

## **Basic Tasks of the American University in the Modern Society**

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The University is an important and unique reflection of modern society. Since its creation it has carried out social and political tasks. New tasks have supplemented the original roles of preparing men for the ministry and transmitting a culture to future generations. The university now prepares students to join many professions through the teaching and training processes; it critiques society and tries to develop it through services and activities; and it produces knowledge through research and study (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995).

### **Definitions**

Although thinkers and writers define the university from different perspectives, the aims and goals of the university are still well determined. The roles the university plays to develop society are not restricted to educational or teaching processes, but they also include research and service. The following are some definitions given to the university.

-“A body of mature scholars and scientists, the faculty, with whatever plant and other equipment may incidentally serve as appliances for their work” (Veysey, 1974, P.121).

-“An educational institution of great size, and which affords instruction of an advanced grade in all learning” (Veysey, 1974, P.11).

The university was also described as “one of the world's most dominant and enduring social organizations” (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995, P.1). It is also seen as “a fascinating specimen of social organization, remarkably unlike any other” (Caplow and McGee, 2001, P.4). These definitions concentrate on different roles and functions. While the first definition focuses on the structure composing the university, the second definition focuses on the role of the university as an educational institution, and the third and the fourth concentrate on the university as a social organization. The four definitions complement each other and can be considered different scenes for the same picture.

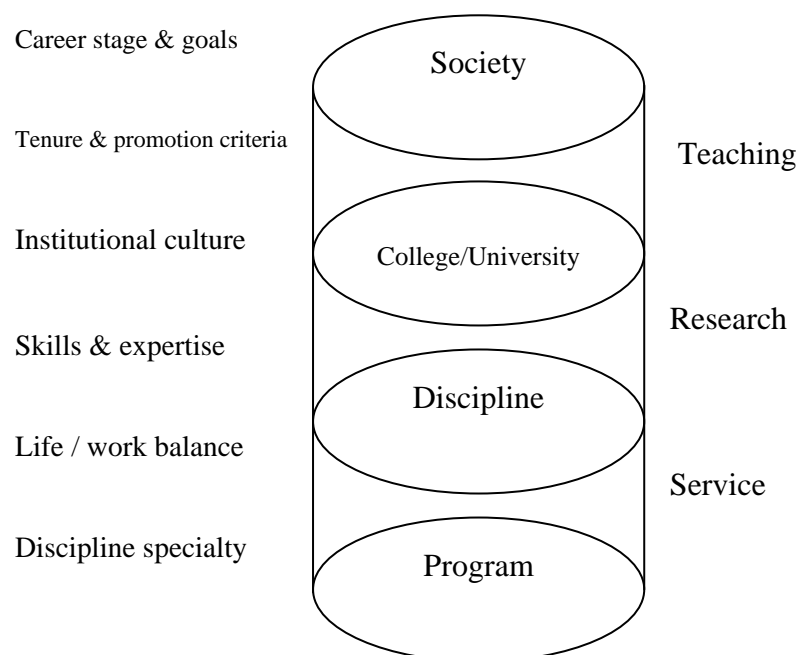
## The American university

The American university is considered to be “a national treasure, created and developed with ingenuity and devotion and vested with the capacity to serve society into the indefinite future, as it has done since its establishment” (Ehreberg, 1997, P.18). The American university, claimed to be the best in the world, is a unique system because it provides high quality education, uses new methods in teaching, depends on advanced technologies for illustration, and finally provides freedom in performing the major tasks, teaching, research and service.

Although the university as a social institution carries out the main functions and the basic roles, teaching, research, and service, which can be achieved in other institutions, the way it performs its tasks --to reach its goals-- is unique and comprehensive. And although these responsibilities may be differently determined from one person to another, they are classified into three main tasks: teaching, research, and service. This section discusses the three basic responsibilities of the university showing the main characteristics of each function.

## The Academic World

The following model shows the academic world that includes the main tasks performed in the academic environment.



The academic world (Blackburn and Lawrence, 2001).

