

Rough Seas or Normal Swells?

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In the course of our discussions at this conference we have touched on many of the current challenges to the research enterprises confronting universities. Some of these matters are national/political issues and others are trends within the academy. I would like to try to place a couple of these issues in some kind of historical perspective in the hope that the scale of these problems might be better estimated.

Perhaps the most compelling presentation of the conference has been that of Jim Battey on the current promise and challenges to stem cell research. The political storm around stem cell research is familiar to this group. The slim margin of Missouri's decision to protect stem cell research, while a victory, was ultimately disheartening to those of us who had hoped for a more decisive statement by the voters. The consequences of this slim victory continue to reverberate. Opponents of stem cell research are encouraged and threaten to bring the matter back before the voters of Missouri yet again. The Stowers Institute has had trouble recruiting world-class scientists whose work involves stem cell lines not approved by the Bush Administration. The University of Missouri has had funds targeted to essential research infrastructure shifted to other purposes for fear that such infrastructure might one day be used for stem cell related

research. This litany of continuing problems is discouraging and almost certainly bound to be a source of embarrassment in the judgment of history.

Lest we despair, however, it is important to note that the intervention of political causes in the realm of science is not a new problem. One needn't go back as far as Galileo to find similar serious impediments to science. In our own times we have seen moments when political matters could not only disrupt research agendas, but destroy careers. There was a time in the American academy when an accusation of communist sympathy could lead to termination and exile from the research and teaching that sustains every scientist. The parallels are worthy of note. Like the discourse around stem cell research, the hysteria associated with accusations of communist sympathy was not grounded in clear understanding of what such accusations or concerns

involved. Like stem cell research, anti-communism was often the tool of the demagogue who knew little or nothing of the fundamental issues, but who rode the hobby-horse to electoral gains. In retrospect, those whom we most admire from that time are the members of the academy who steadfastly refused to be intimidated by the hysteria and continued in quiet resolve to speak what they knew to be the truth. Jim Battey's presentation is a source of encouragement. The scientists of the NIH clearly are not cowed (they may be inhibited but they are not silenced) by the current political interference with scientific inquiry. Such colleagues will rightly take a place of distinction in posterity's view of yet another peculiar moment in the history of science.

Many of the presentations made by our colleagues here have had as their common theme money. We should not shrink from the unvarnished assertion that it is money that is the prerequisite for our success. Without adequate funding, the best minds and the most creative ideas will come to very little in the realm of research. I often have the impression that we are much practiced in lamenting the absence of funding, but less good at articulating the reasons why we should be at the head of society's queue for its largesse. Beth Montelone did a good job of demonstrating how "situating" one's research in society's understanding of its own needs can enhance the chances for funding.

When I listen to conversations in the academy on the question of society's support for higher education, I hear an understandable frustration verging on anger. I say that this is understandable

because most of our colleagues understand in fundamental ways that the work that goes on in the academy is genuinely important and has the potential to improve, shape, invigorate, and even save society. What we do here is of the greatest importance for the future. We know this with a clarity that makes it frustrating when legislators, donors, and, yes, administrators don't act to support our work. But we have often skipped a step between our understanding and our frustration. Our audiences seldom share the same degree of understanding that we have. Legislators, alumni, donors all have an intuitive sense that what happens at KU or Missouri or Nebraska is genuinely important, often they have first-hand experience. But we sometimes fail to give them explanations that they can grasp. This is essential if they are to put our needs ahead of other voices in society.

As Joe Steinmetz pointed out, public institutions are struggling to maintain their competitiveness. Whipsawed by diminishing legislative support and public resistance to tuition increases, the challenges to keep our salaries, infrastructure support, and research investment competitive with the best of our private rivals is difficult. Still, it is useful to recognize that the \$240 million/year that the University of Kansas receives from the legislature, for example, is equivalent to the expendable yield on a \$4.8 billion endowment. The difference lies in the future. Whereas a \$4.8 billion dollar endowment, properly managed will continue to yield in perpetuity dividends that will be the equivalent of today's \$240 million, we

cannot be similarly optimistic about future levels of support from our legislatures.

Brian Foster discussed some of the special challenges that we face. He likens the current situation to paddling a canoe in a tsunami. While there are times when this metaphor seems about right, I do not see quite the same degree of turbulence in the currents we are navigating. Brian spoke of the entitlement status of higher education. This view is informed by his –quite accurate—observation that a college degree has supplanted the high school degree as the base level of education that an American student should aspire to in order to achieve a good life. His point is that this shift has colored the conversations about access to higher education and increased pressure – particularly in public institutions—to make accommodations for students who are under-prepared.

