

CHAPTER 2

Meeting the Challenges of the New Millennium

The University's Role

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During the last half of the nineteenth century, much of the higher learning in the United States was reshaped in response to a rapidly growing, expanding, and changing nation. American education accomplished this reshaping by holding on to the best of the past—the liberal arts college modeled on the British undergraduate experience—borrowing the best of the new from continental Europe—the German emphasis on empiricism, research, and graduate study—and adding ideas of their own—the land-grant concept embodied in the Morrill Act of 1862, which increased student access, reconfigured and broadened both the curriculum and public service, and laid the foundation for the country's great public universities. Thus was formed the modern American university.

As the following examples show, the winds of change are again blowing hard, but this time in a more diverse country and in a far more volatile and interdependent world.

- Ideological commitments that had locked in communist governments for decades are giving way, sometimes chaotically and certainly unevenly, to greater political openness, increased international trade, widespread economic development, the aggressive use of new technologies, free market principles, and more democratic institutions and practices.
- The past two decades have seen the emergence of the Pacific Rim as a potent force in the world's economy, temporary setbacks notwith-

standing. The rise of Japan and the newly industrialized states of Asia has challenged assumptions about American dominance of the global marketplace, our current successes aside, as will the impending economic and monetary integration of Western Europe.

- East and West are today struggling less with each other than they are struggling in common with the forces of modernity—the technological revolution, modern science, the industrialization of labor, and large-scale urbanization. These forces are changing the world not just at the margin but at the core.
- Ideas blow across political boundaries, even into the most insulated of nations and societies—disquieting, troubling, indeed, in some instances, overturning even the most ideological and inflexible of established orders, as occurred in the former Soviet Union.

All these forces—economic, political, ideological, religious, social, and cultural—are interrelated and global in their significance and effect; they are abetted by a revolution in telecommunications, commercial air travel, student and faculty exchanges across national boundaries, satellites, and the computer. The leading nations in this dramatically altered economic and political environment will be those with surplus capital, national self-discipline, advanced technology, and superior education. In respect to this agenda for the future, the United States has both advantages and disadvantages as it struggles to define its role and place in this changing world scene. The list of American problems will sound familiar.

- The growing gap between the country's rich and poor and an ominous growth in the underclass—the unemployable poor caught in a vicious cycle of drugs, alienation, broken families, and crime, especially in the inner cities.
- The erosion of our sense of community and civil life, and the corresponding diminishment of local governments as power and authority shift to state and federal authorities.
- The nation's troubled system of public schools, chronically underfunded and underperforming compared with many, if not most, of the world's advanced industrial countries.
- The disquietude within the body politic, in spite of a booming economy, attributable partly to the problems just mentioned, partly to the knowledge that the U.S. is a less dominant player on the world scene, and partly, at least in the western and southwestern states, to large-scale in-migration from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia, which is reshaping the ethnic and racial balance within American social, political, and economic systems, and straining society's assimilative capacities.

On the other hand, the U.S. also has some striking advantages.

- The nation possesses remarkably stable political, social, and economic systems and fosters a society that not only adapts to change but actually encourages it. The American openness to new ways of doing things is a tremendous advantage in a world characterized by constant technological change, as is the nation's willingness to accept new talent and fresh ideas from throughout the world.
- The best American universities, with a handful of notable exceptions, are the finest in the world. The vigor of basic research enterprise in the U.S. is truly exceptional, and its democratic and open spirit helps ensure that the best flourish. Americans continue to capture most of the Nobel Prizes year after year, surely an indication that Americans are doing something right—or at least did so within the professional lifetime of the recipients.
- The creativity and productivity of American business also count for what is right in the country. Much is made these days of the short-term focus of American companies—too much, in my opinion, because that view fails to take into account the extent to which American companies have recognized their problems and have restructured during the 1980s and 1990s. Business has been more strategic and energetic in responding to change than have either the universities or government as the positive corporate bottom line today makes clear.
- The U.S. dollar is valued not only because of its comparative stability and strength in world currency markets but also because it is the currency of a society with an enormous capacity for adaptability, hard work, creativity, and an open attitude and a positive response toward change.

For the world generally, the most essential challenges in the coming years will be to deal with the diminishing sovereignty of nations, the growing balkanization of countries and societies, the increasing gap in wealth between developed and underdeveloped countries, the relentless growth of world population, the mass migration of peoples, the rising level of religious fundamentalism, gross environmental degradation, shrinking stocks of basic food supplies relative to need, including water, and the education of the young for the world they will live in—not for the one with which we are familiar now.

