

CHID 210A

The Idea of the University

Ways of Learning, Exploring, and Knowing



“The idea of a university” is a common refrain in higher education discourse, standing at once as a reference to Cardinal John Henry Newman’s classical defense of liberal education bearing that title in the mid-19th century and as a reference to debates that happened before and have persisted after. In short, “the idea of a university” is contestable. In broad strokes, this course examines its title. Specifically, what is a university, how has it been characterized and accounted for in the past, what are its present challenges and opportunities, and what is its outlook for the future? We’ll begin the course with a historical overview of the idea of the university from antiquity to the present day, relying alternately on histories and primary documents, with a special focus on how an idea of a university is given expression through its curriculum. We’ll then shift our attention to contemporary debates over the meanings and purposes of universities, along the way introducing questions and issues related to disciplinarity, expertise, research, productivity, public and private “goods,” and related matters which commonly find their way into ongoing argumentation. We’ll conclude the course with speculation about the future of the university. Yale professor Jaroslav Pelikan observed, “Except for big-time soccer, the university seems to have become the most nearly universal manmade [sic] institution in the modern world.” Yet many others have predicted the demise of universities. Which will last longer, the Seattle Sounders FC or the University of Washington?

Professor: Associate Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Jason Johnson
SLN 12326 | MW 9:30-11:20 | I&S