

# CHAPTER 5

## The ever Increasing Demands Made on Universities in the United States by Society and Politicians

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**T**he public university is the focus of increasing demands by society and politicians and there is no doubt that this trend will continue. In fact, one can predict that new issues will arise, promoted by new advocates and critics, adding to the pressures.

### **THE DEMANDS ON THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

The public university is expected by its constituents to provide a college education for the greatest number. It is caught between two conflicting realities.

- The number of applicants has dramatically increased as the perception that a college education is essential to upward economic and social mobility has become more widespread among young people.
- At the same time, funding from the public sector is more limited given the increasing demands on public funding to meet society's various and pressing other needs. The consequence of greater and more diverse demand for access far in excess of state funding available to accommodate it presents an unprecedented crisis. For example, the demand in California is expected to increase in excess of 30 % by the year 2010, with no commensurate increase in funding. Nonetheless, the political expectation is that access will be maintained and education of at least the present quality will continue to be delivered.

Well into the 20th century, higher education consisted primarily of colleges and universities that were elite and predominantly religious. The rise of the research university, coupled with the enactment of the GI Bill at the end of World War II, fundamentally altered the role and presence of higher education in the United States. It went from being the limited privilege of the few to an institution of central importance to the economy and society, a center for research and for the education of any student able to benefit from it.

In the century just ended, the percentage of college graduates increased from 3 % to over 30 % of high school graduates. If the anticipated demand for access is met, that percentage will increase significantly. The challenge is how to meet that demand in order to afford students the increased economic opportunity and lifetime benefit of a college education.

Every state has the responsibility to assure its residents of an opportunity for college. With 78 % of college students enrolled in public colleges and universities, the state's involvement in higher education is significant and growing. State appropriations for higher education exceeded \$63 billion for the academic year 2001-2002 (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2002).

Nevertheless, since 1980, the percentage of state spending represented by higher education has declined from 44 % to 33 % in fiscal year 1997, according to the United States Department of Education. Since the mid-1990's, this structural trend has accelerated and is expected to continue. Other priorities, especially health and welfare, human services, correctional facilities and K-12 education, have increased, at the expense of higher education.

At the same time, the cost of higher education continues to grow at a rate greater than inflation and, in an economic environment where welfare and health care have been fundamentally reordered and corporations in the private sector have gone through painful restructuring, higher education is perceived as unchanged and unresponsive.

## THE CRITICISM OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

As higher education becomes an increasingly important public good, and as the competition for state resources makes it increasingly difficult to finance, it follows that the state in both political and social terms will be increasingly concerned about issues of access, quality and efficiency. Will all qualified students be accommodated? Will quality be maintained? How well is higher education using the resources provided by public funding and serving the needs of the state and its people? What is the return?

The criticism that higher education fails to deliver on its perceived responsibilities will become louder and the demand that existing funding be used more efficiently will increase. The issue of establishing priorities for

available funding will become more pressing. Particularly in light of increasing public skepticism about how well higher education serves the concerns of its various constituents. Parents expect their children to be prepared for careers and a viable economic future, the state expects civic engagement from an educated citizenry that also contributes to economic growth; and the business community is looking for a skilled work force. The criticisms target a range of issues: graduates who are unprepared to enter the workforce and have no concept of citizenship; emphasis on research at the expense of undergraduate education; the quality of undergraduate curricula and teaching; policies on admissions and academic standards, grade inflation; failure to address the critical issues facing society, inefficient use of facilities, and costs continually rising beyond inflation.

## THE RESPONSE BY HIGHER EDUCATION

Given that the pressures and demands of society and politics on the university are inevitable, the critical issue is how to respond in a way that preserves the most important and enduring values. What are these values, and what are the issues that brook no compromise? How can the university take the initiative to stake out a position and prevail? What can the university do to ameliorate the pressures, maintain its integrity, and still respond to economic and societal realities?

### Tuition

Given the inability or unwillingness of the states to fund increasing costs adequately, tuition charges will inevitably be higher. It will become increasingly difficult for students from lower income families to gain access to the university, unless student aid is adequate and readily available. A study conducted by the Detroit News (2002) on the rising cost of higher education found only five states where all the four year public colleges are affordable for low income students and in many of those the students still need to borrow money to get by.

