

The Business of the University

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I want to discuss briefly both what I take the business of the university to be and the dangers inherent in an alternative account of the university that I have heard endorsed with increasing frequency. In what follows I will outline some traditional and relatively familiar models of both the university and of the growth of human knowledge. The arguments are not new, though their peculiar juxtaposition here may be. My primary aim, however, is critical rather than constructive. If these traditional positions are sound, and I am convinced that in the main they are, then we need to reexamine just how thoroughly we are willing to embrace an increasingly popular view that the business of the university is to be like a business.¹ But first things first—let us turn to those traditional and familiar positions.

I want to hold that the business of the university is inquiry and that inquiry is its definitive task. If this is true, then the university is, first and foremost, a community of inquirers, and as a community of inquirers, the university is a forum for debate where each new view is to be systematically scrutinized.² Through the dialogue that emerges from such scrutiny we make others' ideas our own. Such debate is necessary because the goal of inquiry is the *improvement* of our knowledge. But still, we have no motive for reconsidering problems until we are presented with reasons for thinking that our accepted solutions are unsatisfactory. Our knowledge increases only when it is the object of continuing criticism. The importance of this *process* of ongoing criticism is what Socrates is attempting to capture when he states that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Surely it is just as true that the unexamined (read "uncriticized") view is not worth holding.

Inquiry, then, is intimately concerned with the exchange of ideas. This, for example, is why a library is a "treasury of wisdom," the repository of the great ideas of the published past waiting to be encountered by each new generation. But exchanges and encounters, like tangos, take two. We are not passive recipients of that treasured wisdom. The contents of our libraries deserve their honorific title not because they constitute truths to be preserved so much as because they comprise the most so-

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phisticated opponents for our debates. Those books in the library are not there because they contain the right answers, but rather because they contain the best of the wrong ones. People are on faculties, or at least they should be, not because they have memorized those answers, but rather because they have had some experience considering and criticizing them.

Unlike any other institution that I know of, except (not coincidentally) our government, the university thrives on debate, because inquiry thrives on debate. Criticism is not suppressed nor should it be merely tolerated. Rather, the university must *systematically encourage* critical exchange; otherwise how will our knowledge grow? (I take it that this is why libraries have also been called "the heart of the university." Their contents embody those debates that have *always* been most central to the life of humankind.)

What I am claiming is that what is most essential to the university is a particular kind of process (as opposed to any alleged product of that process). What makes the university unique is the centrality of criticism and debate in every facet of its functioning. The discussion is open, and all the members of the community, i.e., the inquirers, are entitled, in fact obliged, to participate. All members of the community, but most importantly the leadership, are made accountable by the checks and balances of constant peer review. This is not some occasional occurrence; it is the way of life in the university. No claim, issue, or position is insulated from critical inquiry. The university certainly has other important goals, but they are all subordinate to this one.

Precisely because the university is the embodiment of the spirit of criticism, the university is also the fountain of imagination and creativity. Criticism prods the imagination for new and better answers. Consequently, the university is, among other things, a guardian of the arts, a haven for dreamers and visionaries. These are two charges to which the university has given insufficient attention even in the best of times. This, at least partial, failure to attend to such creative enterprises is, indeed, a serious mistake. Deprived of fresh imaginative insights, constant critical battling will eventually paralyze and/or demoralize the participants. Fortunately, though, our imaginative and critical faculties have a symbiotic relationship. The fruits of one process nourish the other. Hence, in the proper setting, if old answers cannot take the critical heat, we will have imagination enough to create new ones.

The university must be the guardian of all of these pursuits, however, for a far less self-serving reason. Not only is criticism (and the subsequent creativity it provokes) necessary for the growth of knowledge, it is also fundamental to the preservation of political freedoms and the improvement of institutions generally. The most fundamental human right

is ~~the~~ right to criticize. George Orwell has said that, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." The amendments that constitute the Bill of Rights are all important, but surely the first amendment is the most important. Only so long as people are free to gripe about infringements of their rights do they have any serious hope of retaining them.

The university must not only protect all of these activities but promote them as well: This is the university's unique function, the institutional embodiment of criticism and imaginative responses to that criticism. No other institution can fulfill that function, because no other institution is so intimately involved in inquiry. Hence, we must recognize as absolutely crucial the essentially autonomous, i.e., *non-derivative*, character of the university as an institution. It ought not to be either structured or operated on the models of other institutions. To argue that it ought reflects what I take to be a fundamental misunderstanding of not only what is unique about the university but also what is most valuable about it as well.

That comment brings me to the critical portion of this essay. I would like to point out what I take to be certain perils in describing the university that are inherent in the indiscriminate appropriation of metaphors from the world of business. My goal is not to legislate usage. (That is certainly a nugatory endeavor anyway.) Nor is my aim to show some comprehensive incompatibility. Both businesses and universities are human institutions and, therefore, inevitably have certain features in common. I am interested only in exploring some of the potential implications of much current talk about the university. Let me again emphasize that I am not recommending that we completely abandon such talk (I will not do that even in this essay), but rather that we be more sensitive to the world we create when using it. In short, I am arguing for a somewhat more discriminate appropriation of such metaphors.

