

On learning, purpose, and the unexamined university.

The Questions We Keep Deferring.

On Learning, Purpose, and the Unexamined University

WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 05

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WISDOM ... FORGOTTEN · ISSUE 05

In This Issue

We draw together two books separated by time and tradition but united by a single, uncomfortable question: do those who lead and inhabit universities genuinely examine the assumptions that govern what they do?

Bassem returns to Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*, published by Yale University Press in 1992. Written to mark the 150th anniversary of John Henry Newman's foundational Dublin lectures, Pelikan's reexamination tested the enduring validity of Newman's vision against the realities of the modern research university.

What Pelikan found was neither obsolescence nor easy continuity, but a demanding obligation: that institutions claiming the name of university must return, repeatedly, to the first principles that justify that claim.

Christopher turns to a deceptively short but demanding text by organizational theorist Chris Argyris, *Teaching Smart People How to Learn*, first published in the Harvard Business Review in 1991. Argyris identified a troubling paradox: the intelligent, accomplished professionals most expected to model learning and adaptation are often the least equipped to do it.

Their intelligence is deployed defensively, protecting them from the exposure of error rather than directing them toward genuine inquiry. In universities, this pattern carries particular weight, and Dr. Christopher Washington traces its implications with precision and candor.

Together, these two books press the same question from different angles. One asks whether the people inside universities are willing to examine their own reasoning. The other asks whether the institution itself is willing to examine its own idea. Both answers are, in their own way, still pending.

This issue of Wisdom Forgotten is dedicated, as always, to those who dare to reimagine.



ARTICLE ONE

The Idea Reconsidered, The Future Reimagined

Prof. Bassem Khafagy

In 1852, John Henry Newman delivered in Dublin the lectures that would become one of the most enduring meditations on higher education ever written. His text, gathered over years into what we now call *The Idea of a University*, proposed that the university exists not to serve the state, train the professions, or produce useful knowledge for society's immediate needs, but to cultivate minds capable of engaging with the full breadth of human knowledge.

Newman's vision was simultaneously magnificent and impractical, generous and exclusive. For more than a century it hovered over the academy as both inspiration and reproach, invoked in moments of institutional doubt and conveniently set aside in moments of institutional ambition.

It fell to Jaroslav Pelikan, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished historians of ideas, to undertake what Newman's vision had long deserved: a serious, rigorous, and honest reexamination. Published in 1992, to mark the 150th anniversary of Newman's Dublin lectures, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* arrived at a moment of genuine institutional stress.

Universities were expanding rapidly. Professional schools were multiplying. Research funding was reshaping priorities. The forces of specialization were fracturing what earlier generations had imagined as a unified community of learning. Pelikan, Sterling Professor of History at Yale and author of the monumental five-volume study *The Christian Tradition*, was precisely the scholar equipped to hold Newman's idea against the light of a changed world.

Pelikan returns directly to Newman's formulation that a university is a place of teaching universal knowledge, and asks what institutions owe to that formulation in an era of specialization and research.

What Pelikan found was neither simple affirmation nor easy dismissal. He recognized that much of what Newman had described, the university as a place where knowledge is pursued for its own sake, where the intellect is trained rather than merely filled, where learning forms the whole person rather than only the credential, remained as compelling in 1992 as it had been in 1852.

But Pelikan was too honest a historian to pretend that the intervening century and a half had left Newman's world intact. The research university had transformed the institutional landscape in ways Newman could not have anticipated. Graduate education, professional training, the natural sciences, applied research, and the emerging demands of a technological economy had all claimed their place within the university. No serious reexamination could ignore them, and Pelikan did not try.

His contribution was to argue that these developments need not destroy the idea, but that they urgently required a principled framework for governing their relationship to it. The university's primary obligation, he insisted, remained the pursuit of truth, understood not as the monopoly of any single discipline or method but as the common vocation of all.

The danger he identified was not expansion itself but the loss of any coherent sense of purpose that could hold expansion together. When universities pursue research without teaching, or professional formation without intellectual inquiry, or institutional growth without institutional memory, they do not merely fall short of an ideal. They abandon the very justification for their existence.

Pelikan returned to Newman's famous insistence that a university is, at its core, a place of teaching universal knowledge, and asked what happens to that insistence when the institution housing it has become primarily a producer of specialized research, a credentialing mechanism, and an economic engine.

