

CHAPTER

An Agenda for the Governing Board

Harold M. Williams

This symposium addressed a very critical aspect of the future of the research university – governance. Without a clearer delineation of the responsibilities of boards, administrative leadership and faculty, leadership and decision making and the ability of the institution to address the future, responsibly and timely, is severely jeopardized.

Yet, throughout the symposium, I was discomforted by the lack of comment or discussion addressing the broadly based criticisms of higher education generally and the funding crisis facing public higher education, and the impact both are having on the future of the public research university. To address these issues, the following is a recommended agenda for governing boards and administrators concerned with the future of the public research university. While it relates particularly to the American situation, I believe much of it is relevant in other countries as well.

The issues do not lend themselves to simple solutions and some may be insoluble or just “too hot to handle.” Individual institutions will respond differently— experimenting, innovating, and restructuring. But the collective response, I believe, will shape the future of the public research university. With certainty, it will be different than it is today.

The importance of the research university to a democratic society as educator and primary source of fundamental and applied research and public service has never been greater. However, the public research university faces unprecedented external pressures which can fundamentally alter its status, independence and ability to discharge its mission. Its quest for external fund-

ing makes it vulnerable to pressures from political forces, private donors, and private industry. The demand and expectation for access continues to grow far in excess of the resources available to accommodate it. Technology has the potential to reshape how and where learning occurs and research is pursued. Dissatisfaction with the emphasis on research at the expense of the quality of undergraduate education is growing. Private sector, for-profit enterprises are moving aggressively into higher education, using emerging technologies and addressing the need for life long learning and retraining. At the same time, the growth of knowledge will continue to exceed the available resources.

Yet the university appears to behave in the traditional fashion. The academy's inherent conservatism in addressing criticism or pressures for change is both a liability and a source of stability. Higher education as an institution responds to external pressures only slowly and then in an *ad hoc*, unorganized manner. The pattern appears to be to co-opt the critics, to ignore the complaints, to defuse the issue with bland reassurances that the situation is under control and ride it out as best one can with confidence that it will, eventually, go away. The objective: preserve the *status quo*, or at least modify it as little as possible. The positive of such an approach, of course, is the ability of higher education to insulate itself from the fad of the moment, as it sees itself responsible for protecting the essence and integrity of what the institution is all about and how it goes about fulfilling its institutional goals and obligations. At the same time, it constrains and neutralizes the ability of the institution to address major issues in a timely and optimal manner.

The crucial issue facing the public research university is the extent to which it will lead in shaping its own future, taking into account the external forces impacting it or, alternatively, whether it will be overtaken by those forces.

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

The basic governance system of American higher education is sound in principle, with responsibility placed with an independent board of trustees.

Institutional leadership of the university has the responsibility to protect the academic principles that define and guide it and address the issues which will define its future. While shared governance may identify where the responsibility for a given decision may rest, the leadership responsibility remains with the board and the chief executive to assure that the critical issues are addressed comprehensively and timely.

Governing boards need to assure that university administrators exercise their authority and responsibility in this regard. Few university presidents appear to speak for the academic principles. Academic leadership tends to dis-

appear in the process of deliberation. Shared governance has become so pervasive as to deny the concept of or erode much of the responsibility for academic leadership. Further, the time devoted to leading fund raising campaigns – now virtually continuous – distracts, or excuses, leadership from the responsibility for leading the institution.

Fund-raising underscores the troublesome “show me the money” attitude that increasingly pervades higher education and the research university – whether in its competition for public funding or in its capital campaigns. The direction of growth and the priorities of the institution are increasingly determined by those activities for which money can be raised. The tightness of public resources places the institutions under increasingly competitive market pressures to obtain resources. But market economy undermines intellectual independence. Leadership needs to be more deliberate than it appears to be in assuring that the quest for money does not distort the principles, direction and priorities of the institution or lead it in an unwise academic direction. What appear to be immediate opportunities may evolve into unwise long-term commitments. How will institutions of higher education protect and preserve their intellectual independence given the dependence on external resources i.e., government and the growing relationship to industry?