We should never underestimate the power of language (and the power of metaphor specifically) to create new experience. Metaphors prevent the ossification of our categories.⁴ They restructure our conceptions of the world and, thus, the way we operate in it. It is this last point which is crucial. Although the fecundity of a metaphor often depends on its coherence with other metaphors in a local semantic context, this offers no assurance that significant alterations in our understanding cannot occur.⁵ Such changes, like metaphors, can be good and they can be bad, but the proof is ultimately in the conduct they inform.

In discussing these issues I will begin by stating my most general thesis, and then I will attempt to support it by citing some illustrations. My general claim is this: If the university is understood and structured after the model of some other institution (in this case, a business), the university

will fail to fulfill precisely those functions that justify its existence in the first place. What I am suggesting is that unless the university is modeled along lines something like those I laid out in the first half of this essay, I, at least, can see no reason for its existence nor for our regarding it as in any sense unique, for if I am right about what is essential to the university, I can see no way that a business model can be accommodated. The structure and operations of a business are fundamentally incompatible with the aims and purposes of the university as they have been outlined above.

After having made that statement, though, it would be prudent to offer some clarification. The business world is as diverse as any and more so than many. Hence, such sweeping generalizations ought to be made quite cautiously if at all. Nevertheless, the discrepancies about which I am disquieted cut across nearly all of this diversity. They cluster, though, around two salient foci. The first concerns the dissimilarity of the images implicit in the two institutions regarding those human beings who participate in them. The second has to do with the disparity between the relationships of these institutions' processes and their products. In what follows I will be comparing the university with what is, perhaps, a distinctively American and distinctively corporate model of a business. I am, however, confident of *some* wider applicability for the arguments.

It will probably help if I begin by making quite clear what it is that I am *not* asserting. I am not, nor would I ever, argue that solvency is not a crucial constraint on the university. Not only is solvency a necessary condition for the existence of the university, this condition is also one whose maintenance requires greater planning and more diligent effort than most. To deny these claims would just be silly. Having said this however, I fail to see how these considerations serve to justify the considerable prominence accorded so-called business models of the university. The importance of solvency does not entail that business metaphors should dictate our understanding of the functioning of the university.

As a community of inquirers, one of the primary functions of the university is criticism and one of the primary objects of that criticism *must* be the larger society of which it is a part. (As I have said, this is crucial for the maintenance of our political freedoms.) The university is obliged to lead the larger society, not reflect it. By envisioning the university against a business template, we not only misconstrue it, we sacrifice innumerable opportunities for reflection on and criticism of what is, probably, the single most influential sector in our society.

Also, a business model can quite easily lead to a truncated picture of those human beings who are involved in the university. In the market place people are, above all else, consumers and/or sources of labor. This perspective has a number of serious consequences when it is employed by

the university, for to the extent that it adopts such reductionistic pictures of human beings, its focus is dangerously narrowed such that those faculties that most obviously distinguish us and which are the foundation of the university, viz., critical rationality and imaginative creativity, can become easily obscured. This kind of perspective leads to the view of administrators as managers, faculty as labor, and students (and the community at large) as consumers.

I see crucial problems with each of these views. Managers manage, which is to say that they simply monitor and control those under their authority. But faculties ought to be neither monitored nor controlled (in the managerial senses of these terms). Presumably, people are hired to be on university faculties precisely because they can think for themselves and do not need managing. They are collectively self-managing—that is what peer review is all about. If a faculty needs to be told every move to make (with respect to their own governance, for example), the way little leaguers are ordered about by their manager, then it is not at all clear how those individuals could ever be up to all of the other tasks they face as a university faculty.

Just as importantly, managing is not leading. The mark of leadership is not the ability to control and monitor, but rather the ability to dream and inspire. Surely Martin Luther King was a great leader because he so capably communicated and carried out the dreams he dreamed and not because he was especially adept at getting results by manipulating those around him. Leaders motivate. Managers coerce. Administration is not management.

Neither are faculty members laborers. Industrial laborers work at tasks that more often than not *could* be done by machines and thus are generally routinized and demand little creativity or critical insight. Laborers almost always constitute those persons whose activities and interests are (as much as is possible, which, often, is to say as much as they will permit) constrained by and subordinated to the efficient production and marketing of products. They are the persons whose time is regarded as least valuable among those who populate the institution.

The job of a faculty, on the other hand, is to inquire, an activity that is intrinsically valuable. Its creative, critical core can be neither mechanized nor routinized, though the requisite abilities, like any others, are most acute when regularly exercised. Faculty members are to be professionals at it (in the broadest sense of that term), for no one can dream and inspire for long if they are not themselves learning. Faculties, too, must dream and inspire, because faculties too must lead. Teaching is leading—experienced inquirers *leading* less experienced inquirers into new areas of inquiry. The whole point is for these newcomers to learn for themselves *how* to participate in these pursuits.

