

**The purpose of higher education in its own words: Reviewing the University of Washington  
Mission Statement through the lenses of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Critical Discourse  
Analysis**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Mission Statement of the University of Washington (2013)</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>Chapter 2 - Critical Discourse Analysis</b> .....	10
<i>Applying CDA</i> .....	16
<b>Chapter 3 – The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer</b> .....	26
<i>Illustrating Gadamer through Music</i> .....	32
<i>Applying Gadamer</i> .....	34
<b>Chapter 4 - Conclusion</b> .....	45

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## **DEDICATION**

*To Aaron*

## **Mission Statement of the University of Washington (2013)**

### **Role and Mission of the University**

Founded 4 November 1861, the University of Washington is one of the oldest state-supported institutions of higher education on the Pacific coast. The University is comprised of three campuses: the Seattle campus is made up of sixteen schools and colleges whose faculty offer educational opportunities to students ranging from first-year undergraduates through doctoral-level candidates; the Bothell and Tacoma campuses, each developing a distinctive identity and undergoing rapid growth, offer diverse programs to undergraduates and to graduate students.

The primary mission of the University of Washington is the preservation, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge. The University preserves knowledge through its libraries and collections, its courses, and the scholarship of its faculty. It advances new knowledge through many forms of research, inquiry and discussion; and disseminates it through the classroom and the laboratory, scholarly exchanges, creative practice, international education, and public service. As one of the nation's outstanding teaching and research institutions, the University is committed to maintaining an environment for objectivity and imaginative inquiry and for the original scholarship and research that ensure the production of new knowledge in the free exchange of facts, theories, and ideas.

To promote their capacity to make humane and informed decisions, the University fosters an environment in which its students can develop mature and independent judgment and an appreciation of the range and diversity of human achievement. The University cultivates in its students both critical thinking and the effective articulation of that thinking.

As an integral part of a large and diverse community, the University seeks broad representation of and encourages sustained participation in that community by its students, its faculty, and its staff. It serves both non-traditional and traditional students. Through its three-campus system and through educational outreach, evening degree, and distance learning, it extends educational opportunities to many who would not otherwise have access to them.

The academic core of the University of Washington Seattle campus is its College of Arts and Sciences; the teaching and research of the University's many professional schools provide essential complements to these programs in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural and mathematical sciences. Programs in law, medicine, forest resources, oceanography and fisheries, library science, and aeronautics are offered exclusively (in accord with state law) by the University of Washington. In addition, the University of Washington has assumed primary responsibility for the health science fields of dentistry and public health, and offers education and training in medicine for a multi-state region of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. The schools and colleges of built environments, business, education, engineering, environment, information, nursing, pharmacy, public affairs, and social work have a long tradition of educating students for service to the region and the nation. These schools and colleges make indispensable contributions to the state and, with the rest of the University, share a long tradition of educating undergraduate and graduate students toward achieving an excellence that well serves the state, the region, and the nation.

*BR, February 1981; February 1998; AI, December 2001; BR, July 11, 2013.*

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

At a time when the purposes of higher education are under constant debate within the realms of academia and the public perspective, understanding how those purposes are portrayed is as important as ever. Key stakeholders in the debate about the mission of higher education champion disparate and sometimes conflicting perspectives, determined by what *they* see as the university's dominant function. Comprehending the myriad perspectives surrounding the purpose of higher education is a complicated endeavor. William James describes the conundrum: "Any given thing has infinite qualities, but we do not perceive of it in its totality; instead, we select particular aspects of it that interest us. What we consider the 'essence of a thing,' ...is determined by its dominant function. We define things by our interest in them and their use for us, ignoring unrelated qualities" (as quoted in Reuben 2006 p. 45).

David Labaree (1997) believes that the primary purposes of education are tied to three specific goals: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. He suggests that democratic equality and social efficiency align with education's responsibility to prepare students to become productive individuals in their communities, which he defines as the "public good." The notion of social mobility aligns more closely with what Labaree defines as the "private good." Those who champion this purpose look to education to help them obtain personal gains both financially and socially. Popular conversation about the aims of higher education in particular revolves primarily around the two categories of "public good" and "private good." While some people wish to see universities become more entrepreneurial and focused on private-sector interests, there is a simultaneous and powerful counter-concern with education's contribution to civic responsibility. Today, these concerns are often voiced in web-based news

media. However, the ideas have been present throughout the history of higher education in the United States.

As a proponent of an economically driven ideal for higher education, Governor Rick Scott of Florida believes that higher education should equip people to pursue vocations. In his words, “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take money to create jobs... I want the money to go to a degree where people can get jobs in this state” (quoted by Pat Leonard and Paul Gessing, 2011). While some could argue that he is making a case for the “public good” by championing social efficiency, Governor Scott’s sentiment is echoed elsewhere in the country in terms that clearly suggest social mobility. The prevalent opinion is that “For many, the dominant, if implicit, mantra seems to be ‘learn to earn’” (Warrant & Guarasci, 2012). In Washington State, the public message as conveyed by the media claims that “Today, the public purpose of higher education is perceived as predominantly one of economics and entrepreneurship...their primary role is to generate new business” (Murdock, 2006). This perspective also regularly appears in a variety of news journals, television broadcasts, and op. ed. newspaper articles.

Equally, there is a renewed sense that higher education has a civic duty to promote the “public good.” Despite their acknowledgement of the aforementioned “learn to earn” mantra, Scott Warren and Richard Guarasci (2012) explain the vital importance “that students graduate with the requisite expertise and abilities to be informed and engaged citizens of the American democracy.” Toni Murdock (2006) agrees, claiming that “...now, perhaps more than ever, there is a set of civic and social values students must learn. We in higher education must not opt out of our role in bringing our students to the crucial understanding that because they live on this earth,

they have a responsibility for its well-being.” Educators nationwide often take this stance, along with many other groups that champion civic duty and the public good.

Differing sentiments like these are common among the American public, yet almost all participants in the discussion have a singular focus on their individual agenda. This divide creates strife within the walls of colleges and universities. David Starr Jordan, the first President of Stanford University wrote that “The school cannot serve two masters; and the school maintained for special work of the part cannot meet the needs of the whole” (Reuben 1996, p. 84). Clark Kerr (2001) acknowledges the complicated plight of higher education in *The Uses of the University*: “These several competing visions of true purpose, each relating to a different layer of history, a different web of forces, cause much of the malaise in the university communities of today. The university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself” (p. 7). Individual interests regarding the purpose of higher education are pervasive: they exist within the institution *and* in the surrounding environment. Each perspective is esteemed by the individuals who champion it. The university is forced to face competing priorities as a matter of course and ultimately struggles to meet the requests of the many individuals who demand that their particular interest be the institution’s primary concern.

Surprisingly few participants in the conversation about the purpose of higher education take a genuine interest in how the university portrays its own ambitions, though there are numerous channels through which the institution attempts to convey its perspective. Julie Reuben (1996) discusses the university’s historical commitment to the “unity of truth,” an idea that sought to merge intellectual pursuits with spiritual beliefs. It aligns in many ways with Labaree’s idea of the “public good” by working to prepare students to contribute to American

society. By her estimation, “The purpose of education was to shape the student’s character as well as intellect” (p. 246). However, she goes on to suggest that in the “...transition from the classical college to the modern university, the older ideal of the unity of truth was largely gutted. The ideal lingered on in educational rhetoric: universities boasted that they offered instruction in all areas of knowledge and educated the ‘whole’ student” (p. 267). Here Reuben suggests that American higher education maintains a connection to its historical aims via language. Whether or not institutions continue to put those aims into practice, Reuben claims that the *discourse* within higher education institutions clings to traditional ideals.

Leonard & Gessing (2011) are among the few who include the perspective and language of universities in the conversation about the aims of higher education. They submit that, “A mission statement should publicly affirm the institution’s statutory mandate in terms its primary purposes, who will be served and how.” Leonard & Gessing are not looking for flowery prose or grandiose ideals. Nor do they prefer the connection to tradition that Reuben articulates. Rather, they expect the university to clearly state its intentions and present its audience with a contract that the institution agrees to uphold. While including rhetoric from the university is important, Leonard & Gessing stop short of truly including it in the dialogue. By approaching the text with a specific idea of what they *should* find there, I began to suspect that Leonard & Gessing may have missed what the university was actually trying to say.

This background led me to my overarching research questions:

- How might understanding the language of a university’s mission statement enhance the conversation about the goals of higher education?
- Can an institution proactively control the interpretation of its mission statement through the use of language?

- In what ways does the meaning of the mission statement change contingent upon the lens through which it is understood? Or does the meaning change at all with different analytical lenses?

I decided to approach the rhetoric of higher education myself by examining the mission statement of my own institution of higher education, the University of Washington.

