

reveal higher education's long-standing neglect of the ethics of higher education, but the communities working to address these two critical issues are leading us toward the very solution for which Keenan advocates: "making ethics" by "making community" (217).

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III

We owe James Keenan, SJ, a debt of gratitude for this well-researched, wide-ranging, critical, and constructive call to action for those of us who care deeply about the kind and quality of the culture and structures of higher education.

One point as I begin: I am trained in international relations and sociology, and it is through those lenses that I make my comments. I join this discussion in part because Keenan insists there is "the compelling need for faculty to enter university ethics"—all faculty, from the social sciences, the humanities, and the professional schools (99).

What is his purpose in writing *University Ethics*? Keenan states, "My question simply asks whether the university as an institution is willing to develop the context, climate, and structures to promote a culture of ethics for its members' personal and corporate conduct" (21). I will approach this question by exploring the following: Keenan's writing style, the argument itself, and a suggestion for reframing the question somewhat while, I hope, simultaneously strengthening the argument.

Three characteristics of Keenan's writing style are evident. The first two are related to why he wrote this book. He is quite frank about the impetus. When invited to give a plenary presentation on the topic "Impasse and Theological Ethics" at the 2009 annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, he surmised that the audience would presume the "impasse" he would address was that between bishops and theological ethicists. But the invitation came as he was at the beginning of cancer therapy for a stage III melanoma, which entailed surgery, infections, and maximum dosage of interferon. He comments, "In the light of this experience, I decided contrary to expectations, to reflect on my experience of encountering impasse in my illness and how that impasse taught me to embrace solidarity with others. During the talk, I reflected for a moment on whether where we teach and work, the university itself, promotes solidarity" (58). He quickly credits M. Shawn Copeland for steering him in that direction. Her earlier work

had highlighted the culture of isolation: “I had never seen an essay on university culture and ethical issues before, nor thought about the isolationist culture of our workplace” (58).

Thus two characteristics of Keenan’s writing style become clear. First, unlike what some do, and unlike what still seems inappropriate for all scholars to do, he talks personally about his life and about how the reality of his cancer offered him an opportunity to think differently. Is each of us willing to do that, to let the personal shape the professional work we do? Second, he expresses his gratitude to another scholar—by name—in the body of his text for awakening him to some thinking he might not otherwise have pursued. Can this become a common habit for all of us who work in higher education, that is, to express gratitude to others by name, not hidden in some footnote but in the very fiber of our work?

The third characteristic of Keenan’s writing style is its special combination of personal humility and hard-hitting prose. One example of the former: “First, I must come clean about the way I have totally ignored adjunct faculty” (39). An example of the latter: “There is much evidence that gender inequity at the university is primarily due to bias and discrimination. In fact the studies on gender at the university are so eye-opening, one wonders why we have not yet seen a real ethical conversion at our universities” (139). And most assuredly, the hard-hitting style has a purpose, namely, to recognize his own complicity while challenging, and perhaps even imploring (fittingly with his humility), all involved in higher education to hold to higher standards of individual and corporate ethical behavior, to articulate those standards clearly, and to build the necessary supports to make them flourish throughout the university.

Next is the argument. At one level, Professor Keenan’s argument is straightforward, as indicated above, where it is raised in the form of a question. Keenan states his argument in various other ways as well, such as the following: “I am not primarily asking about what we should do with our students; I am more concerned with the institution first” (26); “I am interested in the ethics found across the university and promoted by the university” and “I continually ask whether institutionally a culture of ethics underlies and fortifies a university and its multitudinous constituents” (35).

Two issues become apparent when one delves into the substance of his argument. First, at the outset of the book Keenan points to the lack of professional ethics: “Simply put, the American university does not hold its employees to professional ethical standards because it has not created a culture of ethical consciousness and accountability at the university, and this is in part both because of the nature of the contemporary university and because it does not believe that it *needs* ethics” (4; emphasis in the original).

He discusses various professions that include ethics and in which university faculty teach specific ethics courses (some of which are even required), such as medical ethics or legal ethics. I think many, if not most of us, belong to professional associations that have their own codes of ethics, policies, and procedures; as a sociologist I do, and I know there are other academic and professional associations that university personnel belong to. But Keenan is trying to argue for something “above” that level. He explicitly says that his claim that the university lacks interest in ethics “cannot be addressed by simply developing a code of conduct for professors, students, coaches, admissions officers, and the rest” (6). In addition, in his concluding chapter, Keenan reminds readers of his earlier discussion on how ethics functions in professions such as medicine and nursing “to promote a culture of ethics and professionalism through structures like guilds and professional associations with practices and norms that guide professionals in their ethical conduct with their colleagues, clients, and institutions.” He then states, “I noted how that culture of ethics, along with its social structures, practices, and norms, are absent from the university” (202).

