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## >> News & Communications

[Duke News Home](#)
[Calendar of Events](#)
[Audio & Video](#)
[Experts](#)
[Duke Dialogue](#)
[Quick Facts](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Duke Home](#)

### Opinion

#### Nannerl O. Keohane: Thoughts on Undergraduate Education and Academic Freedom

In her last address at the annual meeting of the faculty, President Keohane says the university must do more to intellectually challenge students

Thursday, October 16, 2003 |

*Text of the address presented by [President Nannerl O. Keohane](#) at the annual meeting of the university faculty on Oct. 16.*

Those of you who attended this year's Founders Day ceremony heard a speech about the joys of scholarship, given in eager anticipation of my return to active faculty life. Today, as I near the end of my work as an administrator, I will discuss some concerns about the future.

One of the many things I've learned in administration is the wisdom of the advice attributed to Yogi Berra -- and, according to the pertinent website, to more than two dozen others, including Will Rogers, George Bernard Shaw, Groucho Marx and Confucius -- that it's dangerous to make predictions -- especially about the future. Universities are multidimensional and rapidly evolving institutions, full of very smart people who have deeply held views about how things should -- and should not -- be done. In these institutions, trying to foresee what is likely to happen around the next bend is always a challenge.

Nonetheless, successful institutions have to make strategic choices. Strategic choices are counter-productive if they are at odds with developing realities that the institution cannot control. I will sketch out a few such developing realities that institutions like Duke will have to grapple with in the years to come.

During my time as president, a number of dire predictions about the future of higher education in this country turned out to be highly exaggerated. In the middle of the 1990s, Peter Drucker and others predicted that traditional colleges and universities would become extinct within the first decade of the 21st century, like dinosaurs, under the relentless competitive pressure of rapidly evolving Cyber-universities. We were assured by other observers that our high-price private universities would become unviable, with prospective students choosing less expensive options such as the "public Ivies."

### News Sections

[Opinion](#)
[Other News Office](#)

### Spotlight



[Meet the new faculty](#)

[Other Spotlight Features](#)

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Neither of those predictions was on the mark. Cyber-universities have had a hard time even establishing themselves on a firm footing, and there is no talk of their driving us out of business anytime soon. And far from losing ground, elite private colleges and universities attract more highly qualified applicants every year. Ironically, the current concern is precisely the opposite: the pervasive sense in this "winner take all society" that you can only make it in life if you get into one of the prestigious name-brand schools, with disturbing consequences for other fine institutions of higher education.

Nonetheless, the fact that the doomsayers were mistaken is no grounds for complacency. The prediction that universities as we know them would become obsolete turned out to be bosh, as many of us thought it would be. But instead of just celebrating that fact and moving on unthinkingly, we should ask why this is true, and even more important, ask the next question: if it isn't cyberspace education in the present crude, imperfect form that requires us to think in novel ways in order to survive and flourish, then what will it be? The ground is moving, education is a fluid enterprise, and if we want to stay at the top of our game, we need to think creatively and not be tempted to sit tight in our Gothic Wonderland.

The problems that I will discuss this afternoon are: the inexorably rising costs of doing business as usual; challenges in undergraduate education; and threats to academic freedom. One indication of the complexity of such issues is that most of the suggestions I offer for improving undergraduate education will cost money, and thus work against the goal of reducing costs that I discuss at the outset. That's a paradox that we'll have to wrestle with as creatively as we can.

### *The rising costs of business as usual*

I worry that we may be lulled into a sense of false confidence by the fact our admissions statistics keep improving, and there seems to be no real limit to our ability to charge prices that rise steadily above inflation. This is partly, of course, because of our commitment to generous financial aid for students in every school, so that large numbers of our "customers" do not pay the full ticket price. Without that buffer, our institutions would be very different places, and the numbers of students who could afford to take advantage of the education at a place like Duke would dwindle alarmingly.

But financial aid itself is an increasingly costly commitment. This year, across the university, we will invest more than \$92M of institutional funds to support financial aid for students at all levels. And financial aid is not going to save us forever from the

consequences of inexorably rising costs. Even the California real estate market can't expand forever, and anyone who has been through Econ 101 knows that we can't increase our costs indefinitely.