## **1-Teaching**

Teaching is often the main and first task the academic faculty focus on, as was indicated by three surveys of the Carnegie Foundation in 1969, 1975, and 1996, which showed that seven faculty members out of 10 considered the teaching task to be their main responsibility (Graubard, 2001). The original study made in 1919 found similar results, in that faculty members spent 63 percent of their time on teaching, 8 percent on research, and 29 percent on other activities (Graubard, 2001). Cook, Wright and Hollenshead (1996) tried to understand how satisfied faculty members at the University of Michigan were with their roles as teachers, in order to determine the factors and conditions that lead to career satisfaction. They examined faculty experiences and how they differ by rank in performing the tasks: teaching and advising students, scholarship, professional growth and creative work, clinical responsibilities, and service. The survey by Sheehan and McCann (2000) aimed to provide data to the public and state policy makers regarding the activities of faculty throughout Ohio's state. The survey used a Faculty Service Report (FSR) to collect data. It focused on full time faculty activities at the academic environment. These studies point to teaching as the main focus of faculty. The following points show the uniqueness of teaching at the university.

### **Producing knowledge**

Teaching at the university is unique. It differs from teaching at high schools and other educational institutions in many ways. One important difference is that faculty members do not only teach the most recent trends in various fields (Falk, 1990), but they also produce and add to the existing human knowledge (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). Therefore, teaching at the university is associated with research to a great extent.

### **Types of instruction**

Types of instruction can be another clear difference, especially in American universities, where three basic types of instruction exist: the laboratory, the lecture, and the seminar. The lecture is widely used in the natural and Social Sciences. The laboratory is used by the chemist, the physicist and the biologist. The seminar is used by the research-minded historian, economist, and philologist (Veysey, 1974). Using different techniques and tools in teaching for the purpose of providing a good education --like advising students, providing training, conducting workshops--are some indicators of what the university does to prepare students for the future.

## **Using new techniques**

According to Mathis and Chalofsky, the university instructor has the ability to use a variety of “techniques, tools, and technologies, in order to enhance teaching in a face-to-face environment as well as at a distance. The following list reflects some of the techniques currently in use at many colleges and universities.

1-Satellite and one-way transmission of educational television

2-Two-way or multi-way compressed video conferencing

3-E-mail and the use of electronic mailing lists and list-serve

4-WWW and on-line course resources

5-CU-SeeMe and real-time video conferencing over the Internet” (Mathis and Chalofsky, 1998, P.183-184).

Although previous techniques and technologies have a great impact on teaching, in that they help in reaching different environments, in saving time and energy and in clarifying new ideas in various fields, many see that using information technologies will restrict the learning process to those who have the capabilities to own such tools and techniques. Therefore, a sizable percentage will not have the same chance others have. Moreover, faculty members will be required to do more tasks than the ones they already do, in that they have to train their students on how to use programs, where to find the information, etc (Ehreberg, 1997). So, although the new technologies have helped in reaching various environments and communicating with different communities, they have added more responsibilities on the shoulders of those using them.

## **Heterogeneity**

“Higher education is voluntary; students of any age are found in all classes” (Falk, 1990). Because the university is open for everyone, it has no restriction in accepting students in its programs. Students from different backgrounds, races, colors, religions, ages, etc., are welcomed and accepted as long as they meet the entry requirements.

## **Lehrfreiheit**

This is a German expression, which refers to "the right to teach freely without interference by anyone” (Falk, 1990, P.60). No one has the right to determine what to teach, how to teach, or even who to teach. Therefore, academics have the freedom in performing their major tasks and doing their own activities.

## **Teaching Methods**

Lecturing students can be the most popular instructional style in the academic environment, where the academic member presents a speech about a certain topic, then opens the discussion with class attendants (Falk, 1990, P.62). Professors, in order to successfully teach, have to consider the following: collecting resources related to a specific topic, presenting the topic to their students in a logical way, discussing certain cases, concluding specific results, and showing dimensions and future trends.

## **Student Advising**

"Student advising is considered to be one of the student's most effective out-of-class relationships; therefore, it may influence the student's success in college" (Mathis and Chalofsky 1990, P.72). It is considered to be an important part of the teaching process because it is usually done privately and individually, so it has a great impact on students.

## **Training**

Training can be offered in different areas like using a new computer service, campus tutor, safety, etc. The university announces this activity by posting messages through bulletin boards, email, or the mailing lists. Training is optional and offered for free, and it is offered to those who seek excellence in performing their tasks in their profession.

## **Grades**

Grades are considered to be the final evaluation of students in a course, and it is a must that a professor has to determine at the end of every semester. No one has any influence on the professor's decision (Falk, 1990). Letter grades, from A to F, including pluses and minuses, are not the only grades used; there are others like numeric grades, satisfactory and unsatisfactory grades, S / U, audit grades, etc.

