

# The Dignitarian University

Robert W. Fuller

[Robert W. Fuller taught physics at Columbia University and later served as president of Oberlin College. He is the author of *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, and the forthcoming *All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), on which this article is based. He has just published *The Rowan Tree: A Novel* on interpersonal and international dignity.]

A “dignitarian” society does not aim to abolish or equalize rank, but rather holds that, regardless of rank, we are all equal when it comes to dignity. The word “dignitarian” is introduced to distinguish this model from a utopian egalitarian one. Its dignitarian approach sees the establishment of equal dignity as a springboard to more fair, just, and tolerant societies that political thinkers like John Rawls, Michael Walzer, and Avishai Margalit have envisaged (Rawls 1999, Walzer 1983, Margalit 1996).

As dignitarian ideals take hold and spread through the institutions of developed democracies, it is only natural that they be applied to education. The purpose of this paper is to sketch the broad outlines of a university schema that can conform to the goal of equal dignity regardless of rank—the “dignitarian university” of the title.

The organizing principle of dignitarianism is the abolition of *rank-based abuse* or “rankism.” A dignitarian society is one that disallows rankism in the same sense that a multicultural society disallows racism.

## Rank and Rankism

As many others who lived through the social movements in the sixties, my attention was drawn to personal traits such as color, gender, disability, or age, each associated with its own particular prejudice. As a college president in the early seventies, I found myself coping with the women’s, black, and student movements. My

position gave me a vantage point from which I began to sense that something more than trait-sanctioned discrimination was going on, something deeper and more encompassing. I was struck by the realization that despite changes in the cast of characters and differences in rhetoric, each of these movements could be seen as a group of weak and vulnerable nobodies petitioning for an end to oppression and indignity at the hands of entrenched, more powerful somebodies.

From this point of view, it was obvious that color, gender, and age characteristics were excuses for discrimination *but never its cause*. Indeed, such features signify weakness only when a social consensus hobbles those who bear particular traits. Anti-Semitism, Jim Crow segregation, patriarchy, and homophobia are all intricate social agreements that function to make whole categories of people susceptible to abuse and exploitation.

Personal traits are pretexts about which social stratifications are erected and preserved. At their deepest level, these arrangements foster and uphold injustice based on something less conspicuous but no less profound in its consequences than religion, color, gender, or sexual orientation—i.e. rank in the social hierarchy. All the various, seemingly disparate forms of discrimination actually have one common root—the presumption and assertion of rank to the detriment of others.

Providing further evidence for my shift in perspective was the recognition that just as whites may bully whites, so too do blacks exploit blacks and women demean women. Clearly, such intra-racial and intra-gender abuses couldn't easily be accounted for within the standard trait-centered analyses. One approach has been to explain black on black prejudice, sometimes called "colorism," in terms of the "internalization of white oppression." But this merely seeks to explain one malady (black racism) in terms of another (white racism) and brings us no closer to a remedy for either. If the goal is to end racism of every stripe, wouldn't it be more fruitful to view inter- *and* intra-racial discrimination as based on differences in power? On who holds the higher position in a particular setting and therefore commands an advantage that forces victims to submit to their authority?

Viewing discrimination in terms of power instead of traits is not intended to divorce the dynamics of racial or other forms of prejudice from the justifications that

particular groups of somebodies use to reinforce their claim of supremacy. But it does direct our attention to the genuine source of ongoing domination—a power advantage—and suggests that we can abolish social subordination only when we invalidate abuse based on nothing more than having a high enough rank to get away with it.

As the implications of all this sank in, I began to understand that, like the more familiar liberation causes, abuse of the power associated with rank could not be effectively addressed if it had no name. Without one, nobodies were in a position much like women when Betty Friedan characterized their plight as “the problem that has no name.” By 1968, the problem had acquired a name: “sexism.” That simple word intensified consciousness-raising and debate and provided a rallying cry for a movement to oppose power abuse linked to gender. A similar dynamic has played out with other identity groups seeking redress of their grievances. Those discriminated against on the basis of their race unified against “racism.” The elderly targeted “ageism.” By analogy, I adopted the term “rankism” to describe abuses of power associated with rank.

