

The Young is The Restless
The Pervading Notions of the Useful and the Tolerant in the University

“All men by nature desire to know.” These words of Aristotle remind us of the innate longing within each one of us which stands as the foundation of university education—our intrinsic desire for true knowledge about ourselves and the world in which we live. The word “university” finds its roots in the Latin word *Universitas*, a word that can also be translated to mean the whole or the universe. If we connect this definition with the idea of the university as “the institution that embodies the human desire for knowledge,” we get a sense of what the university’s intended mission is.¹ In essence, the university’s goal, properly understood, is to be a place where man’s innate yearning to know can be satisfied. It is a search for answers, but more importantly, a search for the truth.

In the introduction to the theme of this year's UNIV conference, the organizing committee has suggested that the University faces “the challenge of recuperating itself,” a challenge that they have deemed to be directly connected with the idea of *universitas*.² It is my contention that this challenge is primarily one of identity—the university has forgotten why it exists and, as a result, finds itself in a crisis. In order to “recuperate itself”, it needs to re-examine its own identity. In the first place, we must identify what is meant by *universitas* and how this can be justified as the proper identity of the University. Secondly, we need to identify the challenges that the University faces in its attempt to embrace that identity. Lastly, we need to examine the means by which these challenges can be faced in order to help the University in its path of rediscovering its own identity.

The University is meant to be more than a place for career preparation—at its very core, the University is meant to form human beings into the men and women who can best realize their potential for the good of all. Fundamentally, the University's greatest challenge is the ethos

¹ UNIV Forum 2009 Organizing Committee, “*Universitas*, knowledge without limits,” 1.

² Ibid.

of “utilitarian pragmatism” and multiculturalism that has not only led to detrimental changes in university policies, but has drastically impeded its ability to embrace the fullness of its own identity. Each individual, I believe, must face these challenges, in his or her own capacity. These challenges can only be truly resolved through the collective efforts of individuals striving to be more counter-cultural in their views of higher education and more demanding of what they receive from their institutions of higher learning.

The University as *Universitas*

Universitas is a word with many meanings, and it is in investigating its possible definition of “the whole” that we come to understand the basic mission of the university. *Universitas* ascribes a dimension to the university that enables it to contribute something great to society. It implies that the university is meant to seek knowledge that has a universal application. It also implies that there is a certain unity in knowledge.³ Yet how can there be a unity in knowledge when there seems to be justifiable reasons to separate the pursuit of different types of knowledge into different faculties? The element that unifies any of these pursuits is the fact that knowledge, in order to be considered knowledge, also has to be true. Therefore, it is not farfetched to suggest that what we all seek in the university is the truth, thus establishing it as an important component of the University’s identity.⁴

Our innate yearning for the truth is far reaching. It does not limit itself to our academic pursuits nor our investigation about our environment, society and our world. Essentially, it also encompasses our desire for true knowledge about who we are as individuals—our identity and rightful place in the world—and as members of the human race. Thus, these points must also be understood as being part of the University’s identity.

³ John Henry Newman thought that “university” implied the pursuit of universal knowledge. He also thought that the unity in knowledge can be attributed to the intimate unity of the subject-matter of knowledge “as being the acts and work of the Creator.” John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1959), 7 & 127. One can also get this account from Timothy Fuller’s article “The Idea of the University in Newman, Oakeshott, and Strauss.”

⁴ Ibid.

Wendell Berry makes an interesting point concerning the idea of the “whole” as being integral to the mission of the university. He says that “[what universities] are mandated to make or to help to make is human beings in the fullest sense of those words—not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture.”⁵ To put it in the words of Newman, a practical end of the University is its “training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life and its end is fitness for the world.” Thus, in the eyes of Berry and Newman, the University takes on the great endeavor of forming human beings for human beings. It becomes a breeding ground for the formation of good and responsible citizens. The University is meant to prepare the person for life.

This leads us to question how the University is able to accomplish this task. Again, we must not forget the idea of the truth and its importance in this whole endeavor. It is the one thing that can fully satiate man’s desire to know. Furthermore, it is the truth, more precisely, the ability of an educated individual to differentiate true knowledge from opinion, that makes him a good and responsible citizen, well prepared for life. This can be understood in two ways. In the first place, the University fulfills the basic goal of an education by helping individuals “develop real knowledge of what is genuinely good in order to correct or displace false or inadequate opinions about goodness.”⁶ This ability is crucial for the development of responsible citizens. It is so important that Leo Strauss suggests that education, that is a liberal education, does not only foster civic responsibility but is also *necessary* for its exercise. For it is in the cultivation of the individual as a “gentleman,” (or a “lady”), which allows the highly educated to serve others by “setting the tone of society.”⁷

Furthermore, the University is often seen as a place of freedom and development, where students are given the opportunity to explore their own interests in both academic and extra-curricular activities.

