

Making the Invisible Visible

Session 03 – Digest

Fall 2025 & Spring 2026

Problem Statement

What is the point of the University? What is it?

- A school,
- A corporation,
- A governing body,
- A business,
- A bureaucracy,
- A tech company,
- ...

Historical detour: The scientific revolution started with Spain & Portugal needing a way of organizing things made visible, something that was continued by Galileo Galilei mapping invisible aspects of the sky. Then came the “Nobel age” and its methodological abundance, also making the invisible visible (quantum, dna, x-ray, Freud, ...). It all came with a scientific orthodoxy: getting rid of pseudo-sciences also limited the methodologies to a few highly effective quantitative methodologies (quantitative social sciences, biomedical protocols, ...).

Thick description: A methodology coming from ethnography, used by Clifford Geertz. It explains actions, words and how they are experienced as part of a web of meaning. It is *context driven* and *subjective*. Even if it is always “Turtles All the Way Down” (as explained in The Interpretation of Cultures), it is possible to explain by observing while striving to remain invisible.

A Thick Description of Augusta University

Faculty Culture (scholarship, shared governance, ...) is important, a common aspect of all universities, but will not be discussed. Discussion on what universities are is often normative, and focuses on faculty culture, omitting other aspects.

What is our product? In a way, it depends on the source of revenue we consider.

- If we look at student money, then our product is degrees, certificates (that they still have to earn). Looking at previous campaigns is telling: we went from “an experience like no other” (without white men on the main picture, stressing a sense of “belonging there”) to “life-changing, life-saving education”, getting back more to a “white-coat campaign”.
- Every dollar coming to the University comes with strings, regulations, audits, control, ... We don’t see it as aligning with faculty culture, but compliance is an important component of what Universities do.

- The business side seems to be more and more data-driven, which makes Universities closer to tech companies. Universities have been collecting computerized data since the ~70s at least, Augusta State University used to have their own, on-site developed Student Information System before Banner. Not to mention all the data on D2L, it seems that Universities are more and more handling complexity by baking-in data in the way decisions are taken.
- The corporate culture is important: “Deans as CEOs of their college” illustrates the call for leadership. It does not always come with appropriate training: Key Performance Indicators are not always well considered.

Limitations in this discussion abound, students were not discussed and politics was also excluded. Students, however, do not seem to shape the place: they become data and are not very powerful.