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Regional

Despite changes, college's role remains the same

In these times of continuous change and challenges to higher education, it is not a bad idea to ponder whether or not its fundamental mission has changed.

Most people accept that the main mission of colleges and universities is the transmission of knowledge. Whether that knowledge is used to learn skills, get a better job, or simply for advancement of intellectual growth, that is and has always been the mission of higher education.

In ancient Egypt higher education was devoted to teaching things that we would consider the basic transmission of knowledge in primary schools today: reading, writing and counting. These studies would later lead to proficiency in both literature and mathematics. This training was exclusively offered to males and evolved into copying religious texts for use in temples. And since medicine at that time was closely associated with religion, interest started to develop in theology and medical practices. We see the production of the first textbooks in Egypt about 4,200 years ago. Educated people formed part of the scribal class and were given high status in Egyptian society.

In the Middle East education was practical in nature and reserved to administrators of the state. The Greeks developed a more open system of education aimed at free people (mostly males) for the sake of knowledge itself, mostly in the areas of mathematics, music and astronomy. The Greek philosopher Plato advanced the idea in the fourth century B.C. that education should be public and obligatory and that women should be allowed full access to it. The ancient Greeks created the first known libraries and the production of teaching materials, and for the first

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time connected teaching with research.

The Romans made advances in the areas of architecture, engineering and legal education.

Other cultures such as the Chinese and Islam also made progress in higher education. A special mention has to be made to Qairouan University in Fez, Morocco. It was founded in the year 859 by a Muslim woman, Fatima al-Fihri and taught not only religious but also secular knowledge. Today it is considered the world's oldest continuously operated educational institution.

Sub-Saharan Africa also saw the development of the University of Sankore in Timbuktu in what is today the West African nation of Mali. Founded in the year 988, it was located at the crossroads of major commercial routes in Africa. At one point it contained an extremely large collection of manuscripts, estimated at between 400,000 and 700,000.

European monasteries started to appear in the 4th century, collecting books and making copies of them for preservation purposes. Because monks were about the only people capable of reading and writing, the feudal lords of Europe asked them to educate their heirs so they could become better administrators of their properties. As they opened their doors to middle-class individuals – and the increase of urbanization – trade started to flourish, and with

it the development of guilds. These guilds carried the name “universitas,” hence the name university, which we use to this day.

That is when we see the birth of the oldest university in Europe: Bologna, in what is today Italy in the year 1088. With the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the transmission of knowledge became wider, easier and more affordable.

Because of the increasing importance of universities, rulers started to provide protection to their faculties and students, as occurred in Paris, Oxford and Bologna. Later the protection extended to guard faculty and students from the administrators (chancellors) of their own universities for political reasons. Universities gained more autonomy, but at the same time students had to pay tuition in order to maintain an increasingly larger and more complex organization.

Lectures were based on readings and the teacher made commentaries about them. Another approach was disputation by which two or more people who had read the material discussed it. The questions to be discussed were announced in advance by the teacher, and the first examinations took place at the fourth year after which the student was promoted to baccalaureus (garlanded with laurels). Two more years and the student could achieve the master's degree, allowing him to teach.

Faculty of the “liberal arts” taught the general compulsory courses, what we call today general education. The teaching of languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Chaldean (former Syrian) started to flourish, while vernacular European languages,

such as English and French were, for the most part, ignored. Because French was used in the British court, however, that language was taught at Oxford. That is why there are so many French words in today's English. History and literature were usually neglected. The reason is that for the society of the time, they found no use for either subject.

As we can see the roots of higher education is almost as old as human civilization itself. Today we may count with “smart classrooms” equipped with the latest innovations in visual equipment, offer on-line education, and other types of technological novelties, but despite all these the mission of the university remains the same: the transmission of knowledge.

The other aspect that we need to remember is that some fundamental tools to achieve that goal are the same: teachers who are well-prepared when they come to class, who are enthusiastic about their subject and about making sure that students learn things beyond of what is written in textbooks.

What all this means is that education is a profound human activity where human nature, from the sublime to the appalling, will always play a role.

When we look at it, higher education may have changed in how knowledge is delivered, but it continues – and will continue to be for the foreseeable future – a deeply human activity.

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