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What University?

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“The task of a University is the creation of the future...”
--Alfred North Whitehead from “The Aim of Philosophy”

When I first began my graduate work in English at the University of Liverpool I initiated discussion with people concerning the actual purpose of a Humanities University. It seems to come down to the question of why study humanities at all. I started by having casual conversations with fellow students, and the lack of purpose expressed by my colleagues struck me profoundly.

At that time BBC radio aired a discussion about the purpose of universities in general. The piece identified a declining morale in a competitive world. Is education an urgent need? How does capitalism affect how we think about education; what about anti-corporate movements? Does education simply propagate elitist cultural values? Should education cross social classes? We should think through the purpose of higher education, and come up with an answer. Is universal knowledge reason enough? Should knowledge be sought for its own end? Is the purpose of college to train professionals with a narrow vocationalism and transferable skills? Has the marketing of the universities created a crisis? Should the University, like a medieval monastery, be a center for scholarship?

University education should be used to promote social equality. How do we actually do that? Why do students want peer and professor-student interaction? Is this a cultural industry? Are we in the same category as theater, music, and opera companies? Is this a teaching school? If so, what relationship exists between various departments and the education program at this University?

Years ago I turned to the statement of function in the Liverpool Humanities Graduate School newsletter. The ten objectives set out by the Director detail needs to encourage funding, research activity, resources, and training opportunities. As important as these aims might be, all are pertinent only to the running of the school and not directed to what the school’s actual purpose should be. When I asked a professor in the English Department what a humanities school should do I received the following response: “Teach cynicism; not so much as survival training for the contemporary world, but as philosophy — a way of believing one’s life should be lead.” Another member of the faculty, Dr. Ralph Pite, said, “Think twice. We should be teaching critical thinking as a life skill. In teaching literature exposure to the Horrible for people in their late teens and early twenties is important. Literature does that without having to show kids the mass graves.”
Lastly, I asked these questions of my parents, a social worker/nurse and a retired grade school teacher. They started me on a liberal education, in the first place. My mother said we should be contributing to the greater good by understanding anthropology, history and the human endeavor: “We study the humanities in order to have a better civilization; to be innovative, creative and not trite. Heads of state, diplomats should be trained in humanities in order to understand the interfacing and interacting of geopolitical groups. In the information age critiquing sources of information is of the utmost importance.” My late father said that an education school should be training future teachers. He also said that nothing changes without an idea.

So are we in the revolution business? There seems to be some range of responses to the question of the purpose of a liberal arts University. I am not sure we all must possess the same reason for being here, but in light of this broad range of responses, and in light of recent important events, I am certain that we should be talking to one another formally and informally about why we are here and where we are going with it.