From the distance of more than half a century, Karl Jaspers's 1946 treatise, The Idea of the University, reads both like a farewell to the 19th-century German university and a lucid anticipation of several of today's academic problems.

Jaspers wrote his book at the end of World War II. The Nazis had suspended him from his position as professor of philosophy. One of his reasons for writing this treatise was to lay the groundwork for a thoroughly democratic restructuring of higher education in Germany. However, Jaspers also insists that the university is a genuinely transnational institution and that his elaborations concern higher education everywhere.

There is a good bit of dusty German philosophy in Jaspers, who positions himself in the venerable line of thinkers that includes Kant, Humboldt, and Schleiermacher. True to their spirit he declares that the university is the place where "a given epoch may cultivate the clearest possible self-awareness," precisely because it is a community "engaged in the task of seeking truth." It follows that research is the foremost concern in Jaspers' vision of the university; teaching is relegated to second place. But because the idealists define truth as communal, it must be shared with other scholars and also transmitted to the next generation. Thus teaching is an indispensable, if secondary, aspect to research.

While the university cannot and should not get out of the business of teaching, for Jaspers, it is well advised to organize teaching according to "aristocratic principles." In other words, university teaching should focus on only a select few among its students.
Jaspers identifies three types of university students: True geniuses, the mediocre ones who make up the largest proportion of the student population, and a small group of talented youngsters. The geniuses require no instruction because in the university setting, they will take care of their own education. Teaching the large majority, however, is a waste of time, Jaspers says. All attention should, thus, focus on those few who are gifted but can develop their potential only when instructed by experienced professors.

Such guidance, though, will have to be gentle. The talented student develops best when inspiration replaces rigid formation. "Artificial guides such as the syllabi, curricular and other technical devices which convert the university into a high school, are in conflict with the ideal of the university," Jaspers writes. "They have resulted from adapting the university to the needs of the average student."

In our age, a university without syllabi would not only fail the next round of accreditation reviews, it would also violate the basic principle of contractual openness. One partner in the educational transaction (the student) cannot be left in the dark about what to expect from the other partner (the instructor).

Equally quaint, and fundamentally out of touch with today's social reality, are Jaspers' aristocratic sentiments that dare to ignore not only large portions of society but also the majority of enrolled university students. His notions were rather outdated in the mid-20th century already. We are, irrevocably, in an era of mass education, and one of the more important goals of our national politics is to significantly increase the percentile of the population's college graduates. Jaspers's call to resist "concessions to outside pressures for mass education" therefore appears bizarre, at best, and dangerously misguided, at worst.

Were the book to consist exclusively of those curmudgeonly, falsely elitist, and thoroughly impractical musings, no reason would exist for us to continue reading it. Yet Jaspers courageously turns toward two structural problems of the university that remain unsolved and, therefore, become ever more pressing. The first problem is the division of the university into departments. The second is that of tenure.

Coming from an idealist philosophical background, Jaspers postulates the unity of all knowledge. Every branch of inquiry should refer back to a common principle. Held up against this Hegelian foil, the division of higher learning into separate fields of study
administered by individual departments seems artificial, and results in an "intellectual
department store."

The departmental structure also creates practical problems. First, strong and creative
scholars often do not fit into existing departmental structures, thus preference in hiring
will be given to moderately talented ones who can readily be cast into existing slots.
Second, academic specialization undermines the common good of a shared knowledge
base to which all research activities must relate. For Jaspers, only inquiries that
connect specialized knowledge areas back to a communal intellectual interest merit full
support. But "mutual respect in university circles tends to a state of affairs where
everyone may indulge his every inclination or caprice, with the result that the
university no longer centers on matters of common concern. ... It is a tragic paradox
that academic freedom tends to obliterate this ultimate freedom of true
communication."

Academic freedom is also responsible for the problems surrounding the institution of
tenure, Jaspers suggests. In Germany, professors are directly employed by the state
and hold lifetime appointments. He does not challenge the principle of state
employment that extends far beyond the university into all areas of public service. Yet
he draws a distinction between academic freedom and freedom of speech. "Faculty
members cannot invoke their constitutional freedom of speech except as private
citizens," he writes.

As the argument goes today, tenure is a necessity so that neither state nor sponsors
nor administrators can interfere with the freedom of research and instruction. Tenure
protects especially those, it is posited, who care to voice politically inopportune
opinions. Jaspers, who was trained in jurisprudence as well as medicine, considers that
position an illegitimate appropriation of the principle of academic freedom, which, he
writes, must never be understood to "mean the right to say what one pleases. ... Practical objectives, educational bias, or political propaganda have no right to invoke
academic freedom." For him, academic freedom simply meant that the state cannot
interfere with the contents of research and student examinations.

Jaspers's aim was to safeguard the universities against radical takeovers like that by
the Nazis. But maybe that line of defense for tenure is outdated today. I would argue
that, in our society, serious political threats to the freedom of publishing and teaching
have been absent for a long time. Evoking the principle of academic freedom to defend the institution of tenure might have become as antiquated as Jaspers's syllabus-free seminar.

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