Academic Visioning Workshop: A brief reflection

Periods of academic visioning invite institutions to ask fundamental questions about who they are, what they promise, and what they owe their students and society. These moments are valuable precisely because they force universities to confront the tension between aspiration and responsibility—between what higher education hopes to accomplish and what it can, in good faith, claim as its proper work. The reflections that follow are offered in that spirit: not as a rejection of ambition, but as a defense of a clearer, more honest understanding of the university's enduring mission.

In moments of institutional introspection, universities often describe themselves in the language of sweeping transformation. We hear promises that higher education will re-make students, usher them into "real-world" mastery, solve entrenched social and economic inequities, produce innovators who will change society outright, and guide young adults to "discover themselves" with near-mythic certainty. These aspirations are sincere and well-intentioned. Yet they risk obscuring the central, enduring mission of the university. They tempt us into framing our role as one of delivering superhuman outcomes—outcomes that no institution, however noble, can guarantee.

I firmly believe that universities are not factories of extraordinary beings. They are educational institutions. Their highest purpose is not to solve society's problems directly, nor to promise transformation on command. Instead, universities cultivate the intellectual and moral habits that allow students to understand problems—historically, philosophically, scientifically, and humanely—and, through that understanding, to contribute meaningfully to the world.

John Dewey once wrote that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." This line is not a call for universities to resolve every challenge that life presents, but rather a reminder that learning is the continuous, living process through which individuals form the capacity to inquire, deliberate, question, and act. What Dewey calls growth is the outcome universities can genuinely offer: a disciplined curiosity, an intimacy with ideas, and the ability to see complexity rather than caricature.

Plato, in the *Republic*, described education as the art of "turning the soul" toward what is worth knowing. The university is one of the few remaining institutions in society that still takes this charge seriously. Universities are not in the business of creating new souls, nor of engineering virtue by decree; rather, they offer the conditions under which minds can be oriented toward truth, toward the love of learning, and toward a deepened sense of responsibility for the world.

Our purpose, I would like to propose, is both humbler and more profound than many contemporary slogans suggest.

Universities do not, and cannot, solve problems by themselves. They did not create climate change, political polarization, housing inequity, or the erosion of public trust. What universities can do—and what they have always done at their best—is analyze problems, illuminate their causes, evaluate proposed solutions, and cultivate the intellectual habits that allow individuals to approach complexity without fear or oversimplification. As Jefferson believed, "self-government

is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight." The role of universities in a free society is not to engineer outcomes, but to prepare citizens who can reason about those outcomes and participate responsibly in shaping them.

My hope is that our work reflects this classical and essential mission. We ought to strive to give students the gift of wonder—a cultivated curiosity about the world in all its dimensions: social and political, economic and ecological, scientific and technological, artistic and cultural. A university education should invite students to examine not only the world around them, but also the assumptions with which they approach it. This commitment to inquiry is more durable, and more honest, than any guarantee that we will turn students into changemakers, activists, innovators, or leaders by fiat. Some may become all of these things. But they will do so because they develop habits of mind—precision, imagination, humility, rigor, and openness—that a serious education can nurture.

If we promise too much, we risk promising what is not ours to give. Universities cannot manufacture "real-world experience" as if it were a commodity, nor can they ensure that every student "discovers themselves" through neatly packaged epiphanies. These outcomes are deeply personal, shaped by chance encounters, relationships, mentorship, apprenticeship, and the unpredictable unfolding of life. What universities can offer is more foundational: disciplined thinking, exposure to unfamiliar worlds of knowledge, and the intellectual virtues necessary to engage with—rather than flee from—complexity.

A university that remembers its first purpose becomes stronger, not weaker. When we reaffirm education as our central mission, we gain clarity about what we can do exceptionally well. We teach students to read with care, write with precision, argue with integrity, evaluate evidence, challenge assumptions, and see problems in the round rather than as abstractions. We preserve the space where wonder can take root—the wonder that makes learning not merely useful, but meaningful.

If our students eventually go on to address social inequities, contribute to economic development, lead organizations, strengthen democratic life, or bring compassion to their communities, it will be because they have developed the intellectual and ethical capacities that make such contributions possible. Those capacities cannot be engineered. They can only be nurtured.

Universities, at their best, do not claim the power to transform society overnight. They offer something more enduring: the cultivation of minds capable of understanding the world before trying to change it; the shaping of citizens capable of reasoned action; the invitation to imagine a better future grounded in knowledge rather than wishful thinking.

We should not aspire to create superhuman beings. We should aspire to create informed citizens.

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