

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In a new CIRCLE Working Paper (#39), William Talcott reviews the literature on the civic mission of higher education. Talcott concentrates on “major research universities, with the rationale that these have had disproportionate cultural and institutional influence over the development of higher education as a whole.”

UNIVERSITIES SHIFT FOCUS FROM MORAL AND CIVIC EDUCATION TO TECHNICAL SKILL TRAINING

The 19th-century American college was explicitly concerned with moral and civic education. In many institutions, the president, who was often an ordained minister, would teach a mandatory capstone course in which students were exhorted to become civic leaders. That approach gave way to what Talcott calls the “modernist” research university. Modernism, he writes, became the “single most influential model of the university/citizenship relationship in the 20th century.”

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Modernist universities replaced moral exhortation with science, specialization, and the training of experts and professionals. In 1933, President Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago said that “education for citizenship has no place in the university.” Many scholars have argued that the modernist research university lacked “an element of moral-critical engagement.” Instead of teaching values and civic habits, it acted “as an agent for individual success through technical skill training.” The research university became “a highly exclusive realm isolated from public concerns, marginalizing moral and civic inquiry in favor of narrow procedures and professional ends.”

THE CIVIC MOTIVATION BEHIND MODERNIST REFORMS

Talcott revises this interpretation by finding a civic motivation behind the modernist reforms of higher education. “The modernist model framed good citizenship as a matter of free individuals making rational, informed choices.” Universities aimed to provide impartial scientific knowledge for the benefit of citizens; they

also sought to teach their own students habits of critical thinking. These were civic goals, and they explain why modernist universities promoted curricular choice, scientific rationality, autonomy for research disciplines, and academic freedom. The rise of research universities coincided with the Progressive Movement, which promoted “modernist” citizenship through changes in elections and government. Progressive reformers opposed “the highly partisan, physical and occasionally spectacular form of citizenship characteristic of late 19th century electoral politics.”

Talcott summarizes this critical literature and describes it as part of “the recovery of republican political/cultural traditions.” He argues, however, against the assumption that modernist universities have lacked civic purposes. Instead, he recommends that we recognize “the tacit models of political society informing current university structures and practices” so that, “through persistent dialogue,” we can find “ways to build on their achievements.”

LEARNING FROM THE PAST: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

By the 1960s, prominent scholars had begun to criticize the modernist university as a “bureaucratic shell,” an institution primarily devoted to its own reproduction that lacked unifying moral or civic purposes. Talcott summarizes this critical literature and describes it as part of “the recovery of republican political/cultural traditions.” He argues, however, against the assumption that modernist universities have lacked civic purposes. Instead, he recommends that we recognize “the tacit models of political society informing current university structures and practices” so that, “through persistent dialogue,” we can find “ways to build on their achievements.” ■