## **2-Research**

The university is not only an educational institution. In addition to teaching students existing knowledge, it also tries to create new knowledge through research. Therefore, the university in addition to being considered an educational institution, could be considered a research institution as well. The saying "publish or perish" demonstrates the importance of publication to academics for the purpose of getting promotion and tenure in the academic environment; however, publishing research is also important for the purposes of gaining a reputation and success in an academic career.

## **Definition**

Wilson claims that “the meaning of research is so equivocal that almost any sort of investigative enterprise may be connoted, but academic men ordinarily have in mind the kind of inquiry that yields publishable results” (Wilson, 1995, P.195).

## **Ideology of research**

Creating new knowledge for the sake of developing society is an important task. This can be found in the academic community in two ways: 1) Performing research where the researcher is interested in a specific topic and has some idea of what he or she is looking for. This type of research does not have to be for the purpose of getting a degree like the PhD, but it has to be implemented in new areas that have not been searched before, or it has to build on others' effort in order to add to human knowledge, and avoid duplication of others' effort. 2) Performing research for the purpose of getting a degree like the PhD that is required for virtually all faculty positions in higher education (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). This degree has also to be based on work in new areas that have not been researched before, in order to avoid repeating others' effort.

In the university, professors have the freedom to search certain fields and disciplines that meet their interests (Falk, 1990). Research has also helped in the following: 1) Creating new disciplines, 2) financial advantage, and 3) Gaining respect, admiration and reputation. Creating new disciplines depends on research, in that research helps in investigating and exploring connections and relations among disciplines. It helps in explaining certain phenomena, establishing models, building theories, and creating a basis for new disciplines. Therefore, research is considered to be “the key element in the formation of new disciplines” (Finnegan, Webster, and Gamson, 1996, P.398). Research has also become a big business for faculty members because they have the ability to publish their research in books and journals, thus gaining reputation, tenure, promotion, and salary. This results in a higher income, popularity, the chance to travel all over the world, and to consult in various organizations (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). Research has also a positive impact on the university reputation, in that the university's rank tends to be affected by the quantity and quality of its own research. Therefore, the more published research, the higher rank the university takes, and therefore, the higher the student enrollments, and the better the support from the surrounding organizations.

### 3-Service

Service is defined as “the catchall name for everything that is neither teaching, research, nor scholarship” (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995, P.222).

The university serves society because it was founded and established for this purpose. In addition to offering teaching and conducting research, it serves society in many ways. It encourages academicians to engage in a wide variety of activities, which the university may support under the name of cultural conservation, dissemination, and innovation (Wilson, 1995). The university is an open system whose “principal job is to build human capital, for the long-term benefit of society at large” (Ehreberg, 1997, P.29). Examples of services can be providing medical clinics, work shops, research bureaus, etc, which are considered to be different channels to interact and reach society (Wilson, 1995). Some of the services offered are free, while others are for fee, according to the type of service mentioned below.

#### **Types of service:**

There are two types of services academics can be involved in: internal service, and external service. **Internal service** includes all the activities that can be under the umbrella of serving the academic environment, such as offering a comprehensive tutorial to new students, helping alumni in getting suitable careers, arranging guest lectures, sponsoring a certain programs, etc (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). **External service** can include three kinds of activities:

1-Consulting---selling personal services to outside parties. In this type the academic member acts as an expert in the field. He/She gets paid for his time and effort resolving certain problems, or helping in reaching a specific goal (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). This kind of service is provided for a fee, so the hiring organization has to seek experts to perform certain tasks by selecting them from the universities that have high ranks.

2-The second external service type is much like consulting, where the academic member serves the academic environment he/she is working at, and usually this kind of service is done for free. An example is a case when the faculty member in the School of Information Sciences is helping the library to develop their system or collection (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995).

3-The third type of external service is that which faculty give to their disciplinary specialty (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995). This type of service can be provided either in the country or outside. It is also provided for free, but certain

associations may support transportation and living expenses for the period. Though this kind of service is provided for free, the reputation of the university and its academics can be the main beneficiary.

Most American universities perform the main tasks mentioned; teaching, research, and service. They compete with each other in the programs they offer, the research they perform and the service they provide. This is in order to gain high reputation whether in the region or abroad. At the time they manage in obtaining high reputation, they will be able to attract more students and gain more support from whether the community and grant organizations. Support and grants will have its impact on the quality of education and quality of research and the type of services provided to the community.

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