⁵ Wendell Berry, “The Loss of the University,” 77.

⁶ Hugh Donald Forbes, George Grant: A Guide to His Thought, 35.

⁷ Leo Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” Liberalism Ancient and Modern, 13.

This participation in the multi-faceted life of the University also enables students to find and establish their own identity. It is expected that the student matures in the process, not just physically or intellectually, but also in his views of his own culture, religion, and social responsibility. This is because in finding himself (what he believes in and is passionate about), the student is also able to discern his vocation, the way in which he may use his time and talents that would be most beneficial for society as a whole. Thus, the university plays a crucial role in the formation of responsible citizens who, having striven to fully know themselves, are thus able to contribute to “setting the tone of society” and using their talents for the good of others.

To some, these ideals may seem excessively romantic, especially in the modern setting. This is because the University, as it currently functions, has an entirely different model on which it operates. Instead of adopting the ideals that I have suggested here, that is to form human beings, it has succumbed to the challenges posed by “utilitarian pragmatism,” and multiculturalism. The combination of these two challenges can be seen as the greatest impediment in the University’s ability to embrace *universitas*.

Practicable Usefulness

There are two world views which provide a unique challenge to the rediscovery of the university's identity: Utilitarianism and Pragmatism. In the context of the university, the former notion suggests that the standard of education is based on utility or usefulness rather than on what is good. It is to see University courses in economic terms, manifested in the student’s focus on courses that he deems most “useful” to his career while picking other courses that can lead him to his final goal with most expediency. Pragmatism, on the other hand, can be regarded as the systematic treatment of education based on what is practicable. In other words, it is to see education as teaching merely what can be

practiced, which translates to the endowment of skills for one's professional trade. Combined, this "utilitarian pragmatism" pervades the ethos of the university today. It can be found in the majority of its students, many of its educators, and in its administrators. It can even be seen in the country's government and political leaders.

In surveying the student body of any university, in any faculty or discipline, one frequently encounters the sentiment that a University education is a mere stepping-stone for a career.⁸ If one asks science students why they are studying at university, most would say that it is intended to lead towards a career in medicine, research, or any other of countless occupations available. The same can be said of students in Philosophy, Political Science, or English who are likely to say that their courses are meant to be a preparation for Law, or teaching.⁹ In all these cases, the majority of students see their course work not for its own sake, but as a means to gain practical skills that will prepare them for their intended career goal.

To be sure, the view of these students is not entirely false. As we have mentioned, part of the University's mandate is precisely to prepare one for their future careers. Focussing exclusively on this aspect, however, seems to be a tragic impoverishment of the University, and an impediment to what it is truly capable of.

The view of the University solely as a place to prepare for future careers, has also led students to view their education in economic terms. One is bound to run into terms such as "opportunity cost," "cost-benefit," and "value-added," used by students to describe their education. They make judgements on their courses based on that which fulfils the requirements

⁸ A survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2004 shows that 87 percent of Americans feel that the role of Higher Education is supposed to prepare undergraduates for a career (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*). Although some time has passed since this survey, this is still a general sentiment that is expressed by many students. It is often a subject of conversation, especially in times of course selection, where one can find students asking "What is the *use* of having studied that?" Furthermore, on an anecdotal level, I have often overheard students talk about their view of their Higher Education as a means to open up career paths that will usually end up in more opportunities and more money.

⁹ Louis Menand, "What are Universities for? The real crisis on campus is one of identity," *Harpers*, 283:1699 (1991), 47.

they need to progress in their degrees with the most expediency and, often, with the greatest ease. In essence, the idea of getting an education is lost as the focus becomes primarily skills training and the degree that opens the door to the future—university education becomes solely about utility and practicality.

Sadly, this “utilitarian pragmatism,” is a view held not only by students. It also pervades the mindset of professors and administrators. A good example of this is the view held by Dr. Stanley Fish, a distinguished scholar and Law Professor at Florida International University. In a recent debate about the place of politics in the classroom, Fish argued that teachers should stick to imparting skills such as proper reading and analysis of texts to their students, and let them “save the world on their own time.”¹⁰ It is naturally important to assert that politics should be left outside of classrooms, as its inclusion can essentially risk turning education into indoctrination. It is uncertain, however, whether skills are the only thing involved in university education. Are students not allowed to ask difficult questions, especially about what it means to be just or what type of life constitutes a good and happy one? For Fish, the answer is a most definite “no.” Yet are students really expected to carry out their university career without the hope of such a dialogue on these important “life questions” that exceed the realm of career preparation?

