

Changing Role of Universities in Society: Being Socially Responsible in a Global Community

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Take Home Message: *How well do universities prepare their graduates to become professionally and socially responsible citizens? They excel at graduating professionally competent citizens who know how to do things well. They have more to do to prepare graduates for careers that merge technical proficiency with social responsibility.*

All universities serve, or should serve, a public purpose, which creates certain responsibilities and accountability. While universities must never shortchange their local communities, in today's world, they must also be responsive to global problems, challenges and opportunities.

Universities can best achieve success via two basic routes: (1) as institutional actors, including administrators, faculty and staff, adopt and implement mission statements, policies and programs—all those things universities do as institutions to advance their role as a public service institution; and (2) through the education they provide their graduates.

No society can afford to have its students educated so that they acquire knowledge without understanding how that knowledge can benefit or harm society. Our graduates must be concerned with not only how to apply their knowledge and skills, but also to consider the value of what they do for others. This means broadening education to take into account now only what we do as professionals and how we might do it even better, but also why we do it, for whom, and with what impact. This will help to foster a sense of responsibility beyond one's self—an outward looking perspective. Education should enable students to look beyond themselves by considering their obligations to others and applying their knowledge and skills to serious social issues/problems.

This task falls to universities because it is in the university that the foundation of a person's professional identity is largely formed, a time when it is critical to instill strong norms of expected behavior that help shape the moral contours of future generations of professionals. Students should have opportunities to clarify and apply their own sense of their professional and social responsibilities as they proceed through their course of study.

Education should help to empower students to act on their social responsibilities by preparing them to: be clear about their own values and that of their profession/discipline; be sensitive to the values held by others (listening); understand and appreciate the social complexity of the issues they will face, including how real people may be affected; and cultivate the tools, skills and

insights needed to fulfill their social responsibilities.

The university of the 21st century will need to find a balance in its priorities, continuing to focus on the transmission of knowledge, while expanding its commitment to how that knowledge can be used in the service of human well-being.

Academic excellence and social purpose reinforce one another. To pursue societal or global well being without proper preparation could easily cause more harm than good. Yet, to pursue knowledge and advanced skills without asking why or for whom could erode public trust and confidence in the university, invite greater external intervention in university affairs, and produce graduates who question the value of their university experience, all consequences that none of us in this room wants to experience.

I close with a letter that appeared in *Science* in 2009. A graduate student wrote, “As I begin to form my own scientific identity, I wonder what it will mean for my fellow socially conscious students and me to exercise our voices in the world we inherit.”

I hope all of you would be prepared to answer him, and then clearly show how your institutions will prepare him for his career ahead as both a well-trained professional and a socially responsible citizen. Thank you.