I chose to focus on the UW's mission statement due to the pervasiveness of mission statements within higher education. According to Morphew & Hartley (2006), "Accreditation agencies demand them, strategic planning is predicated on their formulation, and virtually every college and university has one available for review" (p. 456). Mission statements are a primary means through which colleges and universities communicate their purposes and reasons for existence to their constituents. They also often are short-changed. Many scholars and practitioners write them off as bureaucratic fluff. As Morphew & Hartley (2006) describe, many educators and students "view mission statements as a collection of stock phrases that are either excessively vague or unrealistically inspirational or both... More specifically, the language in mission statements is intended to evoke an all-purpose purpose" (p. 458). Even those who believe in the value of the mission statement often suggest, according to Morphew & Hartley (2006), that "Mission statements are normative – they exist because they are expected to exist..." and that "... you have to have a mission statement if you want to be considered a legitimate college or university by, among others, accrediting agencies and board members" (p. 458). However, when approached from a different point of view, I believe the language of mission statements may contain more value than prior scholars have realized.

While approaching the university from very different perspectives, both Reuben and Leonard & Gessing do believe the rhetoric of the university contains some importance. However,

I argue that examining the mission statement at face value will add little to our understanding of university aims beyond what already exists in the public sphere. Investigating the utilization of language and meaning in the mission statement is important for understanding how colleges and universities represent *themselves* in the overall conversation about the purposes of higher education. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) advises that “Especially in the field of semantics we are confronted with the problem that our own use of language is unconscious” (p. 270). Presenting a surface-level understanding of the words contained in a document will simply lead the conversation back to the reader’s unconscious conception of meaning. In order to move the conversation about the aims of the university forward, I need to look beneath the surface and engage in critical thought about the language in which the university mission statement is expressed. Ball (1990) suggests that “...discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations” (p. 18). In this context, words have the potential to manipulate and steer the direction of the reader’s understanding. Deconstructing a mission statement’s discourse engages the hidden possibilities within the text and opens up the conversation to new thoughts and questions.

I will use two analytical lenses to investigate the language contained in the current University of Washington mission statement, which was last reviewed by the Board of Regents in July of 2013. The analytical frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics differ in their approaches to language and understanding. As I will describe below, CDA focuses on language as an object, while Gadamer’s hermeneutics seeks to engage the text as a conversation partner. By making use of such divergent perspectives, I hope to gain deeper understanding of the aims that the University of Washington publicly sets out for itself.

In order to probe the possibility of intentionality and manipulation embedded in the language of the document, I will employ the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. While traditional discourse analysis focuses on explaining surface-level meaning and popular interpretation, *critical* discourse analysis provides a framework for linking institutional texts, such as a mission statement, with the socio-cultural and political context in which mission statements are produced. CDA offers a basis for considering how powerful institutions legitimate particular understandings of the purpose of higher education. Using this lens, authorial intention and institutional context will be key elements of my analysis of the UW Mission statement. As Ball (1990) suggests, I will look at how “Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses” (p. 18). I will utilize CDA to investigate how the words chosen for the UW mission statement are carefully arranged to create a particular result.

In contrast to CDA, Gadamer’s (2004) philosophical hermeneutics centers on the claim that “...the meaning of a text is not to be compared with an immovably and obstinately fixed point of view that suggests only one question to the person trying to understand it, namely how the other person could have arrived at such an absurd opinion... Rather, one intends to understand the text itself” (p. 390). This style of interaction with text is quite similar to how you would try to understand the meaning of a friend or a colleague with whom you are engaged in discussion. In other words, while searching for understanding through the lens of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, I will not be reading the text as though it were an object containing a fixed meaning. Instead, I will approach the text of the UW mission statement as a conversation partner. I will bring my own ideas and preconceived notions about the aims of higher education to the table to be challenged by the text, and I will challenge the text in return. More likely than not, I

will discover that I carry conceptions about the aims of higher education at the University of Washington that I never realized I had. By actively involving my ideas in a discussion with the text, I hope to be able to see past the surface level meaning of the mission statement. Through the experience of recognizing and challenging my assumptions about the aims of higher education by “conversing” with the UW mission statement, I hope I will be able to understand something about the purpose of higher education that was previously unknown to me.

CDA and Gadamer’s hermeneutics provide two disparate approaches for exploring ideas that I believe may be important for the ongoing discussion about the purpose of higher education. To examine the questions I pose above, I first will describe and explain each of these two theoretical frameworks with special attention to their positions regarding understanding. Second, I will apply each lens to the text of the University of Washington mission statement in hopes of finding a deeper understanding about the purpose of higher education. I then will consider the current conflict about the aims of higher education in light of the understanding I glean from my comparative analysis.

## Chapter 2 - Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse is arguably the primary way in which people make sense of their world. Yet the words and syntax embedded in discourse carry a plethora of nuanced meanings resulting from personal interactions, individual knowledge, experiences, cultural conventions, and social precedents. At various times and in various contexts, each of these meanings conveys different values, causing the information received via language to have varying degrees of perceived validity. Critical discourse analysis studies those nuances in order to discover how language is deliberately used to create meaning in specific contexts.

In order to better understand the ways in which nuances of language can affect individual perceptions of a text, CDA focuses on the inter-relationship between language and power. According to Fairclough (1995) examining discourse through the method of CDA provides a framework to explain language in the larger context of political interests and societal power struggles:

By 'critical' discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor in securing power and hegemony (p. 132-133).

CDA challenges the view that language and social reality are unrelated. It argues that language does not simply convey pre-existing meanings, but rather plays an active role in helping individuals construct understanding.

Given that language is perpetually and purposefully at work in aiding and creating understanding, how discourse represents meaning depends on how language is deployed and by whom. Meaning resides in specific social contexts: between people, in particular spaces and places, under specific circumstances, and at set times. It also is influenced by attitudes, prejudices, beliefs, ideologies, and emotional outlooks. According to James Gee (2000):

Discourses are characteristic (socially and culturally formed, but historically changing) ways of talking and writing about, as well as acting with and toward, people and things. These ways are circulated and sustained within various texts, artifacts, images, social practices, and institutions, as well as in moment-to-moment social interactions. In turn, they cause certain perspectives and states of affairs to come to seem or be taken as 'normal' or 'natural' and others to seem or be taken as 'deviant' or 'marginal' (e.g., what counts as a 'normal' prisoner, hospital patient, or student, or a 'normal' prison, hospital, or school, at a given time and place) (p. 197).

CDA examines the habits of language that create culturally and historically situated understanding. These characteristics help the investigator to see the larger implications that words and phrases may carry beneath the surface of the discourse.

The political, historical, and cultural contexts in which discourses exist contribute not only to the interpretation of a text, but also to its creation. Social cues are crucial aspects of CDA. Weissenrieder (1997) explains:

CDA defines discourse as a form of social practice. Ways of speaking are socially determined and inextricably linked to a society's institutions, values, and beliefs. In contrast to discourse analyses that ignore the larger social context, CDA reformulates discourse, not as a linguistic level or according to purely technical infrastructures, but by

the ideologies of the subjects. Ideologies determine not only discourse content but also the way discourse is organized (p. 428).

In other words, the socio-cultural context of a text will have a significant impact on the language and syntax chosen at the time it is produced. However, the text itself also becomes a part of the greater social framework, creating a cycle of relationships in every text. CDA explores this circle of relationships.

CDA also posits that language intentionally limits the ways in which subject matter can be understood. As Titscher, et. al (2000) explain, conventional analyses “presuppose that the meaning which can be recovered from particular content corresponds to the meanings that the speakers or writers intended in their texts and to those that the receivers hear or read” (p. 10). CDA makes a point to recognize how language is manipulated to create specific social structures of power and authority. Habermas (1967) claims that language is “a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimize relations of organized power” (as quoted in Seal 2004, p. 187). CDA often will find that authors intentionally use language in an attempt to create a limited scope of possible interpretations that support specific structures of authority.

