



Book Review

UNIVERSITY ETHICS:
How Colleges Can Build and Benefit
from a Culture of Ethics

James F. Keenan, SJ
Rowman and Littlefield, 2015. 292 pp.

Reviewed by James Quinn

In *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*, James Keenan, Canisius Professor of Theology at Boston College, has written a powerful and unsettling critique of the ethical standing of US universities. While other writers have studied individual populations within the university through the lens of ethics, Keenan's book is the first to assess the culture and practices of the whole of university life from the perspective of ethics. Keenan pulls no punches in advancing his claims that universities lack a foundation of professional ethics, that inappropriate behaviors or university policies are rarely examined through the framework of ethics, and that current university cultures and structures run counter to universities holding themselves accountable to professional ethical standards.

Keenan considers the university's mission to be the education of citizens so as to enhance the public good, and that this mission incorporates certain rights and responsibilities for

those who are part of it. He situates his work in the literature on the university and devotes an early chapter to the components of a university culture that promotes ethical conduct. More broadly, he sees his book serving as a foundation for a new academic discipline of university ethics, and also as a call to action for the development of a culture of ethics within US universities.

Keenan argues that developing a culture of ethics creates a genuine community characterized by honesty, trust, compassion, and mutual accountability. By the same token, the absence of a culture of ethics results in a fractured community characterized by feelings of alienation and powerlessness, a culture of silence in which members fear to speak up, and a perception that behavior is unlikely to be informed or judged by ethical standards. A central theme of *University Ethics* is that universities have failed to take on the challenging work of building a community characterized by a culture of ethics.

Keenan presents well-documented examples of extensive ethical lapses within universities, and argues that these ethical lapses are not isolated instances, but rather symptoms of systemic ethical failure within the academy. He devotes six chapters to illustrating and analyzing unethical behavior in the treatment of adjunct faculty, in the pervasiveness of student academic misconduct, in how universities respond to issues of gender, diversity and race, and in a lack of attention paid to the consequences of ill-considered commodification of higher education. Keenan also notes ethical concerns related to how universities respond to misconduct by faculty and administrators, the role of university athletics, and the impact of social class on access to a university education. Although these lapses and concerns are rarely examined through the framework of ethics, Keenan argues that this is *exactly* how they should be examined, because they are preeminently concerned with the treatment of persons across multiple university constituencies.

Throughout the book, the author provides numerous ideas for the development of a culture and practice of university ethics. Two in particular are regarded by contemporary

ethicists as integral to human progress—the practice of solidarity and the establishment of mutual accountability among and within different constituencies. Keenan recommends as an early step in developing a university-wide culture of ethics, that the two most privileged groups on campus—tenured faculty and administrators—move beyond their ‘fiefdoms’ (e.g., academic departments, academic affairs, athletics departments) and reach out to other employee groupings (adjunct faculty, clerical technical staff, food service and custodial staff, academic professionals). By doing so, they can learn about how other more vulnerable and marginalized groups are managing within the university, and engage in collegial relationships with them to reduce inequities and create genuine community. However, he argues that this will not be easy, as university structures inhibit such horizontal community-building, and the social landscape of the university impedes rather than nurtures such attempts at solidarity. Second, Keenan recognizes the need to develop structures for horizontal accountability, so that when ethical lapses inevitably occur within and across university constituencies, structures have been developed which make clear the expectations individuals agree to have of themselves and of each other in terms of ethical behavior.

In his final chapter, Keenan writes his “If I were a University President” call to action for the formation and promotion of a University Ethics Committee to examine ways of developing a thriving culture of ethics on campus, and provides guidelines for an initial two-year program of action. Keenan sees it as crucial that the president sets the agenda of the committee as being nothing less than the creation of an ethics charter for the university, publicly promoting ethics as constitutive of the nature of the university. The overall goal would be to develop a university culture in which “But is this ethical?” is a question all university personnel would be inspired to ask themselves and their colleagues when faced with policy and action decisions, and would be emboldened to ask the same question of those to whom they are held accountable.

However, Keenan accepts that not many university presidents are likely to read his book, and concludes with an appeal to tenured faculty. As Keenan notes, 'More than any other employee on our campuses, we enjoy the expressed right to raise comment.' Keenan invites those of us who are faculty to take a critical look at our universities through the lens of ethics, to consider how the various groups he has considered are treated on our campuses, and to choose not to remain silent in the face of unethical behavior, injustice, and inequitable treatment of persons.

While I agree with Keenan that tenured faculty have the greatest freedom to initiate questions about ethics and the university, I doubt that it will be tenured faculty or administrators who will initiate such questions. It seems to me that universities are most likely to act when faced with external pressures to respond to how they operate. However, while Keenan provides numerous examples of unethical practices that have entered the public consciousness, he also points out that public discussion of such practices has characterized them as isolated events within individual universities, rather than as a systemic fault within university ethical culture and practice.

At the same time, public consciousness of a range of problems related to the mission of the university is increasing and I think it is possible that such awareness will lead to increasing systematic scrutiny of university ethical practice. For example, Keenan singles out the role and treatment of adjunct faculty as the preeminent example of unethical practice by universities. While adjunct faculty are the new faculty majority within US universities who teach approximately 70% of undergraduate courses, they are employed at will, are paid a less-than-living wage on a per-course basis, and lack access to health or retirement benefits. Two other issues that are receiving increasing public attention are continuing increases in tuition and the recognition that student debt is now the biggest individual debt burden in the US. I think that such a constellation of issues is just one of several that may well generate increasing public discussion and calls for greater transparency and ac-

countability on the part of universities. As Keenan argues throughout his book, such calls are unlikely to be made using the language of ethics in the short term, but it is certainly conceivable that these issues will eventually be seen to be fundamentally issues of ethics.

Keenan's book is a significant contribution to the literature on the university, and provides a substantial foundation for an emerging discipline of university ethics. However, even more so, I applaud Keenan's book as a call to action to build a culture of university ethics. *University Ethics* is a thoroughly-researched, engagingly written resource that will be useful to all concerned with the development of such a culture.