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The University and the Modern Condition

The response of universities to the characteristics of our era must take into account the purposes of universities and the kinds of contributions they can make. Universities are among the important institutions in our society, but there are other important institutions. You will recall de Tocqueville's description: "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive." The fact there is an unmet need does not at all mean that a university is best equipped to take it on. Even if it is, the added function may place such a burden upon an institution as to defeat its basic purposes. Even a welfare-indoctrinated society must make choices. It may be that new types of institutions are required; it does not follow that universities should become these new types. A university which claims to be all things to all people, or as many different things as different groups wish it to be, is deceitful or foolish or both.

The University of Chicago began with and has achieved for itself a unique combination. Its emphasis on research is paramount. It includes within research the understanding of our own and other cultures and the appreciation of the works of the mind. It includes the search for knowledge so basic as to vastly change man's powers and comprehension. And this is not just the goal but in fact the achievement. Whatever the strains, it believes that research and teaching are closely related. Research itself—the restructuring of subject matter, the revelation of insights, new and old—can be the highest form of teaching. The obligation which the university has assumed is not only to give the individual scholar the freedom and intellectual environment required for research but to undertake to transmit the qualities and understanding of research into all of its teaching.

Perhaps, then, one should ask, "What is the service of this university?" The answer is traditional and old-fashioned. Its greatest service is in its commitment to reason, in its search for basic knowledge, in its mission to preserve and to give continuity to the values of mankind's many cultures. In a time when the intellectual values are denigrated, this service was never more required. I realize, of course, that in all this there appears to be a paradox. It is highly probable, although the subject is not a simple one, that given their choice of profession, training at the University of Chicago has increased the earning power of our students. Basic scientific work at the university could not help but have its impact upon industry. Our graduates do hold a variety of important positions in industry, in the professions, in teaching, and in national laboratories. The university has been a center of self-criticism for our society. We did in fact play a major role in restoring and maintaining an integrated community, and the university's work has given leadership through example as well as study in urban affairs. And while our college is surely not free from the pressure of the discipline of learning, the combination of a research-oriented institution with a small undergraduate college has given us the opportunity for many of the qualities sought—and frequently sought in vain—by the small liberal arts institution. But these results are in fact dependent upon the university's self-limiting goals; its recognition that its only uniqueness ultimately arises from the power of thought, the dedication to basic inquiry, the discipline of intellectual training.—EDWARD H. LEVI, *Office of the President, University of Chicago*

Adapted from *Point of View—Talks on Education* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969).