This claim raises a debatable point: are there “university-wide ethics” or “supra-status university ethics” as opposed to disciplinary and/or professional ethics for each community within it? Keenan clearly supports the affirmative side: “Before we ever articulate a professional code of conduct for each community within the university, I think we need to develop a culture of awareness among faculty, staff, administrators, and students that for a university to flourish, it needs to recognize the integral, constitutive role of ethics in the formation of a flourishing community” (6–7). While I, too, want a flourishing community, my approach would be somewhat different, but at this point I simply want to state that I am not as convinced as is Keenan that such an “integral, constitutive role of ethics” can or ought to be systematically formed, developed, agreed upon, and adhered to with accountability. Do all members (who? how chosen? how many?) of a particular university, at a particular time in history, “decide” on the contents, structures, practices, and norms of ethics? On what grounds? For what length of time before those should be reexamined, in light of new challenges? What if, however, at the most basic level, it really is an argument about all constituents affirming the “right values”? Keenan cites Derek Bok, for example, who says, “Universities should be among the first to reaffirm the importance of basic values, such as honesty, promise keeping, free expression, and nonviolence” (124). Who would disagree with those, but what, then, is the claim? I return to this knotty topic below.

And a second issue arises: the “university” for Keenan often seems to revert to two constituents, “the faculty” or “the faculty and administrators.”

For example, he states, “If university administrators and faculty were to look at ethics, not only as they engaged local fraternities [one of Keenan’s examples], but as a bedrock for the deliberations of what is best for the university’s mission to collectively educate and form their students for the common good, then, I believe universities would be able to counter an array of ethically challenging realities on their campuses” (117). Keenan argues that the purpose of the particular chapter from which I take that quotation “tries to show the compelling need for faculty to enter university ethics” (99). I do think it is a difficult task to ferret out the essentials in defining the key noun. What, in fact, is “the university”? For what purpose does it exist? When does it include all statuses, undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff (from groundskeepers to security personnel), administrators, boards of trustees, alumni/ae? When is it really “just the administrators” or really “the board only”? What would it look like if each and every status group had a “voice” in helping set the standards of university ethics and holding all accountable to them? This leads to my final point.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a somewhat different frame for the central question. The title of Keenan’s book is *University Ethics*, and the first chapter is entitled “The Absence of Ethics at American Universities.” Even though Keenan remarks that he will be using ethics “in a rather broad, inclusive sense” (219 n. 2), I am inclined to think the more inclusive concept is really “university mission.” Why? For three reasons: first, ethics has traditionally been about individual behavior in light of one’s perspective on human nature and what makes for good or virtuous behavior. It is true that we now speak about corporations as “legal persons” and even talk about “corporate ethics,” but at least for some that is a stretch, one that obfuscates the situation: who will be held accountable for “bad” behavior of a “corporate entity”? To cite just one example, who/what was held accountable for the Great Recession? Second, unfortunately ethics seems to have a rather bad reputation, at least for those who dismiss it all as “merely relative”: ethics depends on one’s own perspective rather than on some “universal framework.” As a result, it doesn’t make an argument more persuasive to say, “First and foremost, it’s all about ethics.” Third, and a corollary of the second reason, if for at least some members of a university there is no “universal standard” of “appropriate” (let alone “good”) behavior, what would enable them to think about community membership and appropriate (even good) behavior within that community, namely, the university? My own view is that such behavior comes from “the mission” of the university, both the mission of higher education in general and the mission of a specific university in particular. Keenan himself refers to the general university mission, as cited in the quotation above (117) and again when he states in the chapter

on commodification, “The university aims not at its mission, that is, the education of its citizenry so as to promote the common good, but at its own financial survival” (174). Especially at faith-based universities, this succinct claim about a university’s mission seems foundational. And yet it also provides an inclusive framework for those who choose to come to higher education. Couple that general mission with the particular mission of a specific university, and, I believe, we have a compelling case for a bond that can unite all constituents, thus enhancing a university-wide community. That case is, of course, contingent upon serious, well-constructed orientations about mission for all new constituents, along with ongoing opportunities for deepening their understanding of and commitment to the mission. The mission can then be made manifest in constituent-appropriate ways. One example for faculty might be this: each and every course syllabus would have the mission statement on it, and the professor would explain, on the first day of class, how the particular course fit the mission of the university. In addition, and as Keenan rightfully argues throughout his important book, there must be, both in words and in resources, the necessary structures, processes, practices, and norms to support the vivification of the mission throughout the university. It is within that context, I would contend, that the conversation about ethics could fruitfully occur.

Let me close, however, as I began. We owe James Keenan, SJ, a debt of gratitude for this well-written, wide-ranging, critical, and constructive call to action. There is a wealth of research, commentary, and insight in this book. I hope all who read the symposium reviews will go to the book itself, discover its richness, and collaborate with others to build on Keenan’s significant work for the benefit of their own universities, thereby contributing to the kind of twenty-first-century university system we so desperately need.

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AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

University Ethics and Its Much-Needed Hermeneutics of Ethics

I thank the editors of *Horizons* for making this discussion possible, and in particular Gerald J. Beyer for his suggestion in the first place. Beyer has done much to articulate and develop the issues that I raise in *University Ethics*, particularly in mining the Catholic social tradition so as to set critical, social, and institutional standards that could well be used by our schools of higher learning.