

Regional

Universities need to rethink their missions

Universities have a long history. The first one was founded in Bologna, Italy, in 1088. Harvard, considered to be the first American institution of higher education, was founded in 1636. Yet, universities as we know them today date back to the late 19th century when they started to become a more common feature in the United States. And even from the earliest days people speculated what universities of the future would look like.

Now that the value of higher education is being questioned one wonders to what extent those early predictions were accurate. Take, for example, the Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset. In his 1930 book "Misión de la Universidad" (mission of the university) he wrote about what he saw as some of the dangers faced by postsecondary institutions.

First, Ortega was concerned about their increasing level of specialization. It is true that many engage in subjects that are virtually unknown to the general public, but it is also true that we have seen how the American system of liberal education has tried to deal with that issue through general education courses as well as with more support for interdisciplinary approaches in topics such as environmental studies, cultural studies, and the like. And that is why, despite the criticism, a liberal arts education continues to be central to the U.S. system.

He was also concerned about the lack of visionary leadership that could shape universities into exciting places. There the results have been mixed. Because of budget cuts and enrollment challenges, most of their current leaders have become crisis managers more than anything else. Yet, from time to time we see a few leaders emerging with new ideas – not just fads – in order to make their institutions more versatile and innovative.

However, what I found more fascinating in re-reading Ortega's book was his preoccupation with the fact that many universities were falling into vulgarity ("chabacanería").

What he meant is that governments were behaving in vulgar ways with their own cit-

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izens by setting bad examples when it came to ethics and general behavior. He decried lack of decorum, self-respect and decency. We all agree that the vast majority of citizens today feel that way and that is why we see the emergence of populist political parties in Europe and apathy among Americans at the polls. Ortega predicted that such behaviors would percolate into the higher education system. Many issues surrounding higher education today, like the ones dealt with in past editions of this column, underscore that perception.

Ortega discussed how vulgarity has the tendency to spread itself into many spheres and in many echelons, from government to the family and individual levels. As a cure to that malady, he prescribed for us to distance ourselves from attitudes that are epitomized by parlance such as "whatever," "It does not matter," or "Who cares?" He made a call for the newest generations to change attitudes and that was particularly true when it comes to remembering what is the true mission of a university. He called for universities to ensure that their goal is to provide students with an education that embraces values, positive attitudes and a broad view of culture, not just narrow knowledge. In other words, to build character. Too bad we have not listened to him. In the last few years we have seen how the performance of our students in different areas has fallen behind many other countries, while at the same time we see an increase in the celebration of mediocrity and tastelessness.

In many ways we have been producing what he called educated barbarians, i.e., people with a degree but poor knowledge of the world in which we live, and who fail in areas that really matter: critical thinking, problem-solving, team-work and communication skills. Those are the kind of tools that should make of us better citizens.

