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## **THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN SOCIETY: EXCEPTIONAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS OR ENGAGED INTERDISCIPLINARY NEIGHBORS?**

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Joseph Pitt is a faculty member in Virginia Tech's philosophy department. He has written on dangers facing the University. In doing so, he joins a significant body of scholarship on that topic, including John Henry Newman in the 1850's, Clark Kerr in the 1960's, and Jaroslav Pelikan in the 1990's. Pitt identifies four specific 'dangers' that imperil the American Research University. He describes the fourth danger as a "lack of faculty engagement in the public realm" (2008, 1).<sup>47</sup> In response to this danger, he urges faculty to rise to the role of public intellectuals.

In this essay, I question both the spirit and the substance of Pitt's recommendations and argue that a better way to think about the role of the University's faculty, staff, and students in society is as 'engaged interdisciplinary neighbors'.

First, I critique the spirit of Pitt's recommendations. His essay contains a troubling theme of faculty exceptionalism. Pitt, for example, names students and faculty as the two essential components for a university (2008, 4). Faculty members are the sources and producers of knowledge, the guardians of our cultural heritage. Students are relegated to a passive role, as recipients of knowledge from the faculty, the caretakers of knowledge. The threats to the university, for Pitt, are mostly threats to faculty. He cites peripatetic administrators arriving with agendas and wielding their powers with little regard for institutional culture or consequences. Pitt attributes this disregard to a desire to move on to more prominent posts at other institutions.

Pitt reserves the work of institution-building for faculty and academic administrators. Pitt separates administration into academic and non-academic

groupings. By academic administration, he refers to, “the likes of department chairs, deans, provosts, and maybe even presidents. They are responsible for ensuring the success of the threefold mission of preserving, creating, and transmitting knowledge.” (2008, 11)

By non-academic administration, Pitt refers to “registrars, comptrollers, vice presidents for facilities, vice presidents for finance, etc. These folks are responsible for keeping the books, making sure the buildings don't fall down, and maintaining records. They are essential support personnel.”(2008, 11) Not only does Pitt relegate a very large contingent to the supporting cast, albeit an essential one, he warns against heeding these lesser elements:

Things go wrong, however, when the demands of the support staff takes precedence over the academic job. When, for example, the registrar's perceived need to process grades quickly results in a deadline for faculty to turn in final grades that does not give faculty ample time to grade final exams carefully and to compute final grades fairly.... When the support staff is allowed to arrange things for their convenience rather than in terms of academic importance, the students lose. And with respect to nonacademic administrators, that is all I want to say (2008, 11).

The undercurrent of faculty exceptionalism permeates Pitt's essay. He places faculty on quite a pedestal, as guardians of our cultural heritage. Pitt calls on faculty to be cultural guardians, knowledge producers, institution builders, and public intellectuals. This is problematic on a number of levels.

The modern American Research University is a place of increasing permeability and fluidity. Faculty, who Pitt lauds as guardians of knowledge, may not actually teach, or may only teach one or two courses per semester. So-called support personnel increasingly teach and engage in knowledge creation. Students, even undergraduates, are also often co-researchers, producers of knowledge. Graduate students are also



Beyond the spirit of exceptionalism, the substance of Pitt's solution is problematic. He fails to clearly state the meaning of "public intellectual". Richard Posner in his study of public intellectuals cites a lack of clarity around the term as well as a, "striking variance in the quality of public-intellectual work, coupled with a low average-quality" (2003, 2-3).

While faculty have an important public role to play, that role cannot simply be spreading around "expertise", like a gardener spreading so much manure. Posner urged caution in bemoaning the decline of the public intellectual because, "...with the enormous expansion in universities in the twentieth century, and in the leisure, credentials, and financial security that a university appointment offers to anyone who wants to embark on a career as a public intellectual, few would-be public intellectuals will fail to seek such appointments" (2003, 33). In studying public intellectuals, Posner found that the world of the public intellectual might be best described as a kind of super-specialized academic marketplace, similar to the one Pitt depicts in his discussion of peripatetic administrators.

I concur with Pitt that Universities should be concerned with engaging with the greater public. For Pitt, however, universities equal faculty and engagement equals public intellectuals. Moreover, Pitt fails to clearly describe what he means by public intellectuals, to provide workable solutions for how faculty might take on this role, or to provide a more comprehensive basis for university-community engagement. This is insufficient and leads me to my final point.

Third, I argue that the role of public intellectual is ill-suited to most faculty and that a better metaphor for faculty, staff, and students of a university is that of an engaged interdisciplinary neighbor. My first work in higher education was in the service-learning and community outreach office of a small, private liberal arts college. Among other tasks that first year, I organized the annual Volunteer Fair, where representatives from community organizations came to campus, staffed tables, and met with potential student volunteers. The day was wrapping up. Paper plates and soda cans toppled from over-filled trash cans. I helped take down tables and carry boxes to cars. A





