

## **Size and Mission Matter**

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This was not the essay I planned to write as recently as a couple of weeks ago. I had told Jan-Werner that I would write about the negative impact of the emergence of mega-philanthropy in the United States, mostly because mega-philanthropy is the primary area of my current research, and it surely does present challenges to American higher education -- there is no doubt that the surge in huge individual/foundation gifts to research universities have had a distorting impact on our university mission. But as I began to write this essay, I realized that the current “crisis” in higher education in this country is mainly driven by other factors.

I have been a critical observer of American higher education for many years, especially since becoming the President of the American Council of Learned Societies, our national organization for the humanities and social science disciplines, in 1986. The ACLS position forced me to develop both a national and an international perspective on higher education. ACLS was then responsible for a significant portion of U.S. academic relations with socialist regimes around the world, while continuing its traditional task of working with 60-odd U.S. disciplinary organizations. All of this forced me to think well beyond my own academic training in history and law. The American university was then still the primary location of academic work, but it was a site under severe pressure, since my tenure at ACLS coincided with the Culture Wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This conflict was basically over the politics of knowledge in Ronald Reagan’s America, and especially over the role of the humanities disciplines. It was a tense and difficult period for humanists and soft social scientists, although in the end it actually caused little structural change in the American university.

After retiring from ACLS and returning to full-time teaching at Princeton in 1997, I continued to be active in and concerned with changes and challenges in higher education. For about five years I contributed a blog on higher education policy to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and I spent more

time than I should have at conferences and in planning efforts in the higher ed field. I had become an amateur higher ed “expert”, and that is still my self-assigned role. What led me to accept Jan-Werner’s invitation to participate in this conference was my increasing awareness of how much the field had changed over the past quarter century. That change worries me deeply both as an academic and as a democratic citizen, and this essay is the first step in trying to identify the source of my current concern.

This essay focuses on the elite tier of research universities rather than on American higher education generally. Let me begin by saying that I do not think that this sector is in “crisis”. It is in a state of transition, and it is subject to a number of challenges, but I doubt that most managers of our higher ed enterprise think that the skies are about to fall. Neither do I. But neither do I think that the research university sector is healthy.

Twenty years ago I was deeply impressed by the publication of the late Bill Readings’ book *THE UNIVERSITY IN RUINS*, which presented a deeply historical account of what Readings understood to be the contradictions of the Humboldtian university at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book should be familiar, but although I doubt that it is much read now, I will not rehearse the argument. But I would like to associate myself with Readings’ general approach, which is to argue that we need to “reconceive the University once the story of liberal education has lost its organizing center . . . the idea of culture as the object . . . of the human sciences.”<sup>i</sup> Readings argued that the modern university was based upon three conceptions; “the Kantian concept of reason, the Humboldtian idea of culture, and now the techno-bureaucratic notion of excellence”. Culture, in this account, is “the sum of all knowledge that is studied, as well as the cultivation and development of one’s character as a result of that study.”<sup>ii</sup> Most importantly, Readings had much to say about what he called “excellence” -- basically the neo-Marxian notion of “performativity in an expanded market”.<sup>iii</sup> The underlying argument is that the modern university has abandoned traditional notions of academic culture in favor of a full-blown commitment to utilitarianism in the service of the state. Therefore, Readings concluded, we have to find ways to recommit the university to some more meaningful version of cultural purpose – to the pursuit of knowledge rather than to “excellence”. I only want to use Readings here to suggest that the increasing focus of American universities on a business-like commitment to the solving of short-term problems has badly eroded our capacity to serve larger and more traditional cultural purposes. If we are in “crisis”, it is this sort of cultural crisis.

