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Conflict has recently arisen among educators over the "politicization" (the involvement of academic organizations in political controversies) of associations and universities. The issue, however, is no longer whether organizations should attempt to influence public policy but in what KINDS of policy questions they should become involved. There are both "narrow" issues, affecting only higher education, and "broad" issues affecting many groups in society. The academic voluntary associations have in the last decade engaged in the process of narrow politicization in their participation in shaping educational policy. Encouraging the federal government to provide greater support to higher education has provoked little controversy. But conflict among association members has arisen over broad political questions. Advocates of involvement argue that overspecialization and dependence on federal aid have reduced scholars' incentive to be responsibly critical of social ills. Those resisting broad politicization contend that members of a disciplinary society do not share ideological views and politicization would compromise the association's professional status and autonomy. Associations should show their concern by enhancing their activities related to solving social problems but they needn't engage in overt political activity. "Academic organizations can function most effectively as contexts for the scholarly examination of social issues, thus helping to prepare their members for more informed participation in the political process." (JS)

Section 3

Monday Morning, March 3

THE POLITICIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS:
ASSETS AND LIABILITIES*

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A recent headline of the Chronicle for Higher Education read: "Academic Turmoil Grows Over Moves to 'Politicize' Universities, Associations." Referring to heated debates which had occurred during the 1968 meetings of the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association in New York City, the article bearing this caption attempted to summarize the opposing views of academic scholars on the appropriateness of the politicization of their associations and of universities, defining the term politicization roughly as the involvement of academic organizations in political controversies.¹

The debate is, of course, a meaningful and important one--but it must (and frequently fails to) take into account the fact that academic organizations already are, in at least one important sense, "politicized." Universities and associations have, particularly in the 1960's, been very directly engaged in political activity. The purpose of this discussion will be to describe the nature of this activity and to suggest that the issue is no longer whether higher education organizations should attempt to influence public policy at all--but rather in what kinds of policy questions they should become actively involved in the future. A distinction will be made here between two types of political controversies in which universities and associations have participated or may soon participate. These two types are: narrow political issues--those which touch directly upon the basic educational or scholarly objectives of the higher education enterprise; and broad political issues--those controversial policy questions which affect other institutions and groups in the society as directly and profoundly as they affect academic institutions and groups.

The following remarks will deal most directly with academic voluntary associations--although they have important implications for the predicament of the university as well. The reasons for focusing on associations here are several. They are generally less complex organizations than universities: their membership

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¹Malcolm G. Scully, "Academic Turmoil Grows Over Moves to 'Politicize' Universities, Associations." The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. III, No. 9 (Jan. 13, 1969), 1.

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is more homogeneous, their structure less diversified, and their goals more narrowly circumscribed. As a result, one can see patterns in the behavior of associations which are less clearly manifest (although they are equally significant) in the behavior of universities. In addition, there has been a tendency in the 1960's for associations to play an increasingly important role as links between the academic community and the federal government, and, in fact, to serve as vehicles for the expression of academic views on public policy.

Higher Education Associations and Narrow vs. Broad Political Issues

Many academic associations have attempted, in the last decade, to achieve an effective voice in the shaping of public policy which directly affects their primary purposes as academic organizations. Their efforts to participate in the formulation of higher education policy are viewed here as the narrow politicization of these associations.

The process of narrow organizational politicization has been an inevitable concomitant, it would seem, of widening and deepening federal involvement in higher education since World War II. As more and more critical decisions regarding higher education have come to be made within federal agencies and Congress, there have been strong incentives for national organizations of academicians to defend scholarly and educational standards in the political arena against politically determined decisions regarding research priorities, acceptable research procedures, and the distribution among higher education programs of various types of federal support. In addition, of course, as the cost of all aspects of higher education has soared, these associations have been pressed to the task of encouraging adequate educational support from the only institution now capable of providing that support in sufficient amounts: the federal government.

