

The Three Cultures and The Demise of The Multiversity

Dr. Richard A. Hartnett
Chair and Professor
Education Leadership Department
West Virginia University

ABSTRACT

Three cultures permeate the American university since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century: the rational, spiritual, and political/utilitarian. The author discusses that in their current form as a complementary dynamic, they have propelled the multiversity's disparate aims in the preservation, transmission, and discovery of knowledge. However, with the recent domination of the utilitarian culture, the spiritual culture is imperiled and the future effectiveness of the multiversity is problematic.

Introduction

From its earliest manifestations in fourth century B.C. Greece and China, higher education has served rational, spiritual, and political functions. These three cultures, although typically agonistic towards one another, constitute a complementary dynamic that allows the American university to pursue disparate aims within a complex set of functions including undergraduate/graduate studies; teaching, research, and service; and the preservation, transmission, and discovery of knowledge. Not only are the cultures incommensurate with one another, but also they are intrinsically binary, containing two aspects that are often in opposition to each other. For example, the humanistic culture embraces both the poet and statesman; the rational stream

encompasses both scientific knowledge and technical applications for professional preparation (lawyers, doctors, et. al); and the utilitarian stream features both political and commercial tributaries. Thus, the tri-cultural model not only captures the conflicting forces affecting the delicate equilibrium of the contemporary American university, but also provides a structural diagnosis of the shift in its mission and social role.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss three cultures that permeate the American university since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. These three cultures are rational, spiritual, and political/utilitarian.

Three Cultures Set Purposes and World-Class Ranking

The three cultures are rooted in the earliest manifestations of higher learning in the West, and this trio of traditions has given the American research university a balanced and complementary set of purposes and a world-class ranking. The rational culture anchors the institution in the relentless questioning of received wisdom that sprouted in classical Greece, re-appeared in the fusion of Aristotelian logic and Scholasticism, and constitutes the foundation of analytical scientific investigation, expressed in the pellucid language of logical discourse. The spiritual culture is grounded in the Socratic cultivation of the self and the humanistic search for the meaning of life, and inclines the university toward exploring the relationship between thought and feeling, knowledge and moral development, and change and persistence. The external orbit of the university, expressed in the contemporary quest for utility, has a place in the deep structure of higher learning no less venerable than the earliest philosophy schools and teachers of rhetoric in the agora. In the saga of Western higher learning one or two of these cultures has been dominant at the expense of the others, but for the first time since the incorporation of this tri-partite model in the land-grant universities, the future of the spiritual culture is imperiled by the unprecedented dominance of the utility model, and thereby the viability of the multiversity itself since its balance depends on the support of the three cultural legs.

Distinctive Achievements of the Research University

Since its instauration in the late nineteenth century, the distinctive achievements of the research university are a consequence of its ability to hold these three diverse strands in a delicate balance. American higher education experienced a transformational moment in the late nineteenth century when the German research ideal, the English notion of liberal culture, and the indigenous public service model were incorporated into the newly formed research university. The old-style college with its mission of promoting the intellectual and character development of the student through moral philosophy gave way to a tri-partite pluralistic institution, which championed research, disciplinary specialization, and the expansion the curriculum. The new mission was proclaimed in an early mission statement of the University of California, Berkeley:

to preserve and transmit liberal culture; to share useful knowledge with the populace at large; to serve as an agent of beneficial social change in a burgeoning industrial and commercial order; and to serve as a center for disinterested inquiry and the production of new knowledge through research and scholarly writing. (Lucas, 1994, p.86)

Today, we are witnessing another watershed moment in the pluralistic university, one in which the relative equilibrium among the three cultures is disturbed and the spiritual culture faces extinction, threatening, in turn, the vitality of the enterprise itself. The threads holding this fragile arrangement together are unraveling with the demise of the spiritual or humanistic culture which plays a pivotal role in providing the entire academic enterprise with teleology and a set of purposes that transcend the instrumental functions of the other two orders.

The Rational Culture

The three cultures are ruled by contrary axial principles and rooted in contrastingly different historical contexts. The rational culture, which we shall also refer to as the “academic” realm (O’Malley, 2004, pp. 77-125 and pp. 127-177), pursues an analytical approach to knowledge and truth. Critical of tradition and received knowledge, this culture enshrines rational argument and logical discourse. Beginning with the critical inquiry and probing questioning (elenchic) of Socrates and the comprehensive rational system of Aristotle, culture one reached its greatest achievement in the creation of the medieval university. This systematically organized institution centered on the professionalized disciplines of law, medicine, and theology, demonstrating its formative roots in the application of technical knowledge to vocational purposes. Soon, a full complement of teachers and officers, programs of study, examinations, degree rituals, and a system of rules and regulations gave this new form of organization permanence and a structure that would persist for centuries. Significantly, the medieval university was a text-based enterprise, which encouraged a theoretical and intellectual style of learning as opposed to a practical or humanistic institution. Emblematic of this culture was Thomas

Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, the “cathedral of the mind,” which approached theology as a “speculative” subject of abstract analysis.

