

Draft: What Is a University?
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Preamble

When asked “what is a University,” traditionalists tend to speak rather wistfully in terms that John Henry Newman would have found congenial. In *The Idea of a University* (1852-1858), Newman referred to a university as an assemblage of professors and students from every corner of the knowledge universe, gathered together to communicate and circulate thought through personal exchange. He spoke in terms of the importance of “*litera scripta*,” records of learning from the past, and of the importance of teachers, “the living man” with his “living voice”¹

For many of us engaged in academic life in today’s universities, Newman’s ideals are not far from our own experience as university students in the recent and less-recent past. We remember classes as having been reasonably small, teaching assistants as being few and far between, and our grades as being deployed by the living men and women who were assigned to teach us, and who for the most part knew us, warts and all, quite personally.

Universities today, however, are marked by large undergraduate classes, often mediated by graduate teaching assistants, and by an emphasis on faculty research – factors that can distance teachers from the majority of their students. We no longer know many of our students personally, other than those at the senior undergraduate level or as graduate students who are often indispensable to faculty research. Teaching is only one of the areas for which we are responsible as tenured faculty members. Rather, we are measured annually in terms of our contributions to research, to teaching and to service, in proportions conventionally weighted at 40%, 40% and 20% for purposes of accountability. Everything is becoming benchmarked, from our own “research output” as professors to the learning outcomes attached to the “degree level expectations” that our students are supposed to meet.

Pope Benedict XVI, in a speech to university professors in Madrid in August 2011 denounces the pressures on higher education to focus on job skills as opposed to a broader education. "At times one has the idea that the mission of a university professor nowadays is exclusively that of forming competent and efficient professionals capable of satisfying the demand for labor at any given time....We know that when mere utility and pure pragmatism become the principal criteria, much is lost and the results can be tragic: from the abuses associated with a science which acknowledges no limits beyond itself, to the political totalitarianism which easily arises when one eliminates any higher reference than the mere calculus of power. The authentic idea of the university, on the other hand, is precisely what saves us from this reductionist and curtailed vision of humanity."

Redefinition

A recent attempt at redefining the university as it functions in the present time was proposed by Todd Pettigrew in *Maclean's* magazine (March 17th, 2011) as follows:

¹ <http://www.bartleby.com/28/2.html><http://www.bartleby.com/28/2.html>

1. A university has two principal functions: providing instruction on matters of intellectual importance and conducting research on those same matters.
2. These two functions, to the extent reasonably possible, should support one another. University teaching, therefore, is distinguished from other modes of education not only by seeking the highest levels of sophistication, but also by deriving its vitality from the atmosphere of on-going discovery fostered at the institution. For this reason, most, if not all courses at a university should be taught by faculty who are active researchers. Conversely, research ought not to be done in isolation from teaching.
3. Because strong intellectual work can only be done in an atmosphere where scholars feel free to take risks, challenge conventions, and change their minds, universities must foster an environment that prizes intellectual freedom. Academic freedom is a right of individual scholars, not of universities themselves or their administrations.
4. Though university education should provide the kind of intellectual enrichment that would serve any graduate well in the working world, university education should never be construed solely or even primarily as a path to employment.
5. A university has one additional secondary function: to serve as a cultural touchstone in its community to encourage all members of the public to participate in the life of the mind. Universities should, within reasonable limits and without needlessly detracting from its primary missions, sponsor and host artistic performances and displays, public talks, open debates, and other events that excite interest in intellectual pursuits, broadly construed.

Pettigrew's statement is high-minded and idealistic, and what it says is difficult to dispute. However, he avoids mentioning the unavoidable preoccupation of contemporary universities with funding and the costs of delivering education, and hence the way that universities today must offer programs that "sell" in terms of market share, consumer needs and desires, and, in the end, generate a very measurable bottom line: profitability or what quickly becomes a structural deficit.

