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Walking the Walk --- The Reality of Ethics in the University Presidency

-- Elson Floyd --
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The university holds an exalted place in our society. Since the inception of higher education, the university has been seen as a place of morality and higher ethical standards. Because of the nature of our business -- that of learning, teaching, and gaining knowledge -- we place high value on rational thought, fairness, and principled behavior. Colleges and universities are built on moral obligations, ethical responsibilities and principles and codes of behavior. We are expected to encourage and promote ethical behavior and to exhibit such behavior in all of our actions.

A Carnegie study reinforced this ideal, stating that "universities have taught and practiced moral and civic virtues through our national history, have sought to advance the truth and have been devoted to public service. Their members often have served as the conscience of the nation. The academic virtues are a model for the conduct of society at large."

While such high regard and expectations are quite a compliment and privilege, they also bear a burden of awesome responsibility. As the president of a university, I am always critically aware of this responsibility and my own role in administering it. A university president not only provides academic and administrative leadership for the institution, but serves as its ethical leader as well. When hired to do this job, I was given a public trust and am held accountable -- not only to the Board of Trustees, but to the taxpayers, parents, students, alumni, and community members who support this University. I am accountable for the expenditures, activities, actions, and direction this University takes. I am accountable for the character of this organization. And I strongly believe that accountability can be a great motivator.

As former Suffolk University President Daniel Perlman said, "apart from a desire a president may have to build a more just, open, fair and
moral community, self-protection and self-interest alone will motivate
the president to monitor and elevate the university's ethical behavior."

It was not self-interest and self-protection I had in mind when I set
out to chart a new future for our University. But certainly at the heart of
my imperative was an ethical foundation. In trying to balance the multi-
ple responsibilities and accountabilities that come with this job, it is in-
evitable to run headlong into conflicting or competing values. Certainly
in my tenure thus far, I have had to weigh the desire to grow the Univer-
sity, with the knowledge that there are certain sensitivities and steward-
ship responsibilities that must be addressed regarding how we use our
land. Equally, I have been challenged by the need to improve teaching
and educational quality, while keeping college affordable and accessible
in an era of advancing technologies, diminishing public funds, rising en-
rollment, and rapidly changing public expectations.

While preparing this speech, I attempted to define my own ethical
philosophies and those I employ in my day-to-day dealings on behalf of
WMU. Because I deal with more than 27,000 students, 2,000 employ-
ees, and a community of more than 80,000, the utilitarian ethic of always
"doing the greatest good for the greatest number" may seem the way to
go.

Unfortunately, it is not that easy, and most certainly it is not that cut
and dried. Ethics are a personal matter and are about means as well as
ends. Moral action may not always yield good or even acceptable out-
comes, because we all know it is possible to do the right thing for the
wrong reasons and vice versa. What ethical action is ultimately about is
decision making, reasoning, and acting out of a perceived responsibility.
We are responsible for what we choose to do, and what we do includes
the way in which we choose to do things.

The ethical tenets that most fit what I purport to be and what I en-
courage this University to embrace are those found in virtue ethics. In-
tegrity has to do with the relationship between what one says and be-
lieves and the actions one takes. In the most simplistic terms, if you talk
the talk, then walk the walk. This is a personal philosophy I staunchly
stand by, and I strongly believe it goes for this University as well. Our
words and our actions are telling of our character. It is my intention that
this University will have a strong ethical character, be known for its in-
tegrity, and behave in a manner that reinforces those beliefs.
I have made a commitment to make this ethical character inherent in every aspect of the University's mission. I am determined to see that the University exhibits the most moral of character in the pursuit of our highest goals, three of which often tread on shaky ethical ground. It is the University's role in these pursuits and the ethical nature behind them that I plan to address with you this evening.

Western Michigan University is committed to being one of the nation's premier student-centered research institutions, a goal which often raises the question of whether teaching and research are mutually exclusive. I argue that ethically they cannot be; the University has a fiduciary responsibility to pursue excellence in both.

Improving community relations and making sure the University acts as a good citizen are mutually beneficial goals the University is ethically bound to strive for. Sometimes the needs of the University and the needs of its community seem to diverge, but we have the responsibility to make sure they come closer together in a way that is mutually beneficial.

The last area I will address is that of public-private partnerships and the ethical questions that come from academe aligning itself with the for-profit world. It is a relationship that no University can afford to neglect, but at the same time these relationships can present some moral challenges.

A student-centered research institution

From my first moments on campus, I have sought for Western Michigan University to be one of the nation's premier student-centered research institutions. This involves a commitment to scholarship, research, and teaching which I have heard from many people are goals that are simply incompatible. It has been said that resources -- both in terms of time, money, and human capital -- cannot be equally committed to quality scholarship and quality teaching. I beg to disagree. The University is morally bound to fulfill these dual roles and must do so without diminishing one over the other.

