The Impact of Globalization and the Future University

In any discussion of what a university should be in the future, globalization—in particular, how we respond to globalization—must be a defining issue. For too long, the logic of globalization has been shaped by terms and concepts of the market. When we hear the term globalization, we immediately think of integrated financial systems, tariffs, trade rules, and transnational economic networks. Of course, all of this is important. The forces of globalization have provided for extraordinary growth. But globalization is also blamed for increasing inequalities across nations. I think it is imperative for extraordinary growth. But globalization is also blamed for this is important. The forces of globalization have provided us with our own resources to this engagement.

How can we harness the forces of globalization? First and foremost, we must assert ourselves, animated by the values present in the academic community, and work to reshape the very meaning of the term globalization. Our understanding of globalization is too limited, too constrained—it should not be defined simply by economic terms and market considerations. Instead, globalization should be understood as a force through which we can further advance the betterment of humankind. Universities offer important resources for reframing this understanding.

I suggest here three areas that resonate with the ethos of the university. It is my hope that by engaging these three areas of reflection, we might open up and broaden our understanding of the meaning of globalization.

First, as we explore and expand our range of global opportunities, as new technologies enable us to be more connected, we must be that much more connected to our local communities. In our engagement with the local, we set the foundation to move forward with our work of advancing the betterment of humankind. Our first responsibility as educators is the development, the formation, of young people, and we have a responsibility to them for the cultivation of their intellects and the forging of their characters.

The ethos of the university includes, in the words of my colleague at Georgetown John O’Malley, a recognition of “the preeminence of truth and the dignity of the quest for it.” We seek to instill in our students the habits of mind that will sustain this quest. And we seek to ensure that students are prepared to make a difference in our ever-changing global context. The word that best captures this moral responsibility is cosmopolitan. It captures the sense that the responsibility we have to one another is grounded in our shared humanity. We share a reciprocity of responsibility. We learn this responsibility locally, first in our families and then in our hometowns or villages—our communities of origin, our “defining communities.”

Martha Nussbaum, a noted cosmopolitan, traces this recognition of the importance of the “local” back to the very first to explicate this moral insight:

The Stoics stress that to be a citizen of the world one does not need to give up local identifications, which can frequently be a source of great richness in life. They suggest that we think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one is drawn around the self; the next takes in one's immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one's neighbors or local group, one's fellow city-dwellers, one's fellow countrymen… Outside all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world will be to “draw the circles somehow toward the center” (Stoic philosopher Hierocles, 1st-2nd CE).

We begin in the local. We have our identities, and it is these very identities we ask our students to bring into the orbit of our universities. We need to embrace these identities and the communities that nurture and sustain them as we move out in these concentric circles, recognizing our need to embrace the global but never at the cost of these original identities.

Second, we need to embrace new technologies—and not just for the obvious reasons. New technologies are changing our world, not only how we connect and communicate but also, and more important, how we make meaning in our world.

Yet there is another way in which we must harness technology. We will not meet the needs of our societies with the educational infrastructure that we have today. Anywhere you look in the world today there are asymmetries in the education that people have and the education that people need. Even in the United States, with one of the most sophisticated systems of higher education the world has ever seen, we do not produce enough postsecondary graduates to meet the needs of our economy.

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There simply is not enough higher education, and we will never be able to close the gap through the kinds of infrastructure that have defined our past. Globalization demands that we “leapfrog” to the creative development of new infrastructure and the creative use of new technologies.

Third, we must acknowledge our responsibilities for the full human development of all people. For the past two decades there has been an initiative under way that has the potential to transform our understanding of the nature of our responsibilities to one another.

Beginning in 1990, the United Nations has produced an annual Human Development Report. The intellectual father of this initiative is the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, who over the course of his career has developed a set of ideas: the Human Development and Capability Approach. This approach seeks to address the underlying economic, social, and political conditions that enable each of us to fulfill our promise and potential. This is “an approach to development in which the objective is to expand what people are able to do and be.” The animating concepts were established in the very first Human Development Report. Human development was defined as “both the process of widening people’s choices and the level of their achieved well-being.” The report added: “The purpose of development is to enhance people’s capabilities.” What is meant by “people’s capabilities”? Their “freedom to promote or achieve what they value doing and being.” It is the freedom to engage in the activities and activities that people value doing and for which there is a value doing.4

The question that Sen asks and that is at the heart of the Human Development and Capability Approach is: Do you have the capability to engage in the activities, the practices—who Sen calls the “functionings”—that matter most to you? In addition, do the social, political, and economic structures provide you with the framework to achieve this capability? For so much of the modern era we have considered our responsibilities to each other within the poles of utilitarianism and duty-based theories. The Human Development and Capability Approach asks us to consider a different way.

This idea of human development resonates deeply with the ethos of the university and its focus on the betterment of humankind. It is a moral imperative that we embrace this new understanding of our responsibilities to each other for full “integral” development, allowing the university to play a larger role in the work of human development.

As we accept our responsibilities for one another regardless of our geography, nationality, ethnicity, race, color, or gender—that is, as we accept the responsibility of cosmopolitans—we must be ever more respectful of the local, of our defining communities. As we deepen our connections through new technologies, we must recognize the urgent need to deepen and expand our opportunities for access; we must leapfrog, using technology to ensure that all of our people have access to the learning necessary for participation in a global economy. And as we broaden our engagement in the world, we must accept the responsibilities we have for the full, integral human development of all people.

If the future university is to respond to the forces of globalization, we must bring our voice, our characteristic ethos of the betterment of humankind, and our resources in order to broaden our understanding of the responsibilities we face in this engagement.

Notes
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