Leadership is made more difficult as the sense of institutional community has eroded. Administrators devote more and more time to fund-raising. Faculty are becoming increasingly independent of whatever institution with which they happen to be affiliated. Loyalty today tends to be more to the discipline and to other relationships external to the institution. The number of professors quitting the university to join computer or Internet ventures, or dividing their time between the two, or taking sabbaticals to work on high-tech ventures, raises questions about the depth of their engagement with the university. Faculty are also more responsive to recruitment offers from other universities of increased research funding and support. Hence their concern for the future of the institution and participation in its governance has diminished. Can this trend be reversed or does the concept or extent of shared governance need to be reconsidered?

Henry Rosovsky, in his final report as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) at Harvard wrote: “This brings me to the crux of the matter. FAS has become a society largely without rules, or to put it slightly differently, the tenured members of the faculty – frequently as *individuals* – make their own rules. Of course, there are a great many rules in any bureaucratic organization, but these largely concern less essential matters. When it concerns our more important obligations – faculty citizenship – neither rule nor custom is any longer compelling.

“To put it slightly differently, as a social organism, we operate without a written constitution and with very little common law. That is a poor combi-

nation, especially when there is no strong consensus concerning duties and standards of behavior.” (Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Dean’s Report, 1990-91, Cambridge: Harvard University)

ACCOUNTABILITY

The concept of accountability is difficult to argue against or to implement. Who should be accountable to whom and for what? At a minimum, there are widely held criticisms of the university that should be addressed. They undoubtedly impact adversely upon the image of the institution and the level of support for public funding. They go to the issue of whether the resources are being used wisely and whether leadership is holding itself and the faculty accountable for what they do.

We are a fractured society—critical, intolerant, lacking in community. In context, it is not surprising that higher education comes under criticism as well. But the fact that many of the criticisms have a basis in fact and are widely acknowledged—even by strong supporters—should be ringing alarm bells in the academy and its leadership.

Public financing of higher education has brought with it expectations that higher education be responsive to the inquiries, judgments and will of the public and its political representatives. These expectations have evolved over time to include criticisms of the institution and many of its activities. Higher education faces questions about its basic institutional purposes and goals, its policies on admissions and academic standards, controversy over undergraduate curricula and of quality of teaching, questions about academic culture, concern for costs continually rising beyond inflation, and accountability. As a consequence the institution of higher education is not held in the high regard it enjoyed in the past. These are concerns the governing body should address and to which it should respond publicly.

A report for the Education Commission of the States, entitled “Higher Education Agenda,” stated the following:

“We sense a growing frustration – even anger – among many of the nation’s governors, state legislators, and major corporate leaders that higher education is seemingly disengaged from the battle. Colleges and universities are perceived more often than not as the source of the problems rather than part of the solution. The issues raised are usually specific: lack of involvement in solutions to the problems of urban schools, failure to lead in the reform of teacher education, questions about faculty workload and productivity, and lack of commitment to teaching or the escalating and seemingly uncontrollable cost of a college education. But whatever the issue, the overall sense of many outside colleges and universities is either that dramatic action will be needed to

shake higher education from its internal lethargy and focus, or that the system must be bypassed for other institutional forms and alternatives.” (Education Commission of the States, “Higher Education Agenda,” 17 November 1989)

What are the values of the public research university today that define the end in itself, not the university as an instrument of external ends? How does it measure up? What reforms must it undertake? How does it convince its constituents – boards, administration, faculty, legislators and public constituencies – to “buy in”? How are the complaints and criticisms of the public and its representatives to be answered?