There is not a single system of U.S. higher education. Our higher ed sector is large, comprising more than 4000 institutions, and complex: public and private, two-year and four-year, liberal arts college and research university, and more. My interest in this essay is, however, in the large and complex research university sector, since that is the major site of knowledge production and elite training. It is the aspect of American higher education that is undergoing the most profound sorts of change. And it is the sector that is generally held up for international comparison. The research university in this country has of course changed profoundly over the past century and a half. We began with the public, land-grant universities of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – institutions originally dedicated to undergraduate education, “agricultural and mechanical” research, and public service. We then also developed the “Wisconsin Idea” that education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom, that a state university should in one way or another serve all of the people of the state. But that older and very American conception was to a considerable extent overtaken by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by American embrace of the Humboldtian conception of research as the main objective of the university.<sup>iv</sup>

In this country, however, the German university tradition interacted with our historic, English and local tradition of collegiate education, and transformed many of the early religious colleges (Harvard, Yale, Princeton) into what might be termed “collegiate universities” -- research universities built upon a liberal arts college<sup>v</sup>, in which the primary focus remained upon undergraduate baccalaureate educations, now conducted by research faculty. This transition has been widely noticed and commented upon.<sup>vi</sup> It became the dominant tradition for the research university in the U.S., and a model that public research universities moved toward. It is what might be called the AAU (American Association of Universities) elite model of higher education – a public-facing version of the collegiate university model with a heavy emphasis upon publically (that is, federally) funded research.

This is the model that is currently, steadily, and more or less silently, being replaced by a new model that Bill Readings would have called the University of Excellence. Structurally, the new university looks like the collegiate university, but it is being transformed from within. It is now much larger in every dimension: more arts and sciences fields of knowledge are covered; more professional fields are included, and they have greater authority within the university; the number of students has increased dramatically but asymmetrically (many more in the pre-professional and professional fields; fewer in the arts and sciences); there are more faculty (though percentage-wise there are fewer tenure-track and

massively more contingent faculty) and, as a consequence, the funding necessary to operate the university has increased exponentially. Even more significant is the huge financial resources necessary each year to feed this hungry beast. Annual budgets have risen dramatically, to the point at which the quest for financial support has become the primary goal of university administrations and, for the most part, the primary task of university leadership. The bottom line drives decision-making, as it does in any large corporation. These increases in scale have driven human and organizational responses that are changing the very nature of the university. One of the most significant responses is the dramatic increase in bureaucracy. Less obvious but equally important is the pervasiveness of bureaucratic formalism – or, in other words, the corporatization of the university. This is institutional isomorphism, and the model we are moving toward is the corporation.

Even more important and troubling, therefore, are the implications of the new model for the transformation of the mission of the research university. Here Readings is quite relevant, since the new model can also be best described as the University of Excellence<sup>vii</sup>. It can fairly be said that there was a commonly held (though not usually well-articulated) commitment to an American version of *Wissenschaft* during the first century of the university in the U.S. In American English, that meant an institution that gave priority to the production of knowledge of all sorts in the arts and sciences, with a heavy emphasis on the importance of humanistic knowledge. Certainly (especially in the public universities) a tradition of respect for practical and useful knowledge coexisted with the higher academic commitment to the production of scientific knowledge, but both the state and private donors recognized the inherent value of the older cultural tradition supported by the collegiate university. It is that commitment and value specification that are now threatened in the new model, by the University of Excellence. I believe this is the most urgent dilemma (crisis?) of American higher education today.

I will conclude by gesturing briefly toward what I believe to be some of the most obvious consequences of the American move to what I have called the new model – these are some of the values, practices and institutions of the collegiate university tradition that are currently endangered. I have not attempted to rank order the problems:

1. The scale of the university. I have already alluded to the problem, which seems to me pretty self-evident. Our universities have expanded along every dimension. We have dramatically increased the numbers of students, faculty and staff, and along with them, the

resource needs of the university. The changes are geometric, not arithmetic, and cannot be accommodated by proportionate increases in size – since the growth is highly asymmetrical. Campus geography is part of the problem here – every campus has expanded both vertically and horizontally. The “walking campus” is a thing of the past. The campus is no longer a village but a city – which means that we have a *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* problem to deal with. It is also the case that for some academic activities there is an inverse relationship between quality and scale. At the very least, we have good empirical evidence for the assertion that smaller is better when it comes to class size, and I feel sure that the same is true for other academic functions. Perhaps most importantly (though this should probably be a separate bullet) is community. If the collegiate university, at its best managed to scale down important aspects of college life within the university (think residential colleges, for instance), then we ought to worry what we have lost and will lose as we scale up. And please do not tell me that technology is the answer . . .

