ABSTRACT. This article addresses the tensions between the sense of responsibility that university administrators feel to protect student privacy with the requirement to be accountable and transparent to the public. This discussion is placed in the context of the history and purpose of post-secondary education.

KEY WORDS: education and ethics, student privacy and ethics, universities and student privacy

In his book Academic Duty, former university President Donald Kennedy describes how controversy at Stanford University gained press notoriety which ultimately led to his resignation. While the matter in question was particular to the circumstances at Stanford at the time, the experience of Stanford with the press is one which many institutions have faced. To quote from Kennedy (1997),

The political climate in which the university had to sail for the next months was thus established not by the major issues surrounding indirect cost policy but the carefully crafted public impression that at Stanford we were living high at public expense. Such impressions are difficult to reverse; once newspapers have learned something, they can’t unlearn it. It is as though a computer virus lives in their word processors, seeking out the name of a particular person or institution and then attaching its own boiler-plate (p. 172).

Kennedy came to the conclusion, “...that the furor had made me more of a lightning rod than my university needed” and he consequently tendered his resignation. As he states with hindsight,

There are lessons on both sides of this unfortunate episode. I learned – the hard way that universities have to earn public trust and not simply count on it because they are doing good things for society. We let the important matter of how public research funds are accounted for slip into a swamp of obscurity. By failing in our duty to explain what we were doing and why, we left ourselves open to a painful trial-by-media (pp. 174–175).

In this article, I will share my own painful lessons of dealing with the press during the loss of a student through suicide. The press coverage which we received surrounding this event still strikes me as remarkable. Not only were the events surrounding the disappearance and subsequent death of this student covered in the local papers, but the university was featured on provincial television, national radio, national television, open
phone-in radio shows and received half-page coverage in one of Canada’s national newspapers with a bold headline indicating the loss of innocence for our young university. In outlining the challenges which these events held for the administration of the university, I would like to frame the discussion in the context of an understanding of the purpose of a university and the vocation of university professors.

Donald Kennedy references both the notion of public trust and the fact that universities do good things for society. As many note, the university is one of the few organizational structures (the church being another) which has survived since medieval times. Although universities are currently in a sea change with private, for profit companies entering the domain of university education, public universities and private non-profit universities still exist with much of the idealism of the idea of university, to use the title of Newman’s famous tract, intact. I would like briefly to reference the ideal purpose of education, the professoriate, and of universities because it is partially that historical trust and idealized notion of vocation and public good that drives universities and university administrators to assume a special sense of duty both to protect the institution and to protect those who study within the traditional academy.

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

One of the first philosophers to articulate explicitly the importance and purpose of education was Socrates, at least as he is presented to us in the writings of Plato. For Socrates, the purpose of education was to discover the truth, not as an end in itself, but as a means to living a virtuous life. In the Republic, Plato presents us with the first treatise on education, a treatise which advocated compulsory, universal education, as necessary both for the good of the individual and the good of the state.

In the period starting with the transitional era between ancient Greece and up to and including the medieval period, education focused primarily on knowing man’s relationship to God. From the seventeenth century forward, there is greater continuity with the ancient Greeks in linking the purpose of education to the good of society and the state. Locke believed that the purpose of education was to create citizens who would improve society. By the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant was to devote a treatise to education in which he argued that education was a necessary condition for the furthering and betterment of the human condition.

Another eighteenth century philosopher, James Mill stated that “if education cannot do everything, there is hardly anything that it cannot do.” His