

The University Today: Challenges and Opportunities¹

Bob Trube, Senior Area Director, IVCF/USA

It is both humbling and challenging to be asked to talk about “the university today” and the challenges and opportunities our mission field presents us on a global basis -- in 20 minutes! It feels a bit like the classic college essay question:

Define the universe in 500 words or less. Give three examples!

I should take a moment to acknowledge the social context from which I speak. I have served for the past 18 years as the staff worker for the IVCF/USA graduate student fellowship at The Ohio State University, one of the largest public research universities in the United States. In the U. S., Ohio State is most known for its national championship American football teams. Yet it is a world class research university attracting graduate students from throughout the world. It represents the American tradition of land grant universities, reflected in its motto, ‘disciplina in civitatem’ or “education for citizenship.” From its beginnings, Ohio State has seen its task as one of educating graduates to advance the civic and industrial interests of the State of Ohio.

In the early years of the 21st century, Ohio State wrestles with its own form of the issues that face universities across the world. While serving the students and economic interests of our state, we have recruiting offices in Shanghai, Mumbai, and Sao Paolo.² We have a global internet presence and field researchers on every continent of the world including Antarctica. Our state legislature has reduced its funding of the university while demanding that our curriculum and graduates help fuel our state’s efforts to transition from heavy manufacturing to high technology. We reflect the political, ideological and lifestyle diversity of our time. You can walk across campus and witness competing Israeli and Palestinian demonstrations, see Muslim students gather for prayers at several locations on campus, Jews observing Shabbat, and sign up for any of over 1000 student organizations representing every affinity group and cause on campus. Both Muslim and Christian groups have engaged the university over non-discrimination policies advancing agendas of inclusion dictating leadership positions be open to all students, even those not sharing our faith and moral convictions.

While the forms and cultural expressions vary, I would propose there are four forces for change shaping higher education around the world, that present challenges and opportunities for each of our movements. I would also propose that these underscore the urgency of our conference theme: “Together. In Christ. In Mission. In the University.” These forces are:

- 1) the International character of higher education,
- 2) the impact of technology both in teaching and as a focus of the university’s mission,
- 3) the economics of higher education and how these are re-shaping the campus, and
- 4) secularization, its effects and the militant reaction it sparks.

1. Internationalization

Increasingly, students are traveling from every nation to every nation. Current UNESCO estimates are that 3.7 million students study abroad each year, and this number is growing. Over 690,000 are in the US, but over 235,000 are in China. Increasingly, this is being funded by governments. Brazil has launched an initiative to

¹ Edited transcript of presentation at 2015 IFES World Assembly on July 22, 2015.

² <http://oia.osu.edu/global-gateways.html> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

provide 75,000 scholarships for students to study abroad in science and technology.³ Studies show that international study has great advantages in an enlarged perspective, language learning, international contacts and career development.⁴ The U.S is encouraging students to include study abroad in their educational experience. What studies do not show is the increasing opportunity study abroad provides for gospel witness and partnerships in the universities of the world!

The global nature of higher education does not simply reflect the flow of people but also the flow of ideas. The necessity of collaboration across cultures was underscored by the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa where understanding of epidemiology had to walk hand in hand with understanding the cultural practices of how families care for their sick and bury their dead and those on the ground had to overcome both western ignorance and African suspicion. Whether it is a matter of dealing with contagious disease or climate change or global business, it is increasingly common for students and faculty to work alongside co-investigators half way around the world, whether virtually, at academic conferences or in the field.

Universities themselves are crossing international borders, whether through online courses or through “branch” campuses. The University of Nottingham has a campus in Malaysia, Cornell University is in Qatar, the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi and Leeds Metropolitan University has a campus in India.⁵ New York University is contending with the Chinese government about academic freedom issues on its campus in Shanghai.⁶ Indigeneity has long been a value in IFES and might it be important to listen to each other with regard to this trend and then seek to influence institutional policies in our own countries.