2. Faculty roles. I do not want to romanticize the role of the faculty in the collegiate university, but it seems obvious that the job has changed in kind and character in the last generation. This is something that Peter Brooks has touched on nicely in his conference paper. At the very least, the more traditional conception of the scholar-teacher has been badly eroded. Fewer than half of faculty at research universities are on the tenure track – we are on our way to outsourcing teaching to contingent faculty, and turning tenured faculty into roles that primarily involve research. There is declining respect for excellence in and commitment to teaching in the evaluation of faculty. National (and international) professional (largely disciplinary) communities have replaced the host campus as a source of authority and community for most faculty. This trend, when combined with increases in scale and the bureaucratization of the campus have enhanced the growth of administrative ambition and reduced faculty interest in and capacity to govern their own institutions.
3. Decline in quality and amount of teaching by tenure track faculty. Faculty are sometimes rational, and if they are not rewarded for teaching –or if the incentives to engage in research and other activities are more attractive – they will not teach or will teach less. We have seen a broad reduction in the number of teaching hours per term per professor, and a

big increase in the number of teaching hours for post-docs and contingent faculty. Universities are increasingly willing to bargain away teaching obligations in the race to accumulate research-productive new faculty. Cumulatively, what this means is that the “collegiate” is being excised from the old university model.

4. The decline of the humanities. I spent 11 years of my professional life at ACLS making the case for “the utility of useless knowledge”, and I am happy to have passed that obligation on to others. But I think it is true that humanistic knowledge was broadly and systematically better supported in the collegiate university than it is in the University of Excellence. Indeed, we see arguments to this effect nearly every week in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This is one of the principal arguments in *The University in Ruins*, and I nowhere agree more strongly with Readings than on this point. A democracy that is not humane is unlikely to be a democracy for long.
5. Consumerism. Much ink has been spilled on the concept that conceptualizing the student as a consumer is detrimental to our academic health. I will not say more here, except to note that the reconceptualization of the university as a business is inherent in the University of Excellence. I think it is at odds with the spirit of the collegiate university and indeed with the historic ethos of higher education. One does not need to read Cardinal Newman<sup>viii</sup> to take this point. But a related and worrisome trend is that of entrepreneurialism, which is increasingly the aim and animating spirit of too many American university programs, and indeed of the university as an institution.
6. Community. Finally, although the list could run on, let me put in a good word for *Gemeinschaft*. The “collegiate” aspect of the old model of higher education assumed that the campus was a community in some meaningful sense. The ideal was that each member of the community had obligations to all the others – it was a high social capital situation, in which both binding and bridge social capital coexisted. Faculty took a high degree of responsibility for students, as well as for the governance of the university. All members of the community had significant loyalty to the institution, and shared certain values that undergirded the social order of the university. Another way of stating Readings’ argument

would be to say that the university has moved from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from a society to a formal organization. Think Tonnie's.

Well, there may or not be a crisis in American higher education. But I first taught in an American research university sixty-one years ago, and I do not think we have been moving in the right direction. This makes me anxious. And sad.

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Readings, *THE UNIVERSITY IN RUINS*, Harvard, 1996, p.10.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>iv</sup> For the most recent and best account of the international history of the university, see James Axtell, *WISDOM'S WORKSHOP: THE RISE OF THE MODERN UNIVERSITY*, Princeton, 2016.

<sup>v</sup> See Andrew Delbanco, *COLLEGE: WHAT IT WAS, IS AND SHOULD BE*, Princeton, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> *The making of the modern university : intellectual transformation and the marginalization of morality* / Julie A. Reuben, Chicago, 1996; *The emergence of the American university* / Laurence R. Veysey, Chicago, 1970.

<sup>vii</sup> See S.N.Katz, "Excellence Is by No Means Enough," *Common Knowledge*, vol. 8, no. 3, Fall, 2002, pp. 427-438.

<sup>viii</sup> Newman, J. H. C. (1888). *The idea of a university* (8<sup>th</sup> Ed.). London: Longmans, Green, & Co.