His answer was careful and precise: the idea survives, but only for those institutions willing to do the sustained intellectual work of relating their actual practices to the purpose those practices are meant to serve.

Reading Pelikan today, more than three decades after his reexamination, one is struck by how much sharper his questions have become. The university of 2026 faces pressures he could only have glimpsed: the digitization of knowledge, the rise of artificial intelligence as a partner and rival in intellectual work.

Survival by inertia, the mere carrying forward of inherited forms, is not fidelity to the idea. It is its gradual erasure.

We face the intensifying demand that higher education justify itself in purely economic terms, and a growing uncertainty among students, families, governments, and universities themselves about what the university is actually for. These are not new questions dressed in new clothing. They are, at their core, the questions Pelikan was already asking, and Newman before him.

What Pelikan understood, and what institutional leaders today often resist acknowledging, is that the idea of the university cannot be preserved by defending the institution as it currently exists. It can only be preserved by returning, repeatedly and rigorously, to the questions that gave rise to it.

Why does the pursuit of universal knowledge matter? What does it mean to form a mind rather than merely credential it? How does the pursuit of truth in one discipline illuminate, challenge, and enrich the pursuit of truth in another? These are not ceremonial questions, to be invoked at convocations and forgotten in strategic planning meetings. They are the structural questions on which the integrity of the institution rests.

The idea of the university cannot be preserved by defending the institution as it currently exists. It can only be preserved by returning to the questions that gave rise to it.

The university that takes Pelikan seriously will not find easy answers. It will find, instead, the disciplined discomfort that genuine reexamination always produces. It will discover that the idea it has been administering without examination contains resources it has not yet drawn upon, and obligations it has long deferred.

It will recognize that reimagining the university of the future is not a threat to the institution but the only way of remaining faithful to what the institution was created to become. Newman proposed an idea. Pelikan tested it. The generation of university leaders now at work must decide whether they are willing to inherit it, with all the demands that inheritance entails.

To those who dare to reimagine.

Bassem Khafagy

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ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	The Idea of the University: A Reexamination
AUTHOR	Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006)
PUBLISHER	Yale University Press, New Haven and London
YEAR	1992
PAGES	x + 238
ISBN	978-0-300-05725-6 (hardcover); 978-0-300-05834-5 (paperback)
NOTE	The Newman formulation discussed in this article is referenced throughout Pelikan's text. The exact commentary has not been independently verified by page.
CORE INSIGHT	Pelikan's reexamination of Newman's foundational text argues that the university's deepest obligation, the pursuit of universal knowledge for its own sake, remains valid and necessary even amid the pressures of specialization, professionalization, and utility that have transformed the institution since Newman's time. The idea is not obsolete; it is unexamined. Preserving it requires not institutional defense but institutional inquiry.

[#WisdomForgotten](#) [#TheIdeaOfTheUniversity](#) [#AcademicPurpose](#) [#UniversityReform](#)



ARTICLE TWO

The Quiet Defenses That Keep Universities from Learning

Christopher Washington, Ph.D.

Higher education speaks fluently about learning. We assess it, accredit it, and promise it to students as a lifelong capacity. Yet in *Teaching Smart People How to Learn*, Chris Argyris identified a troubling paradox: those whose roles depend on learning and adaptation, highly intelligent and accomplished professionals, are often the least effective at doing so.

Argyris studied elite management consultants, individuals selected for intelligence and trained in analysis, working in environments where adaptation is essential. His finding was not that they lacked capability. It was that they used their intelligence defensively. They became skilled at avoiding embarrassment, threat, and the exposure of error while maintaining the appearance of competence.

Excellence Without Self-Examination

Few environments mirror Argyris' research context more closely than higher education. Faculty, administrators, and staff operate in roles that demand learning and adaptation, expertise and judgment.

Yet these evolving conditions produce a predictable pattern. Highly intelligent professionals often seek to maintain control, protect themselves from being seen as wrong, and avoid exposing gaps in their reasoning. In universities, this may appear in proposals designed to preempt critique rather than invite it, procedural objections in committee discussion that substitute for substantive disagreement, or private dissent coupled with public compliance.