Conceiving of students and the community as consumers is equally worrisome. They become "heads" to count, instead of persons to educate. A sure sign of this is when concern about enrollments becomes a preoccupation. This view also puts extreme pressure on the university to meet the demands of popular taste, since, after all, the customer is always right. This often manifests itself in such phenomena as a heightened concern for public relations, a proliferation of new programs, and fresh spurts of grade inflation. If the central argument that is offered for the continuation or the creation of a program is that "it will get more students" (read "generate more revenue"), then we are surely in serious danger of sacrificing our academic integrity at the altar of the market place. The university must not adopt the tastes of society, rather the university must meet its responsibility to improve those tastes. In just this way commercial television networks have been so remiss by consistently refusing to acknowledge their role in *forming* the tastes and interests to which they pander.

I have a similar fear that claims about an emphasis on good teaching may also be a bit of sloganeering to catch the consumer's eye. If this emphasis means that special efforts are made to invite and encourage students to join in the endless project of inquiry, then the most important aims of the university have not been subverted. An emphasis on good teaching can only mean that we are devoted to learning more about how to lead and aid others in their learning. We can either summon our students to join us in our learning, or we can "teach" every ounce of curiosity and wonder right out of them. If the university model is in any sense derivative, it is derivative from what I consider to be an appropriate model of what it means *to be human*—not that human beings are labor to be managed or resources to be exploited, but rather that they are unique creatures whose uniqueness depends in large part on their special abilities to learn.

If, on the other hand, an emphasis on good teaching is taken to mean that labor (the faculty) efficiently delivers a finished product (knowledge, answers, the truth) to consumers (the students) under the careful scrutiny of management (the administration), then I think we have securely exchanged what is finest about the university for Madison Avenue. We have reduced inquiry to service with a smile. And if this claim about good teaching is taken to mean that the primary pursuit of faculty is to *teach*, then I fear that we have been duped by our own hype. The *primary* task of a university faculty must be to learn, because it is learning, not teaching, with which the university is principally concerned.

Neither process, though, lends itself very well to the language of production and profitability. This is due, in part, to the fact that both are activities which proceed far more randomly and haphazardly than most of

us are wont to admit.⁶ Businesses, of course, exist to make a profit. The notion of pursuing an activity because it is intrinsically valuable is foreign in the world of business. The expenditure of resources, both human and material, for activities pursued for their own sake makes no sense in the market place. Some poems, paintings, and programs have no market value whatsoever, but of course, not all value is market value.

The more efficiency and immediate profitability are emphasized, the greater are the sacrifices that must be made with respect to excellence and long term progress, especially in those pursuits that do not submit to mechanization. I take the declining quality of many goods and services in the United States and the deteriorating infrastructure of the American economy as the most obvious results of this sort of emphasis in American business over the past fifteen years or so. I am not arguing that efficiency and excellence are always inversely proportional, but I would claim that as a matter of fact they often are. The university can never sacrifice excellence to efficiency without sacrificing its reason for being. The goal of inquiry is to *improve* our knowledge; its increase is but an indirect consequence of that process.

This brings me to what I see as most insidious about the "business model" of the university. This picture implies that the university has a definite product, viz., knowledge, and that this product can be produced, delivered, consumed and, presumably, stored. This view has a number of corollaries of which we have become properly suspicious, such as the notion that knowledge (being a quantifiable product) is measurable by SAT scores. But we have been reluctant to call the overall metaphor into question. Precisely this, though, must be done.

Earlier in this essay I claimed that the process of the university is ultimately far more important than its alleged product. The reason for this and the reason for calling the "knowledge is a product" metaphor into question is one and the same reason, and is really quite a simple reason. Knowledge will always resist being characterized as some *thing*. It cannot be captured once and for all by any set of propositions, and this is not merely to claim that not all knowledge is propositional. The point is that the process of seeking knowledge is not complete, and we have no idea whatsoever what the final "product" will look like. Actually, I think the view can be stated even more strongly. The process will never be complete because we cannot *ever* be certain what the final product will look like, even if and when we might arrive at it. My claim, in short, is this: the process is all we've got and the process is all we will ever have. What the university offers is not a measured portion of truth for each customer but an invitation to a way of life. Learning how to ask questions is infinitely more important than learning how to recite answers. The special contribution of the university is the excellence of its *process*, both in its

inquiring *and* in its functioning as a community. This is what the university is about; this is what a liberal education is about; this is what a free society is about; this is what the growth of knowledge is about; and ultimately, this is what being human is about.

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²Paul Feyerabend, among others, has made it strikingly clear just how imperative it is that this process itself simultaneously undergo similar scrutiny. Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: NLB, 1978).

³On this relationship between criticism and the growth of knowledge, see Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁴This is not to imply that metaphor is a peripheral linguistic phenomenon. On this and other issues raised in this paragraph see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁵Lakoff and Johnson.

⁶Donald Campbell has discussed this feature of the growth of knowledge at great length. See, for example, Donald Campbell, "Unjustified Variation and Selective Retention in Scientific Discovery," *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology*, ed. Francisco Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 139-61.