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The Failure of Pluralism

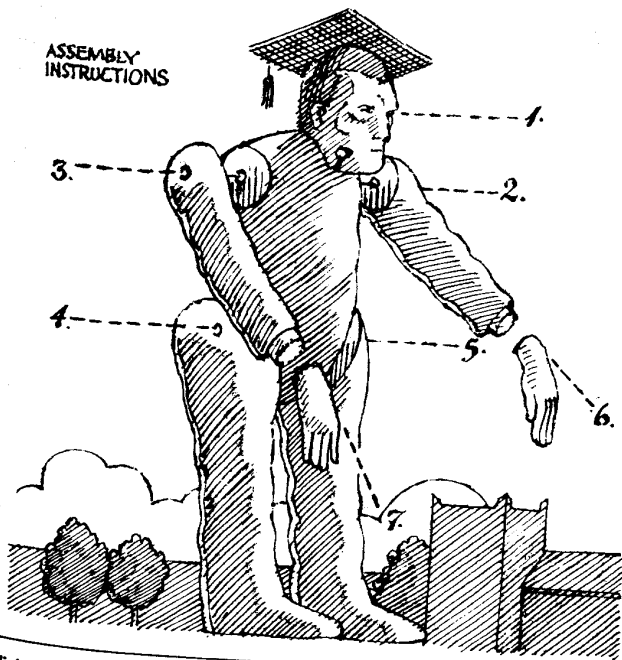
Nicholas S. Thompson

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The Failure of Pluralism

by Nicholas S. Thompson

ASSEMBLY
INSTRUCTIONS



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The central quandary of our universities during the last decade has been the lack of any consensus about their place in society. In the absence of such an understanding, universities and colleges have been generally run as pluralistic institutions, not as functioning wholes but as conglomerations. The advantage of administering an institution as if it were pluralistic is that the administrator can decide every conflict of interest with a compromise. But the disadvantage of such administration is that the inevitably conflicting interests, egged on by compromise of their fundamental needs, may conspire to dismantle the whole enterprise.

Until Clark Kerr wrote *The Uses of the University* in 1963, the pluralistic nature of universities was felt to be an historical accident. With Kerr's publication, however, pluralism became an explicit value to be admired and imitated in the development of state university systems all over the country. "The multiversity," Kerr said, "is not one community but several. A community, like medieval communities of masters and students, should have common interests. In the multiversity, they are varied, even con-

flicting." The multiversity differs from an organism in that "many parts can be added and subtracted with little effect on the whole or even little notice taken or blood spilled." It is a "series of separate schools and departments held together by a common heating system" or "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking." In such "a complex entity with greatly fractionalized power," the president becomes primarily a "mediator among groups and institutions moving at different rates of speed and sometimes in different directions."

A university can be successfully administered as a pluralistic institution as long as its various constituencies do not come into fundamental conflict. As long as such conflict is confined to practical matters, mediation is possible, compromise meaningful and order is maintained. But the Free Speech Movement on the Berkeley campus of the University of California was the catalyst which transformed once banal arguments about routine academic life into holy wars about the nature of the university. As a consequence, the different constituencies of the university began to articulate conceptions of its function, and they were clearly all different and inconsistent with each other.

Suddenly, everybody on campus became aware that a large proportion of the people with whom they deal on a day-to-day basis swore to assumptions and goals inconsistent with their own. In Berkeley, for instance, students assumed that the liberal traditions of the University empowered them to act directly to cure the wrongs of society. Specifically, they wanted the right to solicit funds and recruit workers for an assault on the Republican bastion of Senator William Knowland in Oakland. But the University establishment, including President Kerr, understood the intellectual ivory tower tradition of the University to convey a responsibility to prevent students from launching political attacks in the local community, lest the local community launch something in retaliation. Clearly the two concepts could not coexist as guiding principles of the same institution.

Since the Berkeley crisis, the precise socio-political purposes of American universities have become the focus of wide-ranging debate. Emerging from it have come seven fundamentally different functions, variously ascribed to the universities by the people who live and work in them. These seven widely diverse principles guide the lives of thousands of people in deciding what courses to teach, what courses to take, what books to write, which building to occupy and all the other routine decisions of an academic day. They are:

- (1) *The University as YMCA*: The university protects young people and nurtures their intellectual and personal development.
- (2) *The University as Sieve*: The university sifts and culls the young people of each generation, directing the most talented to leadership positions in government and industry.

