



# Complicated but Crucial: Higher Education's Missions for the Labor Market

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**H**igher education is a multifaceted phenomenon serving many purposes for the individual and for society. But one would never know that from today's political discourse and social media. All we hear about is workforce training, and sometimes attacks on colleges and universities for being hotbeds of wokeism or other purported sins.

The fact is that higher education graduates earn over their lifetimes on average much more than their nongraduate peers, that their institutions have adjusted to the new realities of the workforce, even coping with COVID-19-imposed restrictions, and that enrollments have, with some exceptions, rebounded to prepandemic levels. Yet, about half of the population of the United States has lost confidence in higher education, and one can observe similar trends elsewhere—even though most critics still send their children for postsecondary education, even when graduates from vocational education are in high demand and are well paid.

## A Historical View of Workforce Training

Universities have always been involved in what we now call workforce training. The first European university—the University of Bologna, founded in Italy in 1088—educated young men for the Church, the law, and medicine. But it also provided what we now call liberal education (instruction in mathematics, humanities, and logic), as did other universities founded thereafter. Harvard University's founders bemoaned the lack of educated Christian ministers and started their college in 1636, providing training in theology, as well as English-style general studies and soon education in other professional fields.

Later, during the American Civil War, in 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed the Land-Grant Act to “benefit the agricultural and mechanical arts.” The new public universities, such as the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin, plus a few new private institutions such as Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago, devoted themselves to educating the students who powered the United States' emergence as an industrial power, all combining various kinds of liberal education with preparation for employment. France, following Napoleon's 1808 reforms, established the vocationally oriented and prestigious *grandes écoles*, which exist to this day.

When most Latin American countries freed themselves from Spanish colonial rule in the nineteenth century, universities were established that served professional and vocational needs. Coming from a very different intellectual tradition, China established academies in the eighth century to provide education in the Confucian classics and

### Abstract

Higher education has many and varied missions and purposes. It has from the beginning been engaged in what we now call “workforce training,” including preparing students for the professions. But universities have also provided a broader curriculum in the liberal arts and for critical thinking. Current emphasis on the labor market should not ignore the broader aims of postsecondary education.

later to train young men for the imperial civil service, thus providing a form of workforce training.

Research also became a key part of the higher education mission. Research universities were invented in Germany in the nineteenth century when Germany was emerging as a major power. The United States and Japan adapted the research university idea. Elsewhere, such as in France, the Soviet Union, and China, most research was conducted in specialized institutes—and universities were focused on education and vocational training.

### Expansion in the Twentieth Century

Thus, the modern university emerged as a powerful and highly successful institution that provided training for increasingly complex economies, scientific research that contributed to both basic knowledge and applied innovations, and, in many instances, a broad education that contributed to an understanding of society and critical thinking.

Different kinds of postsecondary institutions emerged in the twentieth century to serve ever more complex economies and unprecedented numbers of students. Thus, higher education moved from a preserve of the elite to a mass enterprise, increasingly seen as a necessity for social mobility and providing the knowledge needed for success. Academe moved from a small elite sector to a broad and diversified system of institutions serving many societal, economic, and personal needs.

In the United States, community colleges expanded in the mid-twentieth century to serve as “open-door” institutions providing vocational (workplace) training, but at the same time some general education for students. Forty percent of students in the United States attend community colleges. In Europe, professional education served a similar purpose. Globally, academic systems are more successful when they are diversified, with selective research universities, mass access institutions, and vocationally focused schools, often with a mix of public and private institutions.

### Twenty-First Century Requirements

Globally, the media and governments are obsessed with “workforce development” or other vocational demands. The fact is that most higher education institutions have always been involved in educating people for jobs—in the professions and elsewhere. In general, they have a combined vocational and professional focus with broader educational goals. In that respect, the divide between research universities and professional schools is a myth. Increasingly, research universities combine the two (see for instance the emergence of one-year professional masters and two-year research masters, and the emergence of professional doctorates next to PhDs). Similarly, in the nonuniversity professional education sector there is a trend toward more attention to research (expressed in the change of name to “universities of applied sciences”) and toward doctoral education, even calls to become research universities. In the United States, some community colleges now offer bachelor degrees.

At no time has higher education been more important. Most people these days have more than one job or even more than one specialization over the span of their careers. And with the job market changing at record speed, this almost becomes a necessity. The current focus on artificial intelligence and its possible implication for the future of work and the professions magnifies this reality. Artificial intelligence, globalization, as well as other twenty-first century technological and other developments, will have a dramatic impact—we just do not know the direction of the coming job revolution.

What this means, among other things, is that postsecondary education needs to provide the “soft skills” and broad knowledge likely to be needed for an unknown future. In other words, to do the things that it has always done, but with greater efficiency and understanding of possible future scenarios. Furthermore, this orientation should not be limited to the elite sector of higher education but should be available for everyone. A diverse system is needed, addressing different societal needs as well as the requirements of the labor force. That is particularly true for low- and mid-income countries, where postsecondary education needs to be much further diversified.

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