Highly intelligent people in organizations often become very good at avoiding the exposure of mistakes, but not necessarily at learning from them.

CHRIS ARGYRIS

As Argyris points out, this pattern is not the result of a lack of intelligence. It is intelligence deployed in service of self-protection.

Avoiding Mistakes and the Rise of Brittle Personalities

Argyris observed that many professionals operate with a set of implicit governing rules that ensure they avoid embarrassment or threat and feeling vulnerable and incompetent. These implicit rules include remaining in control, maximizing winning and minimizing losing, suppressing negative feelings, and being as rational as possible. These rules are rarely stated but are widely acted upon.

When the implicit rules dominate, organizations fall into repeating cycles in which errors are detected but not examined, feedback is softened, and underlying assumptions remain untested. Over time, this produces a form of brittleness. Individuals appear highly capable, articulate, and analytical, yet struggle when situations require them to admit error, revise assumptions, or engage in genuine inquiry, assessment and evaluation practices.

*“One of the paradoxes of human behavior ... is that the master program people actually use is rarely the one they think they use”
(p. 23).*

In universities today, this brittleness can be masked by strong professional reputations, deep disciplinary expertise, or an institution’s favorable brand image. However, when conditions change, such as the incorporation of artificial intelligence making the world’s store of knowledge available at every stakeholder’s and student’s fingertips, the inability to examine underlying assumptions becomes increasingly visible and consequential, exposing limits to an individual or institution’s capacity to learn and adapt under pressure.

Performance Evaluations and the Problem of Being Smart

One of Argyris’ most practical insights concerns how highly intelligent professionals experience performance reviews and evaluations. These practices are rarely perceived by intelligent professionals as neutral opportunities for learning. Instead, they are often experienced as threats to identity and competence.

As a result, professionals may deflect feedback, reinterpret critiques to preserve their self-image, or justify results rather than examine them. In academic settings, this dynamic is often visible in how faculty interpret student course evaluations or academic program reviews. Feedback may be discounted as uninformed, biased, or irrelevant, even when patterns emerge that warrant closer examination. At the same time, students rarely get to know how their input contributes to course and instructional improvement, leaving many uncertain whether their perspectives matter.

For Chris Argyris, these reactions create a persistent paradox. Institutions invest in evaluation systems intended to improve performance, yet those systems are often neutralized by the very individuals they are designed to support.

In universities, critiquing the entire enterprise of obtaining student feedback is amplified by professional norms that reward other behaviors and outcomes such as argumentation, intellectual authority, and disciplinary expertise. These are essential strengths associated with various forms of scholarship, but they can become barriers when the task shifts from defending ideas to examining one's own reasoning, curriculum, or instructional practices.

The Rules We Say and the Rules We Use

A defining contribution of Argyris' work is the distinction between espoused rules, which he calls theories of action, and rules in use, or theories in use. Institutions often express values for open inquiry, critical thinking, and continuous improvement. Yet the rules that guide the thinking and behavior of smart people can differ in important ways.

In practice, individuals may avoid publicly challenging colleagues, openly defend their ideas or strive to protect their credibility in public settings, and express disagreement indirectly. When these implicit rules are made explicit, they can sound inconsistent with the very values institutions claim to uphold. Yet they persist because they reduce immediate identity risk and preserve professional identity.

One cost of the difference between the rules we use and the rules we say is a reduced capacity for learning.

Learning How to Reason Productively in Public

Argyris' central prescription is both simple and demanding. Professionals must learn how to reason productively in public. This means making assumptions visible, sharing the evidence behind conclusions, and inviting others to test one's thinking.

Rather than focusing solely on advocating and defending one's views, individuals must engage in inquiry. This includes asking what evidence might change their view, testing inferences with others, and actively seeking disconfirming perspectives.

For highly intelligent professionals, this shift is not intuitive. It requires a redefinition of competence, one that values the ability to revise one's thinking as much as the ability to defend it.

A Harder Standard for Excellence

I have been both a university leader and a management coach and consultant. I find Argyris' focus on management consultants' need to learn and adapt instructive for professionals in higher education. The rapidly changing social, technological, and policy environment for higher education makes Argyris' points quite consequential.

