

The Danger of Forgetting the Social Benefits of Higher Education

CHRISTINE MUSSELIN

Christine Musselin is vice president for research at SciencesPo, Paris, France. E-mail: Christine.musselin@sciencespo.fr.

One of the main assumptions behind the discourse on the increasing need for more higher education—a discourse that proved to be very effective when one looks at the exponential increase in student numbers during the 20th century—was that higher education will have strong social benefits. Indeed, some studies show that educated people get higher wages, have better living conditions and better health, and are more open-minded.

A key challenge for higher education in the coming decades will be to maintain these beliefs and to convince society that education and training do more than produce human capital—but also have a larger social function and purpose. Knowledge is not only important for its economic value but also for society.

Recently, the social contribution of higher education has been ignored or even distained by policymakers, the governments of developed countries, as they stressed the need for more knowledge and innovation in order to promote economic progress. Training more highly qualified workers, able to understand and produce knowledge, was presented as a challenge for countries involved in the global knowledge economy. What was learned at universities was considered to be less important than the job one could obtain at the end of their studies.

My point here is not to say that preparing students for the job market is not an important mission for universities, or that transforming research into economic relevance should not be assumed by higher education. Yet, this should not mean the abandonment of other missions and activities, the development of purely instrumental training programs, the end of “blue sky” research, or the end of disciplines that may have no direct economic impact.

This challenge is all the more important because obscurantism, ignorance, intolerance, and fanaticism are unfortunately expanding. Recent events in Europe, terrible conflicts in some African and Middle-East countries, and the civil war in Ukraine all prove that higher education institutions still have to promote humanistic values, prepare for citizenship, and to be socially responsible. These missions have never been sufficient to prevent from all misconducts and abuses—some well-trained individuals have in some

cases proved to be as fanatic as noneducated ones—but they have nevertheless been largely effective. They, therefore, absolutely must be maintained and even reinforced. This might be a difficult line to hold at a time when higher education policies first of all promote the economic and instrumental roles of universities. However, it is a battle to lead and win in the coming decades, if universities are to remain a place where knowledge and humanistic values are protected and diffused. ■

The Misuses of the University

PATTI MCGILL PETERSON

Patti McGill Peterson is Presidential Advisor for global initiatives at the American Council of Education and former executive director of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars—The Fulbright Program. E-mail: ppeterson@acenet.edu.

We live in an age where understanding your core mission and being true to it are fundamental concepts for healthy organizations. My concern for the future of higher education is the number of stakeholders, who place upon it an ever-expanding list of competing demands and their impact on its core mission.

When Cardinal Newman wrote about universities in the 1850s, he wanted to define not only their purpose for students but also their purpose in society. Central to Newman’s conception was the student and the environment for teaching and learning. It was connected to society but not driven or heavily shaped by it.

Fast forward to Clark Kerr about 100 years later—the uses of the university trump the idea of the university. His “multiversity” is a mega purpose institution—a place of competing visions and, according to Kerr, is so many things to so many other people that it must be at war with itself.

Juxtaposing Newman and Kerr is not merely an act of nostalgia. It is a signal that demands on universities, and higher education in general have grown exponentially. Higher education has been placed increasingly in the position of providing the antidote for whatever issues governments, business and industry, major donors, and other stakeholders define as needing solution.

In this scenario, it is very difficult to be true to a core educational mission and to plan strategically to enhance it over time. Institutions are like Napoleon on the Russian front, with their line of advance too wide and their supply