

## **Ward Churchill, Duke Lacrosse and the New American Scholar**

Just over one hundred seventy years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his “American Scholar” address, urging his audience to explore such topics as “the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life” (61). Nowadays, Emerson’s idea of the scholar as a celebrant of the nation’s life and its people seems more like a chapter in our intellectual history than a viable model for the contemporary academic. Since the end of the Civil War, the scholar has been, like all other white-collar workers in our country, a professional, a specialist, an expert in a particular subject area. Most academics assume that the scholar’s duty is not to fellow citizens outside the walls of the university, but, first and foremost, to other like-minded researchers within the confines of an academic field.

Yet for all the quaintness of the “American Scholar” address when applied to the scholar’s present professional responsibilities, the spirit of that essay does continue to survive in higher education. Emerson was speaking to an elite audience at Harvard, instructing his listeners to find beauty and worth in people whom they might have previously ignored or dismissed. Since the end of the Civil War, a central project in American higher education has been not so much to find the poetry in such people, but to include them in the university community. We elevate not by lyricizing about the public, but by educating them.

This is the promise of inclusion that the American research university has, at least in word, been extending to all citizens for over a century now. Those with intelligence and a willingness to study hard can enter the university and catapult themselves into the

leadership class. In theory, higher education produces a citizenry that is upwardly mobile and knowledgeable enough in the majority to make good decisions about the direction of our society.

The problem is that the university hasn't been living up to this mission. As leaders in higher education have begun recognizing, the American university is suffering from an inclusion problem. According to the National Center for Education's 2003 report on the *The Condition of Education*, only 30 percent of all 1988 eighth-graders in the U.S. had completed a bachelor's degree in 2000. Of these same 1988 eighth-graders, only 7 percent of students with low socio-economic status (SES) earned a bachelor's degree, compared with 60 percent of students with high SES. If we shift our measure of inclusion to enrollment rather than attainment of the baccalaureate, the same exaggerated disparity exists: According to a 2005 study by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, approximately "31 percent of low-income students were enrolled in or had attended college" in 2000-2001, compared with 75 percent of students in the high-income group (Pell Institute 6). Looking at the two sets of figures in tandem, it also becomes clear that many low-income students are enrolling at colleges that do not grant the all-important BA degree. Moreover, all indicators point to the disparity between the socio-economic sectors becoming much worse.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of inclusion in higher education is partly a function of the ratings game that universities find themselves compelled to play. In order to keep pace in areas like technology, acclaimed faculty, athletics, and student entertainment, the contemporary university resorts to tuition spikes to generate revenue. According to the College Board, between 1987 and 2007 tuition at public universities went up by about 78 percent (almost

\$6,000) after adjusting for inflation; tuition at private colleges increased by about 70 percent (over \$13,000), again taking inflation into consideration (Trends in College Pricing 2007, 11). The same market pressure that leads to tuition spikes places a premium on attracting either wealthy students, who can pay their own way, or those who may need financial assistance but can boost the school's ranking with high SAT scores. As many citizens begin to see the four-year college as a place that is beyond the reach of themselves and their children, they lose much of their enthusiasm for spending on higher education. Consequently, politicians find themselves under less political pressure to fund the public university system. Here is the vicious cycle in summary: The university's competitiveness is increasingly contingent on tuition raises and elevated thresholds for test scores. Because these raises and standards make the university feel like an inaccessible institution to many voters, politicians can all too easily avoid treating higher education as a priority in funding decisions. The limited support from government, in turn, means that the state university must, like its private counterparts, lean again and again on tuition raises to generate revenue. And so forth. Whether the origin of the problem is the tuition hike or the cut in state spending is a chicken-and-egg question: The two symptoms go hand-in-hand, part of a cycle that is pricing lower- and middle-income students out of higher education.

Thus far, the conversation about reversing the failure of inclusion has focused almost exclusively on admissions policies. For most scholars, it is business as usual. Everyone up the ladder—from mentors, to colleagues, to chairs, to deans, to the provost and university president—seems to expect that professors should direct their research efforts toward an audience of expert readers. Peer-reviewed articles and book monographs “count” towards tenure and promotion; lectures to civic groups and collaborations with

local high schools get slotted into the forgotten category of “service.” In the interest of the untenured scholar facing a limited number of publication venues, the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion encouraged universities “to develop a more capacious conception of scholarship” when evaluating junior faculty (MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion 6).<sup>2</sup> Yet the university community continues to take it for granted that the most urgent responsibility of the scholar is to advance the state of knowledge in a highly specialized academic field. Appalling as it would have been to Emerson, specialization remains the best route to tenure, and the young academic generally accepts this reality as inevitable. It is a reality that reflects, after all, the message that we have been getting throughout our careers from advisors, department chairs, and deans about the primary value of “advancing the field.”