Teaching Smart People How to Learn is a short book of just seventy-two pages, yet it poses a demanding challenge. The future standard for excellence in higher education may depend less on knowledge production or institutional reputation and more on the capacity of highly intelligent people to examine and change their own reasoning.

For university leaders, faculty, and staff, the question is not whether learning is valued. It is whether we are willing to confront the ways we avoid it. Argyris leaves us with a question that remains both uncomfortable and necessary.

Are we as skilled at examining our assumptions as we are at defending them?

Christopher Washington

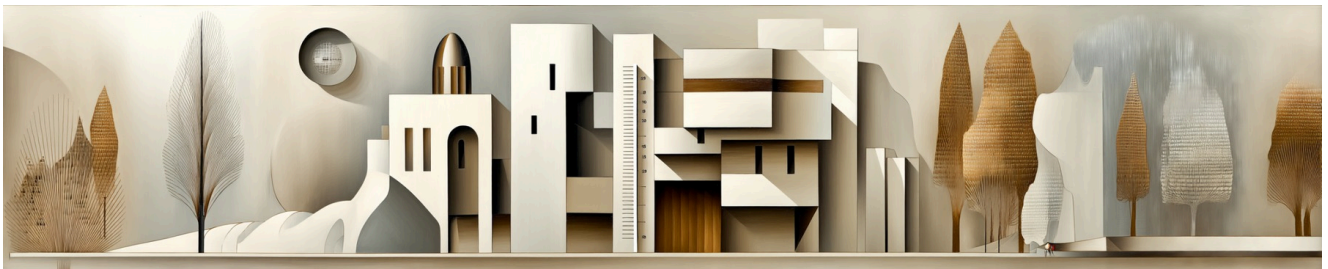
CHRISTOPHER WASHINGTON, PH.D.

01 April 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	Teaching Smart People How to Learn
AUTHOR	Chris Argyris (1923–2013)
PUBLISHER	Harvard Business Review Press, Boston
YEAR	Harvard Business Review, May 1991; book edition (HBR Classics), 2008
PAGES	72
ISBN	978-1-4221-2414-9
CORE INSIGHT	Highly intelligent professionals, including those in universities, develop sophisticated defensive routines that allow them to avoid the exposure of error while maintaining the appearance of competence. Genuine learning requires dismantling these protective patterns and developing what Argyris calls double-loop learning: an inquiry into the underlying assumptions that govern behavior, not merely a correction of errors within existing frameworks.

#WisdomForgotten #DefensiveReasoning #OrganizationalLearning #AcademicLeadership #HigherEducation



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- Share your comments, and let us all learn from you.
- If there is a book that you believe deserves a place in this conversation, tell us. Recommend it. Make the case for it.

About this newsletter • *Wisdom ... Forgotten* is a weekly newsletter by Prof. Bassem Khafagy and Dr. Christopher Washington. Together, they bring six decades of combined experience spanning global higher education strategy, institutional leadership, governance, workforce innovation, and organizational transformation across multiple continents. Each week, this newsletter surfaces ideas from two classic academic works that were often written for moments very much like the one higher education is navigating today, and asks what becomes possible when those insights are brought back into active practice. This newsletter is not a book review. It is a conversation between two thought leaders and a growing community of academics, university leaders, and practitioners who believe the future of the university is strengthened when we reconnect with the intellectual foundations that shaped the field and reinterpret them for today's realities. Many scholars and leaders have carried these ideas forward. Our goal is to help reconnect them to everyday leadership, policy, and institutional design decisions.

Dr. Christopher Washington • Provost Emeritus of Franklin University, is the Founder and CEO of ResiliencePlus Advisors LLC, an executive coaching and advisory firm focused on equipping leaders to navigate complexity, disruption, and rapid organizational change. He also serves as President of the ILI Think Tank at the Innovative Leadership Institute, leading a global network of scholars and senior practitioners advancing the theory and practice of innovative leadership. A contributing author to Forbes Nonprofit Council, Dr. Washington publishes on leadership innovation, organizational culture and performance, and learning ecosystem design.

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The visual compositions • throughout this newsletter and the series are original works by Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy. They are crafted using advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, guided entirely by the author's artistic vision and design sensibility. In a series about reimagining the university, it felt only right that the art itself reflect that spirit of creative possibility.

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