CAN A MODERN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY LIVE WITH A UNIQUE MISSION?

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The Business of a University

The special business of any university worthy of the name is the life of the mind. It is devotion to unraveling problems--to study them for the sake of study, to study them for the sake of people--to fostering curiosity about the universe and its parts, and in the first instance to seeking to comprehend the world more than to control it. But connected to everything it does is a university's inevitable purpose. We study, we discover, we create--sometimes to illuminate reality and sometimes to transcend it--in order eventually to make the world better. We study, while other people build houses, or tear them down, or heal wounds--not because our work is loftier, or that theirs is more necessary, but rather because that's what we do best, and that's what we (as professors), were appointed to do. So while we engage in all kinds of business (even at times the business of mundane commerce itself), and while we do some things well and other things not well, our main work as a "community of scholars" must be devoted to activities of the mind at its highest and most human level--the eventual or general purpose being to make the world better, to serve humanity. Is there really any other more serious purpose, any other more practical purpose, any other more academic purpose?

The Mission of a University

So, who would not agree that every university worthy of the name shares a common eventual purpose--to improve society? By this, I do not mean that we must be "relevant" immediately and in all ways. Indeed, that would be the trap to actually bring down a university. Indeed, what has protected American universities'

academic freedom, and what has permitted us to prosper under all political administrations and under all of our real and metaphorical revolutions, is the fact that we are not taken seriously by the practical world and that we are largely irrelevant to its most immediate concerns. But in the long run that should be ours--and everyone's--goal. However, not many would agree on what should constitute a university's unique mission or immediate purpose. Indeed, I think there are few administrators and fewer professors who feel they could tolerate a statement of unique mission--much less admit the possibility that they or their university could derive benefit from it. After all, the university encompasses everything; it is always diverse, uneven, free and open. And mission statements sound so restrictive and exclusive, so delimiting and narrowminded--so ideological, so controlling and political. "No," many will conclude, "there is no place in a research university for a public articulation of mission." Too few now believe that such a statement could be satisfactorily created, much less lived by. They need convincing. And, of course, persuasion is the most powerful "administrator" in any university. It, more than rank itself, is king.

Well, as a matter of fact, there are mission-type statements around our campus--Syracuse University--and around virtually all others too. There is at least one (a motto) representing Syracuse University, and many others (actual "manifestos") representing our various schools, colleges, and other groups. Is there anything wrong or silly about the idea that "Knowledge Rewards Those Who Seek It", which is the Syracuse University motto? Of course, mottos--especially one in Latin and probably created "by the left hand"--shouldn't be taken too seriously. Notwithstanding, if we would take that motto and write a polemic or two on its theme, we might produce something which is suspiciously close to a mission statement. But is that enough? Probably not. A statement of mission isn't merely for us in the University to understand. The final test of a mission is whether it is obvious to those

outside the University. What is wrong with our University's motto, and what would probably be wrong with a mission statement on it, is that it's neither known nor understood inside or outside the University. Therefore, the motto is something less than dysfunctional. It's even something less than mythical (whose explanatory power might justify dysfunctionality). It's irrelevant, at least to Syracuse University. Of course, we can work toward making it relevant, and that wouldn't be the worst idea ever to enter our imperfect minds. Or we can work to create a mission statement that better reflects what we've actually been up to and want to continue. After all, a Latin phrase created by an unknown committee and translated by imperfect grammarians for discussion with later generations of professors could hardly be expected to capture our contemporary interests and ideas.

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for unique mission statements in universities. Because I know more about (and care more about) Syracuse University than any other, I've appropriated this university to be the subject of the argument. Also, I think Syracuse is ready for such an effort. I think we need a clear statement of mission, one for which we would live and work hard. I think we need to agree on a mission that is more vital to society than merely the effort to attract a greater number of students, or better students. Any university can do that--in the sense that, if Syracuse University won't or can't, other schools will. We need to develop a mission that speaks less about protecting ourselves and more about protecting the world, that is less selfish than we've been and more altruistic than we believe we can be. However, I must admit that I believe this argument has relevancy for other universities--not that they are like us--which would diminish my argument, but that they may need to work harder to better understand their purpose for being.