Rank can refer to either position in society generally (social rank) or position in a more narrowly defined context (e.g., an institution or family). Rankism occurs not just between and within familiar social identity groups, but in schools, businesses, healthcare organizations, religious institutions, the military, and government bureaucracies. Indeed, since most organizations are hierarchical and hierarchies are, by definition, built on gradations of power, it can be no surprise that they are breeding grounds for rank-based abuse.

Examples from everyday life include a boss harassing an employee, a doctor demeaning a nurse, a professor exploiting a graduate student, and children bullying each other. On a larger, societal scale, there are headline-making stories of political and corporate corruption, sexual abuse by members of the clergy, and the maltreatment of elders in nursing homes.

Photos of the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by their guards gave the entire world a look at rankism’s arrogant face. Hurricane Katrina made visible its most common victims. The wealthy and connected got out of New Orleans ahead of time. The poor, the sick, prisoners, the elderly, and those lacking a means of transportation were

trapped by nature's fury and then left to cope on their own during days of inaction by government officials and agencies.

In addition to its universality, rankism differs from the more widely acknowledged trait-based abuses because rank is not fixed. Rather, it changes depending on context. Someone holds high rank at home but is lowest on the totem pole at work. Likewise, we may feel powerful at one time and powerless at another, as when we move from childhood to adulthood, or from our "prime" into old age, or when we experience the loss of a job, a partner, or our health. As a result, most of us have been both victims and perpetrators of discrimination based on rank.

In summary, rankism occurs when those with authority use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves at the expense of others. It is the illegitimate use of rank and, equally, the use of rank illegitimately acquired or held. The familiar *isms* are all examples of this latter form. They are based on the construction and maintenance of differences in social rank that violate constitutional guarantees of equal protection under the law.

The relationship between rankism and the specific *isms* targeted by identity politics can be compared to cancer and its subspecies. For centuries the group of diseases that are now all seen as varieties of cancer were regarded as distinct illnesses. No one realized that lung, breast, and other organ-specific cancers all had their origins in a similar kind of cellular malfunction.

In this metaphor, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other varieties of focused prejudice are analogous to organ-specific cancers, while rankism is the blanket malady analogous to cancer itself. The familiar *isms* are subspecies. Just as medicine explores strategies applicable to all cancers, it is time to broaden the scope of our vision and attack rankism itself rather than targeting its individual components.

Diminishing returns and an obvious backlash are presently threatening the hard-won gains of the civil rights, women's, and other movements. Could it be that to complete the eradication of the familiar *isms* we have to include everyone—somebodies and nobodies alike—and redirect our attack toward rankism, the malady that afflicts us all?

## **Rank Itself Is Not Necessarily the Culprit**

Rarely do I make it through a discussion of rankism without being asked, “Are you proposing we do away with rank?” It is crucial to understand that, in and of itself, rank is not the problem. Unless rank is intrinsically illegitimate—as are, for example, the social rankings that have made second-class citizens of various trait specific groups—the trouble is not with rank per se, but rather the abuse of the power that is a perquisite of rank. This distinction goes to the heart of the most vexing issues in our personal lives, society, and national politics.

Confusion arises because rank is so often misused that many wrongly assume the only remedy is to abolish it. This makes as much sense as endeavoring to solve racial problems by doing away with all races but one, or eliminating one gender to address gender issues.

History suggests that political and social models that try to do away with rank altogether are naïvely utopian. Societies that adopt this slash and burn policy court catastrophe. “Levellers” in seventeenth-century Britain, Socialists in nineteenth-century Europe, and Communists of the twentieth century all disappointed their supporters. And when egalitarian ideologies did prevail, those leaderships typically imposed worse tyrannies than the ones they replaced. Abolishing distinctions of rank that facilitate cooperation can weaken a society to the point that it is vulnerable to existing enemies or invites new ones. Nineteenth-century French statesman Chateaubriand noted, “Equality and despotism have secret connections.”