One on-line response to Pettigrew's definition, for example, notes

Functionally speaking, a university is a business that sells courses to students, and does so at a profit. That drives much of what takes place at a university – from selling, to collection, to delivering courses, diplomas, and all the staffing and support staff and infrastructure required to do so.

Some are now billion dollar businesses, with massive real estate assets, so to ignore this foundation underlying the intellectual aspect is foolish.

As well, if professional training is not included, then again, you are ignoring a crucial aspect that underlies much of the government subsidy and the realities of MASSIVE student debt to participate. Kids are betting that their improved future employment value will pay back this debt...so practically speaking, this better be part of the considerations as well. That is what our students value when they choose to participate.

Intellectual growth through teaching and research is key – but for me, I like to think of a university's core function as a place to open doors, of the mind, but also to opportunity.

Students PAY for a chance to participate, learn, grow, practice and gain credibility, so future doors will be opened to them, upon their exit.²

What this comment elides, perhaps, is the increasing pressure from “society,” but especially from today’s parents, to insist that university degrees be instantly entirely fungible in terms of the job market– that is that universities include job preparation components that will guarantee graduates’ employability in a workplace that, it is imagined, will focus on disciplinary fit and evidence of skills training.

What Pettigrew and his respondent also fail to mention, moreover, is the pressure to increase enrolments, to increase participation rates, in Ontario at least, so that most universities are bulging at the seams, giving rise to serious questions about the possibility of delivering quality undergraduate education to the “masses” who seek to pursue it whether or not they are prepared for the intellectual work that is required of courses at the university level.

Given the hydra-headed beast that the modern university has become, then – where the goals of generation and dissemination of knowledge exist side by side with demands for applicability, career preparedness and meeting the needs of external accreditation bodies in the professions – what is to be said about the way that today’s universities are meeting (or failing to meet) student needs, variously defined, faculty needs and societal needs given their own requirements for contributing in the areas of research, teaching and service?

Research

Faculty research activity, as a core value in assessing a university’s worth, has been rapidly growing in importance in North American universities over the past 30 years. Indeed those entering the professoriate now, our youngest colleagues, have themselves been trained in intense and competitive research environments, and have internalized the message that research matters most, and that it is the main, if not the only, route to reputation in the academy. To develop one’s personal research reputation is paramount, and that reputation is to be built through close attention to the development of one’s CV, particularly in regard to the cumulative weight of publications, presentations and grants accumulated. Some would say we have created insecure researchers who feel threatened in sharing their ideas as these may benefit another’s career. Hyper-specialization (the natural corollary to the demand for “original research”), alignment with one’s university’s strategic plan, and careful attention to the targeted research competitions of the granting councils is assumed to be essential.

Communication with the public at large will be grudgingly undertaken in the knowledge that it is essential to simplify what one does for the public or the press from time to time (even granting councils require this); but what really counts is the protection of “discoveries” and subsequently one’s “intellectual property.” Graduate students have for many become essential partners in research, but as paid employees who work for the researcher and are themselves “trained” in the process. Corporate or government contracts tend more and more to drive research, so that university researchers have begun to take on the guise of servants of business or the state – A worry if one imagines universities to be places of free inquiry driven by imagination and experiment and unfettered by the strings attached to the external funding upon which researchers increasingly must depend.

² <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2011/03/17/what-is-a-university/>

One must question the values shift that is inherent in all of this. Not so long ago, important scientific researchers (Banting and Best, Salk, and so on), appeared to feel that their discoveries, their scientific advances, belonged to society and not to the individual or indeed the source of their funding. Have universities lost their focus on independent inquiry, we wonder – which is to say the application of the contemplative mind to tasks defined by researchers themselves, via idiosyncratic paths? Have we given “research” over to the near-instrumentalism that results from the endless pursuit of grants in a climate where grants are increasingly tied to government-defined “social needs,” and are, in any case, declining in size and number for individual researchers, the backbone (if often unsung) of a university’s research enterprise. Influence and funding for the development of knowledge has gone from churches to governments to a combination of students and corporations.

