

Chapter 21

The Evolving Discourse of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Rhetoric of Higher Education Reform

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ABSTRACT

A brief historical overview of the evolution of the public discourse of the purpose of higher education is undertaken to provide context for current debates over investment in, and reform of, post-secondary education. Four separate discourses are identified: higher education for enlightenment, to develop human capital, as manpower management, and as consumerism. The dominant discourse of the purpose of higher education is shown to have changed from learning for its own sake to an emphasis on manpower planning and consumerism. The separate assumptions and implications of these distinct discourses are often confabulated with little apparent awareness of the contradictory nature of rhetoric drawn from more than one discourse at a time. The authors provide a simple analytical framework to cut through the confusion.

INTRODUCTION

There is frequently a disconnect between research and public policy in the field of higher education (Hillman, Tandberg & Sponsler, 2015). Researchers need to ensure that their research is relevant to public policy, or risk speaking only to themselves. By the same token, policy-makers need to ensure that decision-making is evidence-based or risk making costly mistakes based on faulty assumptions. When addressing fundamental issues, both researchers and policy-makers start from the values and assumptions implicit within the dominant discourse(s) of the purpose of higher education. Understanding how this public discourse has changed over time is, then, fundamental to any analysis of either research or policy trends.

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To be successful, educational leaders and administrators need to understand the assumptions that underlie the policies for which they are responsible. This is surprisingly problematic because the arguments made to support investment in, or reform of, higher education often draw on four distinct (arguably contradictory) discourses. As different discourses have historically appealed to different stakeholders, switching between discourses depending on the audience addressed is a sensible and workable strategy for administrators seeking support for their initiatives. Problems arise, however, when these separate discourses become so confabulated that one is no longer able to disentangle them oneself.

Understanding discourse also abets predictability of changes in actual university practice. Sustainable adoption of online courses, for example, can only be successful if relevant audiences can be convinced that the platform fits within the discourse of higher education. Those institutions best able to predict how shifts in discourse will impact program models and delivery mechanisms will be first to market and therefore best able to capitalize on the emerging technologies. The emergence of online institutions, for example, could be accurately predicted 35 years ago (Runté, 1981) —before there even was an Internet—through a simple extrapolation of the then emergent trends in the dominant discourse.

Therefore, it is impossible to understand shifts in government funding or public support for higher education without first understanding changes in the public discourse of the purpose of higher education. This chapter traces the historical origins of the four competing discourses of the purpose of higher education to examine the fundamental assumptions that direct investment and reform.

FOUR DISCOURSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The emergence of the modern university as a publicly funded institution was first predicated upon enlightenment ideals. A discourse of education as investment in human capital then developed in competition to this ideal. This human capital discourse was dominant during the explosive expansion of higher education in the post-war era, but became subject to further refinement the early 1980s. The emergence of these two new discourses was predicated on the assumption that only targeted investment based on a measurable benefit to the economy justified expenditures from the public purse. Categorized by their fundamental characteristics and presented in the order in which they became dominant, they are the discourses of *enlightenment*, *human capital*, *manpower* and *consumerism*.

The Discourse of Enlightenment

The dominant discourse of the purpose of higher education initially was that *any learning is of value in and of itself*. A significant proponent of this view was Cardinal Newman (1852), founder of Dublin University: “Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind that any kind of knowledge, if it really be such, is its own reward.” (p. 130)

Higher education, in the *discourse of enlightenment*, is not a means to some economic end, such as the attainment of professional qualifications or an assured supply of trained manpower, but an end in itself.

Opposed to this view was the insistence that education must be of some utility in the practical world. Already in Newman’s time, these arguments were being expressed in terms almost indistinguishable from the present discourses of human capital and manpower planning. To quote Cardinal Newman’s summary of the opposition:

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