- (3) *The University as Trade School*: The university trains individuals for professional and technical crafts such as medicine, engineering and business administration.
- (4) *The University as Academic Union Hall*: The university is a place for practicing, teaching and promoting the scholarly professions.
- (5) *The University as Consulting Firm*: The university, by encouraging original research, generates practical solutions to the technological and social problems of the day.
- (6) *The University as Ivory Tower*: The university provides a shelter from economic and political problems of everyday life in order to encourage reflective and creative thought.
- (7) *The University as Liberal Institution*: The university is a reservoir of humanitarian impulses against injustice and irrationality and toward individual development, creativity, self-expression and freedom.

Each function of the university has different implications for students, for professors and for the interactions between professors and students. In the YMCA framework, the professor is a counselor and the student's job is to mature socially and intellectually. Such a concept places a premium on professors as a kind of avuncular presence. It places the least limitation on the kinds of students' activities which are appropriate to an education. Any experience which helps a student learn to live better is seen as an appropriate and creditable academic activity. Courses in homemaking, woodworking, the creative arts, sensitivity training, agricultural arts and physical education, and years working as Vista volunteers or studying in foreign institutions are encouraged because they help the individual's personal development. In the YMCA, the focus is on the student and the professor is judged in terms of ability to nurture healthy, creative, productive people.

When a university functions as a Sieve, relationships of students and professors become much more formal. The professor acts as a task-setter and evaluator, preserving objectivity and maintaining standards at all costs. With so much riding on the outcome of the interaction, the wise student competes vigorously for the favor of the professor. While students in the YMCA might share experiences and ideas and help one another in their personal development, students in the Sieve tend to withhold such knowledge from others, lest they lose a competitive advantage. While students in the YMCA might reveal weaknesses to the professor while seeking counsel and guidance, students in the Sieve will present only their best, so that it may be credited on their records.

At the Trade School, the roles of professor and student are clearly defined as teaching and learning a trade respectively. There, the personal lives of professor and student are largely irrelevant. Their relationship is not likely to be so personal as at the YMCA, but likely to be more

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friendly than in the Sieve, since the teaching and learning of a trade does not impose sanctions of objectivity upon the relationship. However, the success of the Trade School is measured by the number of qualified journeymen it turns out, and the success of professors, therefore, is likely to be measured in terms of their efficiency in turning out students. The Trade School concept demands of the professor a maximum of in-class time and a minimum of time for preparation, reflection or creativity. Similarly, the wise student does not question what he or she is learning, or try to use it as a vehicle for personal expression. The student gets it down pat and prepares for the time when new-learned skills get him or her the right job.

In the Academic Union Hall professors are scholars and all students are future graduate students or they are nothing. In these hallowed halls the professor owes primary allegiance to the profession. The professor frequently attends professional meetings, jollies with colleagues at other institutions, writes books on subjects of interest in the discipline, publishes papers in narrow journals and tries to send undergraduate students and graduate students on to prestigious graduate schools and teaching and research appointments. Undergraduate students who do not aspire to graduate school are hard put to fit into the world of the professional scholar. Lower level courses are taught only reluctantly and are often explicitly directed toward the minority who ultimately plan to major in the field. Students are faced with the choice of making a graduate study commitment or being ignored.

The professor in the Consulting Firm holds primary fealty to government and industry. Like a scholar, he or she may do research, but the research is guided in its goals, and often in its results, by the needs of the funding agencies. As a Consultant, the professor is usually on sabbatical in Washington or in a taxicab on the way to the airport, dictating important memos into a dictaphone along the way. For the thinker, the payoff is understanding of the problem, and for the scholar the payoff is prestige as a scholar. But for the Consultant the payoff is worldly power and money. A Consultant does not have much use for students, even graduate students, except as personal researchers.

In the Ivory Tower, the job of the professor is to think creatively. To do so, one must have a lot of free time, away from the hurly-burly routine of daily survival. This concept of a professor's work tends to emphasize the quality, the novelty and the comprehensiveness of the work. The function of a student in the Ivory Tower is to sit at the feet of the teacher and wait to be tossed a pearl. Under the demands of modern mass education such pearl-tossing sessions have tended to be brought off as large lectures. Indeed, many students need to content themselves with getting pearls through a TV monitor.

