

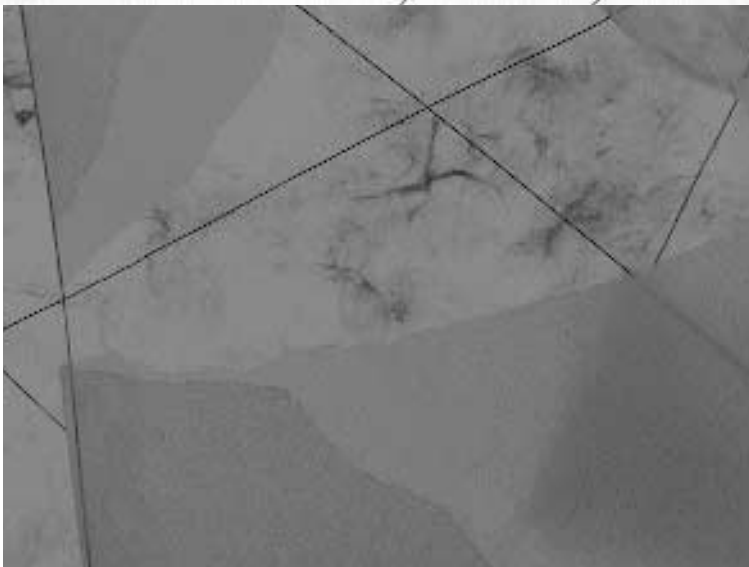
The Idea of Organic Growth

in Higher Education

James Engell
Harvard University

To understand fully and to address effectively the changes sweeping higher education today, we need to regroup ourselves: to consider the most essential purposes and functions of the university. James Engell, professor of English and comparative Literature at Harvard, outlines a model that centers on the *entelechy* of higher education. This *entelechy*—the coordinated fulfillment of several different goals and goods—can serve as a guide for educational leaders, helping them to take decisive action that will shape organic, institutional growth rather than reacting to imposed, external forces largely beyond their control.

when I was
and repeat
the he pointed me every year
to center of the magic circle smoke
three whips and held the pipes until
many as I thought proper, then held it to us
the white persons and then gave it to be carried
by his warriors. This pipe was made of a dense
transparent green stone very highly polished
it was inches long and of an oval figure, the
being in the same direction with the stem. A
piece of burned clay is placed in the bottom of
bowl to separate the tobacco from the end of the
and is of an irregularly rounded figure not fitting
twice perfectly close in order that the smoke
may pass. This is the form of the pipe. Their tobacco
the same kind of that used by the Minnetonka
and
res of the Dipuni. The Shoshone do not cultivate this
it, but obtain it from the Rocky mountain Indian
some of the bands of their own nation who live fur
I now explain to them the objects of our journey etc.
south, all the women and children of the camp
tly collected about the lodge to indulge themselves on



A Model for Higher Education

The entelechy of higher education involves an instrumental economic good, an associative intellectual and social good, an instrumental civic and political good, and two final goods: one moral or ethical, and the other the seeking of knowledge and ideas for their own sake, which is the final cause of all the other goods.

Education as an Instrumental Economic Good

Education readies individuals to undertake specific tasks, careers, and professions, providing basic skills that support any economic undertaking. Much education as an instrumental good should occur by the time mandatory education ceases. Today, however, higher education and professional schools continue this instrumental function, which as an economic good is supported and promoted by an increasing number of colleges and universities. Students, too, often are pursuing economic ends when they strive to enroll in prestigious institutions (even if they are not a good match), and when they select a major based on its perceived economic value.

In this arena, institutions pursue status and reputation through rankings and measures of “excellence” as final goals or goods in themselves, when at best these measures are limited signs of instrumental goods within the institution. Today, the obsessive competition for higher rankings is overshadowing and jeopardizing the other ends and goods of higher education.

Education as an Associative Intellectual and Social Good

Higher education acts as an associative good when it promotes awareness of and derives benefit from the lives of others. Colleges and universities can create an intense social and intellectual experience, particularly when the students in the mix are gifted, reflect different backgrounds, and harbor heterogeneous ideas, values, and interests. Empathy is a hoped-for result; the broader aim should be critical reflection and reasoned discussion.

Education as an Instrumental Civic and Political Good

The freedom to pursue ideas, knowledge, and values (divorced from considerations of economic gain) pro-

vides citizens with perspective, relation, and the ability to connect one field of knowledge with another. It allows for initiative, creativity, and idealism. This freedom is essential to democracy, as an understanding of several fields helps a citizenry make informed choices. Thus, for civic and political reasons, higher education should play a key role in a democratic society. George Washington captured this truth in his Farewell Address over 200 years ago: “In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.”

