Democratic Merit Project

Exploring the Missions of Selective Colleges and Universities

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This investigation examines materials and information related to institutional missions found on the websites of the top ten most selective colleges and universities the United States: Harvard University, Princeton University, California Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Columbia University, Yale University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Brown University, University of California at Berkeley, and University of California at Los Angeles (Ohio State University was also examined because it is relevant to the Kirwan Institute). The five most prevalent themes include: 1) advancing knowledge to serve society; 2) service to the local, national, and global communities; 3) promoting a diverse environment; 4) equitable access to the university; and 5) developing leaders for civic engagement. A literature search was conducted to contextualize these themes within the framework of American higher education.

1. Advancing Knowledge to Serve Society
The university is first and foremost an institution based on knowledge. The authority of the academy rests essentially on its ability to decipher and transmit the realm of truth while discarding falsity (Anderson, 1993). Yet within this general framework, the university and individual scholars occupy incredibly specialized roles. Academia's main purpose is not merely to catalogue or contain knowledge; nor is it even to interpret the meaning of that knowledge (though these are both vital functions). The primary task of the university is to produce useful ways of thinking. What separates knowledge in the academy from other kinds of knowledge is the way in which it is developed, reasoned, tested, and passed down over time (Anderson, 1993). Thus, the public mission of the academy as a whole is to use its knowledge—its ways of knowing—to serve society.

But in many ways, the university’s role and relationship with knowledge are shifting. On one hand, its traditional function as gatekeeper of knowledge is threatened. While colleges and universities have long been considered repositories of information in the form of libraries, archives, people, and materials, the rapid expansion of information technology and the advent of the Internet have made the processes of information gathering more accessible (Desai, 2007). Moreover, some researchers are alarmed with what they see as a trend toward the commoditization of knowledge. Intellectual property that was previously available to all within the university has recently been discovered to have a high market value, and some fear that this will lead to a stratification of “commercially viable” and “non-commercially viable” disciplines and paths of inquiry (Desai, 2007). This trend may also be
exacerbating a perceived rift between the university’s twin goals of research and teaching (Geiger, 2004). Though the quest for knowledge remains the focus of university research, this goal has become increasingly fused with ideas of economic competitiveness.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have addressed this commercialization by developing a theory of “academic capitalism.” One important aspect of this theory is the idea that knowledge-as a commodity-is critical to the new economy. Knowledge is a raw material to be converted into products, processes, or services, and universities are a major source of knowledge. Institutions of higher education are in the process of establishing new relationships with the global economy, with state agencies, and especially with corporations. Before 1981, fewer than 250 patents were issued to universities per year, but in 1999 colleges and universities filed 5,545 patents (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p. 17). Although the potential commercial value of some discoveries is not realized until ten, twenty, or fifty years later, a great deal of university research has immediate commercial application. (Levin, 2003)

Knowledge within the university is also influenced by academic freedom and peer review. Openness in disseminating academic research is crucial to maintaining the university’s unique contributions to knowledge (Rhodes, 2001). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), however, challenge the continued effectiveness of the peer review system in their theory of academic capitalism. They claim that new circuits of knowledge have opened up the assessment of colleges’ performance by involving actors such as U.S. News and World Report and student-created websites that rank schools, classes, and teachers.

The interaction of universities, faculty, and knowledge is shifting. Though stated institutional goals continue to address the public mission of knowledge dissemination, Geiger (2004) and others fear an impending imbalance in market forces that will impact the university. For example, the relationships among the increasing profitability of knowledge, the commercialization of college environments, the funding structure for research, and the nonprofit operation of universities are clearly changing. In light of these changes, universities must continue to strive to hold these forces in balance as they create knowledge to serve society.

2. Service to Local, National, and Global Community
Though American higher education has long understood “public service” to be an integral component of its purpose, implementation of public service has changed dramatically over time. The land grant institutions founded under the Morrill Acts in 1862, for instance, were originally conceived to bring technical training to the public. Checkoway (2001) argues that a shift occurred after World War II “from service to science” (p. 128), spurred by professionalization and departmentalization of academic disciplines as well as the drive for Cold War supremacy and national security. Many professors turned their focus inward rather
than outward, focusing on knowledge production rather than application. However, “service learning,” a new trend gaining in popularity since the 1990s, facilitates the external application of knowledge.

