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# (Wilhelm von) Humboldt's Gift

*An enlightened vision for the modern university*



THE IDEA of the modern university is often associated with the name Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian philosopher of education at whose initiative the University of Berlin was founded in 1810. “Humboldt’s ideal,” as it is reverently known, envisioned the university as a

liberal (in the sense of open-minded and free-thinking) community committed to protecting the intellectual autonomy of its faculty in the pursuit of knowledge and the cultivation of rational judgment. He pictured the university as an academic oasis where scholars were free to be intellectually innovative and skeptical of dogma and non-rational claims to authority. There, in a protected self-governing community, faculty and students could challenge and debate popular beliefs and received truths.

Associated with this classical liberal idea of the modern university were certain intellectual values and dispositions. Disciplined impartiality. A willingness not to rush to judgment. Organized skepticism.

A fondness for dialogue and the questioning of assumptions. Respect for critical reasoning informed by relevant and reliable evidence. As Humboldt saw it, a “university” had a distinctive purpose and a core interest, which he associated with knowledge expansion, free thought, and critical reasoning, and which he distinguished from other important social aims such as the vocational and professional training of artisans, soldiers, lawyers, or businessmen. His vision was for a university, not a “multiversity” influenced by a range of outside interests, and it enjoyed the enlightened support of the Prussian king, with no strings attached.



Several of the world’s universities have endeavored to embody Humboldt’s ideal, and for the past 51 years I have been fortunate to teach at one of them. *Crescat scientia; vita excolatur* (“Let knowledge grow from more to more, and so be human life enriched”) is the motto of the University of Chicago. I have long interpreted the saying in Humboldtian terms to express an idea of knowledge as its own reward, and its essence can be seen in the university’s statements regarding free speech. “Neither an individual, nor the state, nor the church has the right to interfere with the search for truth, or with its promulgation when found,” William Rainey Harper, the university’s first president, said in a 1900 convocation address. “Individuals or the state or the church may found schools for propagating certain special kinds of instruction, but such schools are not universities, and may not be so denominated.” To make the point even clearer, Harper added, “When an effort is made to dislodge an officer or a professor because the political sentiment or the religious sentiment of the majority has undergone a change, at that moment the institution has ceased to be a university.”

You can see the connection: The university’s core mission of pursuing and expanding knowledge is hindered by any constraints on that pursuit or its articulation.

That spirit was certainly present in 1973 when then–President Edward Levi welcomed me (and other new faculty) to the University of Chicago. He assured us that provocation and skepticism in the context of reasoned debate were virtues at the university we had joined, even more so when those debates dared to raise taboo questions, engage dangerous ideas, or lead to upsetting conclusions. He may well have had Socrates in mind as he spoke.

Levi’s view of the mission of the modern university is likely to drop the jaw of most contemporary university presidents. Behold what he declared to the members of the Citizen’s Board of the University of Chicago in a 1967 address. He told them that the university’s goal is not to be popular with the public, or to weigh in directly on political or commercial matters. Nor is it to develop industrial innovations, challenge the injustices of the world, or be a pipeline for the training of professionals. He told them that the university’s true mission is not moral, but intellectual: “improving the stock of ordered knowledge and rational judgment.”

Harper’s position, Levi’s position, and Humboldt’s ideal were further codified in many of Chicago’s statements and statutes over the decades. Here are four:

- From the Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, and Statutes: “The basic policies of the University of Chicago include complete freedom of research and the unrestricted dissemination of information.”
- From the 1967 Kalven Committee Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action: “To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of free-

dom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community.”

- From the 1972 Report of the University of Chicago Committee on the Criteria of Academic Appointment (also known as “the Shils Report,” after the name of the committee’s chairman): “There must be no consideration of sex, ethnic or national characteristics, or political or religious beliefs or affiliations in any decision regarding appointment, promotion, or reappointment at any level of the academic staff.”
- From the Preamble to the patent-policy statute (Statute 18) in the Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws and Statutes: “Research done primarily in anticipation of profit is incompatible with the aims of the university.”



The fate in subsequent decades of these four Humboldtian ideals has not been a happy one.

- The magnificent Humboldtian commitment to “complete freedom of research and the unrestricted dissemination of information” has been replaced with a bureaucratic apparatus of research approval, management, and surveillance.
- The Kalven Report’s charge to “embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community” has been severely undermined by the homo-

geneity of political attitudes among faculty members, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In some academic disciplines the ratio is more than 30 to 1 liberal to conservative.

- The nondiscrimination hiring policy of 1972 was superseded by five decades of preferential “affirmative action” recruitment.
- The caution against the subordination of academic values to market forces has been deleted from the latest edition of the University of Chicago Statutes.

The University of Chicago is not an outlier in this regard. If anything, it has been slower to surrender the Humboldtian ideal than many others have been.

It is the last of these changes, succumbing to market forces, that might be regarded as both the most alarming and revealing of the bunch. Among those forces are government research funds on which the university has become dependent. Such funding comes with strings attached that politicians and public officials use to shape the character of the academic life, even at so-called private universities.

