

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics.
By James F. Keenan, SJ. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. viii + 282
pages. \$34.00.

THREE PERSPECTIVES

I

When I picked up James Keenan's latest book, *University Ethics*, my intention was to review it in light of the crisis around hookup culture, consent, and sexual assault on college campuses across the United States. I've been engaged with this conversation for the last twelve years of research, lectures, and teaching in higher education. As with Keenan, this work has caused me to reflect upon and challenge big-picture problems on campus regarding a decided *lack* of ethical concern for student populations—sometimes among faculty, and often for reasons to do with prioritizing university branding and sports programs over other students' needs, a fear of scandals and lawsuits, or a general shrugging of shoulders toward matters considered too personal (and not academic enough) for a college to worry about (like sex and relationships).

But reading Keenan's book also produced a storm of reactions in me about my own experience as a young, tenure-track professor, and the way various university communities treated me over the years (both very well and terribly, cruelly even) because of a variety of factors—my gender, my research agenda (student life issues and sexuality), and my writing choices, among other more personal things. My current academic identity operates within university communities on a case-by-case basis on behalf of my research, but also allows me to remain outside the traditional structures of academia and tenure. My reasons for keeping one foot in and one foot out of academia are complicated and many. I've made my peace with my in-between status and have come to enjoy and celebrate the many benefits of my independent status. But, to be frank, the academic identity I now enjoy grew out of treatment so cruel and unfeeling while I was still a very young and vulnerable graduate student and then professor that sometimes I can scarcely believe it went on. One of the most difficult lessons from this period of my life—despite the loftiest notions I still hold about the end and purpose of the university—was that university higher-ups fear research that may directly challenge their own communities and the behavior of those communities, and actively work against faculty who take up such research. I realized I

would experience true academic freedom only by taking myself out of the profession in a traditional sense. It is depressing to admit this, and I rarely look back upon this period of my career, not only because I'm professionally happy now, but also because when I do, the pain and rage it provokes is so profound and therefore unproductive that it's best to remain squarely in my academic present and look forward to its future.

All this to say that you, the reader, may have a specific interest, angle, or reason for picking up Keenan's *University Ethics*, yet find yourself personally and professionally immersed in a choppy sea of issues in which you did not expect to be swimming. Everything from worry and anger on behalf of your university community to guilt and shame about your own conduct (or lack thereof) in relation to students and fellow colleagues (those adjunct colleagues especially) may arise as you read. This is due, in no little part, to how honest and rigorous Keenan is in evaluating his personal attitudes and behavior (especially toward adjuncts). He is hard on colleges for being so little concerned with their status as ethical enterprises, but at times, he is even harder on himself, and not at all bashful about sharing his perceived professional shortcomings. This makes him a sympathetic critic and companion, even as he levies the harshest judgments about what he sees as the egregious disregard of colleges and universities for their own ethics on a broad scale. Despite faculty across disciplines being tasked with teaching ethics in the context of *other* communities and professions such as medicine and business, the university tends not to reflect upon its own identity as an ethical body.

On this note, I shall turn to the topic of student life.

In a chapter devoted to student behavior entitled "Undergraduates Behaving Badly," Keenan writes: "Faculty who teach ethics in the professions rarely turn more immediately to preparing students to face their weekends, their friends, or their constant moral dilemmas" (98–99). This statement echoes a concern I raise each time I lecture on college campuses about my research, especially at Catholic schools, which tend to have thriving social justice programs and majors, not to mention a plethora of courses on ethics across disciplines. Yet participants in these programs tend to see themselves as exporters of justice to far-flung places during spring break trips (as an example), rather than on-campus practitioners of their principles. I've wondered when it will occur to more faculty to encourage students to apply the resources and critical thinking skills they learn (and that we teach) in philosophy, theology, literature, and ethics to what goes on at campus parties and in the wee hours of the morning in the residence halls. Likewise, Keenan recalls reading a *Boston Globe* article about campus hazing at Boston University, and wonders if any other faculty would think to raise the

incident during a class, because *their very own students* might have been involved. “Would there have been even one professor who thought this local scandal about twenty-year-old students being brutalized by fellow students merited even a minute of comment?” he asks (106).