Questions

1. What will it mean for our movements to practice relational and intellectual hospitality with the guests on our campuses? What might we learn from our sister movements about extending welcome? And how, in each of our countries, will we work to prepare our students to be culturally sensitive witnesses, and not just tourists, as they study abroad?
2. How might we help each other in grace and truth and humility to recognize the cultural blinders and cultural captivities that hinder effective cross-cultural collaboration in mission and in research?

2. Technology

The explosion of technology is shaping what is taught and funded at many of our institutions. Pressures from parents, students, governments, and businesses are compelling changes in how higher education’s ends are being conceived. Academic degrees in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and math (or STEM) are being emphasized while programs in the humanities, languages, the arts, and social sciences are struggling to secure funding, enrollments, and to reconceive their role as an adjunct to STEM. In many settings, education is being treated as a commodity rather than a formative experience and engagement with life’s big questions. Students are the customers, faculty and university staff the vendors, and productivity is measured in terms of job placement rates. As I’ve already observed, the decision of many governments to subsidize international study reflects the fact that STEM enjoys an international consensus.

³ <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20120926-the-statistics-of-studying-abroad> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

⁴ <http://studyabroad.ucmerced.edu/study-abroad-statistics/statistics-study-abroad> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

⁵ <http://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/choosing-university/university-branch-campus> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

⁶ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/26/officials-us-universities-china-tell-congress-they-have-protected-academic-freedom> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

Technology is also shaping the way we learn, and the way education is delivered. A student may now access on a smartphone information that might have taken hours to find in a university library. Increasingly, the classroom is not the location of lectures but a place to discuss and apply content viewed online and to collaborate in learning with other students, a shift being referred to as the “flipped” classroom. Increasingly educators are required to display expertise not merely in their academic discipline but also in the use of various online technologies and social media. We have also seen a vast increase in online courses as either an alternative to or adjunct to education on a physical campus. Technology also means instant communication of everything from revolutions to complaints about the campus administration. One university leader I know utilizes social media constantly not only to promote the accomplishments of his institution but also to maintain contact with current and prospective students, and other constituents of the university.

Questions

1. How might Christians contribute to the discussion of education’s purpose in the institutions where they work? What are the opportunities for our mission if the spiritual hunger and aspirations of students are not acknowledged and the “big questions” are not explored in their education?
2. How should the transformation in the delivery of education influence our ministry approaches on campus? What will it mean for us to incarnate the gospel in an increasingly virtual world?

3. Economics

Universities in most of our countries are facing economic pressures. In many of our settings state subsidies of higher education has been significantly cut. Part of this reflects the massive debt loads many of our countries are facing. This also is reflected in changes in global research funding trends. The U.S. accounted for 37 % of research funding in 2001, but only 30% in 2011. EU funding dropped from 26 to 22 % in the same period while East and Southeast Asia research funding increased from 25 to 34 %.⁷

What these economic pressures have led to is the increasing corporatization of the university. Academic departments are being treated as “profit centers” and expansions or cuts in programs are determined almost solely on the basis of revenues generated. There has been a spate of articles in American media about the growth of the administrative class while growth in tenured faculty positions has been far slower, and universities increasingly rely upon lecturers or adjunct faculty to control costs.

One of the factors that drive international student enrollments is that many *are* subsidized by their governments or represent the economic elites of their countries and can afford to pay premium tuitions.

The other economic issue is that students and their families are bearing increasing financial burdens for education, and this may lead to a new elitism in education. Student debt in the U.S. is currently estimated at \$1.3 trillion dollars.⁸ In countries where the cost of education is increasingly shifted to students, there is a danger of accentuating class divisions and opportunity inequities.

Questions

1. How might we advocate for shalom and justice in the university as it struggles with issues of cost?

⁷ <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind14/index.cfm/chapter-4/c4s2.htm> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

⁸ <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/03/10/student-loan-initiatives-could-benefit-40m-borrowers.html> (last accessed 7/27/2015).

2. What ought to be our response if we find ourselves in the elite, or ministering to the cultural elites on our campuses?