When legitimately earned and appropriately used, rank has indispensable roles to play throughout society, especially in education. The chemistry professor gives the chemistry course and the freshman takes it, not vice versa. The more fundamental a role rank plays in the mission of an organization, as in the military and the academy, the more important it becomes to distinguish rank from rankism. It is essential that we respect the former while eliminating the latter.

## Rankism Affects Students (or Why Billie Won't Learn)

With no attempt there can be no failure;  
with no failure, no humiliation.

– *William James*

There's a reason why educational reforms, progressive or conservative, inevitably leave many young people withholding their hearts and minds. What saps their will to learn is the unacknowledged rankism that pervades educational institutions from kindergarten through graduate school. In a learning environment rife with rankism, the need to protect our dignity siphons away the attentiveness needed to acquire knowledge and skills.

For many children, chronic indignity resulting from persistent rankism undermines self-confidence by the age of six and takes an irreversible toll by twelve. Students in rankist schools are like ethnic minorities in racist schools: they sacrifice learning in defense of their pride. For blacks this can mean resisting what they see as the "white way." For students in general it often means refusing to do things the "right way," as held up to them by teachers and parents.

Tragically, avoiding personal humiliation trumps personal growth. The lifelong consequences of rejecting the system seem preferable to one more day of submitting to ignominy in the classroom. By minimizing the incidence of rankism, we can spare children this impossible choice.

Ridding schools of rankism will pose challenges. Aptitude tests, for example, can be a useful tool for guiding the young toward a vocation suited to their interests and abilities. But that tool can be misused if, instead of serving a constructive, diagnostic purpose, the tests are employed to stigmatize those who do poorly and to exalt those who do well. Guidance counselors must be very careful not to use educational rankings as they have in the past—to effect and maintain a division between "winners" and "losers," and to reconcile the latter to their station via humiliation and invalidation. As Michael B. Katz shows in *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America*, when that happens, test scores become self-fulfilling prophecies

and eventually an unbridgeable gap is created between students pre-destined for success and those marked for failure. If young people are not actively discouraged, and instead allowed to pursue their interests as far as they're internally impelled to, they will often be able to realize their goals in one form or another. The world has a way of giving more accurate and useable feedback than professionals guided by scores on one-time tests given under what are often artificial and adverse conditions.

Physical education classes are notorious for engendering lifelong reminders of embarrassment and humiliation. The executive director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, Charlene Burgeson, maintains that painful memories of gym class discourage many adults from incorporating exercise into their lives. Although she believes that "...for the most part we have eliminated the humiliation factors [from physical education classes]," she warns, "we cannot practice in a way that leads to embarrassment for students. It's counterproductive"(Bosman 2005).

What is true in gym class is equally true in reading, writing, and arithmetic. There is a very good reason Billie won't learn. Children are greatly disinclined, just as are adults, to put their bodies and minds to the test when it is not safe to do so. *Dignity of self will win every competition that pits shame and invalidation against learning.*

### **Rankism Affects Teachers (or Why not offer "dignity security," instead of "job security?")**

Why must institutions make a judgment that has lifetime consequences after a mere six or seven years? ... Why not a system of contracts of varying length, including lifetime for the most valuable colleagues, that acknowledges the realities of academic life in the twenty-first century?... Today, almost every negative tenure decision is appealed. ... Few if any of these appeals have as their basis a denial of academic freedom.

– John M. McCardell Jr., president emeritus of Middlebury College, Vermont

Models for a dignitarian society imply that it is time to find a more intelligent and evenhanded solution for sustaining and expanding academic freedom and opportunity. Although shielding teachers from administrative rankism was and remains a worthy

goal, achieving those positive ends by granting faculty lifetime job security generates another problem, one whose financial cost has become unsustainable and whose moral cost is no longer defensible.

