

## Offline: What might a university achieve, and how?



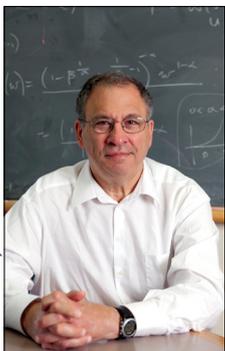
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Princeton University



Angus Deaton



Princeton University

I never expected to discover a university so happy not to have a medical school. Princeton rejoices in avoiding the grip of a faculty that, through its sheer size and force, can sometimes crush its scholarly neighbours. With the highest density of academic stars per undergraduate of any higher education institution in the world, Princeton could afford to enjoy this unmatched reputation amid its beautiful 500-acre estate in the rich heartland of New Jersey. But if you visit Princeton (and I owe a debt of thanks to Adel Mahmoud for warmly opening its doors to me last week), you will find a university not at all relaxed about its present or its future. Instead, you will meet an institution anxious to make an impact. The unique asset that encourages this 268-year-old university to think beyond its comfortable setting is the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Senior figures at Princeton possess their academic specialty. But they also possess an equally explicit role. Angus Deaton is the Dwight D Eisenhower Professor of Economics and International Affairs. Bryan Grenfell is the Kathryn Briger and Sarah Fenton Professor of Ecology and Public Affairs. Princeton faculty are required not only to be great scholars. They are also expected to deliver knowledge into the milieu of wider political, economic, and social debate. Few universities put the translation of knowledge at the pinnacle of their priorities. Princeton does. And when asked what those priorities are, global health is only outdone by finance and foreign policy. Princeton aims to be a leading voice in global health affairs. Is its hope being fully realised?

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At an individual level, yes. Angus Deaton's recent book—*The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*—is an extraordinary distillation of a lifetime's reflection on one of the world's most tragic human paradoxes: that human progress creates vast inequalities, including inequalities in health. Deaton connects economics with ethics in shaping a personal worldview that is not only deeply moral but also profoundly political—"one cannot assess society, or justice, using living standards alone", he writes. Or take Uwe Reinhardt. His work (as a political economist) on health systems also embraces ethical argument, this time concerning health-sector reform. He teaches that before one can

make any judgment about the best method of organising health care, one needs to choose one's own preferred theory of justice. The moral comes before the technical. João Biehl is an anthropologist. He leads a popular course on "Critical perspectives in global health". His book, *When People Come First* (co-edited with Adriana Petryna), aims to put ethnographic work—what epidemiologists often dismiss as anecdotal, exceptional, and unreliable—at the decisive centre of global health decision making. And Tsung-Mei Cheng, a Princeton health policy research analyst, has used a combination of cultural scholarship and incisive journalism to illuminate the subjective motivations behind, as well as the technical realities of, health reforms in China, Taiwan, and Switzerland.

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But this individualistic approach to research impact can only achieve so much. Princeton, like many universities today, is reconsidering its attitudes to international influence. Now may be the ideal moment to contemplate change. Traditional schools of medicine and public health are poorly adapted for the approaching predicaments facing humankind. Contemplating sustainability, resilience, and even survival requires universities to husband their broad intellectual resources with a view to unprecedented collaboration. Individual excellence may not be enough. A clue to that future perhaps comes from one of Princeton's own faculty. Simon Levin is a mathematical biologist whose work on ecological systems has explored conditions for vulnerability and collapse. He sees human flourishing as a balance between the creative freedom of individual competition and "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon". The best future we might hope for is "agreements between subsets of nations, as building blocks for larger-scale agreements". Apply his biologically inspired perspective to the work of a university—agreements between subsets of scholarly disciplines, as building blocks for larger-scale agreements. In an era of engagement between disciplines that demands respect and tolerance, the absence of a sharp-elbowed medical school may turn out to be Princeton's greatest comparative advantage after all.

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