It's Neither Too Early Nor Too Late

This may be exactly the right time for our university to articulate a unique

mission and to seek to live as if we believe it. Why a mission statement for Syracuse University? And why one at this time? There is the possibility that--like poets and serious musicians--mission statements thrive on hard times. Who spends time thinking through a life? A man or woman who is on a lucky streak at Las Vegas? The person who finds only good fortune, happy days, and peaceful nights? Probably not. People seem to need hard times in order to set down honest words about their lives. Whether it is true or not, there is a pervasive suspicion at Syracuse that we may be approaching hard times. But even if our days will continue to be good--i.e., not "easy" but not "hard", as they've been--there is a growing belief that we must more deliberately look to the future. We now have a committee, appointed by the Chancellor, to look to the future. More than ever, there is talk on campus about new academic initiatives, new configurations for teaching new heights. Thinking about the University is in the air--everywhere. And that too is new. So possibly, this is exactly the right time in our existence to work on a statement of mission. That is what hard times can do for people and institutions--make them introspective, cause them to think publicly about themselves and their lives, require them to work at better understanding what they are doing and why.

What We Might Say: A Proposal

I have made the claim that the essential test of a mission statement is whether it is as obvious to those on the outside as it is to those of us who are part of a university's community. If I'm right, it is true despite the fact that, in the last analysis, our University's mission must be about ourselves. And so, the task is to develop something which is just as clear to the outside world as it is to us, but is about us rather than them.

Probably, some of the trouble we will have if we attempt to create a unique mission statement will be because it all sounds so pretentious, so much like what

high school sophomores engage in when they form a new club, or what Knute Rockne or Gregory Peck said in order to rile up the gang to kill the enemy. Reading a mission statement can be an awful lot like reading a sermon. Saying something about a mission statement sounds an awful lot like preaching. Well, it can become that, but it can also be something simpler, more secular, and more useful--something along the lines of special responsibilities and purposes. "Purpose," is a good word to keep in mind (even if I won't often use it here) as we go (if we go!) through this business of developing a mission statement.

So, what is it we might say? It should come as no surprise to anyone that our University is in the business of teaching, engaging in research, and serving the local community and the larger society. But isn't that the work of every university? Exactly. It is even the work of those special purpose universities which are identified with unusual (some traditionalists might even say "bizarre") obligations. For example, there was Antioch College which fostered "work in the real world" for its undergraduate students. Or Goddard College, which fostered something I never could precisely define (I'm sure it was my deficiency); notwithstanding whatever it was, it sounded different from what other colleges and universities foster. But in a larger sense, their "differences" actually were more apparent than real. Antioch, Goddard, those other special purpose colleges and universities did the same work which Syracuse University does--teaching, research, and service--but they took that for granted (for better or worse), and <u>in addition</u> went about other business which they emphasized for themselves and the rest of the world. The point is that virtually <u>every</u> university, even every college, has the same general mission or purpose as Syracuse. Syracuse University is not the only place engaged in teaching, scholarship, and service to society. Syracuse University is not the only place "pursuing academic excellence". Hundreds (thousands?) of other institutions do it, and most of them do a pretty good job of it. We don't appear to have any significant disagreement about what we do or, for that matter, about what other universities and

colleges (great or mediocre) do. Rather, it seems that we simply can't find anything serious and worthwhile to focus on within that broad mandate to teach, to pursue our research and scholarship, and to serve society.

One problem in gaining some sort of agreement may be the traditional conflict between the individual's agenda and the collective mission. In the University, the idea of individual liberty represents the highest of values. To suggest that the whole place has one mission seems to compromise a person's freedom to choose. Of course, a mission statement could be articulated in a way which would threaten that freedom we so zealously guard for ourselves and one another. Such a defective mission statement would be so limiting as to preclude the majority of the faculty from taking it seriously. On the other hand, it could be so broadly stated as to assure the maintenance of an environment in which each person could pursue his or her individual mission. Nothing less--or more. But that would put us back where we started. So we must both protect our freedom and find common ground.

