

Our collegiate university

In its expansion, is Princeton losing its way?

by STANLEY N. KATZ

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This year, my junior policy task force examined a policy problem that I have been thinking about for some time: “Can the research university teach undergraduates effectively?”

As my students discovered, while Princeton is a research university, it is very different from the other 125 institutions in the same category. We are smaller than almost all other research universities, and we have far more undergraduates than grad students. Apart from engineering, architecture, and public policy, we do not have the professional schools that dominate most research universities, nor do we have large professional undergraduate programs in agriculture, education, and commerce. We have an enormous endowment, fourth largest in the country, and the highest endowment-per-

student ratio. Moreover, we are able to use our endowment more effectively than the other universities – President John Hennessy of Stanford remarked ruefully last year that only 18.2 percent of his operating budget was covered by endowment income, about half as much as Princeton’s (34 percent).

What most significantly differentiates Princeton from the other research universities is its history. Like many other old universities, we began as a college and began to take on the accoutrements of a university (emphasis on research and the training of graduate students) around the turn of the 20th century. But while we have expanded

our university functions, we have resisted most forms of professional education and maintained a substantial majority of undergraduates. We also have successfully insisted that the job of Princeton faculty is dual – to teach and engage in research.

As recently as the mid-1970s a committee chaired by the late Donald Stokes '51 *52, the former dean of the Woodrow Wilson School, rejected the notion of a Princeton law school on the ground that we needed to retain a single faculty and a primary focus on undergraduates. None of the Princeton professional schools teaches graduate students exclusively, as all law schools do. So our history identifies us as an institution dedicated to collegiate education and to graduate training almost exclusively in the liberal arts. We are truly a collegiate university. Ours is an agreeably old-fashioned ideal. However, not everything is ideal, for Princeton has fallen prey to some of the serious problems that have afflicted American research universities since World War II.

The main issue is the emergence of government-funded research as the engine that has driven university priorities. On the one hand, that has meant a huge expansion of campus-based science – a multitude of new science buildings, laboratories, computing facilities, professors, and research staff – and on the other, it has biased universities toward research and graduate students, and relegated the teaching of undergraduates to a lesser position. In general the research universities have become more focused on usable knowledge at the expense of what George Santayana once called “the utility of useless knowledge.”

All of these changes have occurred in a neoliberal atmosphere of university fiscal administration in which academic units are viewed as individual cost centers, favoring those most capable of attracting external financial resources. University presidents are typically chosen for their presumed ability to raise funds rather than for their capacity for educational leadership. In an article in the September 20, 2002 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I concluded that despite their tremendous social utilities as generators of new and useful knowledge, research universities have become “large, complex, and hard to finance” and are “large, arrogant, rapacious, and impersonal.”

“Both the organization and the content of the academic life of the mind have become fractionalized, anomic, and increasingly uncertain,” I wrote. “Too many individual professors are running their own research programs, frequently institutionalized as centers, buying out their teaching time, and setting their own agendas, more frequently in response to funding sources than to colleagues or students. The result is that departments and even administrations have little impact on research direction, and there is increasingly a struggle to mount plausible curriculums for undergraduates and even for graduate students.”

These are harsh criticisms of the post-World War II transformation of our research universities, and some of my readers have complained that I insufficiently acknowledged the utilitarian justification for the changes. Many, perhaps most, recent commentators on higher education have claimed that this is indeed the golden age of the university. The case can be made, not only for the remarkable pace of the production of knowledge, but for the education of an increasingly large proportion of the student-age population in America. True enough, but I think we should also wonder what we have lost in the process.

We at Princeton must also wonder, for some of the changes I have just described have occurred here. Compared to 50 years ago, we have expanded physically in a staggering way, especially over the past decade. Much, but by no means all, of the building has been for scientific research and graduate instruction. We are building a remarkable number of new libraries.

We have both permitted and encouraged the establishment of new research centers (confession: I direct one) that typically take up teaching time and bring in significant numbers of postdoctoral researchers. We have put pressures on departments to raise external funds for a variety of purposes. We have had to permit increases in faculty consulting time. We have raised salaries dramatically, but in a highly asymmetrical fashion – the rich are much richer, and the differences between the best and least well paid are significant. Our faculty are increasingly oriented toward the outside – professional associations, consulting, international organizations and obligations. A smaller proportion of faculty teaching time is devoted to undergraduate instruction.

I could go on. It will be objected that these are national trends, and indeed they are. It will be objected that they are driven by the market, and indeed they are. It will be objected that in many ways we are a much better university than we were in 1950. I agree.

But the question I should like to put is whether we need to have gone so far in this direction, and whether it is too late to recover some of the good things that have been lost? I think Princeton has become too much like larger research universities and that we have given up some of our comparative advantage. We need, I think, to return to our vision of the collegiate university, with undergraduate education at the core of our purpose and organization. And there are significant trends in this direction. I am convinced that the introduction of the residential college system in the early 1980s, and the current plans for its expansion with Whitman College along with the plans for four-year colleges, are important steps in the right direction. The same can be said for the wonderfully successful freshman seminar program.

Nevertheless, I think we have a difficult challenge if we are successfully to reimagine a Princeton University that rebalances its several objectives – generally educating undergraduates, training graduate students in the liberal arts, conducting world-class research, and serving our several communities. I am not calling for us to tear down new buildings, but for a debate about how realistically we might reorient the goals of this very special university. We have both the traditions and the resources to make choices that would better serve the best of our historic traditions. There would be no better time to start than now.