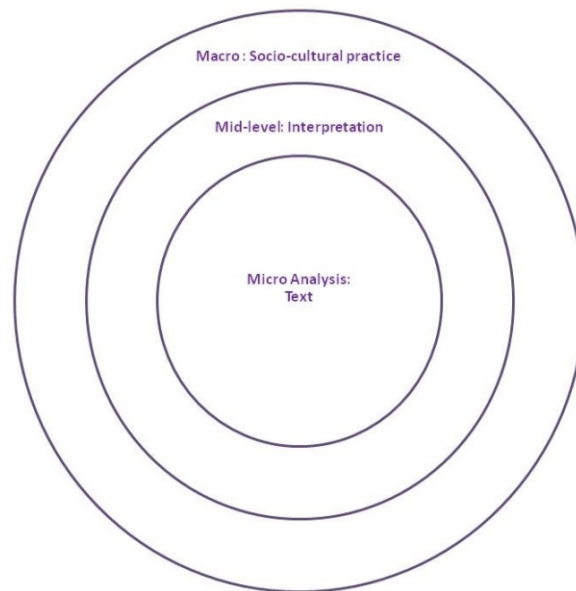
Omission of words, phrases, or ideas is one way in which CDA suggests that discourse limits understanding. The analysis will always include alternative ways of constructing and defining ideas presented in the text. The plethora of ways in which a text could have been written and the implications of those alternate possibilities create a more precise picture of the meaning that a text attempts to express. Often the authors of a text choose language to help readers accept the specific ideas they are presenting. Weissenrieder (1997) explains that “Disguised as transparent and natural, the underlying ideology [of discourse] may remain unquestioned by its subjects. In this way, power entities maintain and dynamically create their position. Uncovering

these ideologies and thus making the power relationships clear is one of the purposes of CDA” (p. 428). These ideologies may be explicitly presented, but often they are hidden between the lines in language that is conspicuously absent from the discourse.

Thus, CDA allows us to consider some of the social posturing that occurs in language, which is only evident if we look more closely at each word and phrase and its social context. As described by Budd & Raber (1995), “...discourse analysis is not concerned with minute linguistic entities, but with larger units that have meaning, especially in a particular context...Meaning...has formative aspects that include the linguistic, the social, the political, and others” (p. 217-218). Or, as Fairclough & Fowler (1997) write, “Critical discourse analysis is intended to be a branch of applied linguistics: it is designed for exposing the achievement of hegemonic power through discourse, for demonstrating ideological processes that may not be heeded on the surface, and for educating people in ‘critical language awareness’ - to scrutinize their own and others’ uses of language” (p. 422). Utilizing CDA allows a reader to connect the details of linguistic forms to their societal context. This process, in turn, creates space for new understanding of the text in question.

As an overall method, CDA is concerned with the ideological nature of discourse. It seeks to analyze and bring to light social and political power relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed in the course of everyday life. To do so, the interpreter must draw connections between the text and the context in which it exists. As such, the perspective of the specific interpreter will be present at all stages of the analysis. However, through a systematic inquiry like the one Fairclough suggests, researchers can uncover the ways in which discourse is deliberately used to mediate relationships of power and privilege in social institutions such as higher education.

Norman Fairclough (1995) argues that through the close study of language, it is possible to describe and interpret the meaning of discourse, the relationships within discourses, and the socio-cultural values that affect and are affected by language. He believes that linguistic and social processes are tightly bound together. In order to zero in on the meaningful components of a discourse, Fairclough uses a three-tiered methodology that focuses on the form and function of language-in-use. The form that a particular discourse assumes can be found in words, syntax, or any linguistic element that is utilized to create meaning. The function of discourse is the way the language is applied to create specific and purposeful meaning. Each level focuses on a particular component of the discourse, but they all function together as one overarching analysis. Fairclough's (1995) approach can be pictured as three concentric circles. Each level of analysis is related to and informs the others:



Adapted from Fairclough (1995)

The first level of analysis, discourse-as-text, is the most basic. It focuses on words and sentences. The intent of this micro-level of analysis is to describe the properties of a text. For example, repetition of words or the use of a specific tense will give specific insights into the

intent of the language. The next level of analysis, discourse-as-discursive practice, focuses on authorial intention and audience. Reading at this mid-level unpacks the meaning of a document by considering how, why, and by whom the document was created in order to understand the relationship between the author and an audience. Discourse-as-social-practice is the third level of analysis. It attends to the broader social relations of power and knowledge that are reflected in and perpetuated by texts. Readings at this macro-level provide an opportunity to explain larger cultural, historical, and social discourses that surround the text. Analysis at this stage helps to account for the ways in which the socio-cultural context of a text contributes to its meaning. Using this model, Fairclough (2001) gives interpreters the means to explore relationships between the “text and social structures” (p. 117). From this perspective, investigating the conscious utilization of language has the potential to illuminate new insights in existing dialogues.

My CDA analysis of the UW mission statement will follow the three-tiered approach of Fairclough. I will undertake a micro-level analysis of the words and syntax embedded in the document. I will examine the intention of the UW Board of Regents and their intended readership for the UW mission statement as dictated by the mid-level of analysis. Ball (1990) explains that, “Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses” (p. 18). Approaching the text from the perspective of CDA, I will search for instances in which the Board of Regents may be manipulating language to create a specific desired effect. As Ball (1990) also suggests, “Discourses embody meaning and social relationships... Thus, the possibilities for meaning, for definition, are pre-empted through the social and institutional position from which a discourse comes. Words and propositions will change their meaning according to their use and the positions held by those who use them” (p.

17). With this in mind, I will pay attention to how the language contains specific meaning for different audiences based on their relationship with the Board of Regents. Finally, I will look at the wider societal framework of higher education to investigate the ways in which the UW mission statement reflects the larger ideologies of its socio-cultural context.

In sum, employing the lens of critical discourse analysis will allow me a more complete understanding of the political and institutional motivations that might be present in the discourse of the UW mission statement, and how those motivations may shape the meaning of the text. I will be able to analyze the affect of the author/audience relationship within that context and determine its impact on understanding. Additionally, CDA will allow me to consider how the UW Board of Regents may use the subtleties of language in its mission statement in order to control and conceivably manipulate the way that people understand the purpose of higher education.

### *Applying CDA*

Because CDA emphasizes the socio-cultural context of documents, I needed to examine my understanding of the current university environment. In my experience, the financial viability of higher education has been regularly in question during recent years, causing many universities to alter their goals in order to serve new audiences and gain new financial resources. Underlying my analysis is the assumption that higher education increasingly and purposefully utilizes language for specific, self-promotional purposes to create a unique identity and to make itself attractive to prospective sources of funding in the community.



workforce, funding, and economy, are completely absent. Given the public concern with economic development, the absence of these buzzwords is mysterious. However, concern for economic development may be implied through the social implications of the text, which I will explore at the macro-level of analysis.

Taking a small step back, I briefly examined common *phrases* that the document employs. Given its short length, not many phrases were repeated, but those that were echoed the ideas already evident in the above visual:

Count	Phrase
2	educational opportunities
2	a long tradition
2	tradition of educating

Again, education is clearly emphasized. However, in this context, tradition also stands out as a possible priority for the University of Washington. The use of strong or dramatic or stereotyping descriptors, such as tradition, is central to understanding the discourse of the mission statement. Due to the social nature of language that CDA mandates, these words often take on charged meaning, giving them the ability to subtly display the attitude of the UW Board of Regents and give insight toward their intentions. Tradition, for example, is a term that brings strong connotations of connection to history, importance, and institutionalized ideas. Words that also caught my attention due to the social nature of how they are currently defined included: diverse, public, research, and service. The relationship between these socially important terms and the prevalent idea of education seemed worth investigating further at other levels of analysis.

Pronouns and voice are pivotal when determining the relationship between the text and its audience. “The way people use pronouns, particularly in addressing recipients, has

implications for their interpersonal relationships and the way receivers are positioned” (Benwell & Stokoe 2006, p. 115). Textual representations of relationships are often denoted by the use of personal pronouns, typically in the form of inclusive words such as “you” and “we” or exclusive terms such as “he” and “it”. An inclusive group of pronouns may suggest that the mission or agenda of the text is shared, while exclusive words position the reader as an outsider. The UW mission statement focuses solely on exclusive pronouns – the word “it” is used 14 times. The only other pronoun I found in my analysis of the entire document is one use of the word “their” in reference to the student body. Recurrent use of the third person also is prevalent throughout the entirety of the document. When not choosing the pronoun “it,” the mission statement regularly refers to “the University,” and “students.” The choice of this language suggests that the University is positioning itself in a place of authority over the reader, who is not given the opportunity to have a voice in determining the priorities of higher education.

To reinforce that point, the mission statement also is written entirely in the active voice. It speaks of the University of Washington as “developing a distinctive identity” and emphasizes the University’s agency in the text by using terms such as “seeks” and “cultivates.” The strong presence of the active voice again limits the role of the reader by putting them in a passive role in relationship to the text. These strategies in combination position the University as the sole controller of its mission.

The tense of a document can influence a reader’s understanding regarding the significance of the information being conveyed. As Fairclough (1992) says, “In terms of interpersonal meaning, the clause is declarative (as opposed to interrogative, or imperative), and contains a present tense form of the verb which is categorically authoritative. The writer-reader relationship here is that between someone telling what is the case in no uncertain terms, and

someone being told..." what they are to understand (as quoted in Widdowson, 2007 p. 94). The UW mission statement presents its discourse entirely in the present tense. According to Fairclough's explanation, this action by the Board of Regents firmly places the reader of the UW mission statement in a submissive role. The document conveys a sense of power and influences the reader to take its words at face value. In addition, the writers have anchored the university's mission in the current reality, clearly defining the modern mission in the present-day.