Clearly, young academics cannot reverse the university’s failure of inclusion on their own. Everyone involved in higher education—not only members of the university community, but the politicians who underfund it as well—will need to tackle the problem collaboratively. What contemporary events in higher education reveal, however, is that scholars in humanities fields have been specially implicated in the problem as a result of the core values that circulate in our fields. Professors in the humanities speak passionately about rights and privileges being granted to ethnic minorities, women, gays and lesbians, non-English speakers—namely, people who had previously been excluded or marginalized by the nation’s institutions. It is the combination of an inaccessible university, and a professional language based in the value of enfranchising people, that all too easily places these fields in the front lines of politicized debates over what is wrong in American higher education.

That combustible combination of an inaccessible university and a rhetoric of enfranchisement has been highlighted by the two most visible recent events related to universities—the Ward Churchill affair at the University of Colorado and the Duke lacrosse team story in Durham, North Carolina. Each event involves a university perceived to be privileged and out of touch with its locality. And each one involves, at the center of the drama, a humanities scholar (Churchill himself in Colorado, and Houston Baker at Duke) with strong leftist politics, and a strong affiliation with one or several minority groups. The similarity in pattern begs some comment. It points not simply to the need for reform in university admissions procedures. More centrally for our purposes, it suggests the need for a new model of the American scholar, embodied initially by academics in the humanities. Given the language of inclusion that circulates within departments of English, History, Cultural Anthropology and the like, professors in our fields have a unique interest in leading the movement toward greater inclusion in American higher education. In all likelihood, the Churchill affair and the Duke lacrosse team drama will not be the last events in which humanities professionals find themselves unfairly scorned as the source of all that’s wrong with the American university. At some point, we will have to start asking questions about our participation in the system of American higher education and what we might do to begin changing that system. Might it be possible to play a part in widening the demographic circle of the university and expanding the spheres in which academic knowledge circulates? And might it not make sense, at this historical moment, to work toward redefining an academic field of knowledge as the product of exchange between citizens and experts, rather than as the exclusive domain of the specialist?

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In most discussions of the Ward Churchill affair at the University of Colorado, the debate hinges on weighing academic free speech versus standards for scholarly conduct. On the one hand, there is an academic's right to make a politically controversial and socially insensitive analogy, such as Churchill's comparison of 9/11 victims to "little Eichmanns" (4). Open, unencumbered debate distinguishes a democracy, and the university is a crucial site for such debate. On the other hand, accusations of plagiarism and distortion, such as those leveled against Churchill by scholars in his field, need to be taken seriously if academic knowledge is to remain legitimate. Given the apparent research misconduct committed by Churchill, didn't the University of Colorado have an obligation to remove him from his post, regardless of the fact that it failed to do so prior to his 9/11 comments?

Whether or not the university acted appropriately in removing Churchill, its sudden, anxious reaction to him needs to be understood in light of the economic context for higher education in Colorado. In the years leading up to the investigation of Churchill's scholarship, the situation for public universities in Colorado had become especially dire as a result of two ballot initiatives. TABOR, or the taxpayers' bill of rights, which was passed in 1992, placed strict limits on the state government's ability to collect and spend revenue. All surplus money generated during a boom year had to be returned to the taxpayers, and any tax increase had to be approved by referendum. Amendment 23, which was passed in 2000, required the state to increase K-12 funding above the rate of inflation. With state money needing to be redirected to K-12 education, and with the government handcuffed by TABOR, higher education was left with relatively little public support. Predictably, the University of Colorado, and other state funded schools, responded to this budget crisis by raising tuition dramatically.<sup>3</sup>

Tuition hikes, and the ensuing exclusion of lower- and middle-income students from a college education, set the stage, then, for the drama that unfolded around Churchill in early 2005, following the publication of his essay “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens” (2002). Churchill’s description of 9/11 victims as “a technocratic corps at the very heart of America’s global financial empire” and as “little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers” was seized on by politicians eager to pin the cuts to higher education on the professoriate (Churchill 4). In an open letter to the university’s College Republicans, then-Governor Bill Owens insisted that “we are not compelled to accept [Churchill’s] pro-terrorist views at state taxpayer subsidy.” In linking “taxpayer subsidy” to the radical statements of a professor, Owens was suggesting that levels of public support for the academic community were legitimately a function of what this community was writing and saying. By extension, professors were perhaps to blame for the current crisis of higher education in Colorado, with the university dependent on massive tuition hikes. The origin of the crisis suddenly appeared to be not the ratings game, nor the cuts in state spending, but the content of what passed for research in the university. With these kinds of implications in the air, the university administration found itself in the midst of a dilemma: How could it wash its hands of a professor who reinforced the impression that the University of Colorado had estranged itself from the general public and was therefore undeserving of “taxpayer subsidy,” while at the same time upholding the principle of academic freedom so central to the reputation of any American university?