Furco (2001) suggests that the rise of service-learning as a goal and as a pedagogy is largely a reaction to the growing concern that higher education has become remote in its “ivory tower.” The author defines service-learning as, “a teaching strategy that enhances students’ learning of academic content by engaging them in authentic activities in which they apply the content of the course to address identified needs in the local and broader community” (p. 67). Thus, public service has been redefined and re-imagined in terms of individual processes and educational outcomes. Musil (2003) argues that motives for increasing public service initiatives within the academy may also include economic self-interest (as some institutions invest in the quality of their immediate neighborhoods) and democratizing access (as the concerns of larger numbers of women and racial minorities bring the concerns of their communities into the academy). “Service-learning” has become the new way for colleges and universities to integrate their mission of public service into institutional practices.

Zlotkowski (2001) argues that in creating service-learning initiatives, the first task should be to revisit the mission statement of each institution of higher education. The publicized visions of many colleges and universities pay lip service to the goals of service to the community, but Zlotkowski claims that “trickle-down” contributions that may evolve on their own are simply not enough to fulfill this mission. Institutions cannot leave it to individuals to take actively engage in service; they must enhance service learning by conducting campus-wide surveys of service-learning initiatives, identify those which are effective and those which are not, and expand effective models throughout the university. Unfortunately, this is often not the case at major colleges and universities. Musil (2003) sees a marked bifurcation of service-learning initiatives within many colleges and universities in which institutional community representatives are often little more than figureheads, while the actual organization of service goals is left to student affairs personnel or to the students themselves. She argues that such a division between work in the classroom and life outside the academy can lead to a societal predicament in which adults “‘care about community’ after 5:00 P.M. or on weekends” (p. 4). Moreover, given that service-learning is conceived of primarily as a pedagogical tool, Furco (2001) argues that those institutions whose primary focus is research find decreased support for service-learning. Thus, he argues for a new philosophy of service-learning that connects faculty research to the greater community.

In fact, involving the faculty is the most cited necessity for invigorating higher education’s service mission through service-learning. Furco (2001) claims that the strongest predictor of institutionalizing service-learning on college campuses is faculty involvement and support for service-learning. Zlotowski (2001) and Checkoway (2001) echo this sentiment and also
recognize that a critical step must include a rewards structure for faculty members who effectively incorporate service-learning in their teaching and research. The academy can realize its educational and civic goals by actively linking classroom activities and other traditional learning environments to service. Faculty and students must view communities as “partners and participants rather than as human subjects and passive recipients of information” (Checkoway, 2001, p. 133), even if this approach challenges the traditional teacher-student model.

Finally, understanding the concept of assessment is critical to understanding the concept of integrating public service goals into the life of a university. While many colleges and universities remain rooted in the practice of examining traditional cognitive outcomes as a means of assessing programs, Kezar (2002) argues that these methods tend to undervalue the true moral and civic benefits of service-learning. She argues that the development of non-cognitive measures, based loosely on Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, may enhance support for service-learning throughout the academy. It remains to be seen, however, whether the advent of service-learning will truly revolutionize the civic mission of American higher education.

3. Promoting a Diverse Environment

Today, it is rare to find a college or university that does not profess a commitment to some form of “diversity” in its formal mission, values, or philosophy. While the word itself can be incredibly complex in meaning, “diversity” in higher education typically acts as a code word for specific policies and practices. Typically, “diversity” references various forms of affirmative action programs in hiring or admissions procedures that are designed to target racial or ethnic minorities or other underserved populations. Because of growing controversy surrounding affirmative action policies, the need for diversity is increasingly framed in educational terms.

The Supreme Court cases involving the use of race in admissions policies at the University of Michigan and its law school in 2003 (Gratz v. Bollinger and Grutter v. Bollinger) are crucial to understanding the meaning of diversity in higher education. In their book Defending diversity: Affirmative action at the University of Michigan, Gurin et al. (2004) provide an invaluable inside look at the Gratz and Grutter cases as well as the educational implications of diversity. In these cases, the Court ruled in support of the University’s affirmative action policies, recognizing that diversity is a “compelling state interest” based not on rectifying past wrongs but on promoting educational benefits for everyone involved (p. 98). These educational benefits have largely framed the diversity debate in higher education.

Gurin et al. (2004) present a strong case for diversity. Because of deep-rooted residential segregations in much of the United States (especially in major urban centers), they argue
that many students enter universities without experience in interacting with others whose backgrounds differ from their own. Such experience can provide significant educational benefits for both learning and democracy outcomes. Moreover, these benefits extend to all students, minorities and non-minorities alike, as well as to faculty and staff. Three kinds of diversity contribute to beneficial outcomes: structural diversity, represented by the percentage of a student body that is composed of minorities; classroom diversity, defined as exposure to knowledge about minority issues in formal classrooms; and interactional diversity, indicated by the extent to which students interact with peers with backgrounds differing from their own. Affirmative action programs mainly have an impact on structural diversity, and though the authors argue that interactional diversity is most important, it also depends on the racial representation on the campus.