My micro-analysis of words and syntax also indicated some other subtle ways in which the UW mission statement asserts authority over its readers by cleverly manipulating small elements of text to ensure that its words are accepted as fact, rather than as a discourse that is open to different perspectives. For example, the mission statement declares that its mission, in no uncertain terms is "the preservation, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge." Pairing this idea with the intent to serve "both non-traditional and traditional students" allows the reader to believe that the emphasis on knowledge production in higher education will build social capital and promote equity in the interest of the individual reader. This approach is easily reinforced by my analysis of word frequency in the UW mission statement (page 18), which indicated a strong emphasis on students and education.

In sum, analysis at the micro-level of discourse-as-text reveals that the mission of the university identifies education as a central aim, but also that the university is establishing a distinct position of authority over the readers of the mission statement. My micro-level analysis depicts how the text uses language to repeatedly establish the prestige and relevance of the university. The nods toward charged words such as tradition help to place the university in a context of social power and the choice of pronouns and tense helps solidify the university's elevated position over readers of the mission statement.

*Mid-level-analysis (discourse-as-discursive practice)*

Discourse as discursive practice, or the mid-level level of analysis considers how the text was created and how it may be interpreted. The goal at this stage of CDA is to understand and interpret the relationship between the author and her audience. Where the text is distributed and who is likely to read it are important factors in making interpretations at this level. The idea that language is being utilized for communication with an audience is central to the concept of language as a social device.

The UW mission statement is posted on the main page of the University website under the heading “Discover.” The placement in such a public forum suggests that the Board of Regents intend it to have a wide readership. Looking more closely, however, the link from the main webpage takes the reader to a document within the Board of Regents Governance. It is contained within a directory of policies and labeled specifically as Regent Policy No. 5. While it is available to the general public at large, the Regents have written the document as a policy. Further visual cues on the page clarify that it is distributed via the Rules Coordination Office. By placing the mission statement in this context, the Board of Regents clearly depict document as a definitive set of guiding principles for the higher education at the University of Washington.

At the surface level, the primary subjects of the UW mission statement are the university itself, the students it serves, and the education it provides. The document touts the accomplishments of its three campuses and its various disciplines, claiming they make “indispensable contributions” to the community. However, the discourse of the UW mission statement adopts a linguistic style that is similar to the style of informational pamphlets that are intended to explain goods or services to an audience that is not familiar with them. Utilizing the

mission statement, the Board of Regents speaks of how the institution “cultivates” students, is “an integral part of a large and diverse community” and has a “distinctive identity.” In doing so, the statement becomes less focused on the goals and purposes of higher education, instead focusing on legitimizing the institution and showing that it understands the “rules of the game” (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 458). According to Morphew & Hartley (2006), “This theoretical proposition assumes that there are some processes and structures that organizations must incorporate because they are normatively prescribed” (p. 458). At the mid-level of analysis, it becomes increasingly clear that the Board of Regents is crafting the mission statement to fill a multitude of purposes.

Who the Board of Regents hopes to influence varies. Contextually, phrases such as “...the University is committed to maintaining an environment for objectivity and imaginative inquiry and for the original scholarship and research that ensure the production of new knowledge...” and “...the University fosters an environment in which its students can develop mature and independent judgment and an appreciation of the range of diversity of human achievement” imply that the document is more *about* the students than it is *for* them. In the first case, students are a product the university creates to serve its primary objective of knowledge. Conversely, a document written *for* the students would presumably describe the education they will receive and how it will serve **them**. The mission statement goes on to describe the ways in which the University sets out to serve its *community*, making “indispensable contributions to the state” and “educating undergraduate and graduate students toward achieving an excellence that well services the state, the region, and the nation.” It is important for public universities in modern economic times to prove their worth to many constituents, including students, taxpayers,

and potential private funding sources. With this in mind, it is very likely that the Board of Regents created the mission statement for numerous types of readers.

*Macro-analysis (discourse-as-social-practice)*

The third and final level of analysis, discourse-as-social-practice, allows us to approach discourse from a socio-cultural perspective and consider how the mission statement of an institution of higher education reflects broader social relations of power and knowledge. The careful use of language in a mission statement has the ability to privilege certain types of knowledge and build the reputation of a social institution.

Public universities, especially top research institutions such as UW, are characterized by a strong funding link with the national and state government. Research and educational opportunities are dictated in part by the level of importance higher education receives from legislatures and other governmental bodies. As such, the discourse of an official university document such as the mission statement is likely to reflect values similar or relevant to the source of the institution's financial support. By referring to the institution's "integral" position in the community and the "essential complements" its programs provide to one another, the mission statement creates a focus on the values that carry weight with its most powerful constituents. Additionally, by listing some of the most highly valued subsets of the institution individually, the Board of Regents draws attention to the programs they believe the government and the taxpayers most highly prize.

The Board of Regents utilizes descriptive language to align the institution with the values of those funding higher education. However, the placement of this document in the public sphere has a reverse impact on the community that the university serves. Highlighting specific

programs, such as law, medicine, and engineering, in addition to continuing the “sales pitch,” subtly suggests that these fields are of more importance than those that are not mentioned. Implications such as these, that privilege particular areas of knowledge, embed themselves in the subconscious minds of readers. By attempting to garner favor with its audience, the UW Board of Regents also, potentially inadvertently, reinforces the hierarchical structure of knowledge within the institution itself.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, my micro-level of analysis suggests an emphasis on the importance of the university’s role as an educational facility, but also manipulates language to place the institution in an authoritative position relative to its readership. At the mid-level of analysis, the dissemination of the document continues to imply that the Board of Regents intends to assert control in the discussion, which is taking place with multiple audiences. From the macro perspective, I observed that the document was imbued with a tone reminiscent of marketing and I saw a connection between the language of the mission statement and the priorities of the government, suggestive of a relationship between the institution and its primary sources of funding.

In conclusion, a complete three-level analysis of language in use within the UW mission statement reveals that the institution is looking to retain significant control over its readership. Strategic use of discourse, dissemination, and social cues allows the institution to subtly steer the conversation in a specific direction that is beneficial to itself. Initially, the mission statement looked as though it would contain a significant focus on the educational and student-centric aspects of the institution. However, upon closer inspection, the linguistic cues cut away at the possibility of students as the *primary* concentration of higher education at the University of

Washington. Instead, the language of the mission statement paints a picture of higher education as another player in the capitalist economy of the United States, vying for a distinct identity and monetary resources. Although the mission statement never uses language that specifically states these agendas, CDA makes it possible to see the nuanced way in which the document employs discourse to achieve multiple possible ends. A surface level reading from a prospective student may well reveal the education-centric perspective that I initially probed at the micro-level analysis. Using the methodology of CDA to its fullest potential, however, illuminates the many ways in which the UW Regents are carefully crafting the language and placement of the document to serve multiple potential agendas.

### Chapter 3 – The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

In the previous chapter, I applied Critical Discourse Analysis methodology to interpret the University of Washington mission statement. As many readers would expect, this approach assumes that the UW mission statement is an object with a fixed meaning that can be understood through a methodological approach to interpretation. The next analytical lens that I will employ is quite different. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding is an actual experience that you have to undergo. It necessitates a shared encounter between conversation partners focused on a topic or question that is of mutual interest. In order for this lens to be applied in my study, the text of the UW mission statement must become a live partner existing in a dynamic relationship with me. It no longer is an object to be analyzed, but instead is a subject along with myself – an equal member of a conversation. To understand how this approach works in my study, it is helpful to review some background of Gadamer’s ideas about understanding.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer takes a unique approach to the concepts of understanding and interpretation. In contrast to many of his predecessors, Gadamer did not see hermeneutics as a methodological approach to understanding. Rather, understanding to him is a way of being in the world. He believed that we are *always* engaged in understanding and interpreting our experiences, whether consciously or not. Interpretation in the Gadamerian sense “...characterizes how human beings naturally experience the world. Realized through our moods, concerns, self-understanding, and practical engagements with people and things we encounter in our socio-historical contexts, interpretation is an unavoidable aspect of human existence” (Kerdeman, Forthcoming). As such, Gadamer was an advocate of approaching new situations with an open mind as a means to finding new insight and gaining a deeper appreciation of our shared world.

