

Mr. Chancellor, colleagues, friends and family,

About a year ago I was in Spain to help celebrate the 800th anniversary of the University of Salamanca. It was a remarkable occasion, not just because of the age of the institution, but because of the exuberance with which the citizens of Salamanca poured out onto the streets to join in the festivities. In the academic procession which snaked through the narrow streets of that medieval city I walked beside the University's Rector—the Principal—and was astonished to see and hear the special applause as he walked by.

I was deeply moved. I expect you will be thinking cynically that it was probably envy that I felt—after all, it is almost impossible to imagine a similar spectacle taking place in any North American university town. But it was the fierce pride of the community that impressed me, their apparent belief that the fortunes of ordinary citizens were profoundly intertwined with the history and future of their university. That experience brought home to me the importance of these institutions to the specific communities in which they have grown up, as well as to the broader enterprise of social and political construction.

In the case of Salamanca, of course, I was looking at the result of eight centuries of collaboration, cohabitation and shared experience between the university and its community—something that cannot be contrived or easily replicated by younger institutions. At the same time, though, universities like ours have emerged, from a very different history, with a perhaps more self-conscious, deliberate and *theorized* understanding of their relationship to society and the state.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the German statesman and scholar credited with imagining and then realizing the modern research university,

wrote in 1809 that “the essence of higher academic institutions is twofold. Internally, these institutions join objective knowledge with the process of forming the subject. Externally, they connect the endpoint of secondary education with the starting point of self-guided education”¹

This has been generally understood to mean that the essence of what happens inside universities is the cultivation of individuals (“the forming of the subject”) through learning and discovery, a process that in turn prepares them each for a life characterized by continuing education through experience.

In selling his ideas to Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III, Humboldt went one step further, arguing that another function of the university “was to mediate the competing demands of the ceaseless and unencumbered pursuit of knowledge with the more practical interests of society as represented and organized by the state.”²

Engaging in some rather transparent flattery, Humboldt praised the King for his previous investments in education: “It is clear to see that in all of Your Royal Majesty’s new state institutions a sensibility predominates in which these most important of all assets also serve the highest purpose of any unification of states.”³

So, while one aspect of Humboldt’s contribution to the development of research universities was the notion of *Wissenschaft*, of a life devoted to scholarly knowledge in and for its own sake, another was the idea that such institutions are important agents of social construction and transformation. When his conception of the university was transplanted to America—as it was by emissaries

¹ “On the Internal Structure of the University in Berlin and its Relationship to Other Organizations,” in Louis Menand, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, eds., *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 108.

² Editors’ summary, 108.

³ “Request for the Establishment of the University of Berlin,” May 12-14. In Menand et al, 117.

sent to Prussia by Thomas Jefferson and educational leaders on this continent—that sense of social mission came along as well. In fact, it was also to some extent amplified, because colleges in America were implicated to an even greater degree than those in Germany in the process of nation-building. Perhaps the most obvious indication of this preoccupation in the United States was the creation of the Land-Grant Universities under the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which created institutions specifically to bring benefit to their immediate communities. In several cases existing institutions were given Land-Grant status, and these included some that today rank among the world’s great research universities, most notably Yale.

The point of this brief history lesson is simple. While it is true, as Peter Magrath recently wrote, that “universities that are not engaged with their communities in the twenty-first century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance to [their] citizenry . . . ,”⁴ the assumption that universities will or must contribute to the public good goes back at least two hundred years to the very beginnings of the modern research university.

The story I have told furthermore provides an important context for the otherwise puzzling prominence accorded to universities in such fundamental documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris in 1948. Article 26 of that document declares education to be a right, asserts that education should be free and compulsory, “at least in the elementary and fundamental stages,” observes that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit,” and then takes flight in this description of the mission of educational institutions: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

⁴ Foreword to Stephen M. Gavazzi and E. Gordon Gee, *Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2018).

That education serves “the full development of the human personality” echoes Humboldt’s words about the way in which the “subject” is “formed” through the encounter with “objective knowledge.” And of course “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” points towards an ideal, or at least desired, polity.

In our own time and in this country the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has forcefully underlined the link that is possible, though not inevitable, between education and the achievement of social justice. In suggesting that the link is not inevitable I have in mind Justice Murray Sinclair’s often-quoted assertion that when it comes to the residential schools crisis, “education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it.”⁵ That educational institutions have power to change lives and affect society is beyond question. What is often and entirely open to question is the system of values they may serve in doing so. In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Report, educators everywhere in this country are called to redress the incalculable individual and societal damage done by an educational system founded on dehumanizing, racist and colonialistic assumptions.

The purpose of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is to say unequivocally what a desirable system of values should be, to insist that the end of education is the fulfilment of human beings, both in their individual capacity and in their social or political alliances. This represents what is usually referred to as the Human Development paradigm for education—an optimistic approach very much in keeping with the mood of post-war reconstruction in the late 1940s, the period from which the Universal Declaration comes, and throughout the 1950s.

⁵ Interview with Peter Mansbridge, June 2015.