The strengthening of the scholarly mission demands the willingness to focus on broad educational objectives, rigorous selection of priorities and understanding of and address to the university’s internal weaknesses and failures. The demands on the institution and its opportunities will always exceed the resources available to respond. Its future will be determined by the choices it makes. It needs to be able to change and introduce new priorities and maintain the dynamism of the institution essentially without adequate additional financial resources. It needs to question existing premises and arrangements, evaluate, revise and/or eliminate existing processes and administrative structures. It needs to do new things and old things better with existing resources and eliminate or diminish some functions so others can be established or grow. It needs to reduce less useful areas in order to develop more useful ones.

The academy allocates additional resources reasonably well, but does not address resource reallocation decisions well. These circumstances place new pressures on the processes of governance and call for strengthening the decision making process – for the governing boards and administrators to be more proactive in addressing the issues and building consensus and for faculty to rise above parochial interests and to engage with the future of the institution.

FUNDING PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Access to public higher education in the United States has become a right rather than a privilege for every high school graduate capable of benefiting from it and at a cost that he or she could afford. Demand for access is growing due both to changing demographics and to the public perception that a college degree is essential for economic opportunity and upward mobility. In a shift attributed to the changing economy, higher education is increasingly seen as essential for access to the middle class. A college education has become as important as a high school diploma formerly was.

Public funding for higher education, however, does not correspond to the demands for access. It has been described as “boom or bust.” It is not high in priority in relation to other demands on the public purse. Therefore, during economic recessions higher education tends to absorb disproportionate cuts in

public funding, often accompanied by steep increases in tuition. To compensate, during economic prosperity higher education is often benefited disproportionately. However, over the long run, the percentage of government revenues devoted to higher education and per student funding have been shrinking.

Maintaining current quality and service levels for higher education will require either increasing taxes or favoring higher education over competing public service demands, such as elementary and secondary education, health, welfare and prisons. Neither is likely. It is likely that existing financing trends coupled with political and public demand for access will drive public policy on higher education. *The political and economic reality of public higher education is that access must be maintained and that education of at least present quality must continue to be delivered but at lower cost per student.*

This creates a situation which calls for a basic rethinking of the structure of public higher education generally and the role of the public research university specifically. It will not be solved by changes at the margin or by wishful thinking that political attitudes will change. Can both access and quality be maintained? Given priority for access, what will happen to quality? How can costs be contained?

Public higher education, and particularly the public research university, will not survive as it is merely because it should. It will not disappear, but the forces at work threaten to transform it so that at some point in the next half-century it may be recognizable in name only.

Many studies in the private sector demonstrate that the reputation of a product brand franchise can last much longer than the quality of the product justifies. There is a time lag between decline in the quality of a well-respected branded product and the public realization that the product is no longer what its reputation was based upon. The principle applies equally in the world of higher education. Erosion of quality is subtle and the realization that its product no longer lives up to its image may occur long after its current university and political leadership have retired without confronting the issue.

The pressures on access and quality do not have the same impact on the private institutions. Private research universities are not under public pressure to increase access. At the same time, their endowments have grown enormously. In the past year alone, many private university endowments have grown by 30 to 40 percent, and as much as 60%. Not concerned with increasing access, they can direct their expanding resources to improve quality. The ability of the public research university to compete is eroding. For example, the April 22, 2000 issue of *The Economist*, page 24, reports on a study by Ting Alexander, an economist at the University of Illinois, to the effect that the salary gap between full professors at the country's best private universities and its best public ones has grown from \$1,300 in 1980 to \$21,700 in 1998. They can

offer larger research budgets, smaller teaching loads and tuition reciprocity programs, which Alexander characterizes as “a quarter of a million-dollar jackpot if you have three children.” The article goes on to conclude that the nation’s public universities are at risk of becoming training grounds for private universities with bigger checkbooks. Given the pressures for access and limited public funding, can the public research university any longer realistically aspire to compete with the private research universities? Is this a conclusion for which the public governing and funding bodies are prepared to accept responsibility?

EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

Historically, the central purpose of higher education has been the development of responsible citizens rather than training students for jobs. Isn’t it time for higher education, including the research university, to re-examine its commitment to that purpose? What remains of general or liberal learning in the modern university? Are we educating citizens, potential leaders, and people with the ability to question and discern, or are we training a work force? What is the appropriate trade-off between professional preparation engaged in chiefly with a view towards primarily extrinsic considerations and a liberal arts education pursued first and foremost for its own intrinsic value? Undergraduates should have a broad learning experience in addition to their specialization. But it seems that the pressure towards the latter is increasing.

If the universities have no independent mission of their own other than the training of individuals for jobs, then they should not be surprised that they are treated like any other supplier of a service.

Renewing the institutional commitment to meaningful undergraduate teaching and learning would require a fundamental shift in resource allocation. It would also increase interest in exploring pedagogy and the use of technology. Can this be accomplished without a thorough re-examination of the academic culture as a whole, i.e. of the institutional environment?

TEACHING

The unity of teaching and research, a fundamental principle of the research university has lost its equilibrium.

Allegations are broad based that teaching as an activity is seriously undervalued, that undergraduate instruction and student mentoring are neglected as a priority or consigned to the hands of graduate students to an unacceptable extent and that professors have forsaken their classroom obligations for other pursuits, particularly research and published scholarship.

There are many students, parents and legislators, probably an overwhelming majority, who value institutions of higher learning not for their outreach and service functions or even for their research mission, but for the teaching they are capable of supplying. As consumers they will expect and demand improvement.

Is there a choice? Is the concept of a four-year undergraduate education on a residential campus, with graduate education in various academic disciplines and professions and faculty devoted to teaching research and service any longer a fit and will it meet with the needs and expectations of the various constituencies? Why should the research university engage in undergraduate general education? Why not begin in the upper division or possibly only at graduate level and professional schools? Can research institutions be economically viable without the undergraduate infrastructure?

To the extent that new, primarily for profit, providers of higher education focused only on teaching, erode the university's role of job training, what will happen to government and private support of research and service? For, regardless of how universities allocate costs internally, it is teaching that provides its largest revenue source and infrastructure, which in turn underwrites much of the research and service.

TENURE

What could be more detrimental to effective teaching than its order of priority in the attainment of tenure and promotion? Can teaching be improved without addressing the absolute job security provided by faculty tenure? Does tenure serve the best interests of the institution? If not, how might it be modified? While academic freedom is clearly a right, should academic tenure be of the same stature? While it is defended as a protection of academic freedom and a guarantee of independence, being permanent and without limit of time gives it a different quality. Upon grant, it is or should be recognition of competitive excellence. Unlike the right to academic freedom, however, shouldn't academic tenure continually be justified and sustained? Shouldn't it be a privilege rather than a right? Shouldn't it carry with it a special obligation to perform as a trusted professional and at a level that reflects continued competitive excellence not only in research but in teaching and service as well? Academic tenure should not be a form of security of employment similar to civil service. The expectations and obligations that come with a tenured appointment are greater than those that come with bureaucratic employment. Given federal legislation ending mandatory retirement, tenure truly guarantees faculty members the right to lifelong employment subject to very minimum standards of performance. Further, given the increasing mobility of faculty, tenure lacks a reciprocal commitment to the institution to justify it.

Recognizing the distinction between academic freedom and tenure may help focus attention on how academic freedom, which depends on institutional autonomy, can be protected when the institution is so vulnerable to the market economy.

RESEARCH

The research university is where society still turns for the solution to its problems and the address to its needs. This is where science, technology and modern medicine are created. Is higher education's research effort sufficient in the face of contemporary problems? Is investment in research at current levels sufficient to sustain the intellectual momentum of the research university? A strong case can be made for answering both questions in the negative. If so, what are the consequences?