However, Gadamer's vision of an open mind is very specific: it requires finding a perfect balance between awareness of one's own beliefs and receptiveness to another point of view that challenges our beliefs. This balance allows us to consider other perspectives and process them in the context of our own preconceptions. In the end, the experience of considering other perspectives and reconciling differences between our own ideas and the other's position reveals new insights for both partners that neither can see in advance of participating in the conversation. These insights not only concern the subject under discussion. They also concern the conversation partners themselves. As Kerdeman (Forthcoming) explains, "Gadamer insists that one's own understanding cannot be clarified or corrected as long as one entertains the other's perspective from afar and continues to maintain the truth of one's own position. Change instead requires one to risk one's assumptions and to actually experience the negation of one's understanding." Openness entails risk, and this can be uncomfortable. The process of being challenged even can be painful. However, it is Gadamer's position that those negative experiences are precisely what allow us to experience genuine reflection and understanding. As such, changes in our conception of ourselves become as important to Gadamerian analysis as the insights gained regarding the topic that is being investigated.

For Gadamer, the path to engaging another perspective in order to seek understanding is found in conversation. Similar to Socrates, he believes that dialogue is how understanding manifests itself. The focus of a discussion is not to present a persuasive argument or win the other side to your cause, but rather to concentrate on discovering understanding within the subject matter itself (*die Sache*). Kerdeman (Forthcoming) explains, "In a successful conversation, each party is open to the possibility that the other's perspective is true and may challenge and even refute one's own understanding." A genuine conversation will only occur,

therefore, if all participants are considered equals. As Jane Roland Martin (1985) writes, “A good conversation is neither a fight nor a contest. Circular in form, cooperative in manner, and constructive in intent, it is an interchange of ideas by those who see themselves not as adversaries but as human beings come together to talk and listen and learn from one another” (p. 10). A Gadamerian conversation is an inherently two-sided endeavor with no single perspective taking precedence over another.

In the process of being challenged, both the interpreter and her partner are fundamentally changed. Gadamer (2004) explains, "Reaching an understanding in conversation pre-supposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counter-arguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position ... a common dictum" (p. 388). Thus, each act of interpretation results in a transformation of perspectives for all parties. In short, to reach an understanding in conversation, you must be open to being questioned and challenged by your partner's perspective.

In addition to accepting each conversation partner as an equal, it is important to acknowledge that the perspectives that each conversation partner brings to the discussion are not arbitrary. Gadamer recognizes that each interpreter will approach a dialogue already situated in a pre-existing tradition. For Gadamer (2004), “Understanding is essentially a historically effected event” (p. 299). Thus, in conversation we have to accept that the preconceptions, or prejudices, that we hold (our “horizon”) are connected not only to ourselves, but also to the linguistic, historical, and cultural traditions in which we are situated. In order to reach the state of openness

required to engage in true conversation, Gadamer (2004) believes it is important to acknowledge our historical situation. He explains,

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (p. 278).

The lives we have lived up to a given point, according to Gadamer, frame our perspective. However, it is not just our own experiences that help to define us. The whole of human tradition that has come before us interacts with each situation we find ourselves in and helps to shape our perspectives. For example, a classical musician performing a work by Mozart will not only rely on his or her own personal training to determine the best way to play the piece. She will also be informed by the entire classical music tradition that pre-existed her, the piece, and her musical training. Gadamer calls the human necessity to be situated in traditions a "life-world" and believes that it is the foundation upon which understanding arises. He believes it is impossible to approach any conversation without first acknowledging that we are embedded in a historical context that has helped shape our existing perspective.

Our individual perceptions, interpretations, and perspectives are embedded in our own history, but in order to reach understanding in conversation we must find a common ground with our discussion partner. According to Gadamer (2004):

...in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding

in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (p. 371).

As we already learned, in Gadamer's philosophy every conversation is obliged to pay homage to the historical situation of its participants. Understanding and embracing these familiar contexts is what allows members of the discussion to recognize the moments in which the conversation conflicts with their preconceptions and to be challenged by those conflicts. However, it is equally important to recognize the common subject that is placed at the center of the dialogue. That "something" is the very reason a conversation will even occur. The collision of perspectives that arises always surrounds this shared topic, the idea or subject that inspired the conversation in the first place. The relationship that is then forged between the members of a conversation is linguistic. In a Gadamerian conversation, language is the shared medium in which new understanding may be discovered. As Wachterhauser (1986) explains, "We live and think *in* language and never just *with* language" (p. 35). The mutual understanding that arises after the conflict dissipates occurs in a language that is now shared by both participants in the dialogue.

Gadamer does not limit these shared conversational experiences to verbal discourse between two human beings. He believes that fruitful discussions can also happen between a reader and a text. Gadamer (2004) adds an important caveat however: a text must always speak through a reader. In his words, "Texts are 'enduringly fixed expressions of life' that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter" (p. 389). As a "fixed" expression (written), the text contains a consistent idea that it is looking to convey. At the same time, texts are not closed off to new understanding of the ideas they express. Lacking the traditional distractions provided

by the environment of a speaker, including bodily cues and vocal tones, a conversation with a text has the ability to become “the most purified conversational encounter that humans engage in” (Sotiriou 1992, p. 121). Encountering a text, therefore, is much more to Gadamer than a simple reading of an object that contains static meanings. The words on the page must be allowed to converse with each interpreter. As Sotiriou (1992) suggests, “The reader in this hermeneutical scene is not armed with a series of interpretive methods that will make the text speak, nor should she be searching for those key sections of the text which reveal its kernel of truth” (p. 121). In a Gadamerian conversation with a text, understanding involves “hearing” the “voice” of the text through the process of reading and re-reading, questioning the text, and being open to being questioned by the text in return. Understanding a text requires the same presence of mind and active involvement as any dialogue with a living partner. “For Gadamer, immanent meaning does not reside within a text nor does a reader impose her meaning upon a text...it is a constantly reinterpreted encounter between reader and text. As in good conversation, the speaker does not impose his meaning on the listener, but responds to and is transformed by, what the other has to say, so in textual conversation the reader allows a text to speak and responds to what the text says” (Sotiriou 1992, p. 120). Just as in a conversation with a living partner, the conversation between a reader and a text must be a two way street; each perspective is equally relevant and neither can be the only voice at the table.

Like all language for Gadamer, dialogue with a text results in a mutual understanding that exists *between* the participants. As we saw, from a Gadamerian perspective, understanding does not concern the meaning of the text in the traditional sense. Texts for Gadamer are not objects that contain meaning that has been frozen in time. The understanding that an interpreter gains, rather, concerns the meaning of the topic that mutually concerns her and the text in that specific

moment. According to Kerdeman (Forthcoming), “Texts for Gadamer are conversation partners no less than people. Texts are not inanimate objects in which an author’s intended meaning is permanently congealed. Texts rather are dynamic linguistic horizons that disclose meaning over time.” Each conversation is an experience that the interpreter and the text must actually undergo and is unique to their specific situation. Entering into a conversation with a text, as opposed to superimposing a premeditated set of meanings onto the words, makes way for a completely new understanding of the subject matter being engaged by the discourse. By challenging the perspectives of both partners, the dialogue lays the foundation for a point of view that combines the history and the situation of both participants.

It is clear at this point that Gadamer’s conception of understanding is very different from the conception we are used to. To many people, his ideas will seem a little bizarre. To help illustrate Gadamer’s view of understanding before I put it into practice with the UW mission statement, I want to use my own background in music performance to illustrate how his ideas play out in real life.

### *Illustrating Gadamer through Music*

As a performing musician the type of experiential understanding that Gadamer champions, resonates for me. When I approach a piece of music, I have a particular history and point of view. I’m rooted in my culture, my gender, my race, my education, my instrument, and countless other things. The particular combination of those things that I embody is what approaches the score, with all of the biases and pre-conceived notions that are inherent in my experience. My conversation partner, the music, is an expression of an idea with a background entirely unique from my own. The music by itself is simply notes on a page, much like the black and white words of a text. But like language, in music, each note relates to the greater whole and

implies a vast array of other musical ideas without actually including them in the literal score. The three notes of a chord can create a mood of happiness or melancholy without any additional indication of the emotion intended. Those ideas are the result of the music's own history: a combination of its original conception into a written work along with every interpretation it has experienced prior to this moment. Gadamer (2004) believes that "The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning" (p. 394). When I play a piece of music, I am not simply copying a previous artists' account of how the work is to be played or treating the score like a rigid set of rules that must be adhered to precisely. Although music can be created that way, as an artist I am blending *myself* with the music, each in our present form, to create something entirely new. We come together with a common interest in expressing a particular story via song. Because we will grow and change, every performance will contain similarities, but also be inherently unique. The music and I will continue to challenge and change each other as we continue to experience one another in relation to new things. Perhaps most importantly, the music itself that is created during performance is representative of the understanding that we have reached in that moment and is expressed in our mutual language. When we are done, I will have a new understanding of the ideas we shared, and the music will carry the new meanings it has gleaned from my having played it as well. Neither of us will ever be exactly the same as we were prior to our collaboration.

