

Land-Grant Universities

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The original intent of land-grant universities is rooted in the political concerns of Thomas Jefferson. Through each addition on these ideas, there is a dilution to the original stress on the liberal education idea from Jefferson. That dilution has resulted in a system with an emphasis on training people for specialized jobs instead of a liberal education. The educational functions of the public universities impact the direction and shape of the public. This makes it a foundational political concern.

Jefferson wrote “Cultivators of the earth are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds.” This is in contrast to Jefferson’s concern about the values of the business sector. “I consider the class of artificers,” Jefferson writes of management and labor “as the panders of vice, and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned.” Jefferson was a strong advocate for public education. The main reason for this was the link between education and a public that is critically aware, “...I do most anxiously wish to see the highest degrees of education given to the higher degrees of genius, and to all degrees of it, so much as may enable them to read and understand what is going on in the world, and to keep their part of it going on right: for nothing can keep it right but their own vigilant and distrustful superintendence.” A public that is critically aware would be able to be on guard of threats to the values and direction of the country’s policies and the preservation of democracy.

This took shape in the early university programs. Originally, when someone was college educated, they were thought able to do any job. This was because they had learned how to learn. They had a liberal enough of education that they had the foundation to self-educate and build their knowledge. This ability to learn is a sort of awareness. And the sort of awareness that Jefferson thought necessary to guard against the corrosion of liberties. Corrosion of liberties is a great political concern for a country seeking to remain a free democracy. The liberal education is emphasized in the Morill Act language “liberal and practical education”.

The Morill Act established the land-grant university program on July 2, 1862. That act provides the financing for a college “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts ... in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” Justin Smith Morill of Vermont was the author of this Act and the intention can be better understood from his memoirs. Morill was concerned about the effects of “the very cheapness of our public lands, and the facility of purchase and transfer, tended to a system of bad-farming or strip and waste of the soil, by encouraging short occupancy and a speedy search for new homes, entailing upon the first and older settlements a rapid deterioration of the soil, which would not be likely to be arrested except by more thorough and scientific knowledge of agriculture and by a higher education of those who were devoted to its

pursuit.” Morill, unlike Jefferson, was concerned for the “class of artificers”. Morill explains, “...being myself the son of a hard-handed blacksmith...who felt his own deprivation of schools...I could not overlook mechanics in any measure intended to aid the industrial classes in the procurement of an education that might exalt their usefulness.”

The idea of liberal and practical education together suggests a balance between the two. Liberal education should be anchored or focused in a sense of practical applications. At the same time, not to have an education that is purely practical, ignoring other learning that opens the range of thinking. However, Wendell Berry points out, “in practice...the Morill Act’s formula has been neatly bisected and carried out as if it read ‘a liberal *or* a practical education.’” Wendell Berry believes this causes a competition between the two that is causing the practical to drive out the liberal.

Certainly majors can now be classified as either a liberal degree or a practical degree. A practical degree is valued more because it gives marketable skills that get a person a good paying job. People generally scoff at liberal degrees, because they are considered not marketable. A practical degree, where a person is trained for a specialized job, leaves the person narrowly focused and not critically aware. They have not been given the tools to be a life-long learner on any subject. If an expert of a different subject tells them that something is true, they wouldn’t be able to critically review the idea. They would have to accept it as the expert’s truth.

The only reason one would practically consider a liberal degree is if they plan to get an advanced degree and probably go into research. Thus the liberal side becomes an isolated cycle, research for the sake of research, with out being rooted in practical application. This disconnection makes the advice given from research poor advice for the public. The research being conducted may not even be focused on what needs to be learned for the benefit of the public.

The Hatch Act in 1887 added agricultural experimental stations to promote “a sound and prosperous agricultural and rural life” It also declared the intent of Congress “to assure agriculture a position in research equal to that of industry.” The act goes on to charge the State agricultural stations “to conduct ... researches, investigations, and experiments ... contributing to the establishment and maintenance of a permanent and effective agricultural industry...including...such investigations as have purpose the development and improvement of the rural home and rural life...” The wording of this act does identify rural life being linked to agriculture and agriculture being separate from industry. However, the barrier between agriculture and industry is left open with how the research at land-grant universities is funded. An experiment is conducted when there is funding for it. Most of this funding now comes from private industries that, of course, fund those projects that will help their business position. This could be turned into an argument for how university research is being focused on practical application. However, the focusing is being done by industry or business. These are the descendents of the artificers that Jefferson disliked in favor of the agriculturalists; the “socially mobile” are now the dictators of what research is conducted.

Berry identifies another symptom of the liberal academics' isolated cycle with the example of the person "who has 'succeeded' by earning a Ph.D. and a nice place in town" having an inability to advise his/her students to go home and make practical applications. This perpetuates the up rooting of the on the land experience and the lack of return of knowledge to those cultivating the land. Perhaps the structure that doesn't lead to information being taken back "home" was what concerned the creators of the cooperative extension. That addition, however, ended up compounding the degradation of Jefferson's original ideas. It has turned into a conflict against the very "cultivators of the earth" that Jefferson believed held a special understanding about the preservation of liberties.

The Smith-Lever Act added a vehicle for spreading information from the land-grant universities in 1914. The cooperative extension service was "to aid in diffusing among the people useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same..." This information was to come from the universities' research, which is now industry and business driven. A research focus that has developed a technology for large scale, business motivated, purposes without the input of original rural life values. And this information is supposed to educate the very people whose values Jefferson wanted to preserve.

The original intentions of the land-grant universities were for public institutions that provided education that was both liberal and practical. Since then, a separation of those two components and a greater emphasis on the practical education has occurred in the practice of land-grant universities. This affects the mindset of the people coming out of the universities. People with specialized educations were the exact opposites of the critically aware people that Jefferson believed was imperative for the maintenance of a virtuous democracy.

Bibliography

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986