At the outset, we have to recognize that the creation of a unique mission statement is difficult business. To further complicate the matter, you will have already seen that such effort lacks urgency: there are few who believe that such a task really needs to get done; nothing would collapse if we continued to be silent about our mission. And while some people might admit to the eventual usefulness of such a statement, there aren't many of us who would permit the lack thereof to interfere with what we do today. For sure, there will be other disclaimers concerning the need for such a statement. After all, many of us (the best of us?) believe that our actions should speak our mission, that our mission--our good works--should be revealed rather than announced. Of course, this is a disarming suggestion--first because it is true, second because it appeals to one's sense of modesty, and third because it is an easy evasion of a serious question. But that nagging, that serious question remains: "What are our actions speaking?" Are they good, are they moral,

are they helpful to people, are we making the world a better place? Yes, admitting to want to leave the world a better place than one found it probably embarrasses most academics. So we hurry on to new commentary, leaving such questions for a better (that is, for a more courageous) time.

I think I should come to the heart of the matter--almost immediately. When rankings are published, Syracuse isn't near the top (even when a Maxwell School, my own School, or other professional schools gain special notice). In part, this may be because rankings inescapably reflect reputation rather than substance, and rankings favor the merely famous. In part, Syracuse University is not near the top of the rankings because Syracuse University really isn't near the top. But even more pertinent to this issue, Syracuse University is not near the top of the rankings because the kinds of indicators weighed in even the most thorough and thoughtful ranking systems are insensitive to those dimensions of excellence which make Syracuse University a very good place. We know who <u>is</u> near the top--Harvard and Yale, Princeton, Chicago, MIT, Stanford, a dozen or so other universities. But, at the very top, we find Harvard and Yale, maybe Princeton, maybe your nomination. Syracuse University can't yet compete with Harvard and Yale on their terms, in their game. But in some fundamental way, Syracuse University can enjoy a profoundly more important, if not always more distinguished, mission. Yes, a profoundly more important, more vital place in our society than <u>even</u> that of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton!

It is proposed that: THE MISSION OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY IS TO PROVIDE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTELLECTUAL EXCELLENCE.

What follows is commentary to support the argument:

1. On the one hand, a mission devoted to the development of intellectual excellence distinguishes Syracuse from the handful of Harvards of the world, in that those places tend more to sponsor the polishing and exercise of excellence rather than the nurturing of its development.

On the other hand, it distinguishes Syracuse University from the many hundreds of colleges and universities which don't aspire to excellence so much as to competence. Syracuse University may be a rarity among institutions of higher learning, possibly as rare as Harvard. It inspires and produces greatness, but doesn't require it on entrance.

2. To have any meaning for anyone--inside or outside--a mission statement must be much more than another affirmation of devotion to teaching, scholarship, and service. To reiterate, every university and--for that matter--every college and junior college has in some fashion a commitment to those goals.

3. Consequently, our mission statement in one sense must deal more with "style" than "substance." What characterizes the "style" of Syracuse University better than the opportunities it affords both students and faculty? Our mission must deliberately steer us toward maximizing <u>opportunity</u>. We take risks--with faculty as well as with students--risks which Harvard does not (will not) take. Another way of saying this is that the practicing mission of Syracuse University has been to give reign to human potential. What we have stood for in the past because we had no other choice is, I submit, what can make ours among the greatest of institutions--if we deliberately and forcefully pursue it and call it to society's attention--giving people OPPORTUNITIES. People here speak about "steeples of excellence". That's true! There are steeples of excellence at Syracuse, but also foothills of very good work. That too is the point! Where there are <u>only</u> steeples, there are a few leaning towers (wonders of the world); but there are no risks. There is greatness, but also sterility and lack of

excitement (which one almost invariably finds in such places). The concern is not that we have mediocrity around here, although that might worry us from time to time. It is when a Chancellor, or a Vice Chancellor, or one of the Deans would say that now we will all be excellent. Paradoxically, that is when we must begin to worry most, because that is when the greatest danger will face us. This is another way of saying that the mundane also constitutes a very important part of life, not because the mundane is a fact of life but rather because it is out of the mundane that we are surprised from time to time to observe a splendid achievement or discovery. By definition, miracles are wrought unexpectedly.