Service

The notion of service began as a measure of one’s contribution (presumably 20% of a faculty member’s time) to the institution as a whole, through committee work and/or special projects contributing to the university’s internal academic functions and thereby its core mission.

Today, however, university’s core missions most frequently include external obligations, and universities are seeking to redefine themselves as connected with rather than separate from their surrounding communities. More of our universities are openly defining themselves as “engines” that will transform local economies, especially in areas hard-hit by the decline in manufacturing and seeking to become active participants in the “knowledge economy.” Business parks and other kinds of economic “incubators” designed to commercialize university research are emerging everywhere. Branding or positioning that might smack of the “ivory tower,” or suggest privileged contemplative silos divorced from economic productivity, is anathema to governments, and, increasingly it is thought, a turn-off to potential donors, two main sources of revenue for cash-strapped universities today.

On the social and cultural side as well, it is more and more assumed that students ought to participate in their surrounding communities through co-op placement, internships or linkages as part of their programs of study, especially when or where their research is highly applicable, to community service or cultural organizations. The notion of “service learning” is taking hold – strategies through which students will complete curricular components via courses that involve work experience in communities near and far.

The forces of globalization fit into this paradigm as well. Students are now encouraged to participate in exchanges or projects in international settings. Universities are expected to increase their international populations and to properly incorporate international students into the broader student body, while internationalizing their own courses and curricula.

The pressure on faculty to participate in community-based initiatives, whether internal or external, or both, is certainly in and of itself a positive thing. However, such work does take time and does put even more pressure on faculty to add new service-related activities to their already burgeoning workloads, while preserving their mandatory emphasis on research. At minimum 60% of one’s “merit” within universities now emerges from activity in these two areas, leaving – some would say – ever-decreasing amounts of time and energy for what used to be the central task of universities, teaching those students, both traditional and non-traditional, who pass through our portals and pay increasing amounts of tuition for the privilege of learning from us.

Teaching

It is teaching, indeed, that is the part of the triad that causes the most concern as we think about the contemporary university.

At base, most professors still believe that the first order of the day for universities is training minds, producing citizens who are innovative thinkers, able to ingest and critique ideas, both new and old. The processing of ideas and knowledge and its paradigms, the ordering of information, and the ability to think through materials presented for study, whatever the discipline, is assumed to be the first step. Critiquing those ideas and/or pushing the boundaries of the known comprises step two. Working with others to apply such thoughts, and thereby producing new kinds of knowledge is the ultimate goal. To return to Newman's dictum, with which this paper began, the key to all of this is teaching – teaching that is individualized and “face-to-face,” whether the learning communities are on-site or virtual, and whether the “personal trainer” is always the professor or, instead, well-trained assistants of one kind or another.

As class sizes increase and multi-pronged learning outcomes become our “measurables,” faculty concerns have begun to emerge. Nowhere is this alarm more pronounced than in Social Sciences and Humanities. There is evidence that parents actively discourage enrolment in Arts and Humanities because they believe their children, having earned such degrees, are unlikely to be as job-ready as graduates of professional programs are. And the fact is that over a life-time those with professional credentials do tend to make more money than those whose preparation was entirely in non-professional degree areas and who did not upgrade with practical or applied through post-graduate diploma or degree studies.

To some extent, however, the problem is perception and the data may be skewed. Much could be made of the contributions via creative thinking, critical thinking, and communications skills of these kinds of students in diverse workplace settings. To a greater extent than other, more information- or skills-based degree programs, graduates of Arts and Social Sciences programs possess contextual awareness, and especially knowledge of historical contexts relevant to the examination of and the finding of solutions to contemporary problems. It is difficult to measure the influence of those who have been training to think, critique and problem-solve in these ways but also difficult to deny its likelihood. It is significant that multi-disciplinary research teams tend to draw upon humanists and social scientists to contribute to the “big picture”.

