

**THE PRINCIPAL CHALLENGES TO PUBLIC
HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

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Although I'm not intimately familiar with the issues confronting higher education in Canada, I should imagine the concerns I express could just as easily apply to all of North America. In the interest of brevity, I shall address only a few of the challenges we face, all of which could be gathered under this rubric: breaking the shackles of parochialism. We are hindered in our collective mission by pervasive parochialism, which takes several forms.

The first challenge is the imperative to transcend disciplinary boundaries. During the thirty-eight years I have served as a college professor and administrator, there has been a noticeable shift in the orientation of the professoriate away from fealty to their home institution, especially after receiving tenure, to loyalty to their respective disciplines. It is my conviction that this shift has increased dramatically over the past couple of decades. When I began my professorial career as a young instructor, faculty spoke warmly and often of devotion to their college. Although they complained about sub-par salaries, minimal office space, and invariably inadequate parking, even among the curmudgeons there was admiration for the traditions that the institution preserved and for the heritage they felt privileged to continue—even if their enthusiasm could hardly be described as unabated.

Particularly in our research universities, as the standards for promotion and tenure have risen, exhibited by the increased emphasis on scholarly productivity – whether manifested in externally funded research and resultant publications in refereed journals or participation in juried competitions or favorable reviews of one’s scholarly work – we have perhaps unwittingly fostered allegiance to peers within the discipline but at other institutions. Thus as we emphasize the importance of raising the bar in search of a more prominent place in the academic landscape, in part by employing professors at peer and peer-aspirant universities to judge our own faculty, we have asserted in at least one very important respect that orientation to the divisions within the academy supercedes allegiance to any given institution. Ironically, all this is occurring as our National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, and other prominent U. S. funding agencies place high priority on scientific proposals that are multidisciplinary.

Thus the propensity to focus within disciplines provides a segue to our second challenge: to transcend institutional and political boundaries. In virtually each of the fifty states in the American Republic, as well as the District of Columbia, support for institutions of higher education from the respective legislative bodies has declined substantially over the past several

years. Although a few states, including my own, are facing the prospect of modest increases in support of higher education for the next fiscal year, in most instances the magnitude of the increments will barely offset the rate of inflation and surely will not redress the Draconian cuts that many of us have experienced over the past decade or so.

Here are several reasons for us to transcend our respective institutional and political boundaries in finding ways to work together:

- (a) In a few instances, although I think the impact is often exaggerated, we can achieve economies of scale in integration of programs and initiatives. For example, at another university of which I was president, we were negotiating the purchase of a new computing platform for all of our computing activities.

The package included a multi-million dollar acquisition of computer hardware, as well as an additional multi-million dollar purchase of software, and a several million dollar contract for consulting services for organizing access to computing service and adjudicating decisions as to what activities should be centrally provided as opposed to those that should be distributed.

A sister university was involved in comparable negotiations at precisely the same time. As a result of approaching our vendors as one rather than two competing parties, we saved an estimated \$11 million in the contract. Because we had budgeted the total estimated cost at the outset, we were able to invest an additional \$11 million in our computing services and escalate substantially the sophistication of our technology to say nothing of enhancing dramatically its access to our faculty, staff and students.

- (b) To my mind, a much more important consequence of transcending institutional boundaries is the synergy of scholarly endeavors that it precipitates. If the activities of faculty and staff working together across these boundaries are coordinated and territorial sensibilities are diminished, they can be enormously more effective in competing for funding and elevating their productivity.

This is truly a situation in which the whole can be enormously greater than the sum of its parts.

(c) A serendipitous benefit of transcending these boundaries is that faculty and staff morale is enhanced by the sincere belief that the resources of the institution are being used more effectively: it is especially valuable if the end users easily perceive the benefits. If more bang for the buck is actually delivered, and the faculty have irrefutable evidence that their level of productivity has risen as a consequence, the effect on their morale is salubrious.

The third is to transcend barriers of race and class in our search for academic excellence, which is a desired outcome of transcending disciplines as well as institutional and political boundaries. There is an inevitable tension between the drive to enhance an institution's academic reputation, on the one hand, and on the other hand providing access to those who have not been privileged to acquire adequate preparation for university education. It is my firm belief that those two goals need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, I submit that we have a moral responsibility to provide access to our very best institutions to families who were unable to afford the economic, pedagogic and psychological support to prepare their children for university work.

The fourth challenge is to foster a truly entrepreneurial culture within the academy without compromising our institutional integrity. In a word, we simply cannot allow the financial tail to wag the academic dog. But on the other end of the spectrum, we cannot be indifferent to the societal needs that potential funding agencies put before us [e.g., NIH and AIDS.] As we meet this challenge, our research universities must dip deeper into the innovation stream, and—to extend the metaphor—build bridges between our educational programs and technological innovations on one shore, and across that stream to what knowledge-driven businesses need. The timing of enlarging our entrepreneurial spirit could not be better. Private companies are cutting back on research and development done in-house, and are looking for other sources of innovation and breakthrough developments. It is possible to respond to many of their overtures without compromising the integrity of our mission.

As those of us in the public sector join forces with those in the private sector, we can help create environments rife with economic activity, communities where the brightest and best want to live; where people are talking about great school systems, terrific universities and meaningful career opportunities; and communities in which responsible government is working hand in hand with taxpayers to preserve our natural resources for future generations. However, we will be highly successful only if, in concert with our sister institutions, we are able to serve as a driving force in shaping higher education in North America for the twenty-first century.

Quite frankly, however, success will not occur without a long-term commitment from government, business and education. As pointed out by Harvard Professor Michael Porter, who has served as our principal consultant on a statewide program to foster public-private partnerships between universities and knowledge-revolution driven industries, the race we are in is not a sprint; it's a marathon. The momentum required to meet in a sustained fashion the challenges I have described will be achieved only if we are dedicated to the synergy of purpose that commitment to coherence will yield.

If we embark on this task with compatible goals and harmonious aims, and if we are undaunted in pursuing such collaboration, the whole will truly be greater than the sum of its parts. The challenges before us are monumental, and in several respects our near term prospects are formidable. To borrow a theme from Jim Collins' best-selling book, we need a "good-to-great transformation." But Collins warns that such transformations "never happened in one fell swoop. Like pushing on a giant, heavy fly wheel, it takes a lot of effort to get the thing moving at all, but with persistent pushing in a consistent direction over a long period of time, the fly wheel builds momentum eventually hitting a point of breakthrough."

I truly believe that if we find ways to transcend academic disciplines, institutional and political boundaries, race and class barriers in order to elevate the quality of research and teaching in all North American institutions of higher education, and at the same time invest in the high technology industries that are capable of transforming the economy of our respective regions, we shall move from good-to-great universities, and in the process accomplish far more than if we work in splendid isolation from one another, or if we persist in pouring new wine in old bottles.