More and more, America's universities are looked to for the cutting-edge research that is saving lives, changing technology, and making advances in all aspects of our world from medicine to mechanical engineering. Donald Walker, the author of The Effective Administrator, points out that "the university is established by society to serve society's purposes. The campus is a service institution in the highest sense of that
terminology and is established by society because it provides needed and worthwhile services." In today's increasingly complex landscape, the university has found that the worthwhile services it provides includes teaching, scholarship, and research.

From the standpoint of research, the changing economic landscape means that fewer corporations are willing to take on the burden of intensive research on products, goods or services that may prove to be limited in potential profitability. One needs to only look at the lack of development for treatments of "orphan diseases," those disorders that impact only a small proportion of a population, such as progeria, which is a rare progressive disorder of childhood characterized by premature aging and shortened life. This disease, while devastating, affects only about 100 children in the United States.

Because progeria affects so few, does this make this disease unworthy of being investigated with the hope of finding a cure or treatment? Utilitarian ethics would advocate that spending research dollars on such a disease is not in the interest of the greatest good for the greatest number, and those dollars would be better spent studying heart disease or obesity. However, I believe that academia has a responsibility to further knowledge. We are uniquely positioned to be able to do so without regard to profit. We have a moral imperative to continue that process, not only because it could save lives, but also because there is no certainty on where such research could lead. Research on progeria could result in innovative findings on how humans age, leading to knowledge that can affect us all.

We cannot forget, however, that universities were established by societies to educate. And it is the educating, or teaching, that can often suffer in the interest of pursuing research. We will not allow this to be the case at Western Michigan University. Teaching is an enterprise that is afforded the highest ethical expectations; and once again, we have a fiduciary responsibility to provide education that is of high quality. A student-centered research institution is one where the student is not secondary to grants and scholarly pursuits but, instead, is at the center of all we do. We are here to teach more than knowledge based on the achievements of previous generations of scholars. As educator Charles Chambers noted, a significant number of young persons get their first chance to learn about the world on a university campus. It is at a univer-
sity that students frequently develop the mental capacities that will allow them to accept and initiate social change.

As we learn more from the research and scholarship that is pursued, we have an obligation to pass that knowledge on to our students. Knowledge should never be hoarded. For this reason, teaching, scholarship, and research truly go hand in hand. The quality of the education we provide increases as the quality of the research and scholarship of our faculty increases. Students will undoubtedly learn more from experts who are continuing to learn more themselves in the pursuit of scholarship. And as Kalamazoo College President James Jones recently pointed out at our Presidential Scholars convocation, the university also has the responsibility to teach students how to use that knowledge wisely.

In the community

As one of the largest employers and landholders in this community, Western Michigan University has an ethical obligation to be a good neighbor. I am committed to improving the University's relationship with the community. This is where the practice of virtue ethics is the most critical and the most visible. Our character is defined by what we say and believe and the actions we take. If we want to be perceived as a good neighbor, we must act like one.

As an example, the decisions we make on how we develop the land we own cannot be made in the isolation of the ivory tower. This community has a vested interested in developments at Asylum Lake, the Arboretum project, and Lee Baker Farm. We are a member of a community and region and without their support, our progress and success are severely limited. The decisions we make about the University's future facilities will affect traffic flow in residential neighborhoods, services provided for the citizens of Kalamazoo, and the economic development of not only the city of Kalamazoo, but also the entire region. That is why it is critical that we actively listen to our neighbors and civic officials and then act in good faith to address their concerns, all the while moving the University forward. And we will continue to do so. We cannot ask a community to listen and understand our concerns, if we do not do the same.
Public-private partnerships

Perhaps one of the higher education issues most fraught with the potential for ethical conflict is a university's pursuit of private-public partnerships.

I strongly maintain that universities and private industry must form strong collaborative relationships and we must strengthen our curricula to prepare our students to meet the needs of businesses and corporations. Many times corporate-educational linkages are opposed on the grounds that the University should not be corrupted by the influences of the for-profit sector. However, the University is not immune to the impact of the health and growth of our economy and plays a viable role in its vitality. Public-private partnerships are innovative means to meet the mutual needs of the educational and corporate sectors. More and more universities and corporations team up to share capital and operational costs in an effort to find and commit to common research goals.

Just last week, Procter & Gamble gave our Paper Technology Foundation the rights to a significant number of global patents for new technology that our University researchers will develop and commercialize. That donation, which recognized the quality of our paper science and engineering programs, provides examples of the very best benefits that accrue from University/industry cooperation.

The technology Western Michigan University will develop has the potential to bring huge savings to the packaging industry and decrease the number of trees required to produce pulp for shipping containers. It also may lead to a number of improved consumer products and it could significantly increase the market for Midwest farmers.

Not only will our researchers be involved in developing technology that will positively impact the economy and quality of life for the people we serve, but also they will be enhancing the knowledge base that they pass on to their students. Our students will gain experience in working with new technologies that will make them highly sought after by industry and other graduate programs. And if all of that is not enough, commercializing the technology will bring revenue that will be turned into scholarships that will dramatically increase student access to our paper engineering programs.

