

My view of the purpose of higher education is rather in line with the Humboldtian model of a university. In this model, the role of higher education is twofold: first, its aim is to develop well educated citizens that can take an active role in society. Second, higher education institutions exist to push the boundaries of our common knowledge.

In its first role, well educated graduates are the result of the educational role these institutions have. These graduates will then be able to participate actively in society. This participation is enabled though both the relevance of their degree to society as well as making them aware of who they want to be as a person. This duality between a more utilitarian view of education and a more enlightenment inspired perspective is hard to balance as market demand become more and more important in deciding academic curricula.

In its second role, our educational institutions have an important role in pushing the boundaries of human knowledge. This is done by conducting fundamental and applied research both theoretically and experimental. Within this role a new role has emerged as a communicator of this knowledge. Researchers have to be more and more active in communicating their results to new audiences that where traditionally outside the scope of science communication. This makes higher education, within this role, no longer just a generator, but also a communicator of knowledge.

This shift in both roles has changed the being of a higher educational institution (and thus its mission). No longer are mission statements only about being the pinnacle of knowledge but have become also more society centered.

With regard to the student body, the majority of students has not changed. Although the regular student population has become more diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender, the majority of students are still young adults in their late teens/early twenties. There are however changes in the student population. This is mainly the result of the development of programs focused to different groups. Examples of these programs include blended learning certificate programs (such as the Executive Program for Social Impact Strategy (SIS) at UPenn) and short online-only programs (such as the CORE Program from HBX/Harvard Business School). Further, the rise of MOOCs made higher educational content available whole new groups of students, seeking small bits of knowledge instead of full degrees.

In order for this to happen, the use of new technologies has been necessary. The internet has resulted in a huge increase of blended and distance learning opportunities. Although the postal system made distance learning more accessible, the recent surge in online programs and the resulting accessibility of higher education is something that has not happened before. Nevertheless, the act of learning itself has not changed that much even if pedagogic trends come and go.

Based on the above, my ideal university would be based on the Humboldtian school of thought. The mission statement of the higher education would be:

“Educating all people to actively take an active role in society and together, push the boundaries of common knowledge”

Its goals would be to be a center of knowledge and wisdom for all that seek it so that together, the world can become a nice place to live in.