Clifford Orwin, a Professor of Political Theory at the University of Toronto, argues otherwise. Although he agrees that ideology should be left outside the classroom, he does not agree with Fish on the suppression of these important questions. In his view, this is precisely what needs to happen in the University classroom, for there are questions to which not only the students, but also the teachers, seek

¹⁰ [The Agenda with Steve Paikin](#), “Politics in the Classroom,” podcast, 16 February 2009 [originally aired 29 January 2009]. Stanley Fish has also written a book entitled “Save the World on Your Own Time,” which deals specifically with the ideas mentioned here.

answers.¹¹ The quest for answers, the raising of difficult “life questions,” helps the student get insights into his own beliefs and essentially, a better understanding of himself and the world in which he lives. As we have mentioned, this cultivation of the individual is an intrinsic part of the University’s identity.

Finally, this idea of “utilitarian pragmatism” in higher education is also reflected in the amount of funding made available for students. The best example of this is in the Canadian Government’s 2009 Budget. In the section “Further Developing a Highly Skilled Workforce,” the Canadian Government has mandated the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to grant scholarships “focussed on business-related degrees.” They justify this by stating that prioritizing the development of skills is important for Canada’s “ability to prosper in today’s global, innovation-driven economy.” The problem with this view is clear, as it espouses the very problem that has ravaged the university in its struggle to recover its identity. In essence, if such a view persists, universities are pressured to follow the “market trend,” and offer “business-related” degrees over other pursuits in the hopes of attracting more students and faculty to its community—which essentially brings more money. It also gives universities justifications for budget cuts in disciplines that are not necessarily “business-related,” further shrinking faculty and program sizes. Essentially, this can lead to the change of the University into mere skill-development, business centres, moving away from its identity as *universitas*.

The “utilitarian pragmatism” pervading the ethos of the University stifles it and prevents it from embracing its true identity. Endorsing such a view is essentially a movement away from higher learning. It can be argued, even, that such skills training can also be attained through Technical Colleges and other Specialized Faculties or Professional Schools.¹² In these institutions, it is unnecessary to seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge, as their primary goal is to train individuals

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Professional schools include Law, Medicine and Engineering, due to their highly technical focus. Furthermore, professional schools train their students specifically to become lawyers, doctors, and engineers, which essentially differentiates their education from the general aim of the University. Vocational Schools are also geared towards specific career training, and require less intellectual work.

to work. Yet, as we have also discussed, “the University— if it is *Universitas*— can contribute something greater.” That is to say, it is not merely to be seen as a training ground for future professionals, but as a formative arena for human beings as such. This view of “Utilitarian pragmatism” leads to a lost sense of the importance of one's activity as a means for service to Humanity. It leads to the effective ignorance of the truth—for truth is reduced to what is merely useful—and also to the use of one's time, talent, and skills for the fulfilment of one's own selfish ambitions.

Multiculturalism: The Greatest Challenge

Aside from the challenge posed by “utilitarian pragmatism,” the University is also challenged by the notion of multiculturalism. To many this may come as a shock and may even seem overly radical. This is because of the way that multiculturalism has become a reality that we all live with. It is a consequence of the globalization of the world, an undeniable fact such that “those who do not love it bear it, and those who accuse it are few.”¹³ It is problematic because those who do not wish to oppose it succumb to it, and those who dare challenge it are considered to have committed the gravest social sin of all: intolerance. Few people realize that the facade of multiculturalism is actually intolerant, and as a part of the ethos that prevails in modern Western societies, there is truly a great cause for alarm. For in the words of Professor Orwin, this is “an ethos of intolerance disguised as tolerance, of conformity masquerading as diversity, and of a drab uniformity passing for multiculturalism.”¹⁴

So how can we understand the problem posed by multiculturalism? Here, it is important to make some clear distinctions. First of all, the notion of culture used in “multiculturalism,” refers to “the

¹³ Clifford Orwin, “All quiet in the (post) Western front?” *The Public Interest*, 3-5. Also see “Relativism,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/> (accessed 11 March 2009).

¹⁴ Clifford Orwin, “On the Greatest Obstacle to Higher Education Today,” transcript of a talk given on 19 January 2009 to students of the University of Toronto. It was an event hosted by Current Affairs Exchange Forum (CAFEX).

distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products or way of life of a particular society, people or period.”¹⁵ Secondly, there is a need to distinguish multiculturalism as a fact from multiculturalism as a policy. As a fact, multiculturalism asserts that there are people from a great variety of “cultures” that are now present in the same geographic area, receiving the same education.¹⁶ This is undeniable. To move from the fact towards applying a policy, however, is where problems begin to arise.

Policies regarding multiculturalism have negative implications for the University, leading it further away from embracing its own identity. This is because a multicultural policy in this sense leads to intellectual repression and eventually to complacency. The combination of these two makes it practically impossible for true learning to occur. For one, students become overly concerned with the type of questions they ask. They refuse to ask difficult questions, such as what is the good, what does it mean to live the good life and what is the truth, because of the growing concern of “offending” others. They often forget that there is a crucial difference between offending and insulting, although our society seems to conflate the two. That is to say, although I may offend by asking difficult questions, I surely do not mean to insult. Hence, one may essentially offend while still upholding the dignity of the other, while insulting disregards such dignity in the first place.