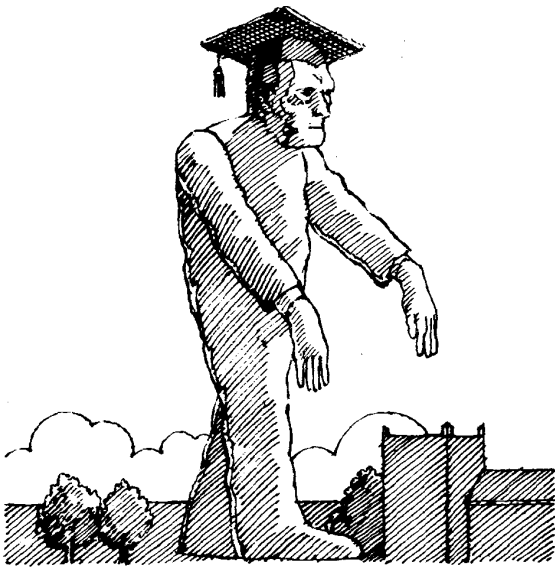
The Liberal Arts University is where the teacher reigns.

As a teacher, the professor draws together knowledge, packages it in palatable units and presents it to students. Achievers in the Liberal Arts University are convinced that certain qualities of understanding which are conveyed by teaching history, literature, natural science and philosophy are essential to the maintenance of a humane society. These qualities are reason, independence of mind, deliberateness, thoughtfulness, fair-mindedness and esthetic sensitivity. The graduate of the Liberal Arts University is a well-rounded person; professors in such institutions must similarly be well rounded, at least to the extent that they can appreciate relationships between their own interests and those of others. The Liberal Arts University feels a sort of *noblesse oblige* toward the society which supports it. This University seeks to be a model for the good society, spreading its benevolence to society through its students.

Each of these concepts of the university, of course, is fairly inconsistent with each of the other. The conflicting nature of these concepts lies behind many of the disputes which have occurred on American campuses over the last few years. Students acting on their understanding of the university as a Liberal Institution have attacked many of the activities pursued on campuses in the name of other ideals. They have attacked the Sieve notion as it is embodied in competitive grading and in campus recruitment by government, military and industry. They have attacked the Ivory Tower ideal, demanding that the university take responsibility for the direct social and economic consequences of its actions. They have attacked the research and professional functions of the consultant and scholar, demanding that professors serve in their role as teachers.

Legislatures and politically appointed boards of regents have attacked the Liberal Institution, the Academic Union Hall and the Ivory Tower functions of the university, demanding that professors be more efficient as teachers and leave off such idle pursuits as political action, professional fraternizing or innovative thinking. Federal granting agencies have been cajoling the university to better serve its Trade School and Consultant Firm functions.

Some concepts of the University, of course, are more in favor among some constituencies than among others. The YMCA concept is surely more often asserted by students than by professors, the Liberal Institution idea is more often defended by those in the humanities than by those in the natural sciences, and the Consulting Firm and Academic Union Hall concepts are more often defended by full professors than by either assistant professors or emeriti. But the striking fact is that all of these concepts may be held differently all over the same campus. However inconsistent they may be to each other, they tend to be held by people working in the same departments, on the same research projects, taking the same majors, rooming in the same dormitory, or indeed by the same individual at different times of the day. It is a private crisis within each of us, as well as a public one.



This quandary is particularly evident among professors who are charged with maintaining all of these functions. Most of us seem to feel that if we worked hard enough, if we didn't fall asleep over stacks of student papers in the evening, if, perhaps, we took shorter lunch hours, if we were really true to our calling, we could be Counselors, Evaluators, Trainers, Scholars, Consultants, Thinkers and Teachers all at once. Hallucination, perhaps. To perform any of these functions adequately, we have learned, is to neglect the others.

So the professor who spends the day advising students feels guilty because no time is left for creative thinking or original research. The professor who disappears into the laboratory and leaves the teaching to assistants feels guilty when it is discovered at the end of the semester that the students haven't learned anything. In the liberal arts tradition, professors who tried to make students see the relationships between specialties feel vulnerable to attack from experts in any of the specialties they have related, while the specialists feel equally vulnerable because their interests are so obtuse and isolated from the interests of any of their colleagues.