Over the last several years, not only in our province but more broadly around the world, that paradigm has given way to another. In discussions about what is needed for a nation to develop, wrote Martha Nussbaum a decade ago, “what is on everyone’s lips is the need for an education that promotes national development *seen as economic growth*”⁶ (my emphasis). Along with this focus on economic growth as the principal index of our communal health has come a broad preoccupation with measurement in all aspects of life, in the field of education no less than in commerce and industry. In education we have moved rapidly, and with a surprising lack of concern, from productivity metrics—graduation rate, employment rate, citation count, publication rate, number of awards, and so on—taken as proxies for human formation and development, to the treatment of such metrics as ends in and for themselves.

Consequently, it nowadays seems rather quaint to speak, as the Universal Declaration did, about education as “the full development of the human personality.” The annoying motto of our time is “only what gets measured gets done”—or some variant of that—which is demonstrably untrue: human beings will develop by being joined to “objective knowledge” whether we measure them or not. And a good, just society will always be more than the sum of its metrics. Nevertheless, in the sway of a culture that regards economic growth as the *sine qua non* of all human achievement and happiness, even educators have gravitated away from the Human Development paradigm, finding it alien, awkward, perhaps slightly sentimental.

What is the context in which we must think about education today? We find ourselves—I want to say “suddenly,” but this has not come upon us without warning—living in an age in which we cannot take for granted that inherited value systems will prevail, that either the laws of economics or the tenets of religious faith will deliver us into a state of equity, justice, peace and prosperity. Speaking to an

⁶ *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 17.

international audience I recently recalled some comments by António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations.

“This is a time,” he has observed, “of multiplying conflicts, advancing climate change, deepening inequality and rising tensions over trade . . . It is a period when people are moving across borders in unprecedented numbers in search of safety or opportunity. We are still wrestling with the risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction — and only beginning to reckon with the potential dangers of new technologies. There is anxiety, uncertainty and unpredictability across the world. Trust is on the decline, within and among nations. People are losing faith in political establishments — national and global. Key assumptions have been upended, key endeavours undermined and key institutions undercut.”

Universities are amongst those undercut in what has been called our “post-truth” age, as indeed is the entire educational ecosystem, premised as it is, or ought to be, on the idea that humanity seeks power over its destiny through the pursuit of knowledge and the quest for truth. I don’t know whether our movement away from a Human Development paradigm for education is a mere symptom or a cause of this; and I certainly do not wish to suggest that the recent dominance of an economic growth paradigm is to blame. But I do believe that a connection exists between the disempowerment of educators in the process of social formation and our acquiescence in a philosophy that subordinates human aspiration to economic rules and imperatives.

We need, because of the challenges facing our world, to return to the Human Development paradigm, to reassert, in the teeth of all contrary arguments and complicating philosophies, that the primary mission of the university is human fulfilment, the development of people in and for themselves, in their relationships with others, and in their relationship with the planet that must sustain them. Such an

approach does imply a politics, to be sure, and that is captured admirably in what the Universal Declaration says about the relationship between education and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It points, through the smokescreen of contingent circumstances, to a social and political dispensation which Dr. Borrows, one of today's Honorary Degree recipients, captures in a phrase which echoes wonderfully throughout his writings on Indigenous constitutionalism. Culture, institutions, ideas and traditions—all of that which education serves to transmit from one individual or generation to another—he says must “facilitate freedom by encouraging people to live a good life.”⁷

Martha Nussbaum argues that education following the “old” (that is, Human Development) paradigm is “committed to democracy, since having a voice in the choice of policies that govern one’s life is a key ingredient of life worthy of human dignity. The sort of democracy it favors will, however, be one with a strong role for fundamental rights that cannot be taken away from people by majority whim—it will thus favor strong protections for political liberty; the freedoms of speech, association, and religious exercise; and fundamental entitlements in yet other areas such as education and health.” She observes further that “the Human Development model is not pie-in-the-sky idealism; it is closely related to the constitutional commitments, not always completely fulfilled, of many if not most of the world’s democratic nations.”⁸ I am reminded of Dr. Borrows’ observation that “the pursuit of a good life is a politically messy process and not just an idealized end goal.”⁹

In encouraging us to return to a Human Development paradigm, founded on freedom and a good life, I do not wish to construct a false opposition between the human and economic goals of the educational process. One of the more positive characteristics of the

⁷ *Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 7.

⁸ 25.

⁹ 103.

current world order as I described it earlier on is that longstanding boundaries between the various dimensions of human experience are becoming much more porous, and for institutions like ours to fulfil their Humboldtian responsibility to society, they will need to take a comprehensive rather than an exclusive view of the human enterprise.

While we need to have our gaze firmly fixed on the vision of society we wish to realize, we must acknowledge, understand and integrate its messy intersections with all the various manifestations of human commerce broadly understood. In that we are again very close to the historical purpose of universities, a bringing together of diverse perspectives and disciplines for illumination of individuals and the greater good.

I have spent over four decades as a beneficiary of this vision, three of them as its servant. To have the opportunity now to serve Queen's University as your Principal is a particular honour. Notwithstanding the challenges of our time—indeed, *because* of them, because of the “post-truth” ethos and spreading skepticism about expertise and knowledge—I relish the work that lies ahead, and in committing myself to you and the mission of this great Canadian institution, I commit myself again to a world where power consorts not with ignorance and arrogance, but with wisdom, creativity, modesty, and optimism.

Thank you.