Churchill himself provided the escape route. As it turned out, complaints of a different nature, related to the integrity of Churchill’s scholarship, had been surfacing over the years. Although these complaints had previously been ignored, in the current climate

they allowed the university to pursue dismissal on the grounds of research misconduct. The issue was not, ostensibly, political speech, but violation of standards related to scholarly research and publication. Two years after the investigation into Churchill's scholarship began, University of Colorado President Hank Brown recommended to the Board of Regents that Churchill's tenure be terminated, and in July 2007, the Board of Regents officially fired Churchill.

Viewed in this context, the university's reaction to Churchill's remarks seems motivated by a desire to reestablish credibility with the taxpaying public. Rising tuition had left CU eager to dispel the impression that it was elitist and uninterested in the needs of ordinary citizens. By contrast, Churchill threatened to exacerbate that impression. His 9/11 comments perfectly fit the stereotype of the radical professor, inculcating alien values in young minds and thumbing his nose at mainstream America, no less during a time of national crisis. Indeed, talk show hosts had little work to do in order to turn Churchill into a caricature; he had served himself up as one already. Suddenly (and ironically given his supposed status as pariah), he became the most publicized humanities professor in the country. He was interviewed by Paula Zahn on CNN, appeared as a guest on the Bill Maher show, and received mention, by one count, on twenty-five different episodes of the O'Reilly Factor (Montopoli).

As public perception has it, the radical professor—so conveniently personified by Churchill's long hair, sunglasses, and inflammatory statements (fig. 1)—not only flies around the world spouting extremist rhetoric and spending taxpayer money on fancy hotels; she or he also speaks about rights, privileges, and general understanding being granted to citizens who had never before had a recognized place in the nation's institutions (Native Americans,

African Americans, Islamic foreigners, Latino/a immigrants, homosexuals, women, etc.). Prompted by conservative pundits and politicians, those who presently feel excluded (even those from the very minority groups that the professor ostensibly defends) can easily direct their resentment toward a figure who seems to be using a vocabulary of inclusion, but not to benefit the families and communities to which they belong. This is to say that the general problem of inclusion in American higher education allows for a special scrutiny to be placed on professors in the humanities. The image of the university as a place of privilege and



Fig. 1. Front cover of a report published by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an organization founded in 1995 by Lynne Cheney to monitor left-wing bias on college campuses.

insularity too easily becomes an image sutured to those academics who appear only to talk the talk of inclusion.

The recent debate surrounding the disciplinary action to be taken against Churchill has focused thus far on whether, on the one hand, Churchill committed academic misconduct, or, on the other hand, the university compromised his academic freedom by

capitulating to the outcry over his 9/11 essay. Meanwhile, the more pivotal factor that gets neglected is the exclusiveness of American higher education more generally. Clearly, Churchill was producing questionable scholarship, and clearly the university only investigated his research after his controversial comments became national news. But the unspoken context was that the University of Colorado found itself resembling a private institution in the eyes of the general public. In order to redeem itself with the taxpaying public within Colorado, and the television-watching public outside of it, the university needed to disassociate itself from a humanities professor who appeared to epitomize higher education's disdain for ordinary Americans. Churchill's faulty scholarship allowed the University of Colorado a way of denying its elitism and reasserting its status as a representative public institution. The problem is not simply that the firing threatens free speech. It also diverts attention from the spiraling tuition and cuts in state spending that led to the Churchill crisis in the first place.

