

The 480th Convocation

Address: “The Fun Index”

By Richard A. Shweder

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I wonder if you remember the “fun index.” It was a ranking of 300 American colleges and universities put together by some clever Harvard students a little over a decade ago. It got lots of publicity in the mainstream press. The University of Chicago was ranked number 300 out of 300, just behind the United States Military Academy. Russell Baker, the *New York Times* humorist, immediately responded in an op-ed essay. He complained that his alma mater, Johns Hopkins University—which was ranked number 296 on the fun index—should not have been outdone by Chicago. Yale University was ranked in the bottom ten, too. Florida State University had the distinction of being number 1.

That playful and prankish fun index—confirming the view that the University of Chicago, Yale, and Johns Hopkins just can’t compete in the same league with the fraternity parties and nightclubs at Florida State—managed to make administrators at many colleges around the country, and even in Hyde Park, a bit nervous. So, over the past decade we have invested heavily in the life of the body as well as the life of the mind. We have a new swimming pool, which we love, and a new award-winning dining hall at Bartlett. We have a new business school center right across the street, which, quite fortunately, achieves part of its splendor by remaining in the shadow of Rockefeller Chapel rather than overshadowing it (as some had feared). And if the fun index still existed, by now the University of Chicago might even have nudged a bit ahead of Hopkins and Yale in providing those satisfactions in life that are abundant and readily available at Florida State University. Perhaps our ranking might have risen to number 287 or even number 252 on the “going to college to have fun index”—the type of fun they have at FSU.

The most resounding and noble reaction to the fun index, however, came from George Will, the political commentator. George Will is a “political conservative,” which is a rather difficult-to-define notion these days, when religious fundamentalists and libertarians are supporters of the same political party. And George Will graduated from Princeton. Yet he revealed himself to have

maroon-colored blood running through his veins and to be a great admirer of the University of Chicago's classical, or should one say premodern, conception of having fun.

George Will liked the idea that somewhere in America there is a university with a Socratic-sounding philosophy of education, which can be boiled down to a single maxim: "If someone asserts it, deny it; if someone denies it, assert it"; and where "Anything you can do I can do *meta*" is a popular refrain. He liked the idea of the University of Chicago as a temple of critical reason where you leave your identity politics at the front door—a place where every voice is encouraged to become autonomous, assumption-questioning, and self-critical. He liked the idea that at the University of Chicago no person's voice is deferred to or granted special authority because of the speaker's social or government-defined census status as an insider, whether male or female, American or non-American, white American or black American. In his retort to all the publicity about the fun index, George Will stepped forward and in effect gave an honorary degree (or more accurately a degree of honor) to the University of Chicago. And he did so in a syndicated column which appeared in a few hundred newspapers around the world. The *Washington Post* gave his column the title, "Fun in a Cold Climate." Three months later, applications to the University increased by 24 percent.

It was pleasing to see George Will spreading the word that the brain is an erogenous zone at the University of Chicago. That is one of our claims to fame, and it appeals to some very special women and men (young and old) who are eager to place their minds, their emotions, and even their identity politics at risk, as well as to engage in some hard-hitting assumption-questioning conversations (and this is true whether you are in the Graduate School of Business, the Divinity School, the graduate divisions, or the College). But there are other things that make us a peculiar (and priceless) academic institution. One is that we refuse to be compliant in the face of political and social pressures. Another is that we are not risk-averse. Indeed, we have often been blessed in this community with courageous leaders who have made us great and have kept us great, by being intellectual entrepreneurs and by being willing, again and again, to invest in things that we really can't afford. Perhaps our leaders have believed that it is the fully examined and budgeted life that is not worth living.

During a recent admission season, I received a letter from a prospective student from China who wrote: “The United States now, like the T’ang dynasty in Chinese history, is the center of world scientific research, and the University of Chicago is a mecca in the mind of a student like me.” Of course it is possible that I am just a fool to think it was an honor to have been placed at the very bottom of the fun index along with Yale, Johns Hopkins, and, yes, the United States Military Academy. Nevertheless, I am here today at this joyous occasion, when we gather to confer titles and honor academic achievements, to invite you, however foolishly, to imagine that our real claim to fame at the University of Chicago is that we are mavericks, freewheeling, tough minded, intellectually annoying, against the current, out there on the fringe, sometimes even a little beyond the pale.

So, let’s see . . .