Another key characteristic of this culture, inherited from this formative period of the birth of the university, is the predilection for debate, exemplified in the dialectical point-counterpoint of Peter Abelard's *sic et non* method of intellectual inquiry. Forsaking the tendency to place two dichotomous extremes side-by-side without attempting to reconcile the differences, the rational culture attempts to transform opposites into a synthesis and eschews paradoxes. Thus, its distinctive style champions clarity, rationality, coherence, comprehensiveness, and order.

In the early nineteenth century, the rational culture underwent another transformation. Following a period of decline, the European university was rejuvenated by the founding of the University of Berlin (1810), which became a model for American reformers. With its emphasis on research, the primary aim of the German university was the advancement of knowledge, not merely its transmission. *Wissenschaft*, a kind of scientific orientation toward knowledge, became the intellectual framework not only for the physical sciences but also for the humanities. The specialized approach to learning substituted the learned amateur with the professional expert trained in “scientific” methods and armed with a Ph.D. In the United States, the graduate school of arts and sciences was added as a superstructure to the university as part of the “scientific” approach to the study of the humanities; whereas the undergraduate college, the home for generalists, resisted (at least until recently) such a transformation, producing a predictable tension between the academic culture and the humanist cultures.

In the newly revitalized academic culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the university created departments of engineering, agriculture, law, medicine, business, education, music, architecture, etc., incorporating features of the specialized schools founded a century previous for the various professions. Research became the focal point of the new university, superseding the cultivation of character and the amelioration of society as the primary aim. Like the medieval scholastics, the contemporary university researcher strives for technical precision and objectivity, writing in a style reminiscent of the syllogism, dispassionate and detached, questioning and repudiating conclusions at odds with their own. The key point is that the style of culture one had not changed substantially from its roots in Paris and Bologna.

The Spiritual Culture

The spiritual or humanistic culture is centered on finding meaning in life and learning how to be fully human. Its axial principle is the enhancement and fulfillment of the self and the “whole” person. As one of the earliest humanists said, “the humanities as a whole aim at creating a good man (*vir bonus*), than which nothing more useful (*utilius*) can be imagined . . .” (Proctor, 1998, p.3). Through the realm of symbolic forms in the arts and humanities, religion, ritual, the spiritual order explores and expresses the meanings of human existence in some imaginative form. The core elements are the

cultivation of the intellect, the development of the imagination, and a humanistic approach to existence. Unlike the questions probed by the rational culture, the humanistic culture pursues the existential, axiological, and aesthetic realms, such as the relationship of death to life, the meaning of love, the idea of beauty, what it means to be human, etc. Historically, therefore, this culture has often been fused with religion, but in its current form on campus, it is not reducible to religious doctrines or theological tenets. A recent study of a resurgence of interest in spirituality on campus defines it laconically as an “inner development that engages us in our totality.” In other words, spirituality does not necessarily imply being religious (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006).

Spirituality denotes an inner development, which engages our totality and our search for ultimate meaning (which may or may not posit a divine presence). It is intertwined with the idea of learning as a way of life and the care of the self, not as a doctrinal or purely theoretical pursuit (which is more the realm of rational culture). It was most memorably expressed in an exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades (in the eponymous Platonic dialogue) regarding the classic question of Greek education. Socrates asks Alcibiades if he would rather die today without glory or live a long but ordinary life? The hero of course opts for the former, the short but glorious life. Socrates then demonstrates that he lacks the self-knowledge and the quality of education to govern the state and fulfill his heroic ambitions. The message is that one cannot govern others if one is not concerned about oneself.