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As Churchill's scholarship was undergoing review, a related struggle, featuring a high-profile humanities professor and a university notorious for its exclusiveness, was playing itself out in Durham, North Carolina, following accusations that three Duke lacrosse players had raped an African American woman who had stripped at a team party in March 2006. The primary humanities scholar in this case was Houston Baker. In a letter to administrators, Baker expressed outrage at the Duke administration for failing to protect not only the alleged victim, but the Duke University community as well: "How soon will confidence be restored to our university as a place where minds, souls, and bodies can feel safe from agents, perpetrators, and abettors of white privilege, irresponsibility, debauchery

and violence?” Baker’s letter to the Provost was followed by an advertisement, published in the campus newspaper and endorsed by 88 faculty members, consisting of quotations from women and students of color. The advertisement repeatedly described the events as a “social disaster,” one that required “the volume” of marginalized voices to be turned up “in a moment when some of the most vulnerable among us are being told to wait.” In predictable fashion, once the case had faltered and the state prosecutor had dropped the charges against the three lacrosse players, conservative pundits turned up the volume in their own way, vilifying both Baker and the other 87 scholars for their “rush to judgment.”

Baker was intent on turning theory into practice, scholarship into activism; and activism in this case required situating events in a history of white male sexual abuse. Because of what they did in hiring strippers of color and then, to a greater or lesser degree, uttering racially inflected insults at these women, the lacrosse team members had joined themselves to the centuries of white American men who systematically and with total impunity exploited black women for sport. According to Baker, this was a case of “drunken white male privilege loosed amongst us,” threatening both residents of Durham and “the citizenry of Duke University.” The university was responsible for enabling that privilege through its “blind-eying of male athletes.” In order “to restore confidence in a great institution and its mission,” the administration needed to take “swift and considered corrective action” against the team and the athletics program.

Baker’s letter gave the impression that Duke University privilege resided primarily in white male athletes, who were given license to indulge appetites for sex and violence at the expense of vulnerable citizens, both inside and outside the walls of the campus. Ironically, once the case against the athletes began to fall apart, conservative bloggers

began to talk about humanities scholars in similar terms to the ones that Baker had used in reference to the athletes. “Today,” wrote William Anderson in “An Open Letter to the Duke Lacrosse Families,” “we know who the real thugs are.” Anderson went on to equate the signers of the advertisement to “Goths and Visigoths” running roughshod over the campus, “dispens[ing] with due process and other foundations of what was once called law.” This group, not the lacrosse team, was the unchecked, entitled mob responsible for destroying the foundations of the American university. “As for higher education,” wrote Anderson, “you have seen the future and it is Wahneema Lubiano, Houston Baker...” K.C. Johnson, a professor himself, attributed the power of these scholars to “a diversity hiring policy [that]... has had the unforeseen effect of widening the gap between professors and the students they teach.” For some time now, the professors had been moving the university in a radical direction, away from mainstream America. “While Duke’s student body has tended to take mainstream positions on most issues,” Johnson noted, “its faculty has not.” According to the picture presented by Johnson, the new diversity scholars threatened to tyrannize students as their “ideological enemies” and to turn places like Duke into enclaves dominated by extremist views.

Obviously, we have two very different stories about the dysfunction at Duke University—one, told by a humanities professor, featuring white male athletes as a source of physical violence, and another, by conservative writers, featuring radical academics as a source of ideological tyranny. At the same time, these stories do share something: They each attribute the trouble at Duke to a relatively small group of dangerous individuals, and they each blame the administration for enabling this group to have extraordinary privilege and power at the expense of others. In each story, the threat posed by the group in question

is inflated symbolically, being associated in the one case with sexual exploitation dating back to slavery and in the other case with totalitarian regimes. What gets distorted through all the association, meanwhile, is the *undramatic* part that each group plays in reinforcing the university's status as an elite institution.

The thing that makes Duke a truly distinctive brand name in higher education is its twinned pursuit of an ultra-elite Division I athletics program and ultra-elite, Ivy League status in academic research. In order to achieve its dual objective, it actively recruits both first-tier athletes, who make the university a source of pride for incoming students and alumni, and celebrity faculty, who bring international reputation and prestige to the institution through scholarly publication. Top-caliber athletes and widely recognized faculty guarantee that Duke remains a valuable brand name, to be used both socially and professionally by the alumni members who fund the endowment. The athletes, faculty, and students are all valued contributors to the institution, well protected with rights by the administration, and they all benefit from the privilege that accrues to membership in the community.

These are the related institutional conditions in which both lacrosse players and humanities faculty are implicated, conditions that are determined by feverish competition between Duke and its peer institutions in both sports and academic research. They are also the conditions that make elite universities appear like distant planets to many students who have great academic potential but lack wealth or high SAT scores. What the lacrosse team story revealed most painfully was the relationship between an elite university community *as a whole* and its home city and state: The only way, it appeared, that an African American Durham resident could enter the orbit of a reputable four-year university was by

taking off her clothes for a group of entitled teens. Those teens would have known that the crucial divide was neither between athletes and a vulnerable mass of women and people of color; nor, quite clearly, was it between humanities faculty and the well protected Duke student body; the most meaningful difference in this case was between those who taught, lived, and studied in those neo-Gothic buildings, and those who could only dream about getting into them as legitimate citizens.

