the many others like them that can be adduced to make the point, suggest a concern with the consequences of education that relate not so much to intelligence as to character and citizenship. In short, they relate to questions of the nature of being human and of being members of a civic or even global community. Usually, however, such claims are made at the beginning and at the end of a student's college experience and are rarely invoked or addressed throughout it. The dilemma for us today is that the university has become so fragmented into divisions, departments, and disciplines that these larger claims for education can become at least diffused and at worst abandoned.

In one important respect, of course, this diffusion is explicable even as the abandonment is lamentable. It is explicable for all sorts of right reasons, among them the growing methodological sophistication of the disciplines and the attending specialization of academic research. We have assuredly gained much, in knowledge and insight, by these developments. But accompanying them is the insidious temptation--at least as perceived from the perspective of the liberal arts college--for the teacher or student to be drawn further and deeper into areas of restricted and rarified disciplinary technique and interest and hence away from the broader questions and concerns that affect us as humans.

Graduate schools often, maybe usually, perpetuate this mentality and treat this temptation as a blessing. And for some years now, Lawrence has recognized that it cannot take its clues regarding its mission and style

from those graduate programs which seem bent on producing Ph.D.s who know more and more about less and less and whose idea of teaching is little different from cloning. What we have been faced with, Alston Chase wrote, are academics who, "having received a highly specialized schooling in graduate school, regarded themselves as specialists training other specialists in the same field. Thus a professor of philosophy would teach philosophy to students who would become teachers of philosophy, and so on, apparently forever." That definition of teaching runs precisely counter to the aims of liberal education.

W. Jackson Bate, in a recent article on "The Crisis in English Studies," spoke to a similar point. Bate criticized the consequences of excessive specialization in the field, especially as it relates to the narrowing of interest and expertise, the accompanying emphasis on mastery of minute subareas, and the resulting loss of range and breadth. At the end of his essay, Bate calls for a return to a broader, more humanistic vision. "Most intelligent people," he writes, "do occasionally ask what life is all about. Of course, this can be overdone, and we end in paralysis. Yet if English Studies [and we might extend his claim here to encompass the liberal arts and science disciplines collectively] say that these questions are not only unanswerable but not even worth asking, they are flying the white flag of surrender."

Bate's caution is worth heeding. What it suggests is that it is possible for the professional preoccupations of a discipline's practitioners to blunt the discipline's connections with the objects and topics it is supposed to illuminate and with the questions of meaning and purpose that students might properly ask. My own field of American Studies may well be among the more culpable here. For the past few decades the literature of the

field has contained books and articles attempting to theorize about American Studies, seeking to legitimize the field, trying to define and describe its methodology. This pursuit passed beyond the sublime several years ago when some scholars began constructing elaborate theories of "interdisciplinarity"-- a bogus word which was a fitting description of what had become a bogus quest. Exploring the American experience in its many facets had been subsumed to a more abstract and arcane search for disciplinary legitimacy.

Beyond what might be styled the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the disciplines, higher education today suffers from another tendency that helps to explain our present situation. As Richard Morrill has argued, we too often adopt a view of the student that assumes that as a learner he or she is split between reason and emotion, knowledge and action, cognition and affection, and lives in a world in which facts are separated from values. If and where this view dominates, higher education can become an arena in which questions of morality, ethics, and values have no standing since they are consigned precisely to that part of the learner not addressed in the classroom. When values are excluded from intellectual discourse or academic inquiry, they are located in the realms of emotion on the one hand or personal preference on the other and thus beyond the purview of education. Values, then, become an expression of one's feelings or opinions and are neither counted nor challenged in the learning process.

There is no easy remedy for this situation and any effort to address this issue is likely to illustrate the observation and warning of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. "Values," he wrote. "A terrible business. You can at best stammer when you talk about them." Well, it may be time for us to stammer. It may be time for us to open ourselves to explorations of values, not to set out to establish or even seek uniformity of values but at least to admit issues of

values and ethics to a central place in our academic community.