Like Keenan, I have long seen sexual assault on campus as a focal point that illuminates the ethical problems noted throughout the entirety of his book, from the ways colleges will brush what amounts to felony criminal behavior under the rug in order to prioritize a thriving, moneymaking sports program and/or a pristine university image and brand, to the faculty/student affairs disconnect that hands over sexual assault and consent education to student life staff. Keenan tackles sexual assault in his chapters on undergraduates and also on gender, identifying sexual assault (and harassment) as “*the issue in university ethics where faculty, staff, and administrators, in particular women faculty, are already involved*” (127). Keenan sees the work and research of faculty, staff, and administration on gender issues and sexual assault as a kind of ethical beacon for the university as a whole, a model really, or what Keenan describes in his concluding chapter as “the gateway to university ethics” (204).

In response to these hopeful and positive claims, I say, *Yes!*

And also, *No, not at all!*

Faculty may indeed teach on gender and sexual assault in classrooms, and university staff provide the now-requisite education on consent and sexual assault to our students. But so much of this work is still very disjointed and reflects the pronounced division between academics and student life. As university communities, we are woefully behind on the broad, integrated conversations necessary to see a transformation of our campuses. There are always *a few* faculty as well as staff and administration who take up sexual assault, sex, and gender, and who form a core group to whom students go to for advice, help, and intellectual reflection around these issues. Yet there are *far too few*. Sexual assault (and anything to do with sex) is still a marginalized issue precisely because it is considered personal and private, and in the academy anything personal and private is relegated to the margins. Also, most victims of sexual assault are women, rendering the subject vulnerable to further marginalization, precisely because of the biases against and the diminishment of “women’s issues” that persist in society and the academy.

In Keenan’s extensive and excellent chapter on gender—one of the best in the entire book—he tackles this conundrum, acknowledging that women faculty typically do the research on issues stereotypically associated with women—family, parenthood, gender discrimination in the workplace, and so on. As long as it is mainly women faculty who care about these issues, they will remain on the margins of university concerns. Through the work

of these women, “we can see the significance of faculty using their own research, teaching, and mentoring skills to better their own situation, especially in the light of the ethical issues of gender bias and discrimination,” writes Keenan (147). But this same struggle to fight against bias and discrimination on behalf of their findings also illuminates, rather brightly, “the lack of familiarity that the university has with issues of justice in the first place” (147).

Keenan’s wise judgment about the university’s failure to attend to issues of justice applies wholesale to sexual assault on campus, in my opinion. Sexual assault has come to the fore not because universities have taken it up as a widespread ethical cause or as an issue that gets to the heart of justice itself, but rather because of worries about money and scandal. National scandals surrounding sexual assault on campus create conflict with respect to the commodification of the university, one of the last subjects Keenan takes up. Universities have become businesses, and administrations and trustees often seem more worried about damage control and the threat of the loss of federal funding than about the basic well-being of students. Instead of standing up for this issue of their own accord, universities must be “compelled” by law, as Keenan puts it (30), to care. The subject of sexual assault seems more a danger to a university’s reputation than a danger to the students themselves.

In my own experience, my pursuit of a research agenda on sexuality, young adulthood, and student life issues turned out to be a dangerous move as a pre-tenured faculty member. In a Catholic university context, people were nervous about having a full-time faculty person engaged in such research, because it seemed to publicly announce students were having sex on campus, which might damage the Catholic identity of the university. I learned that topics like sex and gender, but especially sex, gender, and *youth*, are considered less rigorous academic pursuits. Keenan goes through research about “baby penalties” (147) and the ways academia makes it difficult for women to prioritize family *and* pursue successful academic careers, and I would argue that there are *research agenda penalties*, too. The priorities of academic, university communities discourage (at least indirectly) such research, at least if the faculty member wants to be taken seriously and get tenure. This means that university communities make it risky for young professors to take up research agendas that might actually have an impact on the subject of university ethics in relation to student populations.