Humanities scholars are no more guilty of excluding the wider public than anyone else within the university. Yet taken together, the Churchill affair and the Duke scandal demonstrate that humanities scholars have become centrally embroiled in the university's failure of inclusion. Professors in the humanities often find themselves specially targeted and specially burdened by the university's deficiency, and this is, at least in part, because we use a language of broad rights and privileges that conflicts with the reality of higher education. In the Churchill affair, the contradiction created pressure on a state university to sever ties with a professor, who had extended sympathy to Islamic militants at a moment when the university itself was perceived to be grossly out of touch with the tax-paying mainstream; in the Duke case, the contradiction opened the way for the distorted charge that "diversity hires," who concerned themselves with the protection of minority groups, were the privileged few who had turned Duke into a place of tyranny for mainstream American students. Clearly, academics in the humanities have a stake in doing something about the disparity between the rhetoric of inclusion that so often circulates in our fields and the institutional settings where we work. Taking meaningful action to correct that disparity means changing not the words—not the content of what gets said—but the goals of the work, in an effort to lead institutions toward greater public accessibility.

The humanities professor whose time has come is the person trained to enrich valuable public discussion outside the walls of the university and to expand the demographic reach of the university. Work performed by this person might include, for instance, developing educational programs with civic groups in an area of expertise; offering core curriculum evening classes to low-income adults interested in returning to school; collaborating with museum curators on exhibits and programming; using media like radio, television, and webcast to access a non-academic audience; organizing broadly conceived conferences with other city leaders; bringing together artists and academics to address topics of mutual interest; leading discussion groups on novels that are read city-wide; and, perhaps most importantly, collaborating with high school teachers in an effort to bring low-income students into the orbit of the university. Through this kind of work, communities outside the university encounter the scholar as a concrete, living presence, rather than as a cut-out figure, distinguished primarily by political extremism. Furthermore, the members of these communities have a chance to participate in the intellectual give-and-take of the university classroom, and they are provided with the logistical knowledge, encouragement, and counsel that might lead to their matriculation.

The point of all this emphasis on a new scale of value for scholarly activity is not to banish specialized languages, but to coax young academics toward becoming more versatile public writers and speakers, able and eager to communicate to non-specialist audiences interested in intellectual exploration. Although professors generally receive little credit for versatility in speaking and writing, many have begun to pursue it anyway. As Amy Koritz noted recently in Profession 2005, a movement to make the humanities more public—to see them, in fact, as intrinsically oriented toward the public—has been gaining

noticeable ground, propelled by a consortium of universities called Imagining America, whose stated purpose is to “strengthen the public role and democratic purposes of the humanities, arts, and design.”

On some intuitive level, contemporary scholars who are drawn to this movement find themselves facing a choice of emphasis and priority: We can focus on protecting the sheltered spaces where we have been thinking and writing freely, even as those endangered spaces are subjected to increased public scrutiny and misrepresentation; or we can demonstrate the seriousness of our commitment to inclusion by working to open the university to greater public participation. Despite the compromises that come with it, the latter option feels more appropriate to the times. The failure of inclusion has become not only a problem for administrators and politicians, but *our* most pressing issue too. In the current climate, the romantic scholarly quest for the big idea, the epistemological earthquake that will shake up an academic discipline, has begun to feel like a misguided preoccupation. The next big idea will have less to do with producing a radically new form of knowledge, and more with defining a new purpose for the scholar, one that accords with both the rhetoric in our fields and the public mission of American higher education.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Pell Study notes significant decreases, from 1999-2000 to 2000-2001, in both participation rates and in the percentages of BA recipients among low-income students (12).

<sup>2</sup> While I agree with most of the recommendations of the Task Force, I focus here not on the crisis of publication within the humanities, but rather on the more encompassing crisis of inclusion in higher education.

<sup>3</sup> Between academic year 2000-01 and academic year 2005-06, tuition at the University of Colorado Denver, where I teach, increased by 84 percent—from \$2,298 to \$4,224. Similar hikes were instituted at all University of Colorado campuses. Institutional Research, Planning and Analysis, University of Colorado Denver, “Common Data Set,” 2001 and 2006.

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