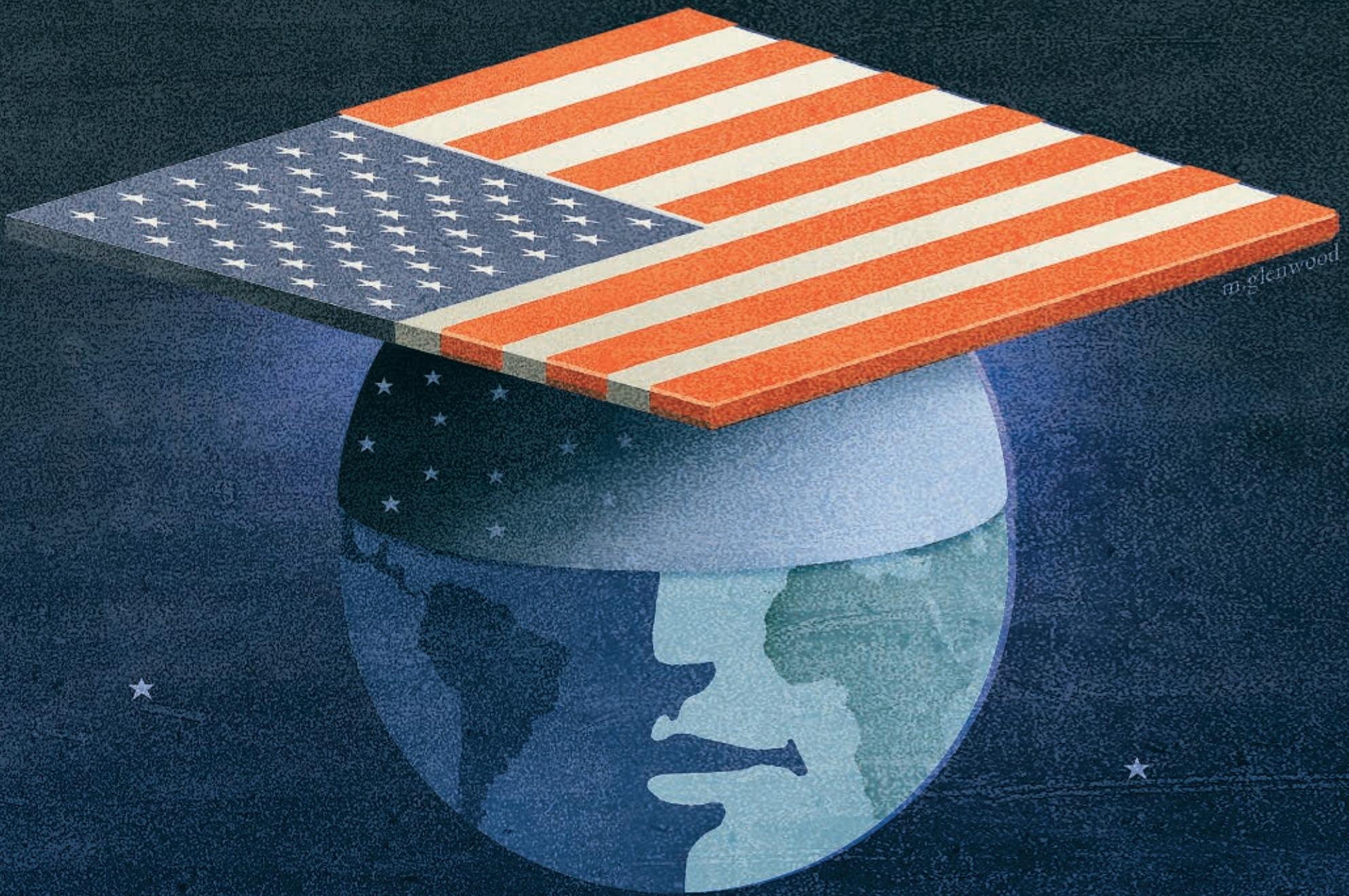


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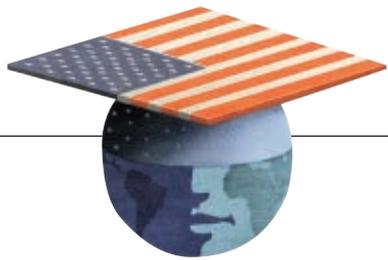
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American Campuses Abroad: Promises and Perils

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Universities in a Complex World

By JEFFREY S. LEHMAN

UNIVERSITIES are not monasteries. To teach, conduct research, and contribute to the world, they forgo isolation from impurity. They push themselves to engage directly with flawed people and institutions, trying to ensure that their activities do good and not evil.

The mission can be challenging. What if someone who misbehaved wishes to atone by endowing a scholarship for impoverished students at a university? Is it OK to accept such a gift and to honor the donor? As a general principle, yes. As long as the donated funds were not the fruits of criminal behavior, and as long as the university does not bless the misbehavior, it is generally better that the university do good by helping the poor than that it seek isolation from impurity. But the essential caveat—not blessing the donor's misbehavior—can sometimes be tricky business.

This challenge does not arise only in the context of individual donors. Universities must confront similar questions whenever they are active in a country where the government misbehaves.

Again, the guiding principles seem fairly clear. On the one hand, the university must not be an active participant in odious behavior. It must not provide the mechanisms for implementing intolerable policies. And it must not grant its blessing to such misconduct.

On the other hand, universities as institutions have no general duty to speak truth to power. Silence in the face of government action is not endorsement. If, for example, the American government engages in waterboarding,

racial profiling, regressive taxation, or wasteful farm subsidies, universities properly stand mute. Their missions are in the domains of teaching, research, and public service; the general watchdog role belongs with individual members of their communities.

Nonetheless, things sometimes get messy. Some forms of odious behavior by governments do call for a response from the university as an institution. Think of government actions that, as applied in practice, meaningfully disrupt the core functions of the university. What kind of disruption triggers this responsibility? And what kind of response is called for?

In these situations, a university's leaders cannot escape the task of highly contextualized, case-specific analysis. Even important general values often have blurry boundaries, especially when they conflict with one another.

Consider, for example, the freedoms enjoyed by American college students. If a government denies them access to alcohol or pornography, is that inconsistent with the university's core mission? What about access to WikiLeaks? What about access to hate speech? What about access to criticisms of the host government?

If a university's leaders do conclude that government action is odious and undermines its mission, calibrating an appropriate response can also be excruciatingly difficult. "Going public" with a protest is sometimes more effective than working behind the scenes, but it is perhaps more often less effective. "Forcing the issue" early is sometimes more effective than patience, but it is perhaps more often less effective.

It bears mention that a university leader's primary responsibility in such circumstances is to be as effective as possible. That means silently withstanding the criticisms of those who demand public proof that the university

is not being cowardly (or even complicit) in the face of odious behavior, if public statements might undermine the effectiveness of private efforts that are under way. It also means, however, that such leaders are well advised to maintain careful private records of their thoughts and actions, so that history can ultimately give their decisions a fair review.

American universities' new willingness to understand themselves as transnational institutions, and to engage the world more fully, deserves our praise. That engagement extends the reach of intellectual values we cherish, it opens new possibilities for a kind of collaborative research that can generate otherwise unobtainable breakthroughs, and it provides fertile soil on which students of all nationalities might acquire the skills they need to work effectively across cultural borders. Indeed, in the age of globalization, American universities' embrace of their new role could be as consequential as was their commitment last century to lead humanity's exploration of Vannevar Bush's "endless frontier" in the sciences.

But this new role brings special new challenges. And university leaders must be prepared to face them with sensitivity, subtlety, and courage. ■

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