Rank, to be legitimate, must be earned in a fair contest with all qualified comers. In practice, this means periodic re-qualification because, over time, new aspirants (who overwhelmingly outnumber the tenured in the academic world) may prove more qualified. In the face of this reality, academic tenure gives professors a job for life regardless of subsequent performance. And this kind of non-accountability is the ideal breeding ground for rankism.

Certainly academic and political freedom must be guaranteed, but as McCardell's epigram illustrates, there are now more effective ways to do this than by bestowing fail-safe job security. Until an alternative is implemented, however, colleges and universities will resort to the appointment of so-called "adjunct faculty" to avoid long-term hiring commitments. Adjunct professors, with a fraction of the pay, lacking benefits, devoid of job security or a role in governance, and often denied even parking privileges, are the Wal-Mart clerks of Academia.

Recipients of tenure may well have earned renewal of their contracts, but lifetime appointments effectively bar hard-working adjuncts from competing for those positions. Tenure now functions as the equivalent of a perpetual "Sorry, No Vacancy" sign to thousands of bright applicants, legitimate contenders for tenure-track positions.

To have two categories of teachers working side by side—one privileged and secure, one exploited and expendable—with the underpaid group effectively subsidizing the prerogatives of the other, is redolent of segregation and apartheid. Adjuncts and graduate student teaching assistants are hamstrung in fighting this injustice by their own reluctance to take on the real culprit, the tenure system itself. The forlorn hope of sharing in the spoils of rankism—in this case, the security and privileges of tenure — inevitably functions to keep marginalized individuals from uniting to oppose the institutionalized rankism that keeps them down as a group.

Another hidden cost of tenure is to students and taxpayers. Since pay goes up with seniority, tenure results in an unjustifiably expensive faculty. The result is to price higher education out of reach of the middle class. Without tenure, there would be more



young faculty with junior level salaries, and fewer older professors with senior level compensation. Savings resulting from a younger faculty could be used to improve the affordability of, and consequently access to, higher education. Although senior teachers are important as repositories of experience, wisdom, and institutional memory, lifetime tenure for a majority of the faculty results in imbalanced and unnecessarily costly institutions.

The burden of keeping a university solvent and affordable to tuition-payers should not fall disproportionately on its adjunct faculty and teaching assistants. Their low-paid labor is an involuntary gift to tenured faculty and long-term administrators in the same way that the rank and file working poor subsidize entire societies. Forced benefaction is indentured servitude by another name.

Ridding academia of rankism will involve presenting every teacher with the same challenges: earn your job; re-earn it periodically in fair, open competition with other aspirants; remain accountable to your peers and students.

What deserves and needs protection is not teachers' jobs but their dignity. Since losing a job can leave one vulnerable and subject to loss of respect (an archetypal instance of rankism), attention needs to be given to anyone experiencing such a transition. In fact, as technology-driven productivity improvements – outsourcing, downsizing, off-shoring, automation and information – makes millions of jobs redundant over the coming decade, society as a whole will need to develop orderly processes for “recycling” our human resources into new roles and careers. As support of this kind is institutionalized, conduits will be established from the academic to the corporate world and vice versa, and from one specialization to another. Retraining programs will be created within recipient institutions, and in-house faculty placement offices will spring up alongside those that help students locate jobs.

To predict the future of higher education, especially in the face of our growing need for higher RE-education, one has only to look at the soaring costs of a traditional college degree and the burgeoning enrollments in Internet-based schooling. Universities will have to design alternatives to tenure and institute placement programs that will protect the dignity of their present faculty and staff in order for a dignitarian post-industrial university to be fait accompli.

## **Governing a Dignitarian University**

Although it is possible to delineate the broad features of a dignitarian university, no one can foretell unerringly what shape it will take because the process of transformation must be one in which everyone has a voice and everyone's views are accorded appropriate political weight.

