

'TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND, AND NOT TO YIELD'

Ulysses, Alfred Lord Tennyson

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Abstract

This essay explores the essential role of universities in modern society, emphasizing their need to transcend isolation and actively engage with their communities. Drawing on Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield', it argues that universities must rebuild trust, confront challenges, embrace collaboration, and reaffirm their moral responsibility. The essay highlights practical examples illustrating how universities innovate, imagine the future, and address pressing societal needs. Public administration is presented as a model discipline that bridges academic silos, engaging directly with community concerns and demonstrating how universities can anchor themselves in everyday life. The narrative positions universities as living entities that learn, adapt, and inspire. It underscores their ability to foster open dialogue, where diverse perspectives converge to solve real-world problems. By promoting transparency, collaboration, and ethical action, universities can become not just centers of learning but beacons of hope and progress. Ultimately, the essay challenges universities to embrace their role as vital contributors to society, urging them to innovate, connect, and lead with integrity toward a brighter, shared future.

Keywords: university and society, trust in higher education, community engagement.

I firmly believe that the university should be ‘in the city,’ not ‘a city’. Universities should not be isolated fortresses, removed from the communities they serve, but living, breathing parts of those communities, engaged in constant dialogue with people and their challenges. To move forward, we must have the courage to acknowledge the moments when we lost our way—and to learn from them.

The lines that follow reflect a personal belief and a deep sense of duty I feel, both as a professor and as a part of the university. I believe that each of us involved in academic life has a responsibility to help transform universities into places of trust, cooperation, and hope for the future.

To strive: Rebuilding trust requires persistent effort, and a commitment to adapt and connect with society in meaningful ways.

Societies today advance at an unprecedented pace. Technology has placed powerful tools at our fingertips, enabling us to read more, explore the world faster and in greater depth, and understand both the intricacies of the human mind and the limitations of our biological bodies. These tools allow us to peer beyond our planet into distant galaxies and experience more in a single day than previous generations could in a lifetime. Yet, amidst this acceleration, one truth remains unchanged: learning takes time.

We learn as we live, and our earliest steps are often guided by those we trust—parents, mentors, and caregivers who provide support long before we can fully understand the meaning of trust. This relationship of trust is fundamental; it shapes our willingness to explore the world and take risks. The same holds true for universities. For these institutions to guide students effectively, they must earn the trust of those who cross their threshold. But this trust is not easily won—it is built slowly, through transparency, accountability, and a demonstrated commitment to nurturing the individual while serving the collective good.

Universities are not just places of instruction, they are sanctuaries of reflection, spaces where the rapid pace of progress is tempered by the slower, deliberate process of understanding. Yet, their ability to fulfill this role depends entirely on their connection to society and their capacity to rebuild and sustain trust.

To seek: Understanding the challenges faced by universities is the first step toward meaningful transformation.

In striving to rebuild trust, universities begin their journey. Yet, understanding the challenges they face is an essential second step. Universities, much like living organisms, breathe, evolve, and occasionally falter. They carry the weight of their past—sometimes as a source of pride, other times as a burden that holds them back. Within them, opposing forces coexist: the pull of tradition and the push for innovation, the desire for stability and the need for change, the lofty ideals of academia and the practical demands of society.

This inner tension can lead to missteps, moments of stagnation, and even crises of identity. Yet, just as in life, there is always the potential for renewal, for recalibration, for finding a path forward.

If we think of universities as living entities, it becomes easier to understand their challenges. They make mistakes, often shaped by the environments they inhabit. In post-communist Romania, for example, universities emerged from decades of rigid control, tasked with reinventing themselves in a society undergoing profound transformation. Like a creature adapting to a new habitat, they struggled to find their footing. Diplomas became their currency, but quality often lagged behind. Scandals eroded public trust, and their connection to the communities they served grew increasingly fragile. At times, universities seem haunted by their past, much like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, weighed down by a new form they neither chose nor fully understand. But they also possess the potential for transformation. Within their walls, ideas are born, relationships are forged, and change begins to take shape. Despite their struggles, universities remain spaces of possibility.

To find: Public administration is an example of how disciplines can root themselves in community needs.

Public administration exemplifies how disciplines within universities can anchor themselves in societal needs, transcending academic silos to address complex, real-world challenges. Its identity lies in its capacity to bridge the professional pursuit of the common good with the social values that shape communities. From its origins, public administration has grappled with questions of values, behavior, and culture—dimensions inherently tied to the well-being of society (Dahl, 1947; Waldo, 1968). These foundational questions align with the broader mission of universities: to engage with real-world challenges and contribute to the betterment of society.

Unlike many academic disciplines that remain confined to their conceptual boundaries, public administration is inherently interdisciplinary. It draws on insights from political science, sociology, economics, and law to offer a holistic understanding of governance and public service. In doing so, it compels universities to step out of their isolated academic silos and engage directly with the communities they serve. Public administration demands presence—active participation in the life of citizens, where policies are shaped, decisions are implemented, and societal needs are met.

The study of public administration offers a blueprint for how universities can reconnect with society. Rooted in practical wisdom, it asks fundamental questions: 'Where are we going? Is it desirable to go there? What can we do to get there?' (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This interdisciplinary approach resonates with the values of community engagement and shared purpose, making it accessible to students, scholars, civil servants, and citizens alike (Raadschelders, 2008).

Moreover, public administration emphasizes practical experience, equipping decision-makers with tools to address concrete societal challenges. Through case studies and

real-world applications, it demonstrates the transformative power of academia to foster solutions that advance the public good (Raadschelders, 2008). By transcending traditional academic boundaries, public administration positions universities as vital actors in society, not just observers or commentators. It is a discipline that not only studies the public good but also actively contributes to its realization.