Rooted in the rise of rhetoric and literature in classical Greece and Rome, the humanistic culture reappeared in the sixteenth century as the “new learning” to correct the abuses of the academic culture. Erasmus, the leading humanist, launched a vituperative attack on the scholastic discourse of the academic culture, particularly its irrelevance to religious practice. The humanistic critique of the academic culture rested on three indictments: the latter’s imperviousness to human issues and neglect of the Bible; its predilection for ceaseless questioning; and the conversion of scholastic theology into a purely academic pursuit which ignored Christ’s message and His way of life. Erasmus held up Cicero’s coupling of theory and living as the corrective to the rational culture’s excesses. His fellow humanist Petrarch implored men of learning to close their Aristotle and open their Cicero. We see in Petrarch’s manifesto against Aristotelian philosophy, and what would later become a critique of science, the core of the humanistic model. Aristotle explored the natural world at the expense of understanding human nature, “neglecting purpose for which we are born and whitherto we travel” (O’Malley, 2004, p.150). In this view, the earliest exponents of the academic culture, the university *magisters*, are portrayed as treating knowledge as a commodity, whereas the humanists view it as the pathway to exploring human nature and the meaning of existence.

Another important shaping influence on humanistic culture was the focus on character formation manifested in the *Bildung* movement at the newly founded University of Berlin under Wilhelm von Humboldt (the locus for an important chapter in the development of culture one as well). In this conception, the university has the dual mission of research and teaching, that is, the production and inculcation of national knowledge, and is responsible for shepherding the spiritual life of the people. American and English universities converted the German Idealist’s view of culture into a literary

model, as John Henry Cardinal Newman and Matthew Arnold made literature the centerpiece of the curriculum. Newman's figure of the "gentleman" became the embodiment of the humanistic type: self-effacing, eminently courteous, and the promoter of "fair play"—the antithesis of the rational culture's theoretician or philosopher who is absorbed in his "logic-chopping."

Newman's *Idea of a University* and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* both raised the question of the relationship between religion and learning, and both contributed to the transformation of liberal learning as a secular activity. Both books were immensely popular, and it would not be until the publication in 1987 of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* that Newman's work would be surpassed in popular acclaim and visibility. Although there were other humanistic reform movements in the interim, most notably, the Great Books movement under Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, it was Bloom's manifesto at that same university that caught the attention of a public affected by the conservative rhetoric of President Ronald Reagan and his "education czar" William Bennett and disenchanted with the direction of higher education since the explosive decade of the 1960s. Bloom's central point, argued in its own quirky and often disjointed style, was that the contemporary university was so "open" that it was closed to the pursuit of intellectual objectivity and authentic self-discovery. Bloom's book was initially viewed as a jeremiad against "multiculturalism," the rise of women's and Afro-American cultural studies, and other populist fads, but his main concern was the plight of liberal education. In most colleges and universities, the core curriculum was a "cafeteria" assortment of disconnected courses in which "breadth" superseded depth. Although the 60s student movement led to the excesses of multiculturalism, in Bloom's mind the current intellectual predicament was more the result of the pernicious influences of German thought. The main culprits were Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who led the way to the degradation of the faith in Western values—an instance again of the humanistic antinomy against the abstractions of the academic culture. Bloom called for a return to eternal values and to reason, a combination, which had ended, he claimed, with Hegel. At its core, Bloom's prescription for education is spiritual. He ascribes the decline of civilization to the university's neglect of the monuments of Western culture. Education's aim should be to help the self discover its own nature through a Platonic dialogue between master and disciple. To reverse the decline, students should study the sacred texts--the Great Books--that constitute the "best that has been thought and said" (Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture).

In the last two decades, Bloom's manifesto has generated a wave of tirades from cultural and political conservatives against the excesses of multiculturalism and affirmative action; on the left, it has provoked mainly a defense of those same movements, ignoring Bloom's central thesis that the humanistic disciplines (philosophy, in particular) are where we to find ourselves, that the true purpose of higher education is self-discovery, not merely the perpetuation of the Canon. More recently, Arthur Chickering and associates provide a balance to the current exclusive focus on rational empiricism and a narrow concentration on occupational and profession training with an exploration of other ways of knowing and exploring what the authors call "institutional amplification" to appreciate alternative ideas. They write at a time when it would be

premature to declare a *risorgimento* in the humanistic disciplines, but we may be reaching a point when the fascination with technology, the drive for hyper-specialization, the preoccupation with quantification and near-slavish imitation of the scientific method in the social sciences and some of the humanities, and the fixation of the university with serving as society's engine of development leave some minds and souls feeling empty and thirsting for meaning and fulfillment in their intellectual pursuits.

The Utilitarian Culture

The axial principles of culture three envision the university as an instrument for increasing the power of the state, and more recently as an engine of economic development for the private sector. The utilitarian current runs through the history of American higher education from Thomas Jefferson's blueprint of civic engagement for the University of Virginia to the current market orientations of the "corporate university." "Mr. Jefferson's University" was founded "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend." In Jefferson's view, although it encompasses nurturing virtue and enlarging the rational capacities of the students, is primarily political and constitutes the foundation of the public service mission of American higher learning (West, 2000, p.12).