In recent years, university administrators have acted through Washington-based associations such as the American Council on Education and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to promote federal support for a wider range of university activities to counteract what they view as imbalances created within universities by the concentration of federal funds on research in the scientific disciplines. On the other hand, recent cutbacks in federal allocations for science (and particularly basic science) research, and Congressional threats to the research autonomy of federally funded scientists, have stimulated scientific associations to expand their relations with government. Social scientists, too, have looked to their associations to defend their work autonomy from a growing tendency toward the regulation of government-financed social research.

On the whole, such narrow political activity on the part of higher education associations has not been a subject of great controversy among association members themselves. Few academicians have, for example, disputed vigorously the appropriateness of using their professional organizations to promote federal support of basic research or to defend the research autonomy of faculty members supported by federal agencies.

Rather, conflict among association members has arisen in the last few years over questions which have been defined here as broad political issues. Controversy has occurred primarily within national associations representing university faculty members, as adamant factions within these organizations have attempted to involve them directly in policy issues of broad public import. Clear examples of such issues are, of course, the war in Vietnam, civil rights, and police brutality toward demonstrators in Chicago.

Since 1967, particularly, there have been overt efforts within the American Sociological Association, the American Physical Society, the Modern Language Association, the American Physical Society, the Modern Language Association, and many other major learned societies, to establish a public organizational position on the Vietnam war. In virtually every instance, the issue of whether to commit the society, as a professional organization, to such a broad policy view has created heated debate among the members; and, in most cases, proposals related to Vietnam have been--for the time being, at least--defeated. The memberships of a number of these learned societies have agreed, however, not to hold association meetings in Chicago in the near future. And there are indications that more academic associations will begin to take public stands on this and other broad political questions.

It seems important to consider here why efforts in the direction of the broad politicization of higher education organizations have stirred so much academic controversy, and to suggest some assets and liabilities for the higher education enterprise of broad political activity of associations and universities.

Assets of Broad Politicization

The impetus to use associations as vehicles for the articulation of member views on broad political issues grows out of a deep concern among some members of these organizations that scientific specialization--and the extensive ties between academic institutions and the federal government--have subverted the traditional and potential role of higher education organizations as the locus of vital social and political criticism. Advocates of the involvement of educational organizations, as such, in the broad political process argue, on the one hand, that the dependence of university scholars on federal support for their research has introduced a new tendency among academicians to "play it safe" in their role as commentators on national policy, and has reduced their incentive to engage actively in controversial social causes. On the other hand, it is argued that scientific specialization has tended to remove academic scholars from a sense of responsibility for the possible social and political implications of the knowledge they advance.

Thus, the active participation of organizations such as learned societies in broad political controversy draws the higher education enterprise into a more relevant and responsible role in relation to the pressing policy problems of modern society, and counteracts the present tendency for such organizations to serve as the passive instruments of federal policy.

In the terms of this argument, limiting academic associations to participation only in narrow political issues simply strengthens the bonds between these organizations and the federal government and further insulates the academic community from its true moral responsibility as the locus of criticism of the society's ills.

Liabilities of Broad Politicization

The basis for the frequent defeat (so far) of proposals committing associations to a position on Vietnam has been essentially this: The engagement of academic associations in broad political activity seems to many faculty members to fall outside of the essential purposes of the scholarly societies as they define or interpret these purposes. It is widely argued that since the basis for membership in learned societies is a shared commitment to scholarship or to a discipline, rather than to any ideological principle, it cannot be assumed (and is not, in fact, the case)

that the members of a disciplinary society share ideological views on many of the wide-ranging and complex political issues of the day. For the learned society to take a public stand on broad political affairs could, in many instances, be a source of destructive divisiveness among its members. (And if views on policy issues are often widely diverse within higher education associations--with their relatively homogeneous memberships--they can be expected to be even more varied within the differentiated structure of the university.)

Inherent in this argument is the assumption that scientific knowledge--while certainly relevant to political problems--and often highly influential in their solution--"does not directly and clearly provide the answer to any complex political issue."² Thus, sharing a single disciplinary perspective on public affairs does not necessarily lead a group of scholars to the same answers to policy questions, as public policy statements by disciplinary associations may suggest.