Education as a Moral or Ethical Good

The philosophical and humane consideration of what possible uses knowledge might or should serve entails ethical and moral decisions. And though the results of knowledge can be perverted, we can predict neither favorable outcomes nor abuses before the fact: an irreducible element in the search for knowledge is the unpredictability of its application. One compelling example is nuclear physics and unlocking the atom. Today, genetics presents a similar, multi-faceted case. Education, then, is inextricably intertwined with ethical and moral reasoning.

The Pursuit of Knowledge for its Own Sake

At all levels of learning, knowledge may be pursued for its own sake. If we as a society lose this habit, we will spend down intellectual capital and fail to replace it. The well-spring of advancement, pure or applied, remains the quest for knowledge as its own end. First to seek knowledge, and then to debate its ethical application, are goods in and of themselves. They are ends, rather than instrumental means.

The Three Criteria

In the last two decades, money has come to be seen by many Americans as a good in itself, an end rather than a means, something automatically conferring status, class, power, even virtue. Higher education has not escaped this course. The logic that sees money as the most desirable result of education has led to the *Three Criteria*. Their rule is remarkably potent, uniform, and verifiable. Academic fields that offer one (or more) of the Three Criteria have recently thrived by any conceivable measure; any field lacking all three has comparatively languished.



“ the obsessive competition for higher rankings is overshadowing and jeopardizing the other ends and goods of higher education ”

The Three Criteria are:

- A promise of money. The field is popularly linked (even if erroneously) to improved chances of securing a job that promises above average lifetime earnings.
- A knowledge of money. The field itself studies money, i.e., fiscal, business, or economic matters and markets.
- A source of money. The field receives significant external money, i.e., research contracts, federal grants or funding support, or corporate underwriting.

The humanities and several social sciences fail to meet all three criteria. In the last 30 years, by every term of prestige and quality measured—faculty salaries, faculty positions created, percent of adjunct professors, SAT scores, number of degrees awarded, corporate and government gifts and grants, etc.—the humanities have fallen further and further behind other fields. The economic prosperity of the last generation coincides with an overall degradation of the humanities. If we recall the entelechy of higher education, something better could result.

Too often, the humanities have reacted to change, competition, and technology in self-involved, self-defeating ways. Destructive infighting has prevented the humanities from having any important recent impact on the way higher education views or governs itself. Yet one of the strengths of the humanities is an ability to absorb and interpret the results of science, knowledge, and technology for our inner lives, values, and ideals. The humanities help direct the use of knowledge in light of what we cherish, and in light of what we must change and criticize in order to continue to cherish.

In an instrumental vein, the strengths of the humanities in forging well-rounded, adaptable graduates should be fostered. These include valuable skills such as strong writing, critical thinking in areas that cannot be reduced to quantifiable data only, a grasp of historical patterns and change, flexibility, articulate expression, the ability to discern motivations and to deal with ambiguities, and good judgment in addressing complex human and organizational situations.

Conclusion

Campus leaders today, more than ever before, need constantly to re-examine and establish the essential purposes and functions of higher learning. They must exhibit the courage to cooperate and move beyond the current mantra of competition and the destructive struggles it begets. Education as merely an instrumental good geared to economic gain, coupled with competition among education institutions, can form a juggernaut threatening to eclipse the other goals and, ironically, subvert its own. To aid cooperation, higher education should be recognized as a unique form of commerce and trade, and therefore accorded unique options, such as the antitrust exemptions enjoyed by professional sports.

Courage of leadership is key to moving through the institutional conservatism and inertia now prevalent on many campuses. Organic growth is as complex as the changes that influence it, but it cannot be merely reactive; it may be rapid rather than slow. Growth from within will work best if it cleaves to principles and goods best grasped as an entelechy whose formulation itself is not permanent, but ever evolving, yet fitted to an institution's particular strengths and history. If higher education institutions do not resolve to make every effort to grow through their own principles of organic change, if they do not seek, re-examine constantly, and strive to maintain their own entelechy, then accelerating change will force them to become organizations whose operations and very existence are dictated from without rather than directed from within.

James Engell is professor of English and comparative literature at Harvard University. He has written numerous books, book chapters, and journal articles. His first book, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (1981) won the best first-book prize from Harvard University Press. Engell is currently writing a book about issues in higher education, including the challenges that social and cultural diversity pose to liberal education.