Many of the solutions that work for business won't work for us, and the panaceas that are offered don't turn out to be very useful. Having each faculty member teach more students or more classes a semester may sound like a great way to increase "productivity." No doubt some faculty members could indeed teach a few more students. But if you do that across the board unthinkingly you will surely reduce the quality of the "product" that we offer, by increasing class size and reducing student contact, and you will also lose many of your most "productive" faculty members to other institutions. A more imaginative use of information technology can help cut costs in some administrative support areas; but in our core enterprise, involving technology in teaching and research has so far meant a more expensive enterprise, if you wish to sustain or enhance quality.

We know the root causes of the problem: the rapid expansion of knowledge that demands new investments in intellectual capital, without rendering any of the old ones obsolete; and competitive pressures to do more and do it better, in order to attract top students and faculty, enhance our reputation and become a more exciting place intellectually and in every other way. In a few areas, especially in the health system, we face competition based on cost and efficiency as well as quality. But apart from this, there are no robust incentives to engage in serious cost cutting, and powerful incentives to maintain costly quality. The record of higher education makes this very clear. The article on "Jacuzzi U" in *The New York Times* on October 5 gave stark evidence of the "arms race" or "battle of perks" in the area of student services alone.

As I said in my Founders Day address, Duke has managed our finances with exemplary prudence. To give just one example: since 1994, we have brought 48 new buildings on line, for an increase of 29% in the square footage on this campus; our energy costs increased only 9% over this period. Yet despite our prudence, the pressures on costs are significant.

What else can we do? Some promising directions include closer collaboration with other institutions, more imaginative use of information technology, a ruthless analysis of the range of services we have become accustomed to providing for both faculty and students, and rigorous expectations about sources of funding for new facilities -- including endowments for their maintenance and operations -- that do not require that the costs get built into our tuition and fees going forward.

To expand on just one of these examples: close collaboration with other institutions, both those physically nearby and through virtual linkages, will allow us to offer a full range of courses for students and collegial ties for faculty members without having to produce everything on our own campus. This would require us to get away from the attitude that everything is always better if we provide it here, and be more open to the strengths of our collaborators. It will mean accepting some modest inconvenience in travel time, or learning technological skills, and over time reducing the scope of what we offer in some areas as we decide where Duke's own comparative advantages lie.

To tackle the problem of rising costs in higher education without major damage to our basic character, we are going to have to reconceptualize the enterprise. Visionary leaders are going to come up with breakthroughs that allow us to preserve what is most crucial about our distinctive enterprise with economies that we have either not considered, or shortsightedly disdained. It would be great if some of those visionaries work at Duke.

### *Challenges in undergraduate education*

Undergraduate education has always been one of Duke's signature endeavors and one of our recognized strengths as an institution. Compared with many of our peers, we do it very well. But we can do it even better.

We need to move the discussion off the tired old subjects like whether the big bad administration is trying to destroy social life at Duke, or whether Duke is # 4 or #5 in this or that magazine ranking. We need to return to our roots and recall what it is that we are trying to do in educating undergraduates. The thoughtful reviews of the curriculum in both Trinity College and the Pratt School are steps in the right direction. I worry, nonetheless, that our approach may have become too routine, and that the expectations of our students are increasingly at odds with the educational experience they are likely to encounter.

We have good evidence that students come to us wanting more individualized learning, more advising and mentoring, more time to do research with faculty members; they want to be challenged and engaged intellectually, and have fun doing it. Unlike the cynical stereotype that some faculty members cling to, the data from several surveys of admitted students show that most (although certainly not all) Duke first year students come to us ready to work hard, wanting to be engaged, eager for fresh intellectual opportunities. They come as potential scholars, not jaded preprofessional grade grubbers. But after they have been around for awhile, many students tell us that they lower their expectations, and settle for less than they envisioned when they

came.

We need to think hard about why this is so. It's easy to blame it on the formidable social pressures they encounter at Duke, the pervasive influence of the Greek system, the "work hard/play hard" mystique that mandates separation between the classroom and the rest of life. All those are relevant issues, and I believe that it is crucial for us to help students put these things into more appropriate perspective in the years ahead if we want Duke to remain among the very best baccalaureate institutions.

But students tell us that these are not the major factors. Those students who have a good intellectual experience in their first few months at Duke, through the [FOCUS](#) program or the University Scholars or a challenging intensive seminar, are most likely to retain their intellectual enthusiasm and optimism. But students who are not fortunate enough to find faculty members who challenge them, or courses that engage them individually early in their time at Duke, lower their sights and turn their energies elsewhere.

We face some truly powerful competing pressures here. Faculty members, for the most part, work very hard at Duke, fulfilling the several obligations of teaching, research, service, professional and disciplinary activities. Almost no one feels that we have more time to give to individual students, advising research projects, mentoring them about career choices, inviting them out for coffee after class or for dinner in their homes. Some Duke faculty members do provide such opportunities for students, and are often rewarded with deep gratitude and loyalty for doing so. But such personal encounters are what students tell us they find too often missing in their educations.

They would be more likely to get such close attention at a fine liberal arts college. Yet we are accustomed to saying that they can get just as strong an education at a university, along somewhat different lines. That's fair enough: but then we have to be sure that we are indeed *delivering* that high-quality university education. We cannot stint on research experiences, opportunities to know world-class faculty members and all the varied benefits of a large campus with top-notch laboratory and library facilities and several different professional schools. We need to think more carefully about how we make all these advantages meaningful and real for each of our students, so that we engage them and challenge them in ways that are appropriate for a university. And most difficult of all, we need to figure out how we can invest resources to accomplish these goals even as we strive to reduce costs in other areas.

For example, we can do a much better job at what our strategic plan calls "intergenerational scholarship," involving graduate

students in the teaching and mentoring of undergraduates in ways that serve their own developing professional needs as well as the intellectual growth of undergraduates. We can also increase the opportunities for research for undergraduates, capstone seminars for seniors, and similar experiences.

We could use the expertise of faculty members to enhance other experiences outside the classroom. Duke has done a good job of this recently by sponsoring faculty forums on major public issues, from 9/11 to the war in Iraq; we could do more of this, with collaboration between faculty and students in planning and carrying out the projects. When major visiting speakers are invited to campus, faculty members and graduate students could offer to lead discussions with interested students for an hour or so after the address.

The evidence also shows that this generation of students thinks digitally, visually, restlessly. They get most of their information via the Internet, in ceaseless communication with one another, multi-tasking, tolerant of levels of noise and visual challenges that bewilder those of us with middle-aged constitutions. We need to teach them the virtues of delayed gratification, the many advantages of the written word, the importance of hard work in order to accomplish anything worth valuing. But we also need to respond to their strengths with educational tools that play to their skills and imagination.

We need to reach out to them in ways that touch where they are when they come to us, not just subject them to regimens that feel comfortable to our generation because we've always done things that way. Some faculty members with a dramatic flair are excellent lecturers, and should continue to convey knowledge in this fashion. For many others, standing between a chalkboard and a lecture hall filled with several hundred students to deliver a fifty-minute speech is not easy to justify when there are good alternatives in digital technology.

What if instead of asking faculty members to do *more* in order to improve undergraduate education, we encouraged you to do things *differently*?

What about fewer lectures and more time in seminars and discussion groups, working from material shared electronically? What about more effective integration of service learning, study abroad, internships and other cognate experiences? Our students take advantage of such opportunities in large numbers; we should provide better linkages between such opportunities and the rigorous disciplinary and interdisciplinary structures that must remain at the heart of a strong undergraduate education.

*Threats to academic freedom*

Finally, I worry about threats to academic freedom, from both outside and inside our institution. The freedom to write, teach, speak our minds, as faculty members and students, is fundamental to institutions like Duke.

At a time when our nation is engaged in a new kind of war against a different kind of enemy -- terrorism at home and abroad -- the threats to academic freedom from outside the institution are increasingly intense. Freedom must always have boundaries; freedom and chaos or anarchy are not the same. Some constraints on publication of research on sensitive security subjects may be essential, and we all need to accept this. Some heightened vigilance about visitors to our country, their goals and whereabouts, may also be required to protect us against terrorism.

But the boundaries must be cautiously erected and carefully observed. The threat of terrorism should not be used to rule out certain types of speech or arguments on campuses like this. We have seen recently an increase in outside criticisms of Duke's allowing a platform for people with views ranging from Laura Whitehorn to David Horowitz. We are asked by these observers to exercise close vigilance over invitations to outside speakers, whether issued by faculty members or students or administrators, and bar from our campus anyone whose views strike them as an dangerous or offensive. This is a classic case of misunderstanding what free speech is all about.

We believe, with ample historic evidence, that the best way to challenge speech that you don't like or disagree with is not to silence it but to counter it with more speech. Duke has more organizations that provide programming than any other institution I've ever known, and a very active set of student publications. Somebody will always provide the counterargument to a speaker who puts forward a controversial position. Not allowing the speech to occur in the first place is a very different proposition.

As many of you know, Duke has a proud history of protecting free speech. This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Bassett Affair, a landmark academic freedom case involving Trinity College and historian John Spencer Bassett. Bassett wrote that Booker T. Washington and Robert E. Lee were the greatest Southerners of the 19th century. This led to a firestorm across the state and demands that the trustees fire Bassett. President Few and the Board refused to do this, and thereby established this institution as a place that staunchly defends academic freedom.

I am not, therefore, worried about whether Duke faculty, trustees and administrative leaders will protect freedom of speech against outside attacks; I have every confidence that we will do so. But I do think we need to pay more attention to the importance of explaining the crucial importance of free speech to those outside our walls, in op-ed pieces, essays, talks to alumni and civic groups, and in the education of our students.

There are also some threats against academic freedom right here on campus that concern me. This is a very complex issue, and I want to choose my words with special care so that I will not be misunderstood. As I noted above, freedom is not boundless. Any freedom worth the name must be exercised responsibly, within the constraints of basic civility. In campus discourse, this translates into a willingness to allow others to be heard as a fair recompense for allowing you to speak out with your own views as well.

Civility requires respect for others, being willing to listen to what they have to say, not trying to silence them or to dehumanize them with belittling stereotypes. But there is a fine line here. Civility does not require that everybody feel comfortable all the time. I worry that our students too often assume that the norm is one in which nobody gets very passionate about what they believe, or states it in a way that might bring offense to somebody else. Strongly held views are indeed sometimes offensive to those who do not share them, especially those who believe the opposite. But this is no basis for preventing the expression of those views.

As faculty members, we have a special obligation to make sure that our classrooms are places where students can express strongly held views and disagree ardently with us or with their classmates within the bounds of civility. We should discourage cheap shots and ignorant contentions, but we should also encourage the students themselves to counter such tactics. They will learn much more than they will if everyone agrees with everyone else on all occasions. If you need an intellectual answer to students who find this disagreeable, suggest that they read John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* - still, to my mind, the best defense of freedom of speech ever written, and very pertinent today. Open dialogue between human beings about issues that are subjects of conflict or misunderstanding is the only sure avenue to better understanding, and to truth.

### *Conclusion*

Over the years I have often heard people at Duke claim that we can move faster and with greater agility than our peers because we are a young, hungry, entrepreneurial, innovative university. That theme is sometimes overstated around here, as anyone who



has bumped up against inertia, lethargy or stubborn bureaucracy can unfortunately attest. But there is enough truth in it to give me - and I hope all of you -- confidence that Duke will, in the years ahead, justify James B. Duke's faith that this institution will "maintain... a place of real leadership in the educational world."

These are very difficult problems, and none of us has all the answers. Knowing the faculty and administration of this university as I do, I have no doubt that Duke will continue to be one of the places where such problems are forthrightly identified and discussed, and where solutions will be found.

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