In a dignitarian organization, the role of institutional architect is intrinsically collaborative. Providing a blueprint from outside the design process is contrary to the dignitarian spirit. This is not to suggest that the role of the educational specialist is inconsequential. Quite the contrary. But for the resulting institutions to embody equal dignity, specialists must work directly with those the schools are being shaped to serve. A paternalistic process is incompatible with a dignitarian outcome because such a process, no matter how benevolent, is rankist.

To illustrate how an institution can be re-modeled along dignitarian lines, let me share the response that Oberlin College made in the early 1970s to the demands of the burgeoning women's movement.

Not unlike any number of academic institutions, Oberlin formed ad hoc committees on the status of women. Typically, these committees were composed of women administrators, faculty, students, alumni and staff, but included a small number of men. They began their work by holding open hearings on campus during which anyone could call attention to policies or practices that were felt to demean women or put them at a disadvantage. The committees compiled a lists of specific instances of unfairness or abuse along with potential remedies, and presented them to the administrator, group, or governing body that had the power to redress the grievances at issue. Their final task was to persuade that official or body to adopt the recommended changes.

This process, widely adopted to make institutions less sexist, can serve as a template for making institutions less rankist. Open hearings allow participants to identify why people feel disrespected. Complaints may be contested and ultimately judged to be

ill-founded. Some complaints will be relatively easy to address. Other problems may take years or even decades to rectify.

A few words of caution regarding committees—especially those charged with transforming an institution. First, the likelihood of success is greatly enhanced by the participation of a figure of very high rank in the organization who makes it unambiguous that it is safe for others to seriously challenge the status quo. It need not be the president but, if not, it must be someone who everyone understands speaks for the president. Second, the committee must have a fixed deadline against which it works. As the postwar British Prime Minister Clement Atlee noted, “Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.”

Dignitarian governance does not necessarily mean giving everyone a vote on every issue, but it *does* mean giving everyone a voice. To ensure those voices are heard generally requires having at least some voting representatives from each of the organization’s constituencies serving at every level of its governance. This is sometimes referred to as multi-stakeholder or collaborative problem-solving. In an academic institution this means adding students and alumni to committees on student life, educational policy, appointments and promotions, the governing faculty body itself and the board of trustees. Typically, such representatives hold 5–15 percent of the seats, but the percentage can go higher. The aim is to ensure that every group has an opportunity to make its interests known. This goal is given teeth by providing each group with enough votes to determine the outcome in situations where the group as a whole is closely divided.

Vote ratios between constituencies mirror their relative degree of responsibility for accomplishing each specific goal. Thus, students are provided a decisive majority of votes on a student life committee, faculty a decisive majority on educational policy. And students, faculty, and administrators all play minority roles in fiduciary decisions that are traditionally decided by the board of trustees. Including voting representatives from all constituencies creates an environment in which authorities do not merely deign to listen to those of lower rank. Rather, it behooves them to treat everyone with dignity because at the end of the day everyone will exercise some degree of voting power over the outcome.

In addition to shared governance, a dignitarian institution is likely to possess a number of distinctive characteristics. Evaluation processes would be broadened so that people from different constituencies are involved in hiring decisions and job performance reviews. An ombudsperson would have extensive responsibility for resolving disputes involving rank. After giving a talk on rankism at Princeton University in 2004, Princeton's ombudsman, Camilo Azcarate, told me that his job can be summed up as discerning the difference between rank and rankism in a multiplicity of circumstances.

Organization-wide constitutional reviews would be scheduled every five to ten years in order to update the system of governance in view of changing circumstances, thereby ensuring that an institution remains dignitarian. As power evolves, new opportunities for abuse present themselves. No institution can remain dignitarian for long if it is not committed to coevolving with power.

Societies that uproot rankism in their schools and universities will lead the world in the twenty-first century, just as those that curtailed the abuse of rank in government led in the twentieth.

## **Bibliography**

Bosman, Julie, *The New York Times*, "Putting the Gym Back In Gym Class," Oct. 13, 2005.

Katz, Michael B., *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

McCardle, John M., Jr. *The New York Times*, Sept. 13, 2004.

Margalit, Avishai, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

Walzer, Michael, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).