4. Secularization

At Ohio State, we have a statue of William Oxley Thompson, the longest sitting president of Ohio State from 1899 to 1925. What few acknowledge is that Thompson was a Presbyterian minister who on one occasion during his tenure commented, "I am essentially and always a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Incidentally I am president of the university..."⁹ Many of the institutions, even state institutions where we work, have Christian origins and influences, and yet the prevailing ideology is a secularist one that confines matters of faith to personal and private spheres of life. Often, our ministries are tolerated to the extent that they conform to this prevailing ideology.

Issues around human sexuality reflect the emphasis on personal expressiveness that arises from secularization. And here I feel I must apologize for many leaders of the church, even evangelicals, in the west, who have moved from teaching a redeemed sexuality to affirm pretty much whatever our culture affirms. This has been done without consultation with the church in the Majority World. Those in the West have not considered the consequences of affirming what would be considered decadent by some of the enemies of Christianity.

At the same time, we have often said and done that which is hurtful to those Jesus might have considered as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." A friend who is a university leader in my country and deeply committed Christians says, "These are young people, trying to figure out their lives." We may remember our own awakening awareness of our sexuality and our struggles to live with this. Imagine that awakening with the awareness that one's physical anatomy and mental perceptions of attraction or gender are in conflict with each other. I wonder what might have happened in my own country if we had devoted ourselves to caring for those facing these struggles, loving them, and as God gave opportunities, leading them to Christ rather than trying to win a "culture war."

We also see the rise of militant, clashing narratives: political, sexual, and religious. Secularism in part serves to mitigate the clash of narratives in our settings and sometimes affords the opportunity for those of different views to engage each other with civility. And yet both we and others realize this secularism is not a neutral meeting ground but an ideology in its own right. Secularism values certain narratives above others, such as vague gnostic spirituality or outright atheism, and certain value systems such as materialism.

The truth is that secularism lacks substance and the result is the assertion of vigorous competing ideologies from an evangelistic atheism to militant Islam. On U.S. campuses, this takes the form of competing demonstrations. In places like Garissa and northern Nigeria, it means the death of brothers and sisters. Might it be that our opportunity is to witness to a third way between the hollowness of secularism and the militancy of clashing ideologies, one that holds together and extends the grace and truth of the Lord Jesus to an alternately truthless and graceless world.

⁹ James E. Pollard, *William Oxley Thompson: Evangel of Education* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1955), 226. I quoted this in the address from memory which was accurate in sense but not wording. This is the quote as it appears in Pollard's book.

Questions

1. How are we equipping our students to understand and engage with courage and grace the reigning paradigm of secularism?
2. How might we function as a “third way” people providing an alternative to pervasive and empty secularism and militant ideologies?

Conclusion

As I’ve worked on this message, I’ve been profoundly struck with the relevance of the theme of this World Assembly. Given the trends of internationalization, technology that is changing the focus and delivery of learning, the economic challenges facing universities around the world, and the secularization we must engage, it seems to me that like never before, we are faced with fresh questions of what does it mean for us as member movements of the IFES family to be together in Christ in mission in the university. All of our movements have prized our indigenous character. Without losing that, is this the time where we might learn more of what it means to be interdependent as well as indigenous? How might we work more closely to welcome the unprecedented flow of students between our countries? How might we learn from each other about engaging technological change and the questions it raises about the character of a university without being reactionaries? What might we learn from each other about doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God in the economics of our universities as they touch the students, researchers and faculty with whom we minister? And how might we stand together and support each other in proclaiming Christ in the midst of vigorous ideologies that oppose our faith?

These are questions I face as I walk on campus at Ohio State. With contextual differences, the questions are similar in Kinshasa and Cambridge, in Singapore and Sao Paolo, in Seoul and Sydney, in Mumbai and Mexico City. The Lord has given us in His Word, His Spirit, and one another what we need in this World Assembly to meet the challenges set before us.

I want to close by inviting us to listen to Jesus’s prayer for us in John 17:20-23:

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”¹⁰

©Robert C. Trube, 2015. Permission is granted to reproduce this material with acknowledgment of the author and inclusion of this copyright notice.

¹⁰ Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](#)® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.