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Renegotiating the Society-Academy Contract

The contract between society at large and the academy—the learned professions and the institutions in which they work—is being rewritten. The stakes in renegotiation are high.

The original contract—made in Europe, where the modern research university was born—was simple and well understood. Society would give support and independence to the learned professions because learning, like art and music, was intrinsically good. To that end the academy would teach, seek the truth, and stay out of politics. But this relatively simple exchange was not enough for American society. The America of Franklin and Jefferson early recognized the practical value of learning for business and industrial activity and the growth of a continental nation. Furthermore, education would ensure an enlightened citizenry to bear the responsibility for governance. Thus two new features were added to the simple contract between professors and princes. First, from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Morrill Act to the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, American society supported the university as—to borrow Dael Wolfle's phrase—the home of science. Second, egalitarian elitism, an American invention, expanded access to higher education beyond Jefferson's dreams. Society, science, industry, and such central public purposes as national security and public health all prospered. Above all, an educated citizenry proved to be a better repository for sovereignty than kings or priests.

But the old bargain is coming unstuck, largely because of the success of the American additions to the original European contract. Higher education, like government and health care, has become big business, and the general distrust of large institutions has reached the campus as well. The signs of deterioration of support and erosion of the contract are visible to all: the steady decline in support of the premier research and teaching institutions in the state-supported systems of higher education; the end of low or even free tuition in public institutions; severe budget problems in private colleges and universities; the declining use of merit pay for faculty; increasing government restrictions on and new disincentives to philanthropic support of the arts and education; the attack on peer review; politicization of boards of regents in public institutions; the invasion of institutional responsibility for priority setting; direct intrusion into university decisions by federal, state, and local government; and efforts to make university endowments and properties subject to direct political control.

To date, the university response has been little more than a cry that our ox is being gored too. Our claim that we are different from big labor, big welfare, big business, and big government is obscured by our affluence and our success. While recognizing that the contract will never be the same again, we must nevertheless try to renegotiate it on better terms than those now being proposed. In this effort, university presidents, regents, faculty leaders, students, and concerned alumni have an immense task, perhaps the most important in the modern history of higher education. For the terms of the new contract will be hard fought, and some of them have already been traded away. The new contract must include as much recognition of the autonomy of the academy as possible, not because the administration and faculties *want* it, but because the university's contribution to society depends on it. In return, the academy must prove that its autonomy will be exercised with a new sense of accountability for the resources made available by society and with a demonstrated capacity to use these resources wisely. The public demands performance, not public relations. For this task neither timid hand-wringers nor above-the-battle elitists need apply. We must drive a hard and responsible bargain in the face of hard fiscal and political realities.—BREWSTER C. DENNY, *Dean, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle 98195*