Some faculty succumb to their guilt, and spend their day going from classroom to office to laboratory to study to library to department meeting, trying in each activity to make up the deficit which has accrued while devoting time to other activities. Other faculty control their guilt, and grimly do whatever they are good at.

Students, of course, are in the same quandary. They have come to school to mature, to get a good job, to learn a trade, to seek wisdom and to catch their breath. Each student feels that he ought to be able to do all of these things in a four-year college career. So the "grind" who prepares assiduously for a career feels guilty because he is

not going to gain "experience" with coeds. The pensive intellectual who succumbs to an affair feels guilty because he's taking time away from preparing for his Graduate Record Exam. The senior in engineering wonders nostalgically what happened to the interest in music he had when he entered the university four years ago, while the senior in philosophy culls anxiously through job opportunities in the placement office, wishing he had majored in something else that might have gotten him a job. Rare is the student who knows what he or she is doing and feels that it is approximately the right thing.

Under the circumstances students may be forgiven for demanding to know what it is we were doing. Our answer has been that we were doing a little of this and a little more of the other thing. When they demand to know to which of a set of conflicting principles we hold allegiance, we get panicky. The message we have conveyed is that the university belongs to those who push the hardest. Unlike alumni, governments or industry, students do not have money to push with; so they push in the only way they can—with their hands.

The failure of the pluralistic university requires that the conflicting concept of the university be reconciled. A reconciliation does not imply a homogenization of the parts of the university but rather a functional integration of its parts. Such a functional integration requires that the various activities of the university be seen as parallel, complementary or collaborative effects toward a shared goal. A common goal is essential if we are to resist with firmness inappropriate demands upon the human and physical resources of the university.

How do we go about achieving such a reconciliation or defining such a common goal? I propose a concept of the university which will help it with some of the difficult decisions it is being asked to make.

The proper function of the university is conceptual innovation. The university's primary responsibility is to generate and disseminate new and better ways of thinking about nature, society and personal experience. The university devoted to conceptual innovation is similar to a church in that it is concerned with people's beliefs about important ideas. It is different from a church in that it should constantly seek experiences, ideas and information which tend to negate its beliefs. The beliefs of priests and ministers are ostensibly stable and reliable—rooted in tradition and training. The beliefs of the professor should be the transient attempts of a disciplined mind to integrate the conflicting ideas and facts which are being brought to bear on him or her at a given time. The role of the congregation in a church is to assimilate the belief system of the church; the role of students in the university should be to compare, analyze and even to challenge the belief system to which they are exposed. From the activities of the university, society should gain a full, more accurate, more timely understanding of the world. A church strives to put a person in harmony with himself; a university

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Conceptual innovation is the proper function of the university because it is a function which society presently needs. It is a function to which the human and physical resources of universities are well-suited, and which will tend to generate positive interactions among the universities' constituents.

To say that a university is a place of conceptual innovation distinguishes it from a place of social action. The test of an activity in such a university is not whether it accomplishes good directly, but whether the activity brings the individual closer to an understanding of some object, process or experience. "How," one may ask, "can a society so much in need of physical action devote so much of its intellectual resources to conceptual innovation?"

How we answer such a question depends on how we see the problems of our society. If our analysis tells us that America does not have the economic resources to fulfill the economic needs of its people, control its population, develop an ideal human ecology and prevent war, then we are probably justified in dismantling the university and appropriating its resources to meet these pressing needs. If, on the other hand, our analysis tells us that America's social and economic woes are secondary consequences of conceptual problems, then we would probably want to allocate more economic resources to a university committed to conceptual innovation.

My own analysis tells me that our resources are more than adequate to meet all of these tasks, but that we are prevented from doing so by how we think about them. The war could be ended tomorrow if we did not conceive of world politics in terms of the maintenance of honor and the punishment of erring nations. Poverty could be ended tomorrow if we could recognize that what is called work is no longer essential to the production of human needs, but is merely one of a number of stylized settings in which people interact with one another and by which people give meaning to their lives. We could stabilize our ecology in a few short years if we could recognize "progress" as the unhealthy conceptual turn-on that it is. The population explosion could be controlled in a decade if we could think of ways to encourage people to take pride and pleasure in others' children.

All of these practical social problems are in the profoundest sense educational; where, then, but in the universities are such problems to be solved? If the university is to serve as society's conceptual innovator, then it must be in contact with the conceptual problems posed by the society. Without such contact the conceptual activities of the university are empty scholasticism.

