

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

TAKING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES SERIOUSLY

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Session 1: The Challenges Confronting Public Universities

Presentation Remarks by Donald N. Langenberg

I must say, I feel very much at home here. I grew up just over the border from Winnipeg. I have spent most of my career on the Eastern Seaboard among people who sometimes detect an unusual accent but are a little vague about the geography of the American Heartland. So I have taken to answering the question “Where are you from?” by saying that I hail from the middle of the continent and am sixty miles short of being a Canadian.

We are here to discuss “the challenges confronting public universities.” What **are** those challenges? There is a very long list, many of them worthy of an entire conference. But the fundamental and urgently important challenge that is our subject here might be characterized by answering the question with a paraphrase of a former president of mine, “It depends on what you mean by ‘public’.”

I think that is the crux of the issue before us. What **do** we mean by a “public” university? Throughout most of my life the answer to that question has been self evident, something taken for granted by most people. But in the United States in recent years there have been clear indications of erosion and perversion of the idea of a public university. The existence of this conference suggests that that trend is North American, and my fragmentary knowledge of what has been happening in some European countries indicates that it is probably also Trans-Atlantic.

I intend to confine my remarks here to the environment I know, the United States. And I would like to begin with a bit of historical context, because I believe strongly that history drives the future, especially in academe.

In my opinion, there have been just three watershed developments during the first millennium of university history. The first was the recognition in the eleventh century that there is value added in gathering different faculties together into a single institution called a “university.” That recognition was the invention of the idea of the university and it led to the creation of Europe’s oldest universities.

The second watershed event grew out of the idea that a university should not only transmit and disseminate existing knowledge by educating and training the young, but should also discover new knowledge through scholarship and research. What is commonly recognized as the world’s first true research university, the University of

Berlin, was founded in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt in a brief but extraordinarily productive stint as a bureaucrat in Prussia's interior ministry.

The third watershed event was the inspiration of an Illinois farmer – and teacher, newspaper editor, college professor, and Yale graduate – Jonathan Baldwin Turner. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Turner wrote an essay titled, “Plan for a State University for the Industrial Classes.” Turner recognized that his country was in the midst of a transition from an agrarian society to one that depended on what we would today call knowledge-based industries. He saw that if the United States was to navigate that transition successfully, it would need well trained and educated workers and leaders in entirely new fields. And that meant educating the “children of the industrial classes.”

Turner was both an academic and a practical man, and he realized that if his ideas were to stand any chance of practical implementation, he had to do more than publish an essay. So he found a patron, a New England congressman named Justin Morrill, whom he persuaded to introduce federal legislation mandating grants of Federal lands to the states to support the development of colleges that would educate the common people in “agriculture and the mechanic arts.”

I need not tell any of you that major higher education issues are always ultimately political, and so it was with Morrill's bill. It was first introduced in the 1850s, but it failed to pass because the congressmen representing the southern states were not persuaded that there was any value in educating anyone other than the sons of plantation owners. When the Civil War removed them from the Congress, Morrill reintroduced his bill. It passed, and the Morrill Land-Grant Act was signed into law by President Lincoln in 1862.

I would assert that that event was a major contributor to the ascendancy of the United States to social and economic leadership among the world's nations. Our first two public universities were founded in 1789, but the Morrill Act catalyzed the founding of many of our nation's great public universities. It created one of the best educated and most highly-skilled citizenries in the world. And it established cultural centers that have enriched the lives of individuals and communities with the fundamental values essential to a great nation.

In recent years I have become increasingly worried that my country's century-old commitment to the education of “the industrial classes” is fading. Public universities and colleges across the U.S. are struggling to cope with dramatic reductions in state funding. Although the immediate causes of our current woes are a shaky economy and an obsession with tax cuts, both possibly transient, I believe that they obscure clear indications of a far more troubling long-term trend in our nation's fundamental attitude toward public higher education. For decades the commonly held conviction that public higher education is a public good has been eroding into a belief that it is a merely a private benefit to individuals. For a long time now, we have been steadily privatizing American public higher education. Why?

State shares in university budgets have long been steadily declining, through both good economic times and bad. Some years ago the president of one of our greatest public universities commented that his institution had been founded as a state-supported university. It then evolved into a state-assisted university, and more recently had become a state-located university. The president of another great public university later remarked that his institution had reached the next stage and become a state-molested university. State contributions to the operating budgets of both institutions are now in the range of ten to twenty percent.

There are ominous indications that this trend may be just what many citizens want. A public survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* several years ago asked, "Who should pay the largest share of the cost of a college education?" Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said that students and/or their families should. Seventeen percent said the federal government should. Only eleven percent said their state government should.

I find this attitude inexplicable. When the land-grant universities were created, only a small fraction of high school graduates actually attended college. Yet, Americans and their political leaders were then convinced that these universities are sound investments of public resources that yield important public benefits. Today, when at least seventy percent of high school graduates enter post-secondary institutions, and when our nation depends on ever more sophisticated citizen workers, we appear to believe that higher education is not a public good but merely a private benefit to individuals.

Do we realize what we are doing? Why are we turning our backs on accessible affordable public campuses? At a time when tax cuts at both the federal and state levels are touted as the all-purpose nostrum for every societal ill, is there any hope of increased public investment in higher education? Should a public university be supported only by its current users (and perhaps its alumni), even though every citizen benefits from it, indirectly if not directly? And, if so, hasn't it become just another private university?

Then there are questions of control and regulation. State control and regulation of public universities range from moderate to excessive. If state contributions to public university budgets continue their steady slide from modest to minimal to negligible, why should universities be subject to their present levels of state control or, for that matter, any state control at all? Indeed, in many states our public universities are now seeking to shift their status from that of state agencies to that of quasi-independent non-profit organizations. And concurrently we are seeing clear indications that the federal government is preparing to move even more aggressively into university control and regulation.

Hardest of all are the questions that face students and their families. If they must bear the largest share of the cost of a college education, what about those that simply cannot afford to pay that share? Are we supposed to write them off as undeserving of a college education? What about all those striving citizens of all ages whose dream of an affordable education in a public university is withering?

The United States is currently experiencing one of the strongest tides of immigration in its history. When I look out at my physics class of 190 students, it looks like the United Nations. Is not the need to educate our “industrial classes” stronger than ever?

It is striking how little public notice and attention these trends and the questions they raise have received. There has been a great public fuss about tuition increases and other symptoms of public higher education’s current economic malaise. But these seem to be widely viewed as just a passing phase, despite strong evidence to the contrary. In my view, it is high time public academe’s leaders stopped behaving like Pollyanna and started acting like Paul Revere.

Never before in my half century of learning and leading in American universities have I been so worried about their future. Not during the riots of the sixties, nor in other troubled times. We Americans are noted for our optimism, self confidence, ingenuity, and hard-headed practicality. Those characteristics may be in our genes, but they have certainly flowered in the intellectual sunlight of our great public universities. It is painful to watch those institutions being pushed down the path taken by the passenger pigeon.

*This presentation was adapted from an opinion piece, “Storm Warnings: Why are we privatizing public higher education?”, by Donald N. Langenberg, in CURRENTS [the journal of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE)], November-December, 2003.*