

Research Universities: American Exceptionalism?

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A PARADOX

Domestically, American higher education is the subject of almost unprecedented criticism. “Too expensive and inefficient and not a good investment” is a common conclusion. Students are said to be unprepared for the job market. Higher education is accused of being too permissive in tolerating low faculty productivity and in resisting the technological revolution. In general, the current “business model” is judged unsustainable: some think that we are riding on the road to self-destruction.

But in international discussions and evaluations of higher education, American universities are frequently called “the envy of the world.” In the United States, it makes no sense to speak about “higher education” or “universities” in general. The label “American universities” has little meaning when our country is home to more than 4,000 tertiary institutions, ranging from those that might actually be the envy of the world to those barely distinguishable from high schools—with a tremendous variety in between.

At the top of our higher education pyramid—my sole focus here—we find the public and private research universities with their special role of creating and maintaining knowledge, training graduate students in arts and sciences and professional schools, and offering a liberal education to undergraduates. According to Jonathan Cole in *The Great American University*, there are about 125 diverse universities that fit this description and they “are able to produce a very high proportion of the most important fundamental knowledge and practical research discoveries in the world. It is the quality of the research produced, and the system that invests in and trains young people to be leading scientists and scholars, that distinguishes them and makes them the envy of the world.”

All the institutions at the top of the American educational pyramid—and some others as well—share six characteristics closely associated with high quality. Their absence would preclude—or make it much more difficult—for research universities to achieve the highest quality, not just in this country but anywhere else. Indeed, their partial or total absence abroad helps to explain why there are relatively few

foreign—especially non-Western—institutions represented at the top of the accepted surveys. None of the six characteristics is wholly unambiguous; all are blurry. But it is not difficult to detect their presence or absence.

SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY

Shared governance. First, these institutions all practice shared governance: the trustees and president conditionally delegate educational policy to the faculty. That would primarily include curriculum and the initial selection of those who teach, are admitted to study, and do research. The administrative style is collegial rather than top-down, faculty sharing authority in specified areas with appointed administrators and trustees, the latter holding final authority. This is a distinctly American form of shared governance, which relies on a strong executive. Presidents, provosts, and deans possess and exercise considerable authority over budgets, institutional priorities, and many other matters of consequence.

What makes shared governance so important? There are many possible answers, but these are among the most frequently mentioned: universities are extremely complex organizations in which centralized decision making does not achieve the best results; in universities the proportion of self-motivated people is large, and to capture the full measure of their “creative juices” requires a sense of ownership. Susan Hockfield, former president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, puts it very well: “Faculty travel the frontiers of their disciplines and, from that vantage point, can best determine future directions of their fields and design curricula that bring students to the frontier. No academic leader can chart the course of the university’s discipline independent of the faculty.”

Shared governance may frustrate administrators intent on implementing rapid change, but a slower pace may also lead to wiser choices and certainly has not—in light of university histories—prevented fundamental changes.

Academic freedom. Second, despite periodic challenges, American research universities enjoy academic freedom—“the right of scholars to pursue their research, to teach, and to publish without control or restraint from the institutions that employ them”—and, in addition, all rights granted to inhabitants of this country, especially those associated with the First Amendment of the United States constitution.

Merit selection. Third, admission of students and selection and advancement of faculty is based on merit measured by recognized and accepted institutional standards. Some form of prior achievement would define merit: assuredly not an issue devoid of numerous ambiguities. One cannot ignore legacies, affirmative action, athletic scholarships, and similar deviations from the simplest notions of merit for students, such as scores on a standardized national test. Similarly, gender, race, and old-boy networks can create oth-

er deviations from a straightforward standard for selecting and promoting faculty. Nevertheless, objective measures of merit remain at the very least the central core.

Significant human contact. A major component of education exists now and is intended to remain significant human contact: real as opposed to virtual encounters between students and teachers to encourage participation and critical thinking. In his 2012 Tanner Lectures, William Bowen calls this “minds rubbing against minds.” The proportions may change over time but the basic principle has to be retained: it has to be part of liberal education for undergraduates who need guidance and contact in making choices, and it is a self-evident part of the mentor-mentee relation for those aspiring to reach a PhD. Few would deny the great value of digitization, virtual course materials, or occasionally flipped classrooms, but they remain complementary rather than primary.

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Preservation of culture. All these universities consider preservation and transmission of culture to be one of their missions. This would include representation of the humanities in curriculum (mandatory for undergraduate liberal arts), as well as, for some, more specialized activities including research and language studies, and the maintenance of libraries and museums.

Nonprofit status. All research universities operate on a nonprofit basis. If maximizing profit or increasing shareholder value were the goal, all the previous conditions become unwelcome obstacles and inefficiencies that could not be tolerated by a competent management. But this condition is not as cut and dried as it may seem. Decisions in nonprofit universities can be influenced and possibly distorted by considerations of revenue. For example, activities that generate research or operating funds in return for certain privileges obtained by a funder may require exclusive access to specific scientific results for a limited period of time. In this sense, no research university today is purely not-for-profit. None, however, is mainly directed by the business aims of outside supporters.

