

Critical Challenges for Public Universities*

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The critical challenges for public universities occur in four areas that began to surface about ten years ago. These four areas are now evolving quickly and interacting with one another to further complicate the ability to determine which might be the cause and which might be the effect. As the environment is changing so too must universities change.

- *RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS* – Universities will need to evaluate whether they can continue their current approach to funding and how they identify priority activities.

The risks of uncertain economic conditions over the next 10-15 years, coupled with changes in student diversity, population growth, and infrastructure requirements suggest new approaches are required to match university fiscal needs and their resources. Trends over the past two decades indicate that the portion of public university's budgets derived from state resources has continued to decline, while the portion of their budgets derived from tuition and fees and grants and contracts (primarily federal) has increased. As the relative amount of state support for universities continues to decrease, questions arise on whether they are state supported universities, or as some have declared, they are state assisted universities. What happens when a public university no longer believes it is primarily a public supported institution? In addition to the slowing of state funds to universities, the federal government is facing an increased need to make difficult choices among competing programs.

- *LEARNING STYLES AND PLACES* – The combination of new learning places and how students now learn will have a significant impact on how universities should deal with the curriculum and the faculty. This scale or complexity of change has not been experienced before.

In the past the teacher-learner paradigm was focused on “teaching” in only a few places (such as classrooms or laboratories). More recently, with the introduction of a number of technologies and a change in educational philosophy, the paradigm focus has been on the learner and “learning”, and it takes place in many locations (such as classrooms, learning centers, cafes, field exercises, informal gatherings, and internet), and in many ways (such as lectures, independent study, collaboration, gaming, simulations, and debates). Technology and connectivity have made some of these changes possible by allowing access by essentially everyone to very large data sets or specialized information at any location and at any time. Students in the future will have grown up with these technological changes and will have experienced a wider variety of learning styles than current students – before they enter the university. This change in teaching/learning approaches has been underway for some time, but it is accelerating and changing the character of the college experience for students, and will continue to do so for faculty as well.

- *COMPETITION, COOPERATION, AND PARTNERSHIPS* – At times of resource constraints, we need to remain competitive when appropriate, but cooperate and partner so we build on each other's strengths and specializations rather than unnecessarily duplicating activities.

While competition among the State's universities for fiscal and curricular resources has existed in the past, today's environment requires a greater degree of cooperation among universities in the learning area (such as sharing portions of the curriculum or joint enrollment for selected courses) and similar cooperation with private and public sector institutions. From the perspective of some learning programs, activities by international institutions (existing universities and other institutions) may cause us to rethink our approach to both electronically-assisted-learning and our role in educating international students. Resource constraints and availability of new technologies would allow such cooperation to be easily accomplished once a new mindset is developed to overcome resistance from the traditional campus community. Cooperation has long existed, to varying degrees, among the campus research communities, but it needs to be extended to other parts of the university. Formal partnerships have existed for years among some universities, government agencies, and profit and non-profit organizations, while universities still retained their needed independence. Land-grant universities have been especially good at this approach in the past, so ways to accomplish this goal are well known.

- *FOCUSING ON BASICS* -- In the challenging times ahead, universities must be able to clearly define the basics of what a university is expected to do and to address these purposes in ways appropriate to their particular settings.

What is the purpose of a public university and what should it do for the public, outside the immediate university community? This question is increasingly being discussed in and out of higher education, and it is at the core of our new challenges. The purposes of the university are to generally benefit society through such activities as educating the workforce, developing an informed citizenry, seeking answers to practical and theoretical questions, debating and studying the major issues of the day, preserving and extending the frontiers of knowledge, and transforming lives. How a particular university accomplishes these purposes depends on its location, its specific mission, and its funding opportunities. Some universities seem to have lost track of who they are serving and why. Of course, the public university must be led and managed to create an effective and efficient environment for accomplishing its mission. But university leadership must also become proactive in finding innovative approaches to learning and curriculum, defining which disciplines are to be emphasized, creating an excellent workplace and learning environment, identifying and addressing public concerns, and be aware of how the stakeholders of their particular university view the role of today's public university. Some universities, for a variety of reasons, have greatly enhanced economic development through spin off companies or patents, or through the multiplier effect of research activity within the local community. But universities also face increased criticism from some representatives of the state funding sources, because of actions such as rapid tuition increases, duplication of efforts of other institutions, not addressing the needs of the workforce, or a perception of worrying more about research than teaching. Studies have addressed all these issues and we are not unfamiliar with the arguments.

While the fundamental purposes of a university may not be changing, how universities accomplish those purposes in the 21st century, with the resource constraints and current mix of stakeholders, is an open question. What is clear is that universities will have to change the way they do business. What is not clear is how this might best be done. This change will not come easily, even for those that understand the need.

The military (and subsequently some businesses) have a term for the environment we are facing: the VUCA World (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous). Universities are facing the same world and need to make sure they practice forward thinking rather than focusing on celebrating past accomplishments, and that they are up to the task of dealing with the future in a way they can shape it rather than be shaped by it. Otherwise they will find themselves becoming more and more in an unsustainable position.

Additional Reading:

1. Duderstadt, James and Farris Womack. 2003. *The Future of the Public University in America : Beyond the Crossroads* (University Professor of Science and Engineering and former president, University of Michigan).
2. Faulkner, Larry 2005. *Toward Continuous Improvement: Rebuilding the compact between higher education, the public, and our elected officials* in National Crosstalk from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (President, University of Texas).
3. Newman, Frank, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry. 2004. *The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market*. (Former president, University of Rhode Island, Director of Futures, former President, Education Commission of the States, and former director, the Futures Project: Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World).
4. Zemsky, Robert. 2003. *Have We Lost the "Public" in Higher Education?* in Chronicle of Higher Education, May 30, 2003. (Professor of Higher Education and Chair of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education, University of Pennsylvania).

*Roger Caldwell retired in 2003 after a 37 year career at the University of Arizona. In addition to his continuous activities as a faculty member, he was involved in institutional research and strategic planning at the university and college levels for 25 years. He was in the faculty senate, served on a number of committees for the Arizona Board of Regents and the University of Arizona, and was active in getting students and others to understand ways of anticipating the future.

July 8, 2005