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The Soul of the UNIVERSITY

The two most important developments in American higher education in the twentieth century were, arguably, contradictory. First, building on the foundation laid by the Morrill Act of 1862, which gave federal land to states to create colleges that taught "agriculture and the mechanic arts," we created the world's first mass higher education system. When the Carnegie Corporation was founded, fewer than 3 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 were students in institutions of higher education. About 350,000 young Americans were enrolled in fewer than 1,000 institutions of higher education. A hundred years later, more than 35 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds are enrolled, and about two-thirds of high school graduates immediately go on to get more education. The United States has 20 million students in 4,500 institutions of higher education.

Second, building on the foundation laid by the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876, American higher education has embraced the idea of the research university as its most cherished aspiration. Today there are about 300 American universities that confer doctoral degrees, far more than the original proselytizers for importing the research-university model from Germany to the United States envisioned. And this number understates the importance of the research-university model, because the core of the faculty and senior administration at hundreds more higher education institutions hold doctoral degrees and operate within the academic tenure system that lies at the heart of the way research universities are run.

For many people who have spent their lives working in higher education, mass higher education and research universities make for a perfect fit: together they express both the public service and the intellectual ambitions of educators. And during most of the twentieth century, especially the years between 1950 and 1975, the two big ideas grew and