4. I reiterate the obvious: the relevant attributes and goals--teaching, research, and service--are shared by all universities. Therefore, there is simply no way we can have a mission which distinguishes this University from other universities on those dimensions. Consequently, it is proposed that we work on a statement which truly exemplifies this University, which articulates for the outside world (while affirming for ourselves) the idea that we provide opportunities for faculty and students to become intellectually excellent. We take chances with people, not merely to make them competent but to help some of them to become great. The Harvards of the world do indeed have great professors and excellent students, but they select them. We grow them! Should we strive to select better and better professors and students, outstanding ones? Of course! But we should not deviate from our intentional commitment to always have room for those who can benefit from the rich opportunities here to become outstanding. That should be our articulated and publicized mission. I believe it has

been and is now our unarticulated mission. Not only unarticulated but ignored--because it embarrasses us. Our greatest strength and purpose has not been sufficiently appreciated--has not been articulated because it is not Harvard's. Yet it may be greater than Harvard's.

How We Might Do It: Another Proposal

Can we pursue the mission proposed, which captures the essence of Syracuse University--multicultural, very diverse, multipurpose, very open? I know we can, and then we would be a university where more students and faculty use the environment and are not used by it, where more people would grow to greatness.

While he admitted that it never actually happened to him, E. M. Forster did say that, if he had to make the choice between betraying a friend and betraying his country, he hoped he would have the guts to betray his country. I'm not certain I would even want that sort of courage. But if I were forced to choose between teaching and scholarship, I hope I would have the guts to betray scholarship. Or if the choice lay between the glory of science and service to people, I hope I would have the guts to betray science. Compared to betraying scholarship, it's easy to betray teaching. It's easier for at least a few academics to betray people than science. That, I believe, was Forster's point. One needs guts to betray what's hardest to betray.

There must be reconciliation of mind and spirit if we are to achieve a genuine unique mission. We must work to create greater harmony between the arts and sciences and the professional schools, between the "stars" and the "throng", between those who are mainly teachers and those who are mainly scholars, between those who see themselves as serving Syracuse University and those who see themselves as serving their disciplines or larger causes. Of course, there shouldn't be "either-or"

dichotomies here. But there often are, and they are destructive to a university's well-being. Good teachers can be--and are--good scholars; and people can find the time and the desire to serve both their university and their discipline.

How can we do it? I have yet another proposal. I began this paper with the claim that the business of any university is the life of the mind. I discussed later that our mission might be to provide opportunities for people to develop their intellectual potential. How can we foster intellectual development? How can we offer such opportunities that those who can become great--faculty and students--will become great? As fine as it may be, any community of scholars is necessarily incomplete. By itself, it could only endure for the span of one generations's mature years. The life of the mind, like every other life, extends itself only through a concern with the young, by making sure that the young will not only inherit but build on the achievements of the past. Syracuse University has expressed this fundamental concern through its support of teaching and service to the community. In significant measure, through its schools and colleges, the University has become an important influence in the education of our surrounding community, our state, and our nation. It has taken teaching seriously on campus, and service seriously wherever we find appropriate opportunities to serve.

It is proposed that we at Syracuse University work to deliberately recreate our academic community through even more dedicated teaching and service to students and the larger society. In fundamental ways, education--teaching and learning--is concerned with life and death. That is, those who aren't concerned with passing on the knowledge of the generations are choosing death--extinction. In fundamental ways, service to society--making the world better--is also concerned with life and death. A university where the students, the staff, and the professors not only feel useful but are useful will not only survive but have an honored place. The opportunity to build on what we have accomplished seems apparent to me. The value of such

work--teaching and service to advance opportunities for greatness--seems evident. And we wouldn't neglect scholarship in the process. That is inconceivable and impossible at Syracuse--as it is inconceivable and impossible that everyone on campus would, or should, embrace this mission. What should occur is that everyone on campus would know the mission and argue for or against it. After all, not everyone at Teachers College, Columbia, agreed with John Dewey, but everyone there argued about Progressive Education. At Syracuse we finally would have something truly vital to argue about.

Preparing students to excel is an important part of our work. Even in a research university, we are committed to teach as well as to learn. But what we do and what we encourage our students to do should be called important only if it includes a desire to make the world a better place, so, in the most fundamental way, I'm back to the idea of a mission statement. I'm back to the idea of a mission we could not only live with but live for. After all, if Socrates could die for his curriculum, at least one small group 2,000 years later could live for theirs. Possibly, this is a good place to end. Even when a topic is vital, enough is enough.