

Introduction to University: Lecture One

A Guide to the Series

Mark Mercer
Professor of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
sergechestnut@gmail.ca

This is the Atrium at Saint Mary's University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We're in an area in which people play board games, eat lunch, do group work or just engage in conversation; there's the Patrick Power Library; and over there, past the Living Wall, are classrooms and professors' offices.

Saint Mary's used to be a religious university, under the Jesuits and the Christian Brothers, but in 1970 it became a public, secular institution, another university among all the many public and secular universities in Canada. It retains a bit of the feel of a religious university, but only a little. It might have done well to have changed its name when it was separated from the Roman Catholic church, but I understand that keeping the name was part of the deal.

Universities have various purposes and functions. They prepare young people to take their place in the society's professional and managerial elite. They supply people with credentials that they can then use to impress prospective employers. They generate research. They create culture. In some communities, they provide people with sports and entertainment. They promote the received values of their societies. As cynics have noted, they reduce unemployment by keeping a good number of young people out the work force for three or four years.

I'm Mark Mercer, a professor of philosophy here at Saint Mary's. In these lectures, I'm going to describe and explain what universities these days do and how they do it. Much in my talks will be factual, providing what I hope is useful information to newcomers and to people outside universities. I'll seek to clarify terms and practices such as tenure, academic freedom and majors and minors.

I will also be taking a critical perspective on the contemporary university. Ours is not a golden age of the university, not that there ever was such a thing. But universities have seen better and worse times, and ours is not one of its better times. The governments that fund universities are making demands that threaten to diminish the academic mission. Perhaps more than ever in its history, university administrators and many professors are hostile to academic values. They would have universities abandon their academic missions to serve social justice goals. Cultural winds constantly shift, though, and if they should ever shift favourably toward the academic mission and the values and practices that sustain that mission, it will be useful if those committed to academic values and practices had ideas and models on which to draw. Part of my motive for these lectures, then, is to supply young people with a conception of the academic mission a university could serve, should in a generation of two universities enjoy a renaissance.

My conception of a university is that of a place for thinking hard about difficult matters, a place in which people think hard about difficult matters just for the hell of it. That is the conception I will attempt to articulate and the perspective from which I will criticize the contemporary university.

That we can think hard for the sheer joy of thinking hard isn't well known among students, or even anymore among professors.

“Liberal study” is the name I give to the activity of thinking hard about things out of the sheer love of thinking hard about things. In articulating the endeavour of liberal study, I will talk about the sort of person given to liberal study. Such people value intellectual and moral autonomy, the ability to think for oneself and to value for oneself. Those drawn to liberal study prize their own intellectual and moral autonomy, and they respect the intellectual and moral autonomy of all those people—students, professors, administrators, secretaries, cafeteria workers and custodians—within their university community.

Intellectual autonomy, as I will have reason to explain in subsequent lectures, is not only the ability to think for oneself, an ability that comes in degrees (some are better at it than others, and no one's perfect at it). It is also the willingness and, indeed, the courage to think for oneself. Willingness and courage are also ingredients in possessing moral autonomy.

In some lectures, I will attend to the practices and values necessary for liberal study. What would a university hospitable to thinking hard about difficult topics look like? How would it be organized and what would be central to its culture?

In other lectures, I will turn to the question why anyone would want to support an institution of liberal study. We might wish our universities were entirely independent of government, but it is far from realistic to expect even a few universities to be able to operate without money from the government. The history of the university from ancient and mediaeval times to today can be written as a history of the compromises university people have seen as necessary or useful to make in order to sustain and protect their institutions. The trouble here is twofold. First, academics must see compromises as compromises, as changes not expressive of the academic mission and potentially harmful to it. Second, they must maintain a robust sense of the harms that come with compromises they consider making, and seek to mitigate these harms, or to balance them with gains.

“Let the Stoics say what they please, we do not eat for the good of living, but because the meat is savory and the appetite is keen.” So said Ralph Waldo Emerson. We do not study for sake of employment or even to be educated. We study because the topic is compelling and the effort is joyous.

1 July 2025