To some extent, however, the focus on the Social Sciences and Humanities – which still attract the majority of undergraduate and even graduate students in universities today – is something of a distraction and a side-bar. The real question is how to deliver meaningful, inquiry-based education to the masses of students in all of our programs, who, having passed through our gates, deserve to be taught, rigorously and discipline-specifically, within our institutions.

The increasing occurrence of very large classes, particularly in the early undergraduate years, is challenging, to say the least. There are certainly large “super-sized” classes that work in some cases, owing to teacher-specialists who focus on this kind of delivery (and are themselves extraordinary “performers” in the theatrical sense of that word) and who depend upon technology (from media clips to “clickers”) and very specifically-trained teaching assistants to do this kind of work. New modes of distance delivery that combine professorial on-site presence with virtual elements of increasing sophistication, can mediate large-class issues and generate positive levels of student satisfaction.

However, the discussion component, so central to what has always been thought to be the essence of university education, is certainly diminished in classes of 50 students or more (and for many,

the breaking point would be much lower – arguing that in groups of more than 25, at maximum, discussion is seriously impeded).

Another impediment to good teaching, it is felt, is the increasingly prescriptive focus on marketplace relevance, technical skills, and the reception rather than the critique of external policy directives. On the one hand there has been a drift it would seem, from an emphasis on the need for evidence-based policy towards policy-based evidence: rather than focusing on evidence for use in policy development, it is as if pressures to support externally-driven assumptions and values are becoming normalized in our institutions. On the other, the narrowness of prescribed external “needs” that are supposed to be reflected in our “training” of students leaves little room in our curricula (many of which are dominated by the dictates of external accreditation bodies) for breadth requirements or the ability to take advantages of other kinds of research and thinking.

Where is the emphasis on ethics, the use of statistics, or the history of science in a broad (non-prescriptive, non discipline-based, non tunnel-visioned) sense in most students’ programs of study, for example? Where is the emphasis on engaged citizenship or the uses and abuses of rhetoric in modern “democracies,” or knowledge of the ways that supposedly objective social institutions work? Where is there an emphasis on globalization, both its benefits and its disadvantages? Where, in short, is there an opportunity for teachers to explore with students the complexity of modern dilemmas and their historical roots and contemporary contexts?

There is, in our time as in all times, some evidence of cultural disintegration. Change is inevitable and we must move with it. To a large extent, resistance is futile. However, universities have a profound and historic mission and it is a different mission from colleges in most cases. Society requires well-rounded citizens. Universities need to study and teachers need to model behaviours that promote the social good, humanity, contemplation, ethics, fair play, and self-regulation. Programs need to be built and delivered in ways that make possible this deeply relevant educational mandate.

Not all students are cut out for universities; not all university programs are cut out for skills training with direct applicability to the marketplace or government policy initiatives. Universities cannot be all things to all people. While one might strive to make universities accessible to all, not all eligible students have a desire to create, to learn theories and techniques that will improve systems; to become graduates that will look beyond the conventional and push for improvements. This does not imply that an elitist approach should be adopted which suggests that entry be restricted, for instance, based on economics or physical abilities. Nonetheless, we need to be discerning or selective in terms of registrations based on learning capacity and interest to learn.

The university should be a place where students also contribute to the learning process by bringing their own global and often novel experiences to the creation of knowledge. These intellectual skills will help them invent the much-needed jobs, which many so desperately need upon graduation. Our universities should model what it takes to learn and re-invent existing jobs or, yet again, how to use knowledge to adapt for multiple career changes in new contexts.

Their mission begins and ends with the development of students through exposure to faculty research expertise but also the kinds of broad-based inquiry that the best of teachers will impart as part of the vocation that university teaching represents – even in this day and age, even today when post-secondary education is “massified.” Imagination can solve much, but only if the central imperatives of what is being attempted are kept front-of-mind, a mindset that this paper is intended to inspire.