His analysis of this phenomenon focuses on the fact that the greater participation of Americans in post-secondary education has shifted in a very brief 20 year period--the concentration away from traditional four-year institutions to community colleges and for-profit institutions. The fact that 50% of students are now in the latter two types of institutions is, indeed, a new development. It is also the case that this shift alters the political dialogue around higher education. I do not, however, find this cause for alarm. What we do at major research institutions is so dramatically different in purpose and effect than what takes place at community colleges and such places as the University of Phoenix, that there is

little in the way of comparison. The challenge is not that more students are in community colleges, the challenge is in articulating how attending a research university differs from attending a community college.

The challenge of describing the differences between community colleges and universities is more difficult than it may seem on the face of it. *We* know, because we are in the midst of the task. The majority of American voters, legislators, parents, and students do not know. It is our job—our obligation—to be able to reasonably and clearly articulate the difference between what happens at a research institution and what happens at a community college. The old stand-by of invoking the difference between being taught by someone who has read the book and someone who has written the book is not an adequate response to this challenge. Most of our audience in this discussion do not know what that succinct statement implies. In my opinion it is precisely this area of ignorance that lies behind the clamor for assessment of universities. There is a vague notion out there that somehow the vast array of higher education institutions is similar to the array of high schools: they all do the same thing, but some do it better than others. All we have to do is find the right metrics and we will be able to sort them all on to a scale of excellence and rank order them from 1 to 3200.

If we look to history for a similar moment of dramatic shift of university attendance we can find it in the period just after World War II. The passage of the G.I. Bill changed America more profoundly than most of us recognize.

This piece of legislation was initially proposed by Rep. Elliot Rankin of Mississippi, a man of few admirable political views. He was a proud racist, an aggressive anti-Semite, a vigorous member of the House Un-American Activities Committee and utterly uninterested in higher education except insofar as he viewed universities as the playgrounds of Jews and Communists. But he was an advocate of benefits for veterans. The result of his initial legislative proposal was the G.I. Bill of Rights which –among other things-- paid for four years of tuition (with a generous monthly stipend) at any institution of higher education in the United States. It is interesting, and perhaps instructive, that there was vigorous opposition to this legislation by the higher education establishment. James Conant, the President of Harvard was convinced that there would be a disastrous lowering of the quality of education in America because this legislation would fail to “distinguish between those who can profit most by advanced education and those who cannot.” Even the progressive Robert Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, predicted that the G.I. Bill would turn universities in “hobo jungles.”¹ This “catastrophic imposition” on higher education resulted in the education of 14 Nobel Prize winners, three Supreme Court judges, three Presidents, 12 Senators, 24 Pulitzer Prize winners, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 450,000 engineers, 240,000 accountants, 17,000 journalists, 22,000 dentists and one

¹ Edward Humes, *Over Here: How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream*, Harcourt, 2006, p. 32.

million others who became lawyers, nurses, business people, artists, actors writers, and so on.

Dramatically heightened expectations for higher education is a good thing. But it *has* changed the playing field. It ratchets up the focus on us. We need to justify the huge investment that is being made in what we do. We need to explain what we do more often and more carefully than at any time in the past. We need to pay more attention to how our students are being prepared than we have ever had to do in the past. We are obliged to assert the value of what we deliver in venues and to a degree that has never before been required. Brian Foster is right when he says that the higher education has been politicized more than in recent memory maybe more than ever in history.

The politicization of higher education to this degree is largely due to the fact that the stakes associated with what we do have never been greater. Higher education has to bear a greater share of basic research than has been the case at any time since World War II. The costs of higher education are growing at a rate that far outstrips increases in all other sectors except health care. When there are large amounts of money at stake, the scrutiny and resentments grow, but it is better to be in the arena than on the sidelines.

Public higher education institutions such as ours are – of necessity – going to have to take more direct responsibility for our fiscal future. Our institutions— and by that I mean our colleagues, our alumni, our various publics—have not yet internalized the fact that private fund-raising on a scale and in a manner

that emulates those of the private institutions is unavoidable. The quicker we have leaders and administrators in place who understand this reality, the better off we will be. A billion dollar endowment for a research institution of 30,000 students is not adequate. It is a good beginning, but it is only a beginning. Private endowments will be the leading discriminator in determining which of our institutions will flourish and which will languish.

There are large and serious challenges confronting higher education. Those challenges are not of any greater magnitude than those faced by previous

generations of scholars and scientists in the academy. However tempting it may be to place our particular moment at the pinnacle of history's complicated moments, it is the case that we have never had more money or greater numbers involved in our work than we have at the moment. It isn't enough money and there aren't enough scientists, teachers, and scholars in the pipeline to sustain what we will need in the future. But those challenges are likely to always be with us. That we have them is a reason for optimism rather than dismay.