In this increasingly concentric movement toward external engagement, the first transformative moment was the passage in 1862 of the Morrill or Land-Grant Act which "democratized" the university by opening it to qualified people from all walks of life and raised the principle of utility in the form of science and applied subjects (the so-called A&M designation) to equality with the classical curriculum. To promote academic respectability, these "democracy colleges" embraced the German model with its research ideal and advanced subject-matter content, and forged a fusion of American populism and German intellectualism. The pragmatic nexus provided the foundation for the university-industry complex, which fueled a surge in the U.S. economy by the end of the nineteenth century. Engineering and chemical firms supported campus research and industrial research centers began to prepare personnel for corporations. "Captains of Erudition" and their boards of trustees embraced the principles of big business with such relish that the reformer Thorstein Veblen would exclaim that "business principles" were transforming the universities into "a merchantable commodity, to be produced on a piece rate plan."

The next pivotal moment was the creation of the "Federal Grant University" through support from Washington for scientific research during the Second World War. Major American universities were enlisted in the cause of national defense and spearheaded advances in science and technological development, not just for the Manhattan Project and the development of the atomic bomb, but also for public health research (the discovery of penicillin, for example). After the war, public funding filled the void left by the decline in corporate funding, and by 1968 it would reach 14%; ten years later, research universities were receiving three billion dollars from Washington as

they widened their external engagement and grafted additional responsibilities onto their land-grant/research foundations.

This new organizational phenomenon was christened by Clark Kerr in the early 1960s as the “multiversity,” a pluralistic institution serving many purposes and multiple constituencies, and lacking a unified community. The University of California at Berkeley epitomized this conglomerate university (just as it had a century earlier embodied the tri-partite mission of the land-grant university). The new prefix reflected William James’ idea of the “multiverse” in which forces are in a continual state of conflict, flux, and indeterminism, making organizational dysfunctions inevitable. The multiversity’s functions are externally coherent, but internally unrelated. The determining principle of the utilitarian university generates productive conflict, not doctrinal unity as present in the monistic university conceived according the principles of the spiritual culture.

By the end of the last century, the utilitarian university had become increasingly more corporatized and embraced the commoditization of knowledge and instruction as its major responsibility in a climate in which the business organization became a model for “excellence.” A corporate university has several overlapping features. In addition to forming financial partnerships with business firms, it designs academic programs to serve their hiring needs, adopts business-style management techniques and values, markets the products of faculty labor to corporations, and instills corporate culture in faculty and staff.

This metamorphosis occurred in two phases. The first involved the commercialization of intellectual discovery effectuated by the Bayh-Dole Act (1980), which gave business corporations new incentives to invest in university research, and universities turned into entrepreneurial institutions. Under terms of the legislation, universities were allowed for the first time to claim the results of federally funded research. The aim was to make university discoveries available in the marketplace, by allowing universities to license their inventions to corporations, for which they would earn royalties. In this new entrepreneurial environment, universities were no longer viewed merely as incubators for intellectual cultivation and basic science, but as sources of commercially attractive discoveries. They were now in a position to perform contract services for corporations and form financial partnerships with corporations. For example, Novartis, a Swiss pharmaceutical giant gave the University of California, Berkeley, and \$25 million to fund basic research. In return, Berkeley granted Novartis first right to negotiate licenses on about a third of discoveries made by the department of plant and microbial biology, whether they were funded by private or public sources.

In the second phase, the pluralistic university moved into the commoditization of instruction by designing academic programs to serve corporate needs, endowed corporate-funded chairs (for example, at West Virginia University Kmart endowed a chair in the business school which requires its holder to devote 30 days per year training store managers), and sold faculty time to corporations. In the process, the wall between the university and the marketplace disappeared. In fact, to stimulate more university-industry partnerships, Congress has passed legislation granting tax breaks for businesses investing in university research. Thus, the Bayh-Dole Act revolutionized the university-corporate relationship, so that in the first two decades following its enactment, corporate

funding expanded at an annual rate of about eight percent (approaching two billion dollars in 1997), nearly eight times the ratio of investment two decades before. Universities processed almost 5000 patent applications in 1998, up from only 250 per year before Bayh-Dole.

This unprecedented engagement with the marketplace was concurrent in many states with a steep downturn in the ratio of public support for its flagship universities. Some state land-grant universities saw their apportionment decline from around 40% of annual revenue to less than 20% in less than a decade. To offset the reduction, they turned to raising tuition and fees and encouraged the faculty, not just in the sciences and technical fields, to follow the centrifugal forces of engagement with the market. Universities became “co-capitalists” with businesses, with the market serving as a major determining factor in its campus priorities, shaping institutional values and driving campus priorities.

