



Pro-values norms and cultures: A vaccine against corruption?, by Robert Quinn, Executive Director, Scholars at Risk Network - www.scholarsatrisk.org

Goolam Mohamedbhai is right in pointing out the various forms of corruption, their respective origins, and the need for tailored responses (*Corruption in Higher Education: An Overview*). There is no magic solution to this complex challenge. But one common element in all forms of corruption in higher education is a breakdown—whether at the individual, institutional or system level—in respect for the core values underlying higher education itself. These are recognized by UNESCO and elsewhere as including equitable access, accountability, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility. Any meaningful response to corruption in higher education must therefore include a recommitment to these values that goes beyond mere statements. Implementation of pro-values norms and cultures can help to redress corruption after issues arise. When implemented proactively, they can contribute resistance to many forms of corruption, and when broadly shared nationally and internationally, such norms and cultures of practice can have a reinforcing effect, increasing the health of the higher education community overall.

At Scholars at Risk—a network of over 450 higher education institutions in 35 countries—our experience with corruption generally manifests in two forms. Most common are the intentional, extreme cases where scholars, students, administrators or higher education leaders suffer threatened or actual violence or coercion for uncovering or resisting corruption. A librarian is fired and prosecuted on false charges for exposing misdirection of library funds to benefit university officials. A lecturer is threatened at gunpoint by a student involved in sectarian militias over a disputed grade. An scientist receives death threats when published data impedes the goals of government-connected agro-business interests. These cases not only involve a breakdown in higher education values, but also a breakdown in rule of law. In these cases we respond with direct assistance to the threatened individual (trying to arrange a temporary position in a safe location somewhere in our network) and by raising awareness of the attack on the higher education space (as through our Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, <http://monitoring.academicfreedom.info>).

Less perilous in the near-term, but far more numerous and potentially damaging to the long-term health of higher education communities, are when corruption manifests in intended or even unintended erosion of the centrality of core values to the higher education mission. Ostensibly neutral legislation to reform higher education administration goes too far and damages institutional autonomy, threatening outside interference with teaching and research outcomes. Changes in funding models ostensibly necessary to promote academic competitiveness go too far and reduce access to higher education for all but the most privileged. International partnerships ostensibly intended to encourage cross-cultural understanding and inquiry accept recognition of ‘cultural differences’ in ways that constrain academic freedom, limiting inquiry and discourse and posing risks to the reputations of all partners.

These cases generally involve a breakdown in higher education values resulting from two common traps. The first is *neglect*, or the tendency to avoid complex and often competing values claims among a range of stakeholders by limiting mention of higher education values to general statements, without developing implementing procedures. When the inevitable values incidents arise stakeholders have little social or political capital to call upon. An example of neglect might be an overseas teaching program involving faculty from both partner institutions which is silent as to whether academic freedom principles apply equally to faculty from both institutions.

Neglect often leads to *oversimplification*, the second trap, where stakeholders responding to a values-related incident privilege one value over all others, eroding the legitimacy of outcomes. An example of oversimplification might be students demanding more equitable access to higher education adopting tactics which undermine campus safety, eroding institutional autonomy.

With these cases in mind Scholars at Risk encourages a pro-active approach. Through our Promoting Higher Education Values Project, network members and partners are developing frameworks for exploring multi-layered values issues, including frameworks for assessing stakeholders involved, the partnerships or programs involved, and incidents which may arise. Critically, the project seeks to expand both the menu of responses to values-incidents which arise—seeking to escape false and unhelpful binary “all or nothing” or “stay or go” choices in favor of more measured approaches—and the menu of pro-active measures which institutions and systems can develop to encourage the emergence of before-the-fact, pro-values norms and cultures of practice. Examples include wide dissemination of any statement of values and related processes, such as via websites and email bulletins; including values content in staff and student induction processes; circulating a regular values assessment letter or report and creating opportunities to discuss it with stakeholders; encouraging research and course offerings on values-related issues; and appointing a values ombudsperson empowered to raise values issues proactively.

All of these pro-values practices can help to focus the higher education community on its core mission, creating a climate less hospitable to corruption, whether in its violent or corrosive forms. A shared, pro-values vocabulary can make it easier to examine corrupting influences. Widely-known pro-values procedures can encourage reporting of corrupt activities in their earliest stages. Relationships formed among stakeholders engaged in pro-values activities can build the political and social capital necessary to confront corrupt actors, especially those rooted in institutional or national authority.

While it is certainly true that merely talking more often about values is not enough to redress fully the growing and complex challenge of corruption in higher education, it is equally true that *not* talking more often about values is part of the problem, and a part that is relatively easy to redress.

Robert Quinn is the founding Executive Director of the Scholars at Risk Network, based at New York University. Scholars at Risk invites comments and expressions of interest in the global SAR network, the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, and the Protecting Higher Education Values Project to scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu.