

HOW TEACHING [AND RESEARCHING] FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD IMPACTS ON THE ROLE AND IDENTITY OF ACADEMICS

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INTRODUCTION

We teach and do research in a South Africa in which the legacy of colonialism and apartheid lingers despite the negotiated transition towards democracy during the past sixteen years. This leads to the ongoing contestation of the functioning of the academy in the South African society and stimulates growing attempts by government to steer the role of universities according to their politically expedient definitions of the public good.

DEMANDS MADE BY TEACHING [AND RESEARCH] FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

Teaching and researching for the public good inevitably leads to the following demands of academics – one should take note that teaching in this instance presumes research as the flip side of the same coin for the academics involved:

- To maintain and develop its knowledge base.
- To contribute to the personal growth of the students and to educate them for life as citizens in a democratic society.
- To prepare students to function within the labor market of their chosen professions.

DOES TEACHING [AND RESEARCH] FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD REQUIRE ACADEMICS TO BE DIFFERENT?

In the very complex South African society academics have to contend with competing and even diverging conceptions of public good. On the one hand, academics through their research and tuition must contribute to economic growth and the redistribution of opportunity and wealth since these are prerequisites for democratization and equity. On the other hand, universities should not lose sight of their role as educators that empower students as citizens and members of a very fragile civic society mutilated by social experiments and injustices of the past.

Academics teaching for the public good must realize that besides the production of knowledge through research, tuition and community interaction, they must also facilitate the development of social capital in all spheres of the highly diversified South African society, characterized by growing inequality!

Will academics, snugly (smugly?) secure in their ivory towers of lecture rooms and laboratories, become aware of their responsibility to resist those elements in the central governmental steering of higher education in South Africa that impinges upon academic freedom and institutional autonomy without relinquishing their public accountability to the South African society in general? As academics we will have to contribute to establish universities that “*are the means whereby society understands itself, questions its values, squabbles over its ends and purposes, and accrues the knowledge, understandings and insights necessary to inform the debate*” (Nixon 2008). The public good requires the ongoing critical appraisal of our role as academics while we negotiate our identities amidst the rock (Scylla) of personal complacency and the hard place (Charybdis) of governmental political expediency.