Playing music "by rote" or taking a very literal interpretation of it is like a surface level reading of a text. The conversation is one-sided and boring for all involved. Artistically, it would lead to a performance would be deemed "flat" or "uninspired." Understanding the unique type of insight that can be experienced when performing a work of music helped me to consider what a similar experience might be like if I replaced the musical score with a text. With this illustration

in mind, I believe we are ready to engage the UW mission statement in a Gadamerian conversation.

### *Applying Gadamer*

Gadamer already taught me that in order to participate in a genuine conversation with the mission statement, I must be committed to having an open mind with regard to the issue that we have in common: the purpose of higher education. As Wachterhauser (1986) explains:

...in the course of a real, open conversation, that is, a conversation where the participants actually devote themselves to understanding the issue and not simply to ‘scoring points’ or ‘defending’ a position, that, for example, insights, metaphors, and frameworks can emerge that may suggest new ways of seeing the subject matter, or new conceptual vocabularies can be hammered out that will help move a discussion onto new ground...”  
(p. 33).

If I approach the mission statement with a set of fixed expectations, and without acknowledging the tradition in which I exist, I close myself off to the possibility of what the mission statement may actually bring to the table. In order to accept any challenges the text may present to me, I have to first recognize the biases that I carry. Since recognizing my existing perspective and tradition is what makes it possible for me to understand anything in the first place, I prepared for my conversation with the mission statement by first acknowledging my own history and biases with regard to higher education.

I recognized almost immediately that my perspective on the goals of higher education is related to a much wider context than the UW mission statement, or even my experience as a graduate student. It is, in fact, derived from my entire life experience, which in turn is related to the whole of human experience, as Gadamer illuminated. My life as a Caucasian female growing

up in the suburbs of the Pacific Northwestern United States created a set of experiences that color my understanding of everything, education included. The subset of opportunities and experiences that I specifically chose and lived narrow my perspective. In the largely white-collar community in which I was raised, the question about higher education was never IF I would go, but where I would apply and what I would choose to study. In my family specifically, higher education was regarded as an opportunity to gain deeper understanding about myself and the world. While there was some consideration given to the career opportunities that specific areas of study might afford me, those concerns were secondary to the “higher” goals of education. Retrospectively, I realize that my understanding of higher education and my assumption that it was the only logical post-high school step in my life were created from a very specific perspective. As a result, I acknowledged that many other ideas about the need for institutionalized higher education exist and have merit.

However, my unique perspective is precisely what led me to the questions about higher education that I now have. Upon being confronted by my peers and the mass media with alternative rationales for pursuing a degree, I tried to step back and look at my university with a wider lens. I saw what Clark Kerr (2001) describes as a “multiversity.” As a singular entity under the banner of “University of Washington,” my school deals with research and education, public and private interests, youth and wisdom, critical thinking and professionalism, morality and ethics, economic viability, citizenship education, and a multitude of other priorities. The institution I see is a far cry from the focused mission of early colleges and universities that Julie Reuben (1996) describes as seeking a “unity of truth” that would fuse all facets of learning into one common experience (p. 3).

Nonetheless, the university that Reuben describes does resonate with my personal conception of college. Like those early establishments I believe that college should aim to holistically educate the entire person. But while I suspect that a historical perspective of the university mission statement likely will include some of the same fundamental ideas valued by those pursuing a “unity of truth,” I also think that the modern university has faced many experiences that those early colleges were never exposed to.

My relationship with the university has taken shape from many different angles. I have spent time as an undergraduate student, a graduate student, a student employee, and a staff member in several different departments. Through the course of these experiences I have witnessed first-hand the myriad purposes that higher education attempts to embody. The complexity of my affiliation with higher education has led me to believe that the mission statement will make a careful attempt at rationalizing its many components despite the public sentiment that it should focus on just one of society’s many preferred platforms.

However, I now recognize that according to Gadamer, the mission is variable, that the purpose of higher education that the mission statement conveys will be partly contingent upon the outlook of the individual interacting with it. Due to my specific background, I currently see the university embedded in a consumerist, economically driven society that values production and wealth over citizenship and morality. I see it struggling with its traditional commitment to the “unity of truth” and the desires of a constituency that expect it to prepare a workforce rather than enhance humanity through education for citizenship. I anticipate that the mission statement will suggest aims deeply rooted in the humanistic tradition of the university but will simultaneously try to pay homage to the more capitalistic aims of the modern world. These are

the biases that I consciously recognized as being relevant to my conversation with the UW mission statement.

I approached the text with a new level of clarity. Recognizing my biases and my historically mediated relationship with higher education opened my mind in a way that I believed approached Gadamer's ideal. Yet even though I felt prepared for the challenge, I still was surprised and perplexed when I found myself being questioned by the first three words of the mission statement. The document is entitled "Role and Mission of the University." The text stopped me from continuing by encouraging me to ask, how do roles and missions relate to one another? How do roles and missions relate to the goals, aims, and purposes that I am seeking further clarity about? What understanding do these words have the potential to convey that would be different if the document were entitled "Goals and Aims of the University"? And what is the relationship of any of these words to the ideas conveyed by a "purpose"? These questions, which the text itself brought forward, became the basis of the rest of our dialogue.

Initially I probed the word "role" for a deeper understanding. Prior to my conversation with the text I conceived of a role as a part or function that someone or something plays in a production or event: like an actor or a member of a team. A role was a single, focused piece in a greater puzzle. This was a bias that I carried, which I had not previously thought to consider. Using my existing understanding as the framework for my perspective, I questioned the mission statement: What is the role of the university and to whom or what is that role in relation? How does the role of the university relate to the purpose of higher education? The mission statement "responded" by situating the university in historical context as "one of the oldest state-supported institutions of higher education on the Pacific coast." It further defined itself as "three campuses...whose faculty offer educational opportunities to students..." and specified that those

campuses exist in Seattle, Bothell, and Tacoma. The definition of role for this specific context and institution was in relation to its immediate community in those cities on the Pacific coast. The mission statement further qualified the relationships of the university by announcing its intent to “offer diverse programs to undergraduate and graduate students.” Here I paused again realizing that the idea of “role” already seemed to be conflated with the mission statement’s other key agenda: the “mission.” A mission, to me, carried very different connotations from a role. My prior understanding of the word “mission” suggested an active pursuit, an agenda with a fixed end point. At this point the mission statement was pointing to a role in which the university’s agenda involved offering educational opportunities to various students, leading me to question whether the distinction between role and mission would even prove to be significant. I also felt my definitions of “role” and “mission” being challenged as I sensed them taking on characteristics that I had not previously associated with their meanings.

The text then boldly pronounced that “The primary mission of the University of Washington is the preservation, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge.” Again, I felt myself being confronted. Bruns (1992) describes the moment of Gadamerian insight that I was experiencing as “...the refusal of the other to be contained in the conceptual apparatus that I have prepared for it or that my own time and place have prepared for it...” (p. 180). I realized upon reading the mission statement’s proclamation in a new frame of mind that I had been prepared for the purpose of the university to revolve around *people*. Whether those people were described as students, faculty, businesses, community, researchers, or constituents, words describing human beings was the language I was prepared to read. The text, however, was presuming to tell me that the mission was, in actuality, more broad than this: it focused on the abstract idea of knowledge itself. Within his context of open-mindedness, Gadamer “...places an injunction on

the individual who is addressed by tradition, to be vigilant for concealed possibilities within tradition” (Scheibler, 2013, p. 26). I felt myself questioning the text in return, as I wondered if a mission as large and conceptual as knowledge meant that higher education is actually a by-product of a much bigger societal purpose than I had previously encountered. Is knowledge itself a distinct entity, or is it naturally co-dependent with education? How does the idea of knowledge relate to the human component of the mission statement?

Although the text reiterated that the mission is to “ensure the production of new knowledge,” our conversation also returned to the people that I was looking for. The mission statement informed me that the new knowledge, which is the primary aim of higher education, is created through the “free exchange of facts, theories, and ideas.” My experience with Gadamer’s ideas gave me deeper insight into what the mission statement might be suggesting. While Gadamer emphasizes that conversation with a text is both possible and useful, there is always a human component to the equation. As I discovered in his philosophy, the material evidence of the knowledge being created can only gain life and useful existence with the presence of a human interpreter. In order to appropriately understand and interpret the knowledge it seeks, the university must also ensure that the interpreters gain the ability to “make humane and informed decisions” by providing “an environment in which its students can develop mature and independent judgment and an appreciation of the range and diversity of human achievement.” In recognizing Gadamer’s convictions about conversation and understanding, I was able to recognize that the human component of the mission statement was not lost. It was simply more implicit than my initial reading suggested.