Several studies support the authors' claims of educational benefits of diversity. Gurin et al. (2004) present their own study, a survey of college students at the University of Michigan, which finds “consistent, positive relationships between learning outcomes and students' experiences with diversity” (p. 119). These results were consistent across racial groups and across multiple learning outcome measures. Bowen and Bok's The Shape of the River (1990) is an investigation of the claims that students admitted to selective universities under affirmative action policies are underprepared to succeed in those institutions. Bowen and Bok find no demoralizing effects of affirmative action on African American students, and they find higher graduation rates at elite universities for African American students compared to white students within every SAT interval. Finally, a more recent study (Chang et al., 2006) of nearly 20,000 participants looks at the impact of diversity by examining college students' attitudes at freshman orientation and then at the end of their fourth year. The results confirm those of previous studies showing that participants reporting higher frequencies of interaction with someone of a different race during college also display added educational benefits. Their results also extend previous research by finding an added effect over time from entering college to graduation. The authors find that even students who do not participate in cross-racial interaction show more gains in knowledge and understanding of other races and cultures when they attend a school with higher levels of diversity than when they are enrolled in a more homogenous environment.

Rothenberg (2007) warns, however, that due to influence from corporations, many colleges and universities opt to “celebrate diversity” or “encourage tolerance” rather than truly engage with patterns of disadvantage and the inequitable distribution of resources around the world. University programs that focus on “sensitizing” students to “difference” continue to place white students (and faculty) at the center rather than really engaging with the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, and class actually operate on the campus, in the curriculum, and around the world.
4. **Equitable Access to the University**

In their historical overview of access to American higher education, Noftsinger and Newbold (2007) articulate a connection between core democratic principles and the expansion of American higher education since the founding of the nation. Over time, a diverse set of institutions has evolved to meet the needs of a pluralistic society. One of the most important landmarks in this process was the passage of the Morrill Acts in 1862, establishing land grant institutions throughout the country and expanding access to technical knowledge to those not in the wealthiest classes. After World War II, the G.I. Bill and later the Civil Rights Movement further expanded access to the working class and to racial minorities. Also after World War II, several federal programs began to address the issue of financial access to higher education by establishing subsidized student loans, work-study programs, and scholarship programs. Despite these attempts at various levels to increase access to the university for underrepresented groups, numbers remain lacking in several key areas. Women have made tremendous gains in representation at all levels, but the same cannot be said for ethnic minorities (except for Asians). Also, socioeconomic background remains a strong predictor of not only whether a student will continue on to college after high school (with those of higher SES continuing at higher rates), but what type of institution those who do continue eventually enroll in (with those of higher SES attending more selective institutions) (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Clearly, the challenge of access remains an uphill battle.

Perhaps paradoxically, the idea of “excellence” is proving a key obstacle in terms of expanding access to higher education. Ayers and Hurd (2005) note that as rankings have become increasingly important in attracting students, and as more and more public flagship universities are gaining in these rankings, students are left facing a landscape in which not only the most selective institutions, but also local state schools care more about test scores and GPAs than about public missions of open access. Though they remain far more open than their private counterparts, many public universities see their main challenge as attracting students who are both financially needy and academically gifted, increasingly ignoring those caught in the middle. Though it is difficult to argue that schools should not strive for excellence, the selectivity implicit in excellence suggests exclusion.

A new economic system Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) call “academic capitalism” has also altered patterns of access by shifting financial appropriations. While state financial support formerly went directly to colleges and universities, under academic capitalism, a college education has come to be viewed more and more as a private or individual good. Students are thus “consumers” of their academic futures. Though some state financial aid continues to help individual students, this new view that the benefits of higher education are reserved for students leaves many feeling that students should pay for their own gains. Because loans
are now the main form of financial aid, financially troubled individuals face considerable
difficulty obtaining these resources. The social benefits of higher education beyond the
student are increasingly ignored or undervalued. Although government and business leaders
are expressing increased concern over the United States’ global competitiveness (and
national economic interests continues to play an important role in guiding higher education
policy), open access is increasingly divorced from individual gains (Noftsinger and Newbold,
2007).