Some of us do worry these days about the danger of becoming bland, politically sensitive, excessively budget minded, main-streamed, and “nice”—a bit too much like the rest. About fifteen years ago, shortly before Florida State University became *numero uno*, I created a file that I call my “Late, Great University of (*fill in the blank*)” file. This is my neo-antiquarian file. This is where a University of Chicago professor revalues the past with a sense of irony about contemporary lapses of courage in the academy and current retreats from the ideals of a Peter Abelard (the first great scholastic skeptic, who infuriated the Roman Catholic Church in the twelfth century by subjecting sacred texts to multiple interpretative readings) or from the ideals of a Robert Maynard Hutchins (the famous University of Chicago President who eloquently and politely told the Illinois Seditious Activities Investigation Commission—which was akin to the House Committee on Un-American Activities—to shove it and defended academic freedom in one of its darkest hours).

Looking into this file, I can admire the intellectual virtues associated with a Thucydides, the great ancient Greek historian; or with a Socrates; or with a Hannah Arendt, who was a brilliant and very provocative member of this faculty in the 1960s. Virtues such as a principled commitment to impartiality and accuracy in one’s descriptions of political and military events and of other societies; and to fair and thorough exploration of the other side, even when the other

side holds views that are upsetting, unpopular, or unsettling to vested structures of interest and influence. “Speaking truth to power,” indeed.

This is the file where the University of Chicago really shines, even as one worries about external and internal threats to the independence of the academy and any lessening of the spirit of free thinking and robust debate on our college campuses. This is the file in which one tries to form an image of a mythic age of truth (what Hindus call Satya Yuga) in the history of the academy, when it was thought to be a very good idea to separate anything that can be separated from anything else—especially the worlds of the politician, the merchant (the businessman, the banker), and the scholar—and to be wary of all funding (including government and foundation funding) that comes with *any* strings attached. Over the years, surveying the national academic scene, I have found that I have been able to add items to my “Late, Great University of (*fill in the blank*)” file at a brisk rate.

Some of the items in this file are mere tidbits, early warning signs at other universities: for example, some recent items concerning two Ivy League presidents, one at Harvard and one at Columbia, both of whom have fallen out of favor with their faculties. The Columbia president, who is (ironically) a scholar of the First Amendment, is criticized for his failure to forcefully defend the right of his own faculty members to hold views that are offensive to the merchants and politicians of the world; while the Harvard president is criticized for even mentioning points of view that are offensive to some members of his own faculty. Disappointingly, at both universities too few members of the tenured faculty ever take intellectual risks. (A colleague once quipped that it is not “true love” but rather “tenure” that means “never having to say you’re sorry.” Yet can there be true academic love, one wonders, without accepting the responsibility to speculate, think outside the box, and take some creative chances?) Disappointingly, at both universities far too many members of the tenured faculty spend their time demanding apologies from those who dare to be provocative or to challenge received truths. They haven’t left their identity politics at the front door. When an academic institution such as Harvard University (including its president) feels it must offer apologies to the thought police for the forthright expression of unpopular views, you know that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

In contrast—that Chinese applicant had it right—the University of Chicago is a mecca for an international community of free spirits who also love lively debates corrosive of dogma. Meditate with me for a moment on some of those wonderful romantic assertions of dignifying (and emancipating) academic principles that can be readily found in venerable (sometimes even official) University of Chicago speeches and documents. I turn to these speeches and documents when the atmosphere of decline at other universities has become so thick that the mere recitation of noble truths seems quaint or old-fashioned. One of my favorite items is the speech given by the Chairman of our Board of Trustees on the occasion of our one hundredth anniversary in 1992. He quoted our former President Robert Maynard Hutchins, who stated, “The faculty is not working for the trustees; the trustees are working for the faculty.” Such words might have come from any of our Presidents; Don Randel, in his earliest comments when he arrived on campus, said as much. And our Provost, Richard Saller, understands and exemplifies such academic principles as well as anyone in our community.

The basic idea expressed by those words may seem counterintuitive, but it helps define the conditions that make for greatness in the academy, as well as for a vibrant and healthy society. Here is another way to make the point, by the philosopher Arthur Lovejoy: “The distinctive social function of the scholar’s trade cannot be fulfilled if those who pay the piper are permitted to call the tune.” It is a splendid, even if wishful, vision: the luminous image of enlightened patrons—merchants, investment bankers, politicians—who understand the virtue and long-term social benefits of free and unfettered inquiry, and who believe it is wise and dignifying to resist the natural temptation to try to use one’s wealth and power to “call the tune.” If you ever become very rich or very powerful, strive for that type of wisdom—and nobility.