The function of conceptual innovation makes admirable use of the human resources now collected on campuses. The professor in such a university serves as a center of intellectual activity who attracts information, ideas and

controversy in some area of knowledge. One has a responsibility to seek a coherent understanding of his or her speciality and of its relationship to other specialties. One also has a responsibility to impart that understanding to students as well as to instruct them in how they may seek such understanding themselves.

Students play the role of goads while they are in the university and disseminators once they leave it. Adolescents are ideal university students because of all society's groupings they are the least "hooked in," and the least bound by societal assumptions. They are also unstable, and thus a constant source of questioning and challenge to established ways of thinking. Because they are comparatively free of the structure of the society, they are more open to the innovative patterns of thought which such a university can generate. Thus they represent the ideal channel by which new modes of thought and action can find their way into society.

This concept of the student's double function bears important implications for choosing activities. If the student is to serve as a transmitter of innovation from the university to the society, then he or she must become sufficiently familiar with a specialty to understand, appreciate and convey its implications. But if the student is to serve as a stimulator of conceptual change within the university, then it is necessary to pass from specialty to specialty within the university. Going from professor to professor, the student carries from one discipline the implicit challenge which each discipline offers each other: To defend your methods in terms of your assumptions; to defend your assumptions and to account for yourself.

Perhaps the most exciting implication of the idea of conceptual innovation is that it brings the people of the university into interaction. In the pluralistic university everybody does his own thing. Talking to some colleague "outside" is viewed largely as entertainment or a waste of time. Knowledge is viewed relativistically. If the individuals disagree they tend either to judge each other incompetent or to adopt a live-and-let-live attitude that verges on solipsism. In the university devoted to conceptual innovation we try to discover and disseminate the truth. When we disagree with somebody we have an obligation as discoverers of the truth to find out if that person is right, and an obligation as disseminators of the truth to tell the person he is wrong.

Such a view of university life discourages the organization of permanent departments. A department is a method of organizing academic life which makes disagreement unlikely. People who live and work in departments are insulated from approaches to knowledge which are different from their own and from ideas and facts which tend to negate the departmental perspective. A department is like a church in that it supplies all sorts of social pressure for its members to homogenize their thinking. In the university devoted to conceptual innovation, administrative arrangements of professors will be transient arrangements

based on a professor's current interest and current understanding of which people or ideas are relevant to these interests.

Although hostile to departments, such a university would be hospitable to disciplines. A discipline is a systematic, self-conscious method for approaching the world which is based on explicit assumptions about the world. Unlike a department, a discipline can be proved wrong. A discipline is useful in that it makes possible the discovery of things which seem improbable in common-sense terms. In the university devoted to conceptual innovation each individual professor has the responsibility to practice and exemplify a particular disciplined approach to finding the truth. Each professor has the responsibility not only to comprehend his work in terms of his discipline and its assumptions, but also to articulate the relationship of his own discipline to other ways of coming to understand the world.

The modern university has been described as a marketplace of ideas, but this analogy does not accurately convey its true fragmented nature. Marketplaces are coherent, interactive, dynamic institutions. In the marketplace you can find fine goods and cheap ones, rich merchants and poor, policemen and pickpockets, street preachers and

pimps. In the marketplace, vendors shout at you demanding that you consider the quality of their wares. A marketplace is a place of choices.

The modern university is really not that, but rather a shopping mall of discrete enclaves. The departments of a modern university are not small stalls exposed to competition, but huge autonomous establishments which swallow up the consumer and shut him off from other possible excursions. From the bowels of economics you cannot hear persuasive arguments of the Marxist philosopher, any more than you can see the merchandise at Gimbel's from Macy's basement. A mile of neon corridors separates the psychologist from the anthropologist, the bacteriologist from the biophysicist, the European historian from the student of European literature. In the Shopping Mall of Ideas, the consumer must be careful, lest he spend the whole afternoon in the very first store he walks into.

The university today is hardly the conceptual innovator, which would provide the only environment in which people and ideas can suitably survive into the next century. The individual knowledge stalls which make up most of our places of higher learning these days serve neither the scholar nor the learner. Nor will we under those circumstances ever agree as to what a university is really for. But a university devoted to synergistic interactions of thought and discovery cannot help but create some exciting new patterns for tomorrow. ■

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