Debates over equitable access have not disappeared, but they have expanded to incorporate
a more comprehensive view of education. Community colleges have long been the focus of
goals of access and equal opportunity in higher education, but they are coming under
increasing pressure. From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, the number of community
colleges and the number of community college students exploded (the latter to over 5
million), proving their commitment to open access. Since the 1990s, community colleges
have begun to overflow with students, and cutbacks have constrained the commitment to
open access, often affecting the neediest students (Vaughan, 2003). The Spellings
Commission convened by the U.S. Secretary of Education in 2005 agreed that K-12 school
systems form an integral aspect of college success (Noftsinger and Newbold, 2007). The
Commission encouraged collaboration among primary, secondary, and postsecondary
educational institutions to expand access. Rhodes (2001) suggests that access to the
university is also changing by means of expanding information technologies. Such
technologies foster not only increased advertising and information available to prospective
students, but also expanded linkages with corporations, government agencies, and other
institutions. These various connections shaping the path to higher education are expanding
the debate surrounding access, but many colleges and universities seem unsure as to how
they will commit to their mission.

5. Developing Leaders for Civic Engagement
It is the role of universities, especially those which are most selective and most prestigious,
to educate the nation’s and the world’s leaders. For example, Beaumont (2002) suggests
that virtually all civic, political, and professional leaders are products of higher education.
Just as universities benefit from claiming such legacies of leadership, they also realize that
they must live up to them. The nation’s first universities, such as Yale University, were
originally intended to educate the leaders of small colonies, but the academy now bears the
responsibility of educating many of the nation’s top scholars, businesspeople, and politicians
(Levin, 2003). Not only is an ever-widening segment of the public attending college, but “a
variety of research shows that higher education helps shape students—not just in terms of
academic learning or career paths, but in terms of a whole range of attitudes and behaviors”
(Beaumont, 2002, p. 5). Regardless of socioeconomic status or GPA, the simple fact of
having attended college is correlated with increased knowledge of current affairs, familiarity
with domestic and foreign politics, support for civil liberties, and support for social and political equality (Beaumont, 2002). Colleges and universities regularly address this role in their mission statements—and many prestigious university presidents (e.g. Rhodes, 2001 and Levin, 2003) often preach these responsibilities to students and the public—but the exact manner in which an institution engages students in such activities and exercises while they are enrolled is unclear.

A renewed concern about civic education is emerging in public discourse, perhaps because of current trends in population change (Checkoway, 2001). As a wealth of new immigrants enter the country, intergroup communication will become increasingly important as will various other civic responsibilities connected to a college degree: support for democratic institutions, individual liberty, and participation in public life. College students today are among the most politically disengaged in history. Studies show that the interest of entering undergraduate students in public participation is low and actually decreases during the college years (Checkoway, 2001). Institutions of higher education are uniquely situated to promote civic engagement, and though they want to reap the benefits of training leaders, critics contend that most research universities do not perceive themselves as part of the problem or the solution.

Many current debates within higher education contend that universities should not be concerned with civic education (Checkoway, 2001). According to many within the higher education community, universities should teach substantive knowledge and skills, while it is the responsibility of the family, the church, or the individual him/herself to engage in public activities. This model, however, creates a false divide between knowledge and participation. The true role of universities must be to connect academically-based knowledge with participation in a democratic society. Anderson (1993) describes the primary civic importance of the university as teaching its students to think for themselves, imbuing in them a sort of “liberal skepticism” that allows them to examine beliefs and facts imposed by “tradition, convention, consensus, or indoctrination” (p. 48). Though this ability can be used to further self-interest, it also informs public judgment. Checkoway (2001) suggests that citizens who understand their own social identities, communicate with those who are different from themselves, and build bridges across differences for a common cause” are critical to communities in a diverse democratic society. Checkoway argues that shifts from moral education to secularism, and from monocultural views to multicultural approaches have left universities uneven in their commitment to and performance in civic education.

Though their efforts are uneven at best, universities are addressing civic education in a variety of ways (the most popular may be service-learning, discussed above). One way many powerful research universities hope to instill values of civic engagement in students is through a residential college system, which ties students’ common housing to civic themes.
and goals and aims to increase dialogue among diverse individuals and groups (Checkoway, 2001). In addition, Beaumont (2002) highlights the fact that many colleges employ student pledges, whether those enforcing academic honesty or graduation pledges to contribute to the betterment of society, these rituals can help students understand core values and employ them in their own lives. While the academy is beginning to recognize the importance of producing leaders and change agents, it has yet to systematically examine its role in that process.

References:


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