Near the end of our conversation, the ideas presented by the mission statement gave way to the “multiversity” that I had anticipated based on my own history with higher education. The

mission statement spoke of the variety of programs, professional schools, and services that the UW is responsible for providing to the community. The statement clearly aligned these duties to the *role* that the university plays in society, but it left me curious about whether these obligations also belong to the *mission* of the institution. I considered an earlier point which the mission statement had made: “As one of the nation’s outstanding teaching and research institutions, the University is committed to maintaining an environment for objectivity and imaginative inquiry...” It occurred to me that offering a variety of educational opportunities could also serve as a platform to encourage diversity of perspectives. If the goal of creating diversity was achieved, it would be one way to foster both objectivity and imaginative inquiry. With this new insight in mind, I backed up to the very beginning of our conversation one more time to see if, like Gadamer suggests, my new perspectives would help illuminate ideas I had missed the first time around.

The beginning of my conversation with the UW mission statement initially had given me pause. I was unsure whether I had chosen the right text to engage. The questions that had brought me to this document revolved around the purpose of higher education: its goals and aims. Three words into our discussion, I realized that the very language I had been taking for granted – mission, role, purpose, aim, goal, and even university – may be precisely where some of the most perplexing questions exist. As Gadamer’s philosophy suggests, these words contain much more complexity than the fairly simple definitions that arise from a typical cursory reading. Each reading of the document added new depth to my understanding not only of the words that had given me pause, but also of how the words interrelate.

For example, in conversing with the UW mission statement, I began to have an appreciation for the way in which a “role” can have a wide range of dynamic components, rather

than always implying a very specific function as I had thought. I was forced to grapple with the idea that the concept of “university” has some very important non-human elements. The subtle differentiation between a “role” and a “mission” showed me the understated presence that the institution has in a wide array of societal endeavors. According to the mission statement, while the *role* of the university clearly seeks out the human component in its purpose, the *mission* focuses on knowledge itself. Eventually the discussion led me to the realization that while I *expected* the “multiversity” to show off its many parts, I also had a subconscious idea created by my history with higher education that those parts were decentralized fragments, held together only by a title. The mission statement’s deft transitions between role and mission, as well as between people, knowledge, society, research, and civic duty challenged these conceptions and helped me to open my mind to the possibility that the University of Washington may actually still be seeking the integration that Julie Reuben (1996) describes in her depiction of early American Universities. There are now simply more components to put together. In challenging my understanding from the very beginning of our conversation, the mission statement allowed me to reframe my point of view around a new question: What is my relationship with the purpose of higher education?

Each constituent in the existing conversation about the purpose of higher education champions a specific goal. Based on the news media and scholarly ideas that I reviewed, many are striving to create a greater focus on the mission of the university. But no one is looking to higher education in order to pursue endeavors that they are not already involved in. For example, for those who believe that higher education should be motivated by vocational training, the University of Washington mission statement makes specific reference to its professional schools as “essential complements” to the core College of Arts and Sciences. For the civic-minded

individuals who desire a more well-rounded experience in college, the mission statement also highlights the service-oriented side of the university's role in society, acknowledging that it makes "indispensable contributions to the state... the region, and the nation." The mission statement simply suggests that the University of Washington takes all of these narrow aims and integrates them into a larger endeavor.

My dialogue with the mission statement suggests that another perspective is relevant to the higher education debate: members of the community must actually *participate* in a conversation with the University via its mission statement. My particular conversation highlighted the importance of knowledge at the heart of the university's ideals. It showed me ways in which such a broad aim can be pertinent for the more specific desires of the general public. I was able to see an institution that sought integration, rather than the fragmentation that I expected. Regardless of my presuppositions regarding what I thought I believed, the mission statement caught me off guard and was able to suggest a new perspective. In so doing, it also fundamentally changed: for **me**. The mission statement now carries all of the new ideas that we jointly formed during the process of our conversation, and I will never be able to read this document again with the same understanding that I held prior to this project. Each conversation will lead both me and the text to new places, and the understandings we share will constantly evolve. Each dialogue will be relevant and important in its moment in time and will add to the larger conversation regarding the purpose of higher education. This experience helped me to recognize a way of understanding that is truly a participatory, historically effected, linguistically mediated event. By extension, any of the insights I gained will only be relevant to the greater dialogue about the purpose of higher education if others who are engaging in this dialogue participate with me, or with the mission statement, themselves.

The UW mission statement is no longer *just* a statement to me. It is not a fixed declaration or a singular assertion that sets forth unchangeable facts. As Gadamer argues, the meaning of a text is not simply contained in the literal words on the page. The meaning exists *between* the text and the reader, where the issue of importance is shared. I shared a specific experience to better understand the goals of higher education. Much like collaborating with a score to create a musical performance, the understanding I gained is destined to change each time I re-visit it.

The dynamic nature of my relationship with the mission statement and the university as a whole may turn out to be the biggest insight I can personally bring to the conversation about higher education. Gadamer's philosophy illuminated a way in which we can engage new perspectives surrounding the purpose of higher education simply by engaging in dialogues with an open mind. As those conversations occur, it is the responsibility of both sides in the dialogue to be responsive to the new understandings that they gain. The individuals looking for specific goals must be willing to have those ideas challenged. Universities, however, also have a responsibility to be responsive to those who engage in conversation with them. The knowledge that the University seeks to preserve, advance, and disseminate is only significant if everyone involved in the process *participates*. There is no use for additional knowledge in the world if the human component to the equation is taken away. In this way, it is important that the relationship between any person and the university be forged in a manner that encourages shared meaning. Whether the understanding that is gained is utilized professionally, civically, or personally may ultimately be irrelevant to the mission of higher education itself, but it carries great weight for the individuals who seek to engage in learning at the university.

Individuals are an absolutely necessary component if the university is to succeed in realizing the aims that it sets for itself. Whether the mission statement explicitly outlines it or not, there is an implicit conversation that must happen between the university and all of the participants in higher education. As Gadamer (2004) says, “Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus, it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says” (p. 387). Perhaps one way that higher education may benefit from *my* conversation with the UW mission statement is to consider what could be achieved if both the university and the constituents who are looking for specific ends approached her goals from a more Gadamerian point of view. It is possible that both sides could achieve their specific missions by coming to a shared understanding about the goals of higher education in their specific shared context. A shared understanding of the purpose of higher education will allow each conversation partner to approach their individual goals from a new perspective. For example, the university’s focus on knowledge has the capacity to serve many potential aims for higher education, including vocational pursuits and education for citizenship. How that knowledge is applied toward different ends has the potential to be individualized. Individualizing knowledge will contribute to the institution’s purpose and simultaneously will attend to the needs of the people it is in conversation with. This type of education will be unique to the relationship between the individual and the university mission. It would take a different type of effort and understanding than currently is typical in the higher education environment, but it is an idea that merits a place in the conversation about the purpose of higher education.

## Chapter 4 - Conclusion

CDA and Gadamer's hermeneutics provide two unique approaches for exploring how we engage with the university mission statement and by extension, the goals of higher education. The ideas they present offer important insights to consider in the ongoing public discussion regarding the purpose of higher education. My experiences during the course of this study provide one illustration displaying how each of these perspectives can be applied by an individual interpreter. In order to highlight the relationship of these approaches to one another, I will provide a brief summary below.

CDA is a method that seeks to analyze, interpret, and explain language-in-use. It is a means to determine the significance of language used in discourse. This method of analysis also links understanding to a society's institutions, values, and ideologies. It sees language as socially constructed and never neutral. In this study, I looked at the UW mission statement from the micro (textual), mid-level (interpretive relationships), and macro (socio-cultural) levels of analysis. While each level highlighted some unique qualities of the text, the primary theme that ran throughout was a clear desire on the part of the Board of Regents to retain control over the mission statement's readers. Discourse was implemented strategically at every level in order to subtly assert the institution's authority and steer the potential interpretations of readers in a direction that would ultimately be beneficial to the University of Washington. My analysis suggested that the authors likely wrote with multiple audiences in mind, crafting the language in such a way that each would gain an understanding fitting to their relationship with higher education. Utilizing this lens made it clear to me that the University of Washington mission statement was conscientiously designed to be aware of its own societal context and to use that context toward its own aims.

In contrast, Gadamer's perspective on understanding and language is quite unique. For Gadamer, engaging with a text is not a method. Gadamer believes that true understanding is contextual and immersed in the details of a particular time and place; it is a moment of being in the world. In order gain new understanding, the UW mission statement had to become a live partner existing in a dynamic relationship with me. I had to approach the text with an open mind and be willing to have my personal ideas and beliefs challenged. In so doing, the foundation is laid for a new perspective that combines the situation of the text with my situation as the interpreter.

