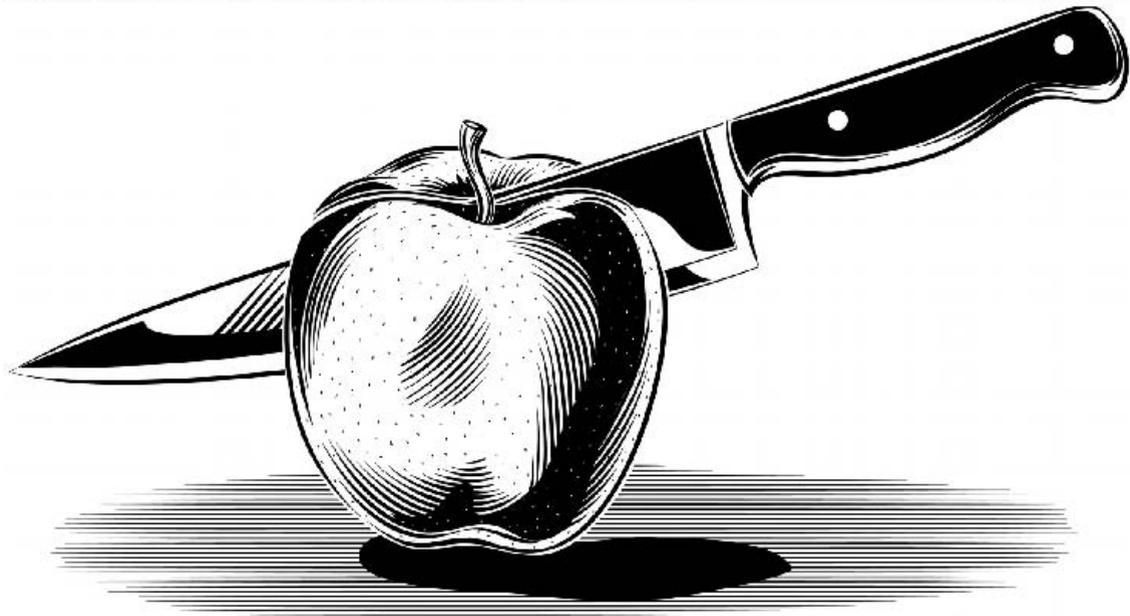


# What I Do

*An answer to the citizens of Texas, who pay my salary and lend me their children to educate*

**GUEST  
COLUMN**



**W**HAT DO YOU DO?" I AM ASKED THIS QUESTION FREQUENTLY, AND often I struggle to answer adequately. Conditioned from our first day as assistant professors, we fall back on academic-speak. • "I do research and teaching." My friend nods politely with glazed eyes. Once again, I have failed to tell the story of the academy grippingly.

**This is what students get when they come to UT. The chef serves you in the kitchen; you learn from the masters.**

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Now the question is asked not by curious friends but by powerful people with agendas. They think they know already: we really don't do much, and the little we do doesn't amount to much. They ask questions about the very soul of the modern university.

It is easy to dismiss the questions from those pushing an agenda. But when my friend asks me, "What do you do?" it makes me wonder whether we have answered it to the satisfaction of the good and generous citizens of Texas, whose children we educate. So let me try.

We are theoretical physicists and art historians, philosophers and mathematicians, sociologists and biologists, engineers, geologists, and anthropologists.

But I think we can say in five words what we do: we create and disseminate knowledge. No other social institution does that. We create knowledge through our research endeavors, sometimes in teams, but often alone in a lonely quest. We disseminate the knowledge we create through our writings, public presentations, and most importantly, our teaching.

This is the rare gift that students attending major research universities like UT enjoy. They get served by the chefs; they receive knowledge from those who create it. I like to tell my undergraduate students that going to a restaurant is a good parable for the difference between a school and a university. You can sit at the front and eat a dish that is already

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**In a fast-moving world where you really cannot prepare for a job because that job may not be there when you graduate, the education we impart must enable young people to be able to do and enjoy a wide variety of things.**

fully prepared (knowledge between two hard covers). Or you can go into the kitchen and discover how it is made.

This is what students get when they come to UT. The chef serves you in the kitchen; you learn from the masters. Even when we teach what others have discovered, we know how those discoveries took place, and we can get our students to question those discoveries. This is often called “critical thinking.” In other words, how can what you learn permit you to not simply repeat what you have learned, but to create new possibilities? Students learn to question, to look behind the curtain, to go into the kitchen and interrogate the chef.

In a fast-moving world where you really cannot prepare for a job because that job may not be there when you graduate, the education we impart must enable young people to be able to do and enjoy a wide variety of things. We have to prepare them for life, not for a job. And for that they must have the best knowledge we can give them about the world and the sharpest intellectual skills we can instill in them to remake it.

But what do I do? I work with ancient and early medieval texts from India written primarily in the classical language of Sanskrit. Why? Because I want to understand and reveal through my writings how societies and cultures of a different time and place may have lessons for us today. But that is not the only reason (a utilitarian one), nor the most important. Research is based on the innate curiosity of the human mind to go beyond the apparent, to explore what is distant and unfamiliar, whether it is the working of sub-atomic particles, the distant birth of the cosmos, or the way ancient people lived. It is this curiosity that generates experiments in art, music, and scholarship; it is what sets humans apart and accounts for the history of human accomplishments.

This curiosity-driven search for knowledge cannot be recorded on a bottom line of cost and benefit, although many of those bottom lines would not exist without that thirst and search for knowledge. This is what sets the university apart from the corporation.

As I have labored over ancient Indian legal texts, I have critically edited many of them, making reliable texts available to researchers. I have made annotated translations, making them available to both scholars and ordinary citizens. To prepare a critical edition, as I did of Manu’s famous second-century

Code of Law, is tedious, time-consuming, and finally exhilarating. To read 50 copies of a work written many centuries ago by hand on country paper or palm leaves in nine different scripts, to note down and compare every variant reading and make a family tree of the manuscripts, and finally to arrive at a critically constituted text that I believe is the closest possible approximation to the original—this is the lonely quest I mentioned earlier. The result, however, is that we gain new insights into how an ancient people governed themselves, the laws by which they lived, and the ways they resolved disputes.

Is research that is unsupported by outside funds or that does not generate profits through practical applications worthwhile? The bottom-line arguments are good for 10-second sound-bites but disastrous for the health of a university. Sometimes when I am feeling down, I get an email from a stranger who has read a translation of mine of an ancient Indian text and wants me to know how much he appreciated it. Although these moments are rare and far between, they tell me that what I am doing is worthwhile.

The centrality of liberal arts, of scholarship in the human sciences, was underlined by perhaps the most gifted technology leader ever: Steve Jobs. “If you’re looking for CEOs of this caliber, you have to look outside the engineering and business schools,” noted a recent eulogizer.

Speaking of what makes Apple products distinctive, Jobs himself disclosed the secret: “I think our major contribution [to computing] was in bringing a liberal arts point of view to the use of computers,” he said. “If you really look at the ease of use of the Macintosh, the driving motivation behind that was to bring not only ease of use to people—so that many, many more people could use computers for nontraditional things at that time—but it was to bring beautiful fonts and typography to people, it was to bring graphics to people ... so that they could see beautiful photographs, or pictures, or artwork, et cetera ... to help them communicate.

“Our goal was to bring a liberal arts perspective and a liberal arts audience to what had traditionally been a very geeky technology and a very geeky audience.”

To which we all can only say, Amen!

J.P. Olivelle  
JACOB AND FRANCES SANGER MOSSIKER  
CHAIR IN THE HUMANITIES