Furthermore, such repression is detrimental for the identity of the individual. As we have noted, the University is also a place of growth in knowledge about one’s own identity. The repression of difficult questions, forces the individual to change his identity to the one that is accepted by the norm. They repress what it is that they truly are, as part of their own defensive mechanism for survival. Eventually, it comes to a point where their lack of recognition leads them to become accustomed in a manner that even if they were given the opportunity to seek the truth and answers to difficult questions,

¹⁵ “Culture, *n.*” *OED Online*. March 2009. Oxford University Press. 13 March 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/cgi/entry/50055634>>.

¹⁶ Orwin (1996), 6.

they would most likely ignore it. Interestingly, this is the same argument that many feminists have used. They argue that women, who find themselves in a chauvinist society that negatively recognizes their identity, are bound to accept such atrocious and indignant treatment precisely because of this lack of recognition. Thus, recognition of one's beliefs and views play an important part in the formation of one's identity.¹⁷ This is a recognition that is specifically lacking in the University today.

This fear of offending necessarily leads to complacency. That is because in failing to ask difficult questions, one is bound to accept what is taught as being the truth. Furthermore, the lack of difficult questions leads one to accept things as they are, including who they are as a person. It also leads to the disappearance of truth all together. Truth is seen as something that can easily offend, and thus is better not to be sought after. This view can be summarized in the words of Orwin:

To celebrate diversity is to abandon the search for truth. It's to say, I'm OK, you're OK. I'll be careful not to offend you if you'll be careful not to offend me. I won't ask any hard questions about you if you won't ask any about me. I'll also thank you not to try to push me to ask any hard questions about myself. The university welcomes you for what you are, recognizes you for what you are; affirms what you are. The problem is that in doing so it discourages you from serious reflection about what you are or should be.¹⁸

The adoption of multiculturalism, and the misconception that many have of it, has many negative repercussions. Whereas "utilitarian pragmatism" turns truth into whatever is useful, multiculturalism abolishes it all together. This points to a particular problem that the University faces today, especially in the age of pluralism and postmodernism.¹⁹ Although there can be a whole discourse on the importance of truth in the University, many of which have been alluded here, I posit that the abolition of truth is but

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, ed. Amy Guttmann.

¹⁸ Orwin (2009).

¹⁹ Graeme Hunter defines pluralism, as "the claim that there is no supreme value which all must uphold, no single indisputable foundation of knowledge, no unassailable canon of achievement in the arts." See Graeme Hunter, "Must Universities Today be Pluralistic?" Postmodernism, on the other hand, is much more difficult to define. For a grasp of what Postmodernism is, see "Postmodernism," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism>.

a mere facade. It is a facade simply because despite their attempts, pluralists and postmodernists base their maxims on truth. That is, they hold the maxim that “there is no truth” as absolute truth. It is clear that such a view is incoherent and contradictory. In the end, the adoption of multicultural policies, in the sense that we have defined, with its negative implications on the truth, leads to a myopic and bland existence, one that is lacking the grandiose notion of what the University is meant to be.

Where to from here?

The problems posed by “utilitarian pragmatism” and multiculturalism have detrimental effects on the development of the University’s policies and its search for its own identity. Upon seeing these problems, one may feel uncertain about what the University can do to overcome them. Here, it is good to realize a very important point: “The impetus that inspires the University is not something abstract; it is as concrete as the students that compose it. Since its beginnings, the University has always looked to them as a driving force.”²⁰ That is to say that we, as students, have much to do in order to influence the University and its milieu. We need to remain “counter-cultural” in our views of higher education, refusing to see it as a mere place to gain skills. This is and should be connected to our desire to know, as Aristotle observed, not just about the world around us but about ourselves as well. Essentially, this boils down to continually challenging ourselves and our friends, by remaining in constant dialogue, growing in our interaction with one another and most importantly seeking what is good and what is true. Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that our purpose for pursuing higher education should be in order to serve rather than be served. It is this spirit of service, keeping in mind that our progress and discoveries should be directed towards the improvement of society. To be sure, the task at hand will prove to be most difficult, and there is no sparing us from the temptation to join the crowd. To combat

²⁰ UNIV Forum 2009 Organizing Committee, 2.

this growing complacency, only a few are required. It only needs those who are both unwilling to accept such unworthy demands and willing to take up the challenge at hand. Thus, as youth, we must remain restless and unrelenting in our quest for truth. Although the challenge points to the notion of *Universitas*, its solution can be found in the restless particulars: students with the insatiable desire for knowledge, truth, and growth.

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