However, many students are from families able to afford substantially higher tuition. The state and the public university will need to consider moving from a low tuition policy for all, to one of high tuition for those who can afford it, while providing adequate aid to those who cannot. The effect would be that the educational “bargain” represented by the public university would be reduced significantly—though it need not be eliminated—and the cost to the individual student would accord with means.

## Defining the Future

While raising tuition may cushion the financial pressure, it will not address the fundamental issue—indeed, it may divert institutional attention from doing so. The issue is that the university has not sufficiently defined its educational mission so that it can resist the pressure from external forces to follow the marketplace. Higher education is being dangerously pushed in the direction of market responsiveness, which can undermine its purpose. The future of the university will be determined by whether institutional changes are driven by the educational mission and are educationally justified or by the marketplace to capitalize on the latest trend.

Yet the marketplace cannot be ignored. Balancing between the two in order to protect the mission requires a level of leadership from within the university. Traditionally, the major developments in higher education in the U.S. have come from outside the higher education establishment, i.e. the Morrill Act land grant college legislation, the model for the contemporary research university, the GI Bill, and Sputnik. More recently, shared governance, the devolution of the university president from public intellectual to fund-raiser and the faculty's primarily loyalty to the disciplines rather than to a larger institutional vision, result in a lack of internal leadership and of address to the fundamental issues critical to the future of the institution. Sadly, the faculty's narrow focus not only keeps them from addressing the bigger picture, but also may lead them to delay or prevent movement or change in direction. While it would be far preferable that the public university be proactive in shaping its own future, will it be able to do so under the present leadership and governance structure?

If the university is to survive substantially as we know it, it will have to make its case more clearly and effectively. The university has difficulty articulating the basic values that justify its own existence. While the university tends to see itself as an end, the public sees it as a means.

What is the university's responsibility to our society? What is the place of higher education within the social fabric? What are the moral, political, economic, or other justifications for the university as an institution? Who is the primary beneficiary of higher education? Are universities instruments of public good or do they merely provide service to the individual consumer?

If the university does not answer these questions satisfactorily, someone else will, and the answers may compromise the university's definition of itself. How much is the public willing to pay for the public good, i.e. for activities that do not directly relate to students' education? If the public does not pay, who does?

## **What is a “College Education”?**

A college education used to mean a general liberal arts curriculum, exposing students to diverse disciplines and general knowledge of literature, history and culture. But increasingly, students are customers, primarily concerned with finding a job after college and less committed to learning for its own sake and to learning how to think as one of education’s primary goals. The late futurist, Herman Kahn, foresaw that one of the principal threats to progress in the postindustrial economy and the postindustrial society would be what he called “educated incapacity.” He defined it as an acquired or learned inability to understand or see a problem, much less a solution. He predicted that this kind of functional handicap would increase in proportion to a person’s academic education and expertise.

With many, if not most, students not pursuing a career in the subject of their major, and with less of a liberal arts education to provide a basic framework, we have college graduates without the skills to adjust to the learning needs of a working lifetime, much less in a position to meet the responsibilities of citizenship. This has important consequences for our country and our society. Has the idea of a college education become so open ended as to be all but meaningless?

If the university leaves its graduates generally unprepared for the responsibilities of citizenship, what will be the consequences? College graduates should be prepared to lead lives of civic engagement in addition to individual success. If we are ignorant of our history, government and the fundamental ideals and values that distinguish our society, we cannot be good citizens. Education has been the best predictor of civic involvement, and higher education now serves as the nation’s most important common ground and is essential to the future of a democratic society.

Will the public university pick up the gauntlet and educate students for citizenship as well as for a life in the workplace? Will it redefine its mission to include opportunities for lifelong learning through non-degree offerings as integral to its programs? Or will the university remove itself from public life, isolate itself from the public interest, and leave the playing field?

## **The Public Research University**

The university’s research contribution in science, technology and medicine will continue to be of critical importance to a healthy economy. While the American research university is admired for its ability to create wealth through new ideas and technologies, it is criticized for failing to address the contemporary intellectual issues, human concerns and social problems of our society.

The need for financial resources will lead to an ever-greater emphasis on collaboration with industry and government in basic and applied research and exploitation of the economic value of commercialization of university-sponsored research. According to the Association of University Technology Managers, universities received more than 3,760 patents in 1999, earned at least \$850 million in license fees, and formed over 300 start-up companies.