The saga of the utilitarian culture from the first Morrill Act to the Bayh-Dole Act is a steady progression from making the boundary between the university and society more permeable to erasing completely any distinction between the two realms; from attempting to rejuvenate the curriculum by forcing the classical curriculum to compete with the sciences and the social sciences in the new elective system to marginalizing the humanities and neglecting their role in self-cultivation and moral development; from awakening the university to its responsibilities to the state to making the university’s focus a contractual extension of the state; from establishing a professional preparation center for scientists and technicians for industrial development to creating a vocational training enterprise; and from building a pluralistic “city of the intellect” with support for the triad of the disciplines nurturing the soul and intellect, the specialized sciences, the professions, and applied fields, and an engine for social change and economic amelioration to constructing a market-model enterprise which seeks to meet environmental opportunities and fill “niches.”

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the cultural contradictions among the three models, which were formerly held in check, or coexisted in a state of dynamic equilibrium because no one of them was capable of totally dominating the other the two, are no longer a productive tension. The university’s capacity to maintain its multiversity or pluralistic mission, which is rooted in the deeper tripartite self of the rational, affective, and volitional, is jeopardized. When the university serves only as an instrument for external ends, it loses its life-giving power, which is centered in the spiritual and rational core.

In the face of an impotent spiritual culture, the corporate culture overwhelms the core principles of the university, reminiscent of an earlier transformation between 1890-1930 when American society was transformed by commercialism. Again, consumerism has become the predominant vision of the good life, “a culture of desire that confuse[s] the good life with goods” (Leach, 2001, p. 116). The most alarming consequence of the

current view of the university as a mercantile enterprise subject to the whims of the market is the loss of a substantive dimension and an intellectual center. Knowledge is reduced to an informational commodity. It is simply something produced in order to be sold and consumed. The assumption is that universities are accountable to the needs of consumers (parents, students, taxpayers), but they often do not know in advance what they need.

When the utilitarian culture is reduced to commercial exchanges and corporate hegemony rules the university, the value of “marketability,” the product of a high-velocity and lightweight culture, leads to the erosion of zones of intelligence. As Russell Jacoby explains, “thinking, reading, and art require a cultural space, a zone free from the angst of moneymaking and practicality. Without a certain repose or leisure, a liberal education shrivels” (Jacoby, 2001, p.122). In this climate, the university’s mission of preserving and transmitting humanistic culture, sharing knowledge and serving as a change agent, and standing as citadel for disinterested inquiry becomes a vanishing prospect.

When the spiritual stream dries up and no longer provides a life-enhancing energy in the university, a set of problems erupt that the other two cultures are unable to resolve. The quality of life on campus begins to deteriorate as the institution succumbs to the twin sirens of specialization and consumerism. Only the so-called quantitative disciplines and professional schools receive serious attention as the rest of the curriculum succumbs to the populist ideal of superficial and shallow studies, what George Steiner once called “the sovereign candor of American philistinism”(Boyers, 1994, p.37).

No other culture but the spiritual can conjoin learning and living and make knowledge a way of life. To restore equilibrium and anchor the institution firmly on the three legs of the cultural stool, the multiversity needs the humanistic disciplines to promote connections among the major spheres of knowledge (liberal arts, science, technology, etc.) and link the subject matter to cultivate the students’ moral and intellectual development. To the extent that is unable to rejuvenate the spiritual stream, its mission is compromised and its viability imperiled.

References

- Boyers, R. (1994). Steiner as cultural critic: Confronting America. In Nathan A. Scott, Jr. and Ronald A. Sharp (Eds.), *Reading Steiner* (p. 37). Baltimore, MD: Hopkins University Press.
- Chickering, A. W., Dalton, J. C., & Stamm, L. (2006). *Encouraging authenticity and spirituality in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacoby, R. (2001). Dogmatic wisdom. In Morris Berman, *Twilight of American culture* (p. 122). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated.
- Leach, W. (2001). Land of desire: Merchants, power, and the rise of a new American culture. In Morris Berman (Eds.), *The twilight of American culture* (p. 116). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated.

- Lucas, C. (1994). *American higher education: A history*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- O'Malley, J. (2004). *Four cultures of the west*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Proctor, R. E. (1988). *Defining the humanities* (2nd ed.). Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- West, T. (2000). Allan Bloom, America, and education. *Texas Education Review*, (Summer), 12.

Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS, Houston, Texas. www.nationalforum.com