



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

November 30, 2016

The University: This week, my thoughts are about the critical yet privileged role that universities play in democracies. I was led to this because of a recent conversation with my teenage sons, during which one voiced the criticism that universities are heavy on debate and light on action, particularly in the face of increasing external and internal tensions. I was helped a little by the talking points in this [Chronicle article](#) in arguing, perhaps not persuasively enough, that universities are indeed changing and reinventing themselves. We can and must adapt to our new circumstances. In our adaptation, however, we should not take for granted the importance of debate, nor the university's role in protecting and facilitating the free exchange of words and ideas. Our financial challenges are real, but we can see our vitality in the current debates around campus climate, symbols, and priorities.

In part, this means that our adaptation must reinforce our mission. William Massy, professor emeritus of Stanford University, wrote a book titled "[Reengineering the University: how to be mission centered, market smart, and margin conscious.](#)" Massy makes the case that non-profit entities such as universities must use the money they make from some of their functions to support others that are less lucrative but crucial to their mission. He proposes a number of intriguing strategies to reengineer the university to remain mission centered, yet thriving in the face of current challenges.

One of the unchanging missions of American universities is to educate the citizenry in democratic participation. Thomas Jefferson stated, "the most important bill in our whole code, is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people." And that "no other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness." Jefferson founded the University of Virginia as a home to "the illimitable freedom of the human mind." A university cannot fulfill that role, however, without the critical pursuit of truth that is enshrined in its commitment to freedom of speech.

In this spirit, I encourage you to read the [Brain Pickings post](#) about Parker Palmer and his book "Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit." Palmer stated, "We engage in creative tension-holding every day in every dimension of our lives, seeking and finding patches of common ground. We do it with our partners, our children, and our friends as we work to keep our relationships healthy and whole. We do it in the workplace ... as we come together to solve practical problems. We've been doing it for ages in every academic field from the humanities to the sciences. Human beings have a well-demonstrated capacity to hold the tension of differences in ways that lead to creative outcomes and advances. It is not an impossible dream to believe we can apply that capacity to politics. In fact, our capacity for creative tension-holding is what made the American experiment possible in the first place... America's founders — despite the bigotry that limited their conception of who "We The People" were — had the genius to establish the first form of government in which differences, conflict, and tension were understood not as the enemies of a good social order but as the engines of a better social order."

The same post quotes Ursula K. Le Guin on [the magic of real human communication](#): "Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it." A university worthy of the name shall always provide a wide and thoughtful space where within our words will live, fight, and die. Increasingly, it is also the last place that such activities may take place in our society.

Weekly Dashboard Challenge: This week is the fourth of five Dashboard Challenges. Here is this week's challenge: According to dashboard.unm.edu, how many baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral degrees did UNM students earn last year? If you send the correct answer to provost@unm.edu, you will be entered into a drawing for a \$10 Lobo Cash card (accepted at [these locations](#)). You must submit your answer by 5 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 2.

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