The Western university, especially in the United States and unevenly elsewhere, has a vital role to play and a nearly unique capability to help with these problems because most of them will require knowledge, brainpower, skilled intelligence, and judgement to solve, or at least to manage. The university, of all institutions, has the capacity to help define these issues, to

analyze and examine them, to discuss creative ways of coping with them, and to share this knowledge and these insights not only with the young but also with the larger society. The university is also able to do so with less ideological or political bias and with more impartiality and objectivity than any other institution, public or private. Moreover, the university is the principal repository of educated and trained personnel, of the sophisticated tools and intellectual resources needed to do the work, and of the infrastructure critical to the task. It is *the* institution with sufficient experience, independence, and authority to carry out its work while possessing a credible reputation in the larger society.

In coming years, the university should be more central to efforts to comprehend and cope with these forces for change. The university, more than any other collective and credible enterprise in our society, should be playing the key role. The question, of course, is: Will it? The answer: Well, probably, but not inevitably.

ADVERSE TRENDS IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

If not deflected or checked, a number of adverse trends in the United States, could compromise or diminish the university's capacity to play its distinctive and natural role in this changing world.

Public Funding

The funding of public higher education nearly everywhere in the U.S. ebbs and flows with the times—with changing public attitudes towards government, taxes, and the universities themselves, and with the public's assessment of the universities' work and worth. And the universities have in the 1990s lost heavily on all counts, just as they did in the mid- to late-1960s, but today for fundamentally different reasons.

More than 30 years ago, the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, general student unrest throughout the universities of Western Europe and the United States, and violent and widespread student demonstrations in the U.S. against the war in Vietnam led to dramatically reduced public support and respect for universities. This loss of respect damaged them, nearly irreversibly, for almost two decades. The mid- to late-1980s, however, were a period of healing and renewed support for universities from both the public and private sectors. The early to mid-1990s, in contrast, were financially hurtful to these institutions (nearly as severe in some instances as were the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s). Moreover, the universities were disproportionately hurt when compared with virtually every other aspect of publicly funded activities. The universities' position was weakened vis-à-vis growing public support and relatively better funding for schools, health, welfare, and prisons. It now appears that the loss of funding, unlike following the years of student unrest,

will not be redressed even though significant increases in enrollment are imminent in many states and levels of tuitions and fees have reached historic highs.

The universities' response to these fiscal problems was to seek operational efficiencies, reduce services, erode student/faculty ratios, defer plant and equipment maintenance, reduce administrative staff, and increase tuitions and fees charged to students. These and other measures used over the years to deal with such fiscal stringencies were always thought to be more temporary than permanent. Today, they have become permanent, and the universities' response will now need to be concerned less with efficiency and more with purpose and pedagogy.

Governmental policies tend to abet, indeed, sometimes to mandate, such university responses through budgetary language and statutes or regulations enacted or promulgated to induce compliance. Examples are mandated levels of staffing; tuitions and fees; enrollment levels; staff and faculty compensation; space standards; and so forth. Such governmental mandates are not always unwelcomed by academic administrators and governing boards, especially during times of fiscal exigencies when they enable university authorities to escape responsibility for making such decisions themselves. Mandates also tend to shift attention from the more salient issues of purpose and pedagogy to those rooted in more familiar prose and politics. After all, bureaucracies and legislatures both prefer quantifiable solutions to more substantive and subjective ones.

Governmental Attitudes

Another adverse trend is the growing perception by state legislators and members of the U.S. Congress that universities are indistinguishable from other special interest groups seeking access to the public purse, with no intrinsically compelling claims beyond their political influence to affect the process and outcome. Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to an earlier time when American universities and colleges were perceived by lawmakers as special institutions in society with unique and indispensable capabilities, singularly able to educate the brightest of each generation, to advance the cause of knowledge and truth by invoking the scholarly norms of impartiality and objectivity, and by sharing what they know with society as a whole.

These legislative viewpoints are widely shared by the populace as a whole, and the public is not amused. There is public frustration, even resentment, with rising levels of tuitions and fees; with teaching loads, especially in leading universities, that are regarded as unreasonably low; with the perceived subordination of teaching to research; with college and university commitments to affirmative action policies and practices that are no longer supported by public opinion; and with the rise of political correctness within the universities

themselves. These “realities” have come to be viewed by the public as betrayals of the social contract between the colleges and universities and the citizenry.

This social contract gave universities uncommon levels of autonomy in the administration of their internal affairs (e.g., admissions, curricula, degree requirements, tuition and fees, faculty appointments and promotions, and tenure) in return for an expectation that the costs to students would be attainable, applicants would be admitted or turned away based upon individual merit rather than group affiliation, teaching would be disinterested and have first call on the faculty’s time and attention, and scholarship would be impartial. Only under these conditions, it was believed, could the university’s role as a credible source of information, knowledge, and informed judgement be assured and the university’s role as an authentic teacher of the young, rather than as a mere advocate for the jumble of personal biases of any given teacher or scholar, be secured. The fraying of this social contract has, in recent years, contributed to adverse public perceptions of American universities and has reduced the willingness of the voting public to fund them.