Not to yield: No matter the obstacles, universities must remain steadfast in their mission to educate and serve society.

Fostering open dialogue

Universities should be the places where dialogue thrives – where professors, experts, and local residents come together to discuss the challenges that affect their communities. This dialogue should not be constrained by fear of disagreement or ideological differences; rather, it should embrace them as opportunities for growth. Technology, alongside the simple willingness to contribute to the common good, offers unprecedented opportunities to engage diverse voices in meaningful conversations.

Universities are increasingly becoming arenas where ideas confront one another, and bridges are built between differing perspectives. For instance, partnerships between universities and local communities, such as those in Cluj-Napoca, Tallinn, Amsterdam, and Tokyo, demonstrate how academic institutions can facilitate meaningful dialogue and foster mutual understanding. These initiatives often address local challenges—whether related to urban development, sustainability, or cultural diversity—by bringing together students, researchers, policymakers, and residents.

By creating these spaces for open dialogue, universities not only strengthen their ties to the communities they serve but also nurture a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility for solving complex problems.

Embracing moral responsibility

Moral responsibility within universities is not an abstract concept; it is a practical commitment that requires action at every level. Professors, students, and administrative staff are all integral to the fabric of the university. Together, they form the institution's moral core. For universities to be places of trust and respect, they must establish clear codes of values and actionable principles that guide their behavior.

A powerful example of this commitment can be found in the collaborative networks of European universities, such as CIVICA¹, CIVIS², and EUTOPIA³. These networks bring

1 <https://www.civica.eu>

2 <https://civis.eu/en>

3 <https://eutopia-university.eu>

together institutions from across Europe to create innovative programs that prioritize societal impact, inclusivity, and the ethical dimensions of education and research. By addressing transnational challenges—ranging from climate change to democratic governance—these networks exemplify how universities can work collectively to uphold and advance shared moral responsibilities.

Universities must also recognize their limits, admit mistakes, and work with their communities to address them. This process builds fortifications not to isolate institutions but to protect honesty in science, integrity in teaching, and mutual respect among all members of the academic family.

Celebrating collaboration

No single solution can address all challenges. While history often attributes transformative decisions to individuals, the reality is that behind every major breakthrough stands countless others who contributed to its realization. Whether in times of war or peace, progress has always been the result of collective effort.

Universities are uniquely positioned to embody this principle of collaboration. Decision-makers within these institutions—and beyond—must recognize that the best ideas often emerge through dialogue, testing, and refinement. No single person or discipline holds all the answers, but every individual and perspective can contribute to the solutions we seek.

Several initiatives across the globe illustrate how universities can drive collaboration for societal benefit. For instance, the Citizen Dialogue Kit⁴, a spin-off from KU Leuven University in Belgium, serves as a unique IoT platform that enables smart cities to actively engage a wider and more diverse range of citizens. In Japan, the Tsukuba Smart City Consortium⁵, a partnership of private companies and research institutions like Tsukuba University, exemplifies how academia and industry can join forces to innovate urban living. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the Living Lab Scheveningen⁶ has been testing a smart city infrastructure since 2020 under the leadership of the Municipality of The Hague, with Erasmus University Rotterdam contributing to the ethical, legal, and societal understanding of AI applications.

These projects demonstrate that collaboration is not merely a means to an end – it is the essence of meaningful problem-solving. Universities, as hubs of innovation and critical thinking, have the capacity to bring diverse stakeholders together and facilitate initiatives that benefit society as a whole.

4 <https://citizendialogkit.com>

5 <https://tsukuba-gi.jp/en/>

6 <https://smartcity.den Haag.nl/living-lab-scheveningen/>

Reimagining their voice

In a world of constant noise and rapid change, universities must find ways to make their voices heard. Their ideas, their people, and the spaces they cultivate for reflection and action should be visible and accessible to all. This is not just about communication; it is about showing society what universities truly represent.

More than spaces of learning, universities are places where the future can be imagined and shaped. For instance, Snap4City⁷, developed by DISIT Lab at the University of Florence, offers comprehensive solutions for city operations and planning across multiple domains: mobility and transport, energy, e-vehicles, tourism, environment, and waste management. By placing the university at the heart of the smart cities of tomorrow, this initiative demonstrates how academic institutions can lead the transformation of urban life on a global scale.

At the same time, universities push the boundaries of human achievement. Take, for example, Aftershock II⁸, the latest rocket designed and built by the student-run USC Rocket Propulsion Lab (USCRPL) at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. This rocket broke the international altitude record, flying further into space than any non-governmental and non-commercial group has ever reached before. It is a testament to the creativity, ingenuity, and ambition that universities can inspire in their students.

These examples highlight the transformative power of universities as spaces where innovation flourishes and bold visions of the future come to life. By making these achievements visible and accessible to society, universities can reaffirm their central role as beacons of progress and inspiration.

The Living Promise: In striving, seeking, and finding, universities rediscover their purpose. In not yielding, they reaffirm their promise to future generations.

Universities are alive. They grow, adapt, and face challenges, just as any living being does. Their past may weigh heavily on them, and their present may be marked by contradictions, but their future holds immense potential. By embracing their humanity—their imperfections, their aspirations, their capacity for renewal—they can rebuild trust and become the beacons of knowledge and community they were always meant to be.

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⁷ <https://www.disit.org>

⁸ <http://www.uscrpl.com/aftershock-ii>

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