Put in another way, we should not only tolerate but even embrace questions of personal commitment in our teaching and learning. This mode, of course, once permeated Lawrence and other independent colleges and universities, either in the form of explicitly religious convictions or of clearly-stated rules of behavior and conduct. I am not suggesting that we attempt to recapture that mode. But I do think that we need to examine the contours and consequences of our present state in which we eschew questions of personal commitment, avoid questions of morality and ethics, and adopt a kind of relativistic posture toward values. As a result, we invite a timidity about such matters that bodes ill for our aspirations regarding character and citizenship.

Last year I heard an anecdote that illustrates this point. In an introductory philosophy course, the instructor was attempting to alert the students to the kinds of issues and forms of inquiry that the class would be confronting. "OK," the professor said, "how many of you believe in God?" Not one student raised a hand. "All right, then," the professor went on, "how many of you don't believe in God?" Again, not one student raised a hand. Turning to a student in the front row, the professor said "Look. Either you believe in God or you don't believe in God. Which is it?" And the student replied, "I don't know. I wasn't in class yesterday." It may have been at this same college where the dean distributed a survey asking if students were prepared to make commitments. Five percent responded yes and five percent answered no.

This indeed may be timidity, but we find similar behavior appearing in the guise of intellectual sophistication. I can recall this kind of situation in divinity school where practically every statement uttered about the

Bible or the faith was prefaced with "Bultmann says" or "Brunner argues" or "Barth claims" so that what was being forwarded was almost always cloaked in the language of some distant and/or dead European theologian and never in the words or out of the conviction of the speaker. Thus, if the statement was challenged, the speaker was not implicated; Bultmann, Brunner, or Barth was. Hence, discussions and conversations often became little more than intellectual party-games of quoting third-party authorities back and forth. One of my professors articulated a principled rationale for this activity by asserting that his role was to be sure that students could identify the furniture of the household of faith, but not to concern himself with whether or not they used that furniture or were members of the household.

In an important respect, of course, we applaud this kind of scholarly objectivity and non-doctrinaire approach. To educate is not to indoctrinate and that holds for religious belief, political ideology, or personal conviction. At the same time, however, we do not want to lapse unwittingly into the position where we are subtly indoctrinating students to consider value judgments as intellectually below the salt. We do not want our fealty to objectivity to banish value questions to the nether realm of idiosyncratic preference. We often find, I think, that in our discourse in the university, the ultimate put-down, the all-time showstopper, the true mark of erudition is to look someone who has just commented on the worthiness or unworthiness of an idea or project stone cold dead in the eye and say, with just a hint of a sneer, "that's a value judgment." And everybody else nods sagely and sympathetically, pitying the poor blighter who has just exposed himself to be so egregiously un-academic.

Here is a classic illustration of treating values as simply personal preferences, as merely matters of opinion. It is an emanation of the relativizing tendency that is embedded in higher education today in which matters of

judgment, taste, and value are either denied or else treated as ancillary. What we create, therefore, is a situation in which judgment gives way to opinion, taste to preference, and value to feeling. When questions of values and of human significance have no standing in academic and intellectual pursuits, or when they are admitted only as a way of illustrating that there are competing values to be considered--that right and wrong fall under the same category of "it all depends"--then we have said that such questions really don't matter, are apart from our central preoccupations, and are in fact matters of opinion, preference, and feeling.

I am obviously not suggesting that the solution is to impose values as an ingredient of instruction or to test for values on examinations. I am arguing that questions of human significance--of judgment, taste, and value--should not be precluded from our teaching and learning. The challenge, I believe, is to seek and steer a middle course between routinized relativism on the one side and intellectual indoctrination on the other. We need to rediscover the capacity to ask of ourselves and each other the devastating question "So what?" and to confront vexing issues of values and human concern squarely, honestly, and openly.

In a fine speech to the entering students last Sunday, Illene Noppe made reference to the work of William Perry, who argued that during the college experience, students move from a position of moral absolutism to one of moral relativism, a move which Perry views as salutary. It is worth noting, however, that Perry also claims that there is a further move past moral relativism to a posture of personal affirmation of certain truths and values. The question for us, I would suggest, is to ask whether students move along this spectrum as a matter of course or whether there is anything in the teaching-learning process or in the college environment which assists or

promotes their doing so. My suspicion is, first, that we have collectively paid little heed to this question. My concern is, second, that insofar as we have considered the question, we may be assuming the former answer when we should have been worrying about the latter. In short--and to repeat--I do not think that our aspirations for the development of character and citizenship should be expressed only as prologue and afterword to a Lawrence education; they should be in the text as well.