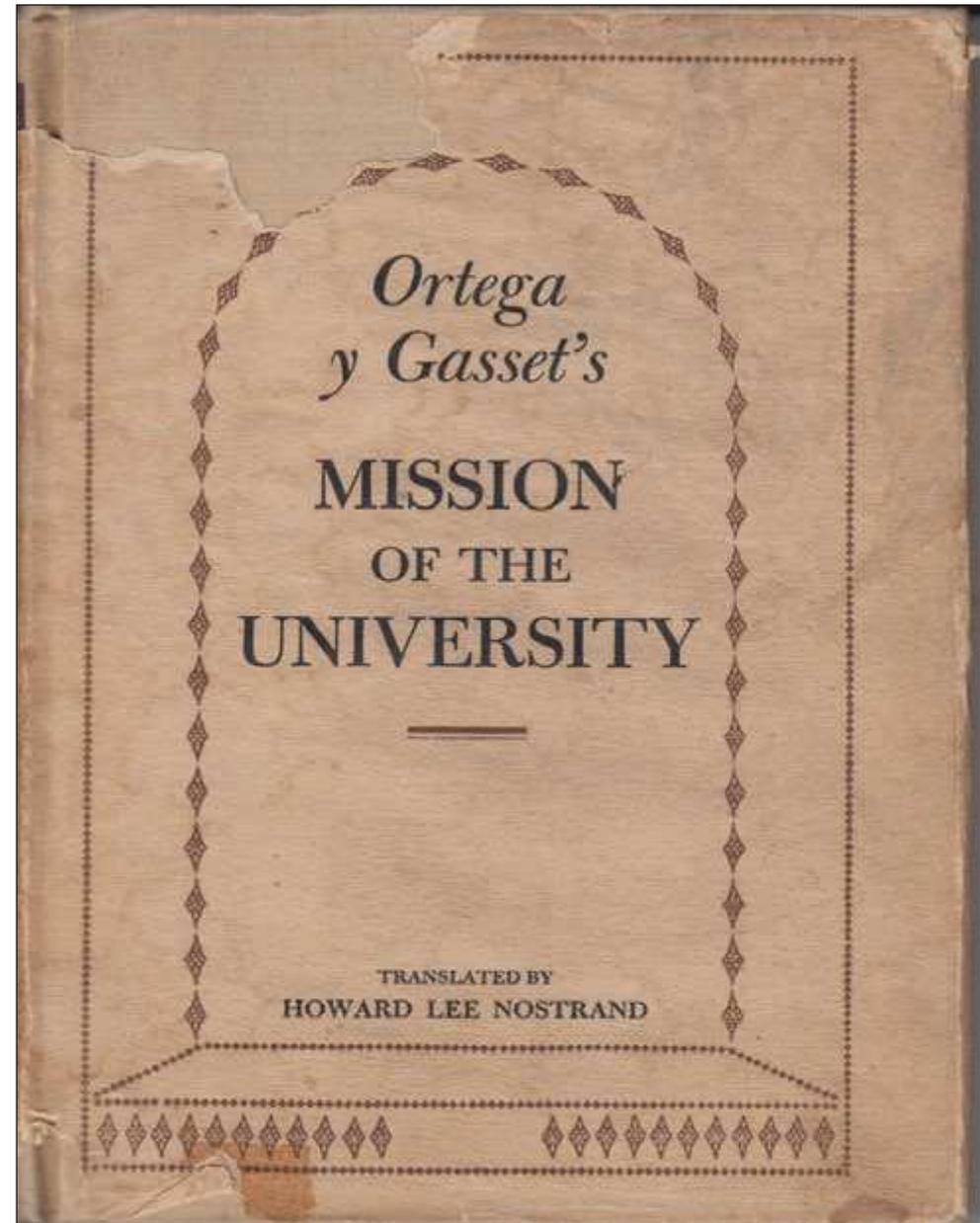
He also denounced some bad trends, such as the lack of authenticity in people and the naiveté of believing that everybody is good, discreet, intelligent and fair. All that we need to do to support that assertion is to read the news. Yet, Ortega thought that the university is the place to correct the worst of human instincts and that is why universities should be student-centered, something that many – including some faculty – tend to forget.

It is interesting that Ortega called for the students themselves to be more demanding of what the university should be giving them, not in terms of banalities such as climbing walls or undeserved high grades, but the best possible education, one based on rigor and high standards, not gimmicks. He said that faculty should be chosen among those who had a broad culture, and more for their effectiveness as teachers than for their scholarly production. He called for inspiring teachers who would lead students to become more creative and whole.

His stance was that at the end of the day people should not be following leaders or crowds. For Ortega we should make of wisdom not just knowledge, but social power. Otherwise, he warned, hostility toward intelligence would advance and that is precisely what we are witnessing these days in terms of anti-intellectualism and the view of institutions of higher education as mere factories of graduates.

Eighty-five years ago, Ortega y Gasset felt much admiration for the U.S. approach to higher education because he viewed it as a system designed to generate the elites that would lead this country into building a better society. Too bad that devaluation of merit and exaltation of the vulgarity he so much alerted us to are taking us down the path of ordinariness from which only a strong rethinking of the mission of the university can save us.

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For the Intelligencer
Cover of one of the earliest English editions of Ortega Y Gasset's book "Mission of the University."