In the last decade I’ve lectured at over 150 university campuses on my research—an incredibly positive and welcoming response to my work, which on one level challenges all I say above. The experience of so many invitations and visits has taught me that yes, there *is* room for talk about some of

the most difficult, damning, painful, and scandalous topics that arise in the context of university communities; that there are faculty, administration, and staff all over the country who put their students' needs and well-being first and foremost, above university and trustee politics, above the reality that universities are now brands to be protected and promoted, and often at great professional risk to their jobs and careers. But I've often joked that my current academic identity revolves around being the "messenger" of third-rail topics. I am the academic that institutions can "import" or "rent" for a day or two, who can safely visit and raise issues others may be afraid to raise themselves (but want to, desperately), who can then get out quickly, before anything terrible happens. My role is to *absorb the risks* that come with talking about sex on campus, and I can do so because *I'm no longer beholden to the academy in a traditional sense*. My outsider status is useful precisely because it gives *me* the freedom to take up risky topics, and it allows *institutions* to hire me to discuss those risky topics. When I visit campuses, I also often become the confidante to whom people confess their complaints, their fears, their anger, dismay, and disappointment about their institutions' behavior—because I am considered a "safe" person to tell. I can hire and fire no one, and soon I will be gone.

As one reads through example after example that Keenan cites of the ways universities and their constituencies behave badly and/or look the other way at bad behavior, it is easy to see how universities are a bit like tyrants. Their tremendous power, prestige, and access to resources allow them to be remarkably benevolent, bestowing favor, opportunity, assistance, and reward on specific groups and individuals. Likewise, university communities can be cruel, using their power and resources to neglect, shame, abandon, and act in inhumane ways toward the very people who've turned to them for help, shelter, and possibility—adjuncts, certainly, but all too often as we've seen with Title IX in the news, their very own young and vulnerable students who've undergone trauma to an extreme. The young woman who is sexually assaulted becomes a potentially scandalous stain on the university's "brand," who must be "gotten out" quickly and completely so as not to do any lasting damage to a university's reputation.

The bulk of Keenan's chapters involve pulling together the research of others to prove his overall point and to show how negligent universities are when it comes to the behavior of their very own faculty, administration, and students. Still missing is the qualitative and quantitative research on university ethics among exactly the constituencies Keenan wishes would think about this topic. His reviews of the relevant literature are compelling and useful, but readers may wish he'd pushed some of this work to the endnotes. It takes up valuable real estate where he could have offered much-needed

constructive suggestions. But this aggregation of research also serves to highlight the “profound reluctance of universities to see an ethical culture as constitutive of its fundamental identity” (195), and to show this across the university’s many facets and layers.

Despite the incisive critique Keenan levies throughout *University Ethics*, I believe he both sees and celebrates the tremendous potential and good that institutions of higher education offer to our world on many levels. It is this potential good that makes Keenan’s project important, even essential: universities are institutions we believe in, that we are a part of, that we need and that others need too. To consider the ways in which they can become greater forces for good, to open up pathways for self-evaluation and, ideally, transformation, is not only necessary—it is a *good* in its own right.

DONNA FREITAS

Author, *Sex and the Soul*

II

In *University Ethics*, James Keenan makes two welcome and bold assertions: first, that the mistreatment of adjunct faculty in higher education is (in the words of one chapter title) “A First Case for University Ethics,” and second, that “the discourse about *gender* at university campuses is the entry point for further discourse on university ethics” (127; my emphasis). By elevating and respecting the work that has been done about, by, and for two historically overlooked and disrespected groups in higher education, Keenan calls for a transformation of university culture from one that only preaches ethics to one that practices it. In so doing, he has invited his readers to recognize that the challenges and questions that these two marginalized communities raise, and the solutions they offer, are at the heart of *all* of the issues that he has identified as crucial to “promoting the constitutive role of ethics in the contemporary university” (30). In this short reflection, I would like to elaborate on this insight.

First, I would add evidence to the argument that adjunct faculty are a “first case” giving us “access to ethical issues often overlooked and not considered ‘material’ for academics” (38). Keenan has identified the most important of these issues in observing that the case of adjunct faculty illuminates critical realities that impede the establishment of a culture of ethics. One such reality is the “cultural myopia” that keeps faculty in their disciplinary and status-based silos, oblivious to the material effects of the exploitative contingent employment system on their adjunct colleagues. Another is the privileging of research over teaching. These attitudes, Keenan recognizes, are