As I said, these are examples of the very best possible outcomes for a university/industry partnership.
The argument has been posed, however, that corporate influence can quell academic freedom and the free flow of information that is a hallmark of the university setting. Certainly, some collaborations are of a proprietary nature, and that raises issues about secrecy. In other cases, the university is asked to venture into ethically murky waters regarding the content of research efforts. Recently, Virginia Tech teamed up with PPL Therapeutics, the same organization that cloned Dolly the sheep, to produce cloned piglets. And while they celebrate the medical advances that can be made by their success in cloning the pigs, the ethical questions of cloning and its human implications loom large.

How does a university, in partnership in such controversial endeavors, not take a stand? Does it not make its position clear by participating in the research? Universities, by their nature, are committed to the pursuit of truth. In his 1979 Jefferson Lecture, Edward Shils pointed out that "although universities are often regarded as the means of providing for society's economic, scientific and technological needs, they have an existence independent of that as a purpose far higher. Their primary justification is, quite simply, the search for the truth."

By examining the implications of cloning and developing the methods to do so, the university researcher is seeking the truth about the implications of such revolutionary procedures. Those in opposition of such research on ethical grounds could argue that the ethical tenet of "first do no harm" is applicable to research of this nature. However, from a utilitarian standpoint, it can be said that potentially more good than harm will come from these endeavors. The organ and tissue transplant possibilities afforded by the development of this research can save up to more than 60,000 lives in the United States alone. But at the same time, animal and moral activists can argue that the potential for harm is great especially if you are the pig whose organs are to be harvested.

To be honest, these are ethical dilemmas that are still being negotiated within our society. There are no right or wrong answers. It is, however, incumbent on both leaders of the university and the private sector to find a comfortable common ground. Universities can pledge neutrality in some cases, but the fact remains that the worlds of higher education and corporations have become interdependent. A university that ignores these developments is not meeting its fiduciary responsibility to the society that supports it. Society depends on the pursuit of truth from the university community; if we walk away from issues because of their
controversial or questionable ethics, then we are not pursuing truth, only cowardice.

There is hardly an aspect of higher education that does not have a moral component. As this University moves forward in its agenda of progress and growth, ethical concerns will be dealt with on a daily basis. As a university president, my task as the ethical leader for the campus is not to try to achieve sainthood, but to mediate and arrive at creative solutions. A university's president plays a fundamental role in setting the attitudinal tone of a campus. It is my commitment and determination that this campus will have the kind of character and integrity that I expect of myself. No less. As I go, so goes the University.

It works in reverse as well; the University must engage in the kind of moral and ethical conduct that has been its historical role. As the University goes, so goes each and every one of us.

Sources Cited


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BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE
ELSON S. FLOYD

Dr. Elson S. Floyd became Western Michigan University’s sixth president August 1, 1998. Dr. Floyd brings a wide range of administrative experience to WMU as well as a systemwide and statewide perspective on higher education issues and policies.

For the three years prior to joining Western, Dr. Floyd served as executive vice chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In that role he served as UNC-Chapel Hill’s chief administrative and operating officer and the senior official responsible for business and finance, human resources, auxiliary enterprises, student affairs, information technology, university advancement and development, and enrollment management.

Dr. Floyd began his career at UNC-Chapel Hill, one of the nation’s leading research institutions, in 1978. He subsequently spent a total of 13 years with the university, in positions that included dean posts in the Division of Student Affairs, the General College and the College of Arts and Sciences.

From 1988 to 1990, he was assistant vice president for student services for the UNC system office, helping develop and articulate policy in student affairs and academic affairs for the 16-campus university system.

From 1990 to 1993, he served at Eastern Washington University as vice president for student services, vice president for administration, and executive vice president. In the latter capacity, he was the university’s chief operating officer.

Before returning to UNC-Chapel Hill in 1995, Dr. Floyd spent two years as executive director of the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board. This agency is responsible for statewide coordination, planning, oversight, policy analysis and student financial aid programs for Washington’s post-secondary education system.

A native of Henderson, N.C., Dr. Floyd has three degrees from UNC-Chapel Hill, a bachelor of arts degree in political science and in speech, a master of education degree in adult education, and a doctor of philosophy
degree in higher and adult education. He is a tenured faculty member in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology and in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership in WMU's College of Education.

Dr. Floyd is active in a number of civic and professional associations including Rotary International, United Way of America and Greater Kalamazoo, Borgess Health Alliance Board of Trustees, the Kalamazoo Symphony Board of Directors, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation Corporate Board, the Regional EDGE Board of Directors, and The Economic Club of Grand Rapids. He is actively involved in fund raising for Western Michigan University and select community projects and continues to write, present, and speak professionally.

Western Michigan University is a vibrant, nationally recognized student-centered research institution with an enrollment of more than 28,000.