Or consider this principle, taken from a famous 1972 University of Chicago report on academic appointments (the so-called Shils Report): “There must be no consideration of sex, ethnic or national characteristics, or political or religious beliefs or affiliations in any decision regarding appointment, promotion, or reappointment at any level of the academic staff.” Today on many college campuses that principle is viewed as an impediment or as old-fashioned or as controversial, and it has been set aside or ignored. Yet, I suspect some of the faculty members on the committee that prepared that report (which included world-renowned scholars of Asian,

African, and European descent) might reasonably have argued that the principle is resonant with the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and that we should feel proud, not embarrassed, to defend it and to act on it; so that his dream—the triumph of character over color, of individual over (stereo)type—might come true.

But the item that makes me feel most proud to be a professor at this university (where I have now thought and taught for thirty-two years) is a document—an extant and influential official policy statement about our institution’s conception of academic freedom. It is known as the Kalven Committee Report. It was written in 1967 by a faculty committee that included the historian John Hope Franklin, the future Nobel Prize–winning economist George Stigler, and faculty from all the academic divisions in the University. The committee was chaired by Harry Kalven, Jr., who was a professor in our Law School. Kalven was a Socratic eminence and a brilliant stylist, who wrote a seminal book called *A Worthy Tradition: Freedom of Speech in America*.

The Kalven Committee Report describes a fundamental aim of the University of Chicago as follows: “A university faithful to its mission will provide enduring challenges to social values, policies, practices, and institutions. By design and by effect, it is the institution which creates discontent with the existing social arrangements and proposes new ones. In brief, a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting.”

In the service of that mission (and of our worthy tradition), the report points to two sacred (and closely linked) University of Chicago principles: “institutional neutrality” and “faculty and student autonomy.” The University as an institution is cautioned against taking any collective stance on the social and political issues of the day, out of respect for the autonomy of its faculty and students, out of respect for those individuals in our disputatious community who may embrace an unpopular or politically incorrect point of view.

The academic freedom ideals defined by Harry Kalven, John Hope Franklin, George Stigler, and others are extraordinarily difficult to uphold and defend. There are many powerful forces in our contemporary society (both inside and outside the academy) that threaten the principles of

student and faculty autonomy and institutional neutrality at the increasingly timid, cowed, and restrained universities and colleges of America. And I don't just mean the USA Patriot Act. Those who love Kalven's report in principle don't always love it in practice; for example, when they want the University (or the Office of the President) to take a collective stance in support of their own favorite social or political cause, or cultural hero. And not everyone loves the report, even in principle; for example, one finds some members of our own community arguing (as do some politicians and bureaucrats in Washington) that conducting research is an indulgence (or a favor) and not a right. There are even those in the academy these days who believe that any student or faculty member who talks to human beings as part of their research should be required to have his or her project approved in advance by an official institutional licensing board (the so-called Institutional Review Board), in part to guarantee that no one asks questions that are too upsetting to some. The T'ang dynasty did not last forever and neither will the spirit of our great university, unless all of us (faculty, students, alumni, and academic administrators) honor it, defend it, and guard its gates.

Dear students, friends, colleagues, kith, and kin. On this celebratory occasion, when one reflects on our deepest values and looks with hope towards a glorious future, it is thrilling—indeed it is a great and deeply satisfying form of fun—for the faculty to be able to congratulate you on becoming graduates of the University of Chicago and to welcome you as heirs to this “worthy tradition.”

Standing up here in this wooden box suspended in space in Rockefeller Chapel, I confess to feeling a bit like some Puritan preacher of old. This is a bit worrisome. For I am sure you remember how H. L. Mencken defined Puritanism: “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy” (or shall we say “having fun”?). So permit me to reach for a climactic antidote.

Some years ago, in 1993, around the time that the University of Chicago was ranked number 300 on the fun index, I delivered an Aims of Education address in this building (which is the architectural symbol of our self-esteem), welcoming new students to our campus. The very first line of that address read as follows: “ ‘No one ever died of homesickness’ were the most comforting words told to me during my first days at college.” Now it is the year 2005. Homes

change. All of our lives move on. History moves on. And here we are together on a graduation day at the University of Chicago, in a very grand and wonderful ceremony, on what is perhaps your final day in this community. And the very last message of this convocation speech, a small piece of avuncular advice (don't worry, it is not "buy low, sell high") offered to you by this member of the faculty, with love, with admiration for your accomplishments, and with many hopes for your future (and futures), is this: Make up your own fun index, and then pursue it for life; but also remember to stand up for your convictions—that above all else. It is our way to be number 1. It is the only true way to be number 1.

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