Furthermore, many academicians fear that association activity in broad public affairs is a threat to the professional status and autonomy of these organizations. According to this view, ideological statements on broad policy issues undermine the claim of academic organizations to a basic commitment to the objective pursuit and transmission of knowledge. If expertise is not a consistent basis for the behavior of these associations, public faith in them is reduced, and belief in their legitimacy as social critics and policy advisors in the narrower sphere of their special expertise is attenuated.

Those who resist broad politicization argue that academic institutions do not now function merely as passive instruments of the established political and social order. Rather, they assert, these institutions continue to serve, in a vital sense, as centers of dissent and criticism. As such, their autonomy must be carefully guarded; and one critical way in which they can take steps to preserve this autonomy is to participate as effectively as possible in the shaping of policy which directly affects their professional interests. Narrow politicization can thus be seen, from this perspective, as a means of enhancing the independence of academic organizations as loci of detached, scholarly research and social criticism.

An Alternative to Organizational Commitment on Broad Political Issues

The arguments cited above concern specifically the appropriateness of public organizational stands on broad policy issues. The case in favor of broad political activity for academic organizations assumes that in order for academicians to fulfill their social responsibility, they must use their professional organizations as vehicles for the articulation of their political views. I would not suggest here that academic organizations can or should ignore pressing political and social problems of whatever scope. However, deep concern for, and interest in public affairs does not seem to require overt political action on the part of these organizations. If the traditional purposes of scholarly associations are to be interpreted in such a way as to assure the relevance of the work carried on within them for the solution of social problems, couldn't this broadening of focus take

²Don K. Price, "Purists and Politicians," Science, Vol. 163, No. 3862 (Jan. 3, 1969), 28.

place through the enhanced use of the association (and, for that matter, of the university) as a forum for careful analysis of broad policy issues and for the consideration of the significance of specialized scientific or scholarly knowledge for their solution.

A trend in this direction is perhaps indicated by the creation within a number of scholarly societies of special committees or groups which concern themselves with public policy. Examples are the American Institute of Physics' new Committee on Physics and Society and the American Political Science Association's Caucus for a New Political Science--both of which offer the potential of stimulating within their parent bodies increased attention to partisan issues and social crises, and a greater responsibility for the use of scientific knowledge in the clarification and resolution of critical policy problems.

In addition, it seems highly appropriate to expand the range of issues raised for consideration by all association members at their professional meetings--encouraging wider interest in the relevance of scholarly research for contemporary social affairs, and informing members on the various facets of major social issues with which they might otherwise be unfamiliar. The association (or university) might thus serve, more than it has previously, as a forum for the analysis of broad policy issues, drawing on disciplinary perspectives and skills to shed light on their matters.

This is not to suggest that social action is inappropriate to individual members of the academic community--as scholars as well as in the role of citizens. As individuals, academicians are provided with a wide variety of avenues--other than through their associations--for the public expression of their policy views. They are, for example, increasingly employed as consultants to government on broad questions of national policy. I would propose, however, that academic organizations can function most effectively as contexts for the scholarly examination of social issues, thus helping to prepare their members for more informed participation in the political process.

Academicians who wish to be politically active through organizations also have the clear alternative of joining organizations which have basically ideological or political purposes. Certainly, the possibility for individuals to join different types of organizations in the pursuit of their varied interests is a characteristic feature of this pluralistic society.

To stress, in conclusion, the advantage of retaining some degree of organizational neutrality in relation to contemporary social crises, it should be emphasized that higher education associations and institutions have a unique role to perform in a rapidly changing technological society. They require freedom from the necessity to commit themselves on each of the constantly shifting policy dilemmas of the day so that they can develop an overview, or a broader perspective, on social and political affairs--an overview which policy makers, responsible for immediate solutions to a bewildering variety of policy questions, cannot possibly sustain.