JOHN HENRY NEWMAN
The Idea of a University

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN’s The Idea of a University is among the most famous attempts to define a liberal arts education. Originally written in 1852 in response to a papal proposal for a Roman Catholic university in Ireland, The Idea of a University served as an intellectual manifesto for Catholics, who had long been an oppressed minority in the British Isles. Full emancipation occurred for them only in 1829; prior to that date, Catholics had been denied political rights in England and Ireland as well as admission to the great British universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

Newman (1801–90), a well-known Anglican priest who had converted to the Roman church, wrote The Idea of a University to explore what a Catholic university would be like — how it might merge religious and secular concerns. He was also responding to a world growing ever more secular in its interests, more scientific in its methods, more utilitarian in its philosophy. Revolutions in technology and industrial organization seemed to be reshaping every human endeavor, including the university.

Newman had reservations about these changes, many of which we take for granted today, such as the division of universities into various “schools” (arts, sciences, professional schools), the selection by students of their own programs of study, and the establishment of areas of specialization (what we would call majors). His aim in this essay is to defend the value of learning for its own sake.

The Idea of a University is an example of deliberative rhetoric. Newman is both recommending and defending the proposal for a Catholic university. He faces both an entrenched Anglican tradition and a scholarly community leaning in the direction of what is today called secular humanism. The following excerpts from this book-length work do not focus on religious issues, however. Instead, they explain several of Newman’s goals for the liberal arts university.

—J.R.

DISCOURSE V
KNOWLEDGE ITS OWN END

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I have said that all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator. Hence it is that the Sciences, into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings one on another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand, comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, balance each other. This consideration, if well-founded, must be taken into account, not only as regards the attainment of
DISCUSS WTH VI

KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED IN RELATION TO PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Knowledge is acquired through the process of learning and experience. This process involves the absorption of information, understanding, and retention of concepts. Through education, one gains the ability to apply this knowledge to real-world situations, thereby enhancing their professional skills.

The acquisition of knowledge is a continuous process that requires active engagement and continuous learning. It is essential to remain open to new ideas and perspectives, as this fosters innovation and critical thinking. Professional skills are acquired through practical experience, mentoring, and formal education.

In conclusion, knowledge is a fundamental component of professional skills. By actively seeking knowledge and continually expanding one's understanding, individuals can improve their skills and contribute to their professional growth.

JOHN HENRY MGWAMN / THE IDEA UNIVERSITY
Joining the Conversation

Since Newman was writing...

6. Can Newman's concepts of higher aims in one world apply? Does it

7. For a national perspective, write a position paper on this subject.

8. What's wrong with higher education? What would you change?

9. Why not write a position paper on this subject.

10. Would the concept of the university be different in the United States if the
    American university were not a place for education, but rather for the
    advancement of knowledge?

11. How do you think a university's role in society has changed over the
    years? How do you think a university's role in society will change in the
    future?

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