

One, two, three, four, go!



The beginning of an academic year is a valuable opportunity to rethink the very meaning of the academic enterprise. To its most authentic nature.

The university is an institution where knowledge of relevance to the good of a society is preserved, expanded and transferred.

**What does that mean?
Let's look at it in four steps.**

Uni(versi)ty

It is an institution born almost perfect in medieval Europe, which has been kept steadily throughout the centuries and across continents, based on an extraordinary "faith in reason" – as Rodney Stark called it¹ – in the capacity, that is, of our intelligence to know the world. It is also, if we want to approach it through the lens of sustainability, one of the most sustainable institutions: because it is capable of enduring through the centuries and because it is focused on the needs of future generations.

It is, from another point of view, one of the greatest "luxuries" a society can afford. Let's try a thought experiment: think of a subsistence economy in which everyone must cultivate land to survive.

A girl from our village appears under a tree, in the shade. We approach her gruffly, encouraging her to join the rest of the group, who are hoeing the ground under the sun.

And she, in response, tells us, "Let me think: my musings will serve you all." "For what?" we reply incredulously and a little annoyed. "They might lead to the discovery of new farming systems, perhaps to the invention of the tractor, or to the promotion of a healthier, wiser, fairer and happier society..."

That's what a university is: a tremendous gamble on the future, one of the riskiest ventures – if in the end she has no brilliant ideas at all? – and at the same time most intellectually exciting one that humanity has devised. Universities are a "way to the future," as USI writes in the Charta that collects and expresses its fundamental principles.

Universities are born as the ensemble, *universitas*, of people – students and professors – who freely come together because of their shared passion for knowledge. And it was born, at the same time, universal: both because it does not exclude any kind of knowledge, seeks deep connections, and has no geographical boundaries. This was clear as early as the Diet of Roncaglia in the mid-12th century, which acknowledged the right of students and faculty to move freely and safely.

Here is the first step to emphasise its social, cognitive and geographical uni(versity) / universality.

In the following few lines, I would like to take three more steps, presenting *two* missions of teaching, *three* missions and *four* types of students.

Two modalities of teaching

Since its origin, university teaching and learning have been articulated around two primary modalities: *Lectio* and *Disputatio*. In the former, the professor read a fundamental text and commented on it, while students copied it and noted the comments in the margin, in the so-called glossae. Printing did not yet exist, and this was the most efficient way to reproduce a text.

Disputatio, on the other hand, was a dialogue in which the students managed the process and asked the professor about a particular topic or the whole discipline (*quodlibeta*).

The birth of the printing press and the spread of books and journals made texts more easily accessible. It emphasised that the university had the task of bringing knowledge into the public domain through *publications*. On the other hand, they have lopsided the relationship between students and faculty toward “*Lectio*”, gradually leaving “*Disputatio*” aside... While contemporary reflection is recovering the dialogical dimension of teaching, it is also necessary to recover the balance between research, documented in publications, and “living teaching”, which goes far beyond their mere oral reproduction. We have met two of a university's three primary missions so far.

Three missions

The *universitas* of students and faculty, passionate about knowledge, is articulated first and foremost as a place of (i) Teaching (*Lectio*) and dialogue (*Disputatio*), as we have seen earlier.

It is not only the transfer of already established knowledge but (ii) the elaboration of new knowledge, of constant Research designed to “know” in a more adequate, deeper and extended way.

Teaching and Research are then understood as (iii) Service to the common good of the societies that support the university and humanity as a whole.

These are, on closer inspection, three complementary declinations of an act of responsibility: (i) towards the new generations, which ask to learn and to be better prepared for the future; (ii) towards reality, which asks to be encountered and studied according to truth, with respect and passion; (iii) towards society as a whole, which asks to be supported in its sustainable development.

Four types of students

A recent study, published by the prestigious MIT Press, gives us insight into the reasons that drive students in their college experience and can help us review the numerous aspects seen so far².

It proposes four types.

The first is that of the *inertial students*, who go to college because they don't know what else to do...

The second is that of the *transactional students* interested in getting a degree and securing a successful career.

The third is that of the *exploratory students*, eager to approach new disciplines, experience new activities and meet new people. At this level, in particular, the international dimension of a university gains importance, providing a microcosm in which to experience the world.

The fourth type is the *transformational students*, ready first and foremost to transform themselves to encounter truth more completely. Those who experience teaching and research as a true Quest and who, perhaps, together with the last two types, will be able to change society a bit...

I wish myself and all of you to be, at least a little, like the latter.

Happy academic year 2022-23!

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¹ Stark, R. (2006). *The victory of reason: How Christianity led to freedom, capitalism, and Western success*. Random House trade paperbacks.

² Fischman, W. & Gardner, H.E. (2022). *The Real World of College: What Higher Education is and What it Can be*. MIT Press. Cfr. anche Gardner, H.E. & Fischman, W. (2021). “Does truth have a future in higher education?”, *Studies in Higher Education*, 46:10, pp. 2099-2105.