States are also encouraging public universities to turn their laboratories into engines of economic development, on the model of Stanford and Silicon Valley. They are investing significant funds in information technology, biotechnology and nanotechnology research.

Will the integrity of the university's research efforts be preserved as the researchers become increasingly involved with industry and the private sector? The issues and conflicts inherent to such collaboration are numerous and serious and will need to be resolved in order to further the growing collaboration while endeavoring to preserve the integrity of the university's role and contribution.

As the research of the public university becomes more commercial and involved with the private sector, how will the society and its politicians react to the perceived neglect of research on the issues facing society that cannot be commercialized?

The research university is a combination of two separate entities — a research institute and an undergraduate college or university. The research institute involves graduate students working essentially as apprentices as in European universities or American research laboratories. Undergraduate education, on the other hand, raises questions about teaching, learning and the meaning of general education as well as the social and political issues of access, diversity, equity, etc. As long as the research university chooses to offer undergraduate education, it will not be able to disengage itself from the issues facing higher education in general.

When it comes to how to allocate limited funds, political and social forces will press for the allocation to undergraduate education whereas the research university would place its priority on graduate education and research. This raises two questions. First, should a research university provide undergraduate education, or should there be a separation between the research “institute” with only graduate study, and the undergraduate institution? What would be the public funding implications of this? What is the compelling logic that combines undergraduate education with the research mission? Indeed, are they compatible? Second, and related, if the public research university maintains its role in undergraduate education, can it ever hope to compete with the private research university?

Given the pressures for access to undergraduate education and limited public funding, can a public research university any longer realistically aspire

to compete with the private research universities? The pressures related to access and quality do not have the same impact on the private institutions. They are not under public pressure to increase access and, therefore, can apply the enormous growth in their endowments to improving quality. A study at the University of Illinois reported that the salary gap between full professors at the country's best private universities and its best public ones has grown from \$4,300 in 1980 to \$21,700 in 1998. The private universities can offer larger research budgets, smaller teaching loads and tuition reciprocity programs, which the report 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 check books. Are society and its politicians prepared to accept that, given the pressures for access and limited public funding, a public research university can no longer realistically aspire to compete with the private research universities?

### **Student Learning**

A major challenge facing higher education is that it cannot tell the public, or politicians, anything meaningful about the most important result of a college education, i.e. what students learn. The tension between research and teaching, a faculty issue, detracts from this more important concern. The focus on teaching methodology rather than on what enables students to learn better is also misplaced. If the focus were on learning, the role of technology, of group learning and of other than the classroom lecture would be incorporated to the approach to teaching.

The view is increasingly expressed that higher education has an obligation to develop better measures of student achievement. The traditional measures of how much students learn — seat time and grade point averages — do not seem to satisfy employers, politicians or the public any more. They want to know more specifically what kind of competencies students have. Some say that degrees are already beginning to fade in importance in favor of transcripts that document each student's competence, including the specific knowledge and skills the student has mastered. If degrees become less important, how will the university continue to attract students in a world offering limitless educational choices? Why would a student stay in college for five years if the value of a degree gives way to a specific measurable competence? As an example of this trend, in 1998, the United States Congress passed legislation requiring all colleges wishing to receive federal funds for training teachers to submit a report documenting their graduates' performance on state licensing and certification exams. Although it may make sense when degree programs are specifically geared to job training, it is harder to visualize the measure of accountability for a liberal arts education with all its desirable

diversity from one student to another. Could this become another nail in the coffin of the liberal arts education? If measures of accountability were to be part of the university's future, it would be important for the university to be part of their definition. If not, the concern about what is a college education and why it is a public good will have to be satisfied in some other way.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that, in view of the significant role of the university in modern society, demands upon it will continue to grow. These will be determined by changing priorities and needs of society itself, as higher education is increasingly perceived to be a right of the many rather than a privilege for the few.

It is crucial that higher education not wait for demands to be imposed, but rather try to anticipate the legitimate needs of the public and the politicians, so that society is satisfied without jeopardizing the educational integrity of the institution.

## REFERENCES

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*Detroit News* (2002). January 8.