Where might additional research resources be obtained and at what cost? The freedom of the university from market constraints has supported the kind of open-ended basic research that led to some of the most important discoveries in history. The university researchers should have the freedom to explore ideas that have no obvious or immediate commercial value. It seems it can only continue if universities maintain a degree of independence from the marketplace—a difficult thing to do in an age of dwindling public support for higher education. How can academic freedom and the integrity of university research be preserved in the context of the need for greater research funding and of increasing connectedness with industry and of proprietary research and faculty entrepreneurship?

SERVICE

Critics argue that the academy as a whole has grown too insular and removed from the actual circumstances of modern life and, therefore, is failing to discharge its service mission in a meaningful way.

Have higher education research and service efforts sufficiently addressed contemporary problems of our society? For example, what have graduate schools of education of the research universities contributed to address, ameliorate, and solve the current crisis in the quality of teaching? It has taken a national teachers' union in a recent statement to urge the strengthening of the standards for selection of potential teachers and the rigor of their content training. While it has not been the role of the research university to produce the majority of teachers for the public schools, they are looked to for the quality of research that would influence and guide the decision making process that results in student achievement. Yet, whatever the issue, whether it be the

quality and content of pre-service training standards, student assessment, evaluation of teaching, or pedagogy, schools of education individually and collectively have had little positive impact on the most important issue confronting American society today. Indeed, their lack of impact, itself an indictment, can easily lead one to the conclusion that they share responsibility for the problem.

DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Does doctoral education need to be restructured? Most PhDs do not make their careers in research universities, yet their training is geared toward such positions. There are arguments within the academy that the apprenticeship model is outmoded. Graduate students feel exploited as teaching assistants and are trained for jobs at research universities that are few and far between. Teaching institutions find it difficult to hire new PhDs who actually know how to teach. Business leaders complain that many new PhDs cannot communicate and don't know how to apply theory to real world problems. It is argued that while we may have an oversupply of PhDs for the academy, we do not have an oversupply of PhDs for society, but that means that the training needs to be different. The challenges facing doctoral education in the sciences differ from the humanities and social sciences. In the sciences, how is the academy going to compete and hold the best and the brightest who are increasingly choosing industry?

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Dr. Neil Rudenstien, president of Harvard University, has said he believes that the information technology revolution and globalization of the economy herald a tectonic shift in academia, akin to the switch from small colleges to large research universities at the turn of the century and the vastly expanded access to higher education after World War II. "The totality of the institution will be a different configuration," he said (New York Times, May 23, 2000), Whether or not one agrees, is this not an issue that should be closely examined and considered on an ongoing basis at the institutional level?

As new technologies spread into society and as demand for higher education becomes more global, how much of what the public research university does, or should do, can be served by it in the traditional model? As publishing, broadcasting, telecommunications and education merge, private sector organizations will create new educational programs and means of disseminating knowledge to ever-larger audiences at ever decreasing costs.

Institutional commitment tends to be inadequate to explore intelligently, and by application and experimentation, the impact of information technol-

ogy – even on such immediately apparent possibilities as the extent to which it can enhance learning, embrace developments in pedagogy, promote access, economize on resources, make the very best scholar teachers more available, accelerate the time to graduation, make classes available at times and locations more convenient to the working student, etc. The concern that campuses would no longer exist, that student interaction within class and otherwise would be eliminated and that the costs and demands on faculty time would be greater impede reasoned exploration and experimentation. With few exceptions, whatever progress is being made is the product of individual creative faculty, rather than of institutional leadership, support and priority. Organized efforts to experiment, build on successes and learn from experience are developing much more rapidly in the private sector, which is offering degree programs and responding to the growing demand for lifelong learning and retraining.

CONCLUSION

The issues described are on the minds of many, both within the public research university and within the larger universe concerned with its future. They need to be addressed at the institutional level. While individual institutions may reach different conclusions on individual issues, I have confidence in the collective judgment, assuming that the issues are addressed objectively and in time.