Why alarming? Because the subjection to market forces undermines the university’s Humboldtian ideal of intentional insulation from the market pressures of the outside world. This ideal was once considered so sacrosanct that it was made explicit by Harper and extended even to the philanthropic marketplace. “A donor has the privilege of ceasing to make his gifts to an institution if, in his opinion, for any reason, the work of the institution is not satisfactory; but as donor he has no right to interfere with the administration or the instruction of the university.” The philosopher Arthur Lovejoy, who in 1915 was one of the founders of the American Association of University Professors, put

the point memorably: “The distinctive social function of the scholar’s trade cannot be fulfilled if those who pay the piper are permitted to call the tune.”

Why revealing? Because succumbing to market forces demonstrates that the university has become the kind of “multiversity” against which Humboldt distinguished his ideal. The university has opened its gates to a diverse set of interest groups representing a multiplicity of missions—commercial, political, moral—of their own. The traditional mission of the modern university has given way to a postmodern vision, which sees the Humboldtian ideal as unaffordable, impractical, and quaint. The administrators of the multiversity have hired faculty and created programs with the purpose of patenting inventions for industry. They have hired faculty and created programs with the aim of battling the real and imagined injustices of the world. They have blurred the distinction between the core and peripheral missions of the university. They have tried to balance the missions or calculate tradeoffs between them. They have grown tails (ineffectual and divisive diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, for example) and empowered them. Some of the tails have been wagging the university dog.



If our multiversities, some of which are essentially multibillion-dollar businesses, are to become universities once again, they must recommit to the Humboldtian mission and, like Harper did in 1900, construct a campus speech policy from it.

The wisest proposal I have seen was presented off the heels of a war far more calamitous than our current cultural one. On September 25, 1946, Columbia University President Frank Fackenthal welcomed the incoming postwar college class with the following words.

You who have reached the age of advanced study will, of course, have opinions, maybe even prejudices; but acceptance in an academic community carries with it the obligation to submit those opinions and those prejudices to examination under the bright light of human thought and experience. If, perchance, your views have been crystallized into slogans held aloft on banners or are subject to control by allegiance to minor or major pressure groups, check your banners and your membership cards at the college gate....If when you leave the University on Commencement Day, after having submitted yourself to the processes of true academic life, you wish to have back your old banner, claim it, and you can take your place in the body politic with the deep satisfaction of tested and confirmed judgment. Equally deep can be your satisfaction should you decide not to claim it, for you will know that you have the ability and the willingness to face and to evaluate ideas.

“Check your banners at the college gate,” for short. That is the Humboldtian policy. It does not mean that you—any member of the university, that is—are not to express opinions. Rather it means that nothing you say or do should be in the service of co-opting the university itself to your side or shutting out or insulating yourself from opposing views. For Fackenthal and Humboldt, the university and the free market of ideas that operates within it, governed by the invisible hand of critical reason, must remain eternally vibrant. Campus political rallies and mass demonstrations in which students shout “We don’t want no Zionists here” run afoul of the mission because of their exclusionary, non-conversational nature. A campus speech policy rooted in this Humboldtian ideal emboldens freedom of thought and speech while managing and regulating the manner of its expression. It facilitates conversation, cooperative and reasoned exploration, even debate, but not conquest

and coercion. It makes the core mission of the university manifest.

Fifty-one years after I arrived at the University of Chicago, senior faculty members who are still Humboldtian liberals retire from academia convinced that the heyday of the modern university is over and happy they had the best of it. Others participate in academic-crisis conferences put on by projects like Stanford's Classical Liberalism Initiative, where they wonder how the elite universities of the United States lost their way. At such gatherings there is a sense of compromised mission and misdirected purpose, but also an interest in finding ways for our universities to go home again.

I would like to believe that Humboldt's ideal for the modern university is still viable. Having that debate might be one way for our universities to begin to find their way home.



In the Windy City, at least, the winds seem to be blowing back in the right direction. Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, dean of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, wrote recently to this effect in the *Boston Review*: "At their best, universities are intellectual communities whose members collectively reason about, analyze, and debate our most important, vexing, and contentious questions in pursuit of truth. Moreover, an essential part of our teaching mission is to help students learn to better understand one another and the world by civilly engaging in these activities, even when they deeply disagree."

Another president of a university up the road, Northwestern's Michael Schill, has been turning the banners away, too:

Social beings operate in community with one another. In dialogue, participants listen as well as speak, allow—as far as possible—the good faith of others' arguments, and remain open to the possibility of persuasion. Even if unmoved in their



views, they will be better able to defend them after the crucible of debate. It is through inclusive engagement across difference, where arguments encounter counterarguments, that learning happens. Dialogue is not domination or denigration. Shutting down or shouting down a speaker with whom one disagrees not only demonstrates a refusal to listen but also prevents others from doing so. Speech that impedes or is intended to prevent others' participation hinders the vitality of our intellectual community. In this light, free speech is necessary—but not sufficient—to meet the University's core purpose: We must cultivate the modes of speech and listening that promote productive dialogue.

There it is, the university's core purpose, its mission, protected and made possible, by a wise statement about speech and the manner of its expression.

Perhaps such statements are reason enough to look forward with optimism. This essay about the modern university is not meant to be an obituary. \*