The six characteristics are neither canonical nor subject to rigorous mathematical proof. They are based on my (I believe uncontroversial) reading of our historical experience.

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING THE QUALITY REQUIREMENTS

Many academics will consider a listing of these characteristics individually familiar, obvious, and of little interest. Non-academics, on the other hand, may have a quite different reaction. The list could easily be interpreted as a plea for the status quo, typical of an academic establishment that stubbornly resists all change.

Both perspectives are wrong. The characteristics of quality are almost never considered as a system, even though the absence of any one of them will affect the integrity and quality of a research university.

Turning to the nonacademic perspective, none of these characteristics, singly or as a group, make—to use the term beloved by our critics—disruptive change impossible. This is an important point because, I think, it runs counter to widely held beliefs.

For example, tenure is perceived to be an obstacle to change. It may indeed be desirable instead to adopt a system of long-term contracts—particularly because US federal law prohibits adoption of mandatory retirements, thereby penalizing young scholars. But it is not the enumerated characteristics that stand in the way of change. Faculty do not determine their own pay or conditions of employment: these are in the hands of the administration and are not a part of shared governance. However, change is made much more difficult by interuniversity competition and the American legal system designed to prevent collusion (cooperation?) among for-profit businesses.

The notion that research universities are “unchanging” has always struck me as bizarre. Our products are education and research, and the vital element is not the format or setting (the bottle) but the content (the wine). And that is forever changing.

ADDRESSING THE PRESENT MOMENT

To fulfill their role in society—creating knowledge and educating graduate and undergraduate students—the university community makes assumptions that may not always be, and almost certainly are not now, obvious either to the trustees who are their governors or to the wider public. For example, the characteristics associated with quality can be seen as pleas for special privileges.

Another reality to consider is that American universities only rarely have written constitutions or long-lasting traditions of common law. The guarantors of their privileges and practices are trustees, most of whose life experiences have been in private business. Furthermore, in the case of state universities, appointment to positions of governance can be political, frequently in the hands of governors and sometimes subject to state elections.

At a time of contentiousness and criticism current practices raise questions: do those who constitute the court of last resort understand the unusual entity with which they have been entrusted? When trustee initiative is necessary and appropriate and when it is not? Have we done enough to prepare trustees for their responsibilities? Are those who make the appointments more concerned about the candidate's ability to read balance sheets than their appreciation of university values? Or do we look primarily at the capacity of potential trustees to make large donations? Or are those who have the power of appointment primarily interested in a candidate's political affiliation?

The same point can be made about faculty. We take great care to examine research credentials and—these days, and this is a major and welcome change—we look more closely at teaching capacities. But do we do anything to prepare faculty to participate productively in shared governance? Both of these tasks will grow in urgency as the American research university—"the envy of the world"—navigates very stormy seas predicted by nearly all observers.

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The Importance of Demographics in Explaining Attainment Patterns

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In the past decade, the issue of how the United States compares to other countries in its attainment rate—the share of adults with a college degree—has become a very prominent issue in American higher education debates. Thus, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has issued a series of reports that indicate the United States has fallen behind many other OECD member countries in its attainment rate, especially among young adults. Concerns about this slippage led President Obama to make increasing degree attainment and completion rates an essential part of his domestic policy agenda. A number of recent reports also have made the related argument that many more millions of college graduates must be produced over the next decade, to allow the American economy to remain globally competitive.

Lost in these expressions of concern, however, is the seemingly contradictory fact that the number of bachelor's and associate degrees awarded in the United States has consistently grown for many decades—including the most recent one—at rates that far exceed the growth in the overall and college-age populations. Since degree holders of a certain age, divided by the relevant age population, determines the attainment rate, that means the US attainment rate has grown consistently over time as well.

How does one make sense of the seeming contradiction that the number of degrees awarded annually and the attainment rate of the adult population in the United States have both grown, even as the country has fallen further behind many global competitors in the share of its population with a postsecondary degree. The simple answer is that the attainment rate in other countries has grown faster than in the United States and thus the relative US ranking has declined, particularly for the youngest group of adults.

But, based on this puzzle, an important answer lies in differences in demographics and the impact that demographic trends can have on the number of college graduates that a country produces and on its higher education attainment rate. What has too often been forgotten or ignored in recent American debates is that the number of college graduates in a country is actually a function of two components: the size of the relevant age group and the share of that group that holds a degree. What is not well understood is that of the two factors; demographic trends can often be a much larger determinant of the total *size* of the college-educated work force than changes over time in the attainment rate.

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The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States has grown much faster than the population, since the end of World War II. As a result, attainment rates for at least a bachelor's degree in the United States have grown consistently over the past half-century for all adult age groups. Even in the most recent decade, the rate for each age group grew by at least 10 percent. In each age group, the attainment rate for those with a bachelor's degree or more has at least tripled since 1960 and at least doubled since 1970. This pattern of sustained growth in attainment is also true over the past two decades for working-age adults holding at least an associate's degree. The time span examined is shorter because the US government has only recorded the numbers of adults holding an associate's degree, since 1990.

The description above, regarding attainment rate trends, contradicts the frequently heard statement that US attainment rates have been flat or stagnant for an ex-