The refusal to consider and address these matters in our teaching and learning may be one of liberal education's chief liabilities. As President Frank Rhodes of Cornell University has pointed out, liberal education often tends to emphasize qualities of "liberation from" without paying sufficient attention to questions of "liberation for." "Liberation from certain things is a means and not an end," he wrote. "Its purpose is to allow informed commitment rather than rootless abstention. Our colleges today are more successful in challenging assumptions than in encouraging conclusions, more concerned with analysis than synthesis. This reflects the temper of the age but it has its dangers, for a liberal education, narrowly conceived, can turn a man or woman into a permanent critic, a convinced cynic, a detached observer of society, rather than a persuaded participant."

As aims of education, informed commitment, conclusions, and synthesis are compatible with attention to judgment, taste, and values in our teaching and learning. How this is to be accomplished in given cases needs our thought and attention. That it can enliven and enrich our mission seems to me a hope that we all should share. There is a marvelous passage in Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance in which the author/teacher confronts his English class after he gave an assignment on "What is quality in thought

and statement?" He writes:

The atmosphere was explosive. Almost everyone seemed as frustrated and angered as he had been by the question. "How are we supposed to know what quality is?" they said. "You're supposed to tell us!" Then he told them he couldn't figure it out either and really wanted to know. He had assigned it in the hope that somebody would come up with a good answer.

That ignited it. The roar of indignation shook the room. Before the commotion had settled down another teacher had stuck his head in the door to see what the trouble was.

"It's all right," Phaedrus said. "We just accidently stumbled over a genuine question, and the shock is hard to recover from."

Perhaps we will not create shocks as dramatic as Pirsig's fictive one. But perhaps too we should begin to consider ways to register something on the classroom Richter scale. Professor David Price of Duke University provides a direction for us here in his discussion of courses in ethics and public policy. Such a course, he argues, "should sensitize students to their own value commitments and to those embedded in the ideological and cultural premises they accept and the analytical techniques they employ. It should also force them to consider alternative, competing values and perspectives. But I am reluctant to leave it at that: students should move beyond the appreciation of complexity to making and justifying some of the hard ethical choices that must, in fact, be made. It is critically important to move beyond 'laying values out on the table' to precise ethical argument and analysis."

Price's point is suggestive, not prescriptive. Precise ethical argument and analysis may not be the strategy for every situation. But

whether one is confronting hard ethical choices in public policy, or issues of personal identity in psychology, or questions about beauty in art or literature, or problems of environmental consequences in the sciences, we need to admit questions of value to the arena of discussion and debate. The moral arguments of a poem, the social implications of a political system, the ethical consequences of a scientific technique, and the human significance of our responses should have a place in our classrooms and dormitory rooms. To deny that place is to relinquish any claim or attempt to link thought and action, knowing and doing. It is to bifurcate ourselves in ways wholly contradictory to our larger intentions and ambitions that liberal learning develop character, inform citizenship, and improve standards.

So I would hope that our collective commitment to the ethic of truth and our mutual openness to issues of value and human significance will become evident characteristics of this special place, the Lawrence community. Rather than focus our attention on the provisions of our Honor Code, we should instead express our commitment to the ethic of truth that undergirds it. That is a value which informs our doing and perhaps by our devotion to that value we can begin the process of receptivity to other values and, in our teaching, and learning and living together enhance and extend the quality of our lives, individually and together, within and beyond the university. Then may Lawrence be a place that embodies the assertion of Plutarch, that "the very spring and root of honesty and virtue lie in good education."

"Values. A terrible business. You can at best stammer when you talk about them." Wittgenstein was right. Values are a terrible business and I have no doubt stammered. But I invite all of us to stammer, students and faculty alike, in classrooms and at lunchtables, in offices and in residence halls. Silence is easy. But stammering is at least speech, and we should care

enough for each other and for our university to talk with one another--to  
stammer together--about values.