Structural Inefficiencies

Universities also possess structural inefficiencies that impair the prospects for adaptation and change. Examples of such inefficiencies include clinging to the familiar and to custom even though they are less well suited to the future than to the past; excessive preoccupation with prerogatives, especially in the academic departments; and, in a university’s institutional relations, being driven by practice and turf rather than by synergies and new ways of cooperating and sharing to mutual advantage. One does not read of mergers or even joint ventures in higher education as one does in the corporate world.

Student Expectations

Another adverse trend is the incipient tension between student expectations and the colleges and universities in which they are enrolled. This tension is more dimly than clearly perceived by all parties, but it is there nevertheless. Today’s students have a heightened sense of their own independence that is at odds with the institution’s sense of its own authority. For example, the Western universities’ sense of self is embodied within the history and customs of 800 years of university life. Such matters as the purpose of learning; the transmission of the culture from one generation to the next; the formulation and structuring of knowledge into a cohesive and credible curriculum; and the subordination of the student’s judgement to the authority of the professor in such matters as required courses, pedagogy, standards, and evaluations are all regarded as within the authority and discretion of the university to define or decide, or, if disputed, to settle. But the students’ view has become that of a

consumer and, as with most consumers, the worth of what the university offers or requires is “priced” by students not so much within the academy’s historic norms and values but more within the vocational or professional ambitions of the individual student.

The universities’ awkward, but generally accommodating response, has been (1) to multiply vocational, pre-professional, and professional programs while shrinking the liberal arts and their place in the newer curricular schemes; and (2) to commercialize both its curriculum and much of its research, e.g., technology-transfer policies, patent and licensing policies, faculty leave policies, gift and grant policies, and linkages between universities and privately and publicly held corporations worldwide.

Learning Preferences

Finally, little systematic account is taken by faculty members, or university administrators and governing boards for that matter, of how today’s undergraduate students prefer to learn. Thus, there is a disconnect between students who come to the universities steeped in technological, electronic, and other visually based methods of learning and a university pedagogy that is rooted more in the past than planted in the future, at least in the lower-division or pre-specialized programs and majors. Moreover, there has been an explicable, but barely defensible, institutional hesitancy in responding to distance learning possibilities and related issues bearing on the time, manner, and place of the teaching function, including the age and other changing characteristics of the student body.

CONCLUSIONS

These impediments to change, and others, will delay, but, in the end, will not prevent university reforms over time. But one should not fail to recognize that such changes, taken collectively, will have a profound effect on our colleges and universities, and not just on this or that aspect of university life but on the totality of its culture and its place in our society as well.

Bill Chace (1999), president of Emory University, in underscoring this prospect, recently observed that

the change most important to the academy as a powerful medium by which values in our culture are expressed, modified and reinforced, is that the “hallowed” or “sacrosanct” idea of the campus is eroding. Where once professors and what they professed enjoyed both the prestige and the vulgar scorn of all those matters removed from the everyday nature of American life, they now are more and more a part of that life. They have been “desanctified.” . . . Each such change can be understood, absorbed,

and explained. But the greater cultural landscape now looks different and will feel very different as the next decade approaches. . . . The groves of academe will bear the traffic of the world.

Account should also be taken of the universities in Europe, many of which are contending with the same issues, although within differing political, educational, economic, social, and cultural contexts. For example, European universities tend to find themselves over-enrolled, underfunded, over-regulated, and politicized. A pattern of faculty employed part-time, rectors and vice-chancellors exercising nominal authority for brief tenures, enrollment entitlements, tuition-free policies, state rather than university employment status, undue ministerial oversight, excessive bureaucracy, institutional separation of teaching and research, and almost exclusive dependence on state funding have all come to constrain, as well as to challenge, European universities seeking to change in a fast-moving world.

But the role European universities should play in the development of their respective countries, in the education of young people of talent, in the advancement and conservation of knowledge, and in the intellectual life of their respective countries is a widely shared and historic obligation, regardless of custom, law, and government.

The Western university has history on its side. Only a handful of institutions from the last millennium are with us as we move into the next one. The university is one of them. For it to remain as vital a force in the coming millennium as it has been in the last will require risk-taking, leadership, renewed confidence, and a greater willingness to reshape and realign its affairs and focus than is presently evident. Universities' historic role can only be placed in the broader service of humanity if they change with the rest of the world, thus remaining a credible, indispensable part of the ongoing life of our culture and a force for good and enhanced stability worldwide.

As the twentieth century closes, Americans need to be as bold, creative, and forward thinking about the university's future as were their predecessors during the last half of the nineteenth century. Americans should be reminded that others before them in the Western world, from the twelfth century on, somehow managed in the face of complacency, indifference, ignorance, and despair to raise the university's lamp high enough to illuminate not only the university's future but also its link to a more broadly civilized and cultured society.

REFERENCE

- Chace, B. (1999). "Public Representation of Culture and History," forthcoming in a special issue of *The American Behavioral Scientist*.