

## *What's the University for?*

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AT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW MILLENNIUM, THE UNIVERSITY finds itself puzzled and vexed, in large part due to its own achievements. It has reached a level of material success, wealth, and power that is unrivaled in its history; yet its very accomplishments have fed larger cultural anxieties about the university's place and purposes in society as a whole. We continue to invoke the old, inspiring ideas concerning the purposes of higher education—they certainly make good copy for recruiting brochures—but against the realities of the twenty-first century they have lost much of their ring.

In particular, higher education in the U.S. is facing a number of challenges that play out culturally, intellectually, morally, and technologically.

Culturally, a university education has become more integral to individual success in our society than ever before; but the growing necessity of higher education for socioeconomic success has seemed to infuse (some would say infect) it with some of the less attractive aspects of our society, such as consumerism and a demand for information and entertainment, rather than education or wisdom. It is unclear just what an education is meant to do for (or to) its recipient.

Intellectually, the university seems increasingly the locus of high-level scholarly endeavors, but the structures of university life have led some to wonder whether the academy has rendered "the life of the mind" irrelevant to the larger American society, by turning broad-minded intellectuals into narrowly specialized "technicians," with critical faculties so refined that they often can gain no purchase on the pressing issues facing contemporary society.

Morally, the university came to prominence professing a mission to create "enlightened individuals" and "model citizens" by educating them in the liberal arts, and was motivated by the professed faith to follow inquiry wherever it might lead. The very ideals the university once professed, however, are no longer the content of a professed faith, but rather the objects of skeptical critique, and some challenge the idea that the university needs any sort of shared moral commitment at all.

And then there is the challenge of new educational technologies. If universities are only for the transmission of knowledge, then we have to admit that this task doesn't require the system we have constructed for it. While bricks and mortar give an appearance of permanence to higher education, the development and extraordinary expansion of the Internet and other "distance-learning" technologies seem to make the old delivery systems obsolete.

Together, these challenges raise the question, "In what ways will this Enlightenment-era institution (with roots that draw from the inheritance of even deeper Christian sources) be sustained in an increasingly post-Enlightenment social order?" The answer is not clear. Given the pace of technological change; the relentlessness of market demands tied to political expedience; and the increasingly compressed time between social, cultural, and technological innovation and the manifestation of its social costs, the nature and direction of higher education certainly warrants serious and sustained reflection.

How have cultural changes such as the commodification of just about everything and the growing demand for entertainment in a wider and wider array of cultural arenas affected American intellectual life? What does this pressure toward entertainment as the mode of "teaching," and "service providers" as the role of teachers, suggest for the future of higher education? How can the university work against both its internal fragmentation, in order better to approximate the intellectual community it aims to be, and its isolation from the broader culture, in order to play a more integral role in society as a whole? What are the prospects for a revitalized public intellectual culture? What relevance do the religious, intellectual, and moral origins of the university have for its life today? And in what ways can we think about the moral aims of higher education given the increasingly diverse sources from which individuals and communities draw in responding to moral questions?

A question like "What's the university for?" only makes sense in a time of rapid societal transformation. The inherited purposes and expectations of the university are seriously challenged as new technologies rapidly change, as knowledge becomes ever more commodified, as the practical demand for job training and skills increases, and as the life of the mind becomes less and less a part of the everyday life of average citizens. This issue takes on these challenges, both dissecting the problems of and exploring the possibilities for the university in our changing cultural context.

— T. H. R.