

What Kind of Universities Does Society Need?

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A little over a year ago many of us were gathered in this same venue to discuss the rather remarkable new ranking system being proposed here known as the Moscow International University Rankings. I am happy to report that this new ranking has come to fruition and stands as an important addition to the more than 200 ranking systems now in place around the world. To my mind, this new ranking's most important contribution is its inclusion of a number of criteria designed to capture how well institutions perform in the so called "Third University Mission." What services to communities and to society as a whole should individual institutions provide? How is the university working to achieve goals beyond teaching and learning?

The discussions at that meeting were often necessarily about the technical aspects of constructing the ranking, but as those deliberations progressed, it became increasingly clear that we needed much more discussion about exactly what we mean by "Third University Mission." It is an extremely broad concept encompassing important questions about what is and is not important for universities to do, indeed about the very definition of what higher education is. Are there any boundaries, or are university missions as broad as all culture?

We tend to think of teaching and learning as traditional higher education functions and the "Third University Mission" as nontraditional—something new and unrelated to the old missions. In fact, service to society has been a part of western higher education since its beginnings in Medieval Europe. Early Universities were there to serve religion and, at that time and in that place, religion was central to every government, community and individual. University research was the study of theology; university teaching was about training priests, and the university third function, its contribution to the community was supplying priests for local parishes.

Now, the Third Mission is much broader. Let me remind you of a few examples cited at our last conference:

- the university as social elevator
- the university a purveyor of on line education
- the university as provider of specific training programs for the labor market
- the university providing students with opportunities for cooperative education with business and industry
- the university as key driver in regional and national scientific research and as incubator of joint scientific and entrepreneurial projects with business, state and other organizations.
- the university as communicator with society, as a 'mover and shaper of society and the university as provider of campus quality of life and 'balanced development' for students

This is, of course, only a partial list. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of topics that higher education embraces which are included in the Third Mission.

In the U.S., the list is particularly long including programs to help prison inmates obtain degrees, programs to design better bathrooms, teaching apple growers to learn how to market apple based food products, Ph.D.s in “Turf Management” for those who aspire to be superintendents of golf courses, and degrees in “Real Estate Staging” to train people how to get houses and apartments ready to sell. Note that many of these activities which once were considered ‘certificate’ programs or involved short term seminars are now full degree programs.

Of course, internet delivery has led to vastly more students and topics. At one point, the University of Phoenix, America’s largest on line provider of higher education, boasted of having over 400,000 students.

The proliferation of Third Mission functions has become so vast that some now argue that things have gone too far, and that traditional scholarship and teaching are being jeopardized. Fortunately, the beauty of an ever expanding higher education sector is that all of these purposes can coexist. Harvard does outstanding research and teaching at the same time that it launches, as it did recently, a massive project to revitalize distressed communities in the state of Michigan.

Hence, a short answer to the question “What kind of universities does society need?” is that society needs a very broad higher education system which uses a myriad of educational tools to reach into and assist virtually every aspect of society. This, of course, is a daunting mandate. Financial resources are finite and many influential traditional educators resist proliferation of purposes. Traditional higher education still controls a large part of public (and in some countries private) support. The good news is that many traditional institutions are embracing a broader mandate—in part because they have an intrinsic intellectual interest in problems of aiding the public good and partly because they know that being relevant is ultimately important to their own survival.

Of course this migration from traditional teaching and learning to a system with equal focus on the third mission is taking place in different countries in different ways and at different paces. But the movement in the direction of third mission focus is universal as “massification” of higher education marches on.

I would suggest that as we analyze the myriad questions about what kind of universities communities, governments, and societies need, we also pose the reverse question. “What kind of communities, governments and societies does higher education need in order to thrive?”

In the U.S. there has always been an ‘anti-intellectual’ strain. Higher education was often in the 19th and early 20th century considered to be an effete playground for the rich with little connection to the ‘real world’. Leaders in the business and political world frequently were praised precisely because they had no college degree and had been educated instead in the

‘college of hard knocks’ – of real life experience. While this perception has largely passed, the anti intellectual strain remains in other forms. The current government’s notion that climate change is a ‘hoax’ is an example. There is growing pressure to prevent higher education institutions from reaching out to diverse communities for students insisting rather that college admissions should be based entirely on grades and test scores. There is an ongoing law suit against Harvard University seeking to restrict its freedom to make decisions about selecting its students.

Of course, the U.S. has no exclusive claim to this problem. Governments around the world have frequently been hostile to universities seeing them as hot beds of political opposition or as being too critical of the status quo. The autonomy that universities need in order to be great often is seen as threatening government control.

The good news is that there is now almost universal agreement that higher education is more than just teaching and research. The third mission is assumed to be a critical component. The arguments and disagreements come in defining the scope of the third mission and about how best to direct university third mission resources. My hope is that the upcoming sessions on formats for delivery and new technology, knowledge transfer, and social involvement will illuminate this debate.

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Before his appointment at IHEP, Parker was executive vice president and treasurer of the \$350 million Nellie Mae Education Foundation in Quincy, Mass. He was a co-founder, senior vice president, treasurer and president of The Education Resources Institute, a private not for profit guarantor of non-governmental student loans. He has also worked in the U.S. Department of Education, National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Institute of Education.

Parker began his career at Harvard University where he was Allston Burr Senior Tutor of Winthrop House in Harvard College and member of the faculty of arts and sciences, secretary to the visiting committees of the Harvard Board of Overseers and assistant to the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Subsequently he served as vice president of Bennington College in Vermont. He taught higher education administration and finance and the history of higher education for 15 years at Boston University.

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