My Gadamerian conversation with the text took many unexpected turns. In approaching the text openly, I found that some of the most fundamental understandings which I held about educational discourse were being challenged. While reconsidering what a "role" and a "mission" might actually describe, I developed a relationship with the text that inspired a new horizon of understanding. I started to see ways in which the text subtly suggested that its mission integrates most, if not all, of the existing voices discussing the purpose of universities. This surprised me. When I allowed myself to be open-minded, the text challenged my conception of higher education as an inherently fractured entity. The experience of that discovery suggested a different approach to the debate on higher education: one which is less focused on the aims themselves and more concerned with the relationship between the institution and its constituents.

CDA and Gadamerian conversation each contribute a distinctive voice to the debate about higher education. As we have seen they present very disparate possibilities regarding precisely what mission higher education is striving to achieve. While these analytical lenses seem quite opposed in their approaches to language and understanding, a closer look at their differences and similarities may provide additional insight to the UW mission statement.

The relationship between the reader and the text is a fundamental component of both CDA and Gadamerian analysis, but what those relationships look like is quite dissimilar. In the case of CDA, the reader is a “researcher” who is applying an interpretive method to a fixed object. In contrast, Gadamer requires both the reader and the text to be active participants in a conversation. How these relationships affect the resulting analysis can be seen in a multitude of ways. One of the most striking is the way in which each approach incorporates the importance of socio-cultural context.

CDA uses the socio-cultural framework of the text and its interpreter in order to limit the ways in which subject matter can be understood. Viewing the text as an object that contains a fixed expression of an idea allows all of the parameters of the relationship between the reader and the text to be known in advance of the document being read. The discourse is then analyzed in the context that society provides. If a specific word has a consistently negative or positive connotation due to the general consensus of the populace, that idea will be projected onto the text. Pronouns, tense, and voice all convey subtle impressions that have been socially created and handed down through time. These understandings create a framework for the ways in which a text is likely to be understood. CDA takes the position that language can use these conceptions as tools to limit how the text will be understood and define power relationships between the text and its readers.

Conversely, Gadamer sees the cultural and historical context of the reader and the text as essential elements in the creation of understanding that will happen *between* them. The conversational experience that his approach demands is an experience that the reader and the text must undergo together. New insights cannot be determined in advance of taking part in the conversation. Gadamer expects the text to be treated as an equal and allowed to speak in its own

right. Thus the effect of its socio-cultural context cannot be pre-determined by the reader. True Gadamerian understanding is created when the subject that the text and the reader share is mutually affected by their respective situations. The fusion of their existing horizons allows an entirely new perspective to be created. There is no assumption of power in this lens; all members of the conversation must be equals in order for it to function. Gadamer posits that the socio-cultural and historical context of the conversation partners is not only relevant but necessary in order for understanding to be reached: it is the foundation upon which any new understanding can be built.

Although CDA and Gadamer approach the significance of socio-cultural context differently, the experience that both text and the interpreter have with history and society is key to the discovery of understanding for both analytical lenses. Being embedded in a socio-cultural situation is what makes each of these approaches dynamic and continuously relevant to modern studies. Gadamerian conversation and CDA are both, in their way, adaptive to the time and place of the text and the reader. Unlike some approaches to understanding texts, which concern themselves only with the literal words on the page and their traditional definitions, these two analytical lenses allow the meaning of the text to change relative to its environment and its interpreter. The fact that both analytical lenses rely heavily on socio-cultural situations, in spite of the very disparate approaches they embody, exemplifies the importance of context for understanding the meaning of texts.

The emphasis on cultural and historical circumstances that both approaches include showed me just how important these cues would be for approaching an official university document. Without an appreciation for the circumstances in which both the text and the reader each exist, understanding that results from interpreting texts convey very little new insight.

Acknowledging the context of myself and the mission statement while applying each critical lens was crucial to recognizing what the mission statement was telling me. Perhaps most importantly, recognizing this similarity emphasized the fact that the mission statement can contain a variety of meanings, depending upon the perspective. The purpose of higher education will ultimately vary, depending upon the current socio-cultural context of the text and its interpreter.

When I applied each of these lenses and their assumptions about the role of culture and history, the results were startlingly dissimilar. While I was a consistent component of both analyses, the way in which my historical situation affected the understanding I gained was wildly different. CDA's belief that socio-cultural influence is a limiting factor on the potential interpretation of the document created a strong suggestion of manipulation throughout the text. The inferences the text made through its use of specific pronouns, voice, and general word choice reached out to specific experiences in my own history. The similarity to marketing materials and government discourse led me to link it with similar documents from my own history. It created a hierarchical relationship between me and the institution, much like other documents I have read that were written in a similar fashion. The mission statement was there to tell me exactly what the goals of higher education are and how the university saw them being enacted. My agency was limited to choosing whether or not I support that mission. CDA sought to *use* my perspective and my socio-cultural context to control the possible outcomes the text might convey.

In contrast, allowing the text to be an equal conversation partner as Gadamer desires challenged *me* to re-evaluate details of the university's purpose that I never expected to be questioned. Approaching the text as a peer ensured my own participation in discovering what it had to say about the aims of the university. The mission statement was obligated to be as open to

my cultural and historical perspective as I was forced to be with it. The open mindedness required by Gadamer forced me to trust that the text truly is my equal and has neither the desire nor the ability to use my existing prejudice to influence me. To approach a text the way that Gadamer requires created a level of vulnerability for me that most people would find uncomfortable. That discomfort taught me a great deal, both about my understanding of the text and about the relationship of these two disparate perspectives.

In one way or another, each of these lenses challenges the reader. Participants in the debate about the mission of higher education are champions of a specific cause. They genuinely believe that the goals they support are the best use of university resources. They also believe that their aims are not being met by the current direction of educational institutions. CDA displays the ways in which the university is hiding its true purpose underneath prose that is intended to placate or motivate its audience. CDA challenges its audience by providing it with something with which to argue. Passive readers who choose not to engage in the critical component of CDA subject themselves to the manipulation that CDA exposes. On the other hand, the very ardent nature of the debaters' convictions suggests that they would find it extremely difficult to believe that the university mission statement would be something that they can engage in conversation themselves. Not only do they have an expectation of being spoken *to* by a text, the risk that Gadamer expects of those who are participating in honest conversation is difficult to accept. Participants in a Gadamerian conversation must be willing to set aside their cause and risk the potential of discovering they were wrong.

As a result of these challenges, my understanding of higher education changed during the course of this experience. Both of the analytical lenses that I used clearly suggested the intention of the university to simultaneously pursue multiple missions. However, neither

perspective indicated to me that one aim was more highly prioritized than another. I recognize that the “multiversity” I instinctually see when I look at the university is a result of *all* the perspectives that drive higher education co-existing within its walls. The university must vie for funding and engage with prospective students. It does seek the advancement, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. Higher education also helps to prepare its populace for the workforce. It strives to embody the values of American citizenship. It’s all right there in the mission statement. What I finally realized was the part that **I** am supposed to play to define the goals of higher education.

Reading the mission statement through multiple lenses helped me find the common thread that runs through every perspective of higher education: the relationship of the constituent with her institution. CDA showed me the ways in which the mission statement may be attempting to manipulate my understanding of the goals that higher education is pursuing. Gadamer forced me to enter the conversation myself in order to achieve understanding at all. In combination, the two perspectives demonstrated to me that in order for me to achieve the ends that **I** am looking for from higher education, I have to be willing participate in the process.

In some ways I found exactly what I expected to find: a plethora of purposes housed under the overarching title of higher education. On the other hand, I also was surprised to gain a better understanding of how those goals interconnect and why they really do belong together. I have argued that the debate is missing a key element: the responsibility of individuals to play a more active role in their own education. We have seen how engaging with the university mission statement was able to have a distinct impact on my individual perspective toward the purpose of higher education. Cultivating a similar open-mindedness among anyone who is judging the

university's aims would potentially foster a different type of conversation about how society can progress toward *all* of our desired results simultaneously.

As an academic adviser at an institution of higher education many of my students arrive in my office with a consumerist attitude toward their educational process. They believe that the university exists solely to help them achieve their professional goals. Some complain that they were misled – that their experiences in the program do not align with their expectations. After participating in this study, my first instinct is now to point each student back to herself. Has the student considered what her experiences in the program **do** have to offer? How do her goals align with the university's goals? Is the student an active participant in her own learning?

Although focusing on understanding a single mission statement stops short of revealing the conflict that naturally occurs as the document's ideas are translated into practice on a larger scale, my analysis provides a starting point for considering the ways in which the seemingly divergent demands directed at universities may, in fact, converge. It is my hope that all those involved in higher education can become open to having their assumptions challenged in order to find a different path to achieve their goals.

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