

Liberal Arts Colleges and Professional Schools: The Normative Dimension of Higher Education

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I

Before taking up the topic at hand, and in the language of Robert's parliamentary Rules of Order, I would like to rise to a question of personal privilege. I do this to specifically address one of the hosts of today's meeting and a good friend, Ambassador Phil Murphy.

Beginning with a first conversation around Phil and Tammy Murphy's dinner table in February of 2010, this is now the 7th – and very probably the last – time that he and I have joined hands in bringing American and German experts on higher education together to compare notes and to exchange views on issues of key importance to universities on both sides of the Atlantic – from diversity to financing, and from citizenship education to the transition from school to university. This remarkable series of conversations would not have been possible without Phil Murphy's sustained and passionate interest in the subject and without his support and encouragement. Through these meetings, as in many other ways during his tenure in Berlin, Ambassador Murphy has raised the notion and the practice of cultural diplomacy to an entirely new level, and we are very much in his debt for his inspiration and generosity.

The least we can do to honor this remarkable legacy is to make sure that this exchange continues. And whatever exciting things the future holds for you, Phil, we hope you will cherish the memory of these conversations, and perhaps drop by from time to time to keep us on our toes. Our warmest thanks, Mr. Ambassador, and God's Speed!

II

My task in my remaining time is to explain why, in planning this meeting, we have decided to deal not just with one kind of institution, but with two – not only with the model of the undergraduate college and the role the liberal arts can and do play in shaping its intellectual and curricular identity, but also with the model of the professional

school – and why talking about both at the same time makes eminently good sense in the current context of German higher education.

My answer to this question is twofold.

First, I will argue that both the Liberal Arts College and the Professional School are not only particularly interesting inventions of American higher education, but also very promising models for rethinking the intellectual architecture of German universities. Karen Beck will later explain why this is so in the case of the liberal arts college and its possible variants. I will, in just a moment, explain why I think this is true for the Professional School model as well.

My second reason for why we are talking about these two institutions at the same time is that they have one particularly interesting thing in common: They both lend themselves, each in its own way, particularly well to dealing with a kind of issue that the contemporary university – American as well as German – is normally not very good at dealing with, and that is an intellectually robust and academically credible way of inquiry into questions of norms and values. I say this against the background of the well established observation that the development of the modern university has leaned heavily towards emphasizing cognitive knowledge at the expense of both aesthetic and normative knowledge

Let me say just a few words on each of these two observations.

III

I probably have to say less on why I think professional schools are an interesting way to organize both research and teaching for certain kinds and areas of knowledge. Over the last few years, as some of you know, I have made a bit of a name for myself by arguing that German higher education can do a lot worse than looking at the professional school model as an interesting alternative for its internal structure. There is plenty to read on this on my website, and my efforts have not gone totally unheeded – just look at the new School of Education at the Technical University of Munich, and at the recommendations of the recent group of experts on teacher education in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

In brief, the argument goes like this: There are fields of human pursuits whose knowledge needs are rather poorly served by traditional, discipline-based university faculties or departments. Education is such a field as it has to rely on the insights of psychologists, sociologists, neuro-scientists, economists, anthropologists, and quite a few others in order to adequately understand what is going on in schools and

universities. The same is true for business, for public health, for engineering, for law, and, indeed, for public policy (which is why we are meeting here today at a professional school of governance).

Professional schools, in other words, provide an institutional arrangement and an academic culture for generating and disseminating knowledge that is both interdisciplinary and applied, and that provides a particular professional affinity with the domains of social life that they serve: Schools of Education with the world of teaching and learning, business schools with the corporate world, and schools of governance with the world of public policy.

Professional schools have a long and, on the whole, distinguished history in American higher education. Silicon Valley would be unthinkable without the symbiotic role of both the School of Engineering and the Business School at Stanford. As I have mentioned, there is some initial experimenting with the model going on in Germany.

IV

Let me now turn to my second argument about why it makes sense to talk about liberal arts colleges and professional schools at the same meeting. My argument was, as you will recall, that both liberal arts colleges and professional schools have a particular, if different, propensity for the scholarly pursuit of normative issues.

We will later on hear more about how the tradition of the liberal arts colleges deals with normative issues, but I for one have always been impressed by how creatively and congenially that tradition, in its finer specimens (such as Bard College), connects the insights of history and the rich human narratives of our great literatures with an understanding of such value-laden issues as conflict, trust, competition, or truth.

Professional schools, similarly and by the very nature of their mandate, can hardly escape a normative discourse of their own. Their closer proximity to the realities of social, economic, and political life exposes them much more directly to the normative conflicts inherent in that reality than is the case for an academic department of, say, physics, psychology, or English.

Let me take the two cases in point with which I am most familiar. The first is a professional school of education, with one of which I have been associated ever since I started teaching at Stanford 48 years ago. In a field like education, it is hard to imagine a pertinent research or teaching agenda that would be oblivious to such normatively charged issues as equality, achievement, competition, or indeed knowledge – not to mention the value questions involved in curricular decisions – just think of the bitter

fight that are still being fought in my country over creationism vs. evolution or over how to teach the Civil War. Professional schools of education simply cannot escape from these issues; moreover, it is part of their professional and academic mandate to assure disciplined inquiry into the nature, origins, and variations of the many normative orientations that define the educational exercise.

My second case in point takes us right into the halls of this distinguished institution, because it is the field of public policy where the professional school model has also served quite congenially at the interface of scholarship and the world of power – and that is true not only of the Hertie School, but also of such places as the Kennedy School at Harvard, the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton or the London School of Economics. Here again, we find a special propensity for dealing with the ubiquitous normative issues that permeate the world of policy, where issues of choice, values, priorities, and ethics play such a key role. Most of the major policy controversies that have lately loomed so large in American as well as German politics have profound normative connotations – from Obamacare, gun control and immigration in the U.S. to the future of Hartz IV, homosexual marriages, and women’s quotas in Germany. It is one of the great challenges for a professional school of public policy to understand and to teach how the normative arguments surrounding each of these issues are to be analyzed, weighed, and mediated.

What is true for education and public policy is true for other fields of professional pursuit as well, such as public health, business, or law. For each of these areas, the capacity for reasoned discourse on normative questions lies at the very heart of the concept of professional schools.

V

Let me conclude by returning to the parallel perspective on liberal arts colleges and professional schools, and here especially professional schools of public policy. There is a complementarity there that I wish to underscore. The efforts of schools of public policy to understand and promote “good governance” ultimately depend for their success on the work of our schools and universities at large to promote, in its broadest sense, “good citizenship”. It is no coincidence that the recent literature on the future of the liberal arts in the United States (e.g., Nussbaum, Delbanco, Keohane et al.) is heavily oriented to the critical function of citizenship in modern democracies. It is this close relationship between “good governance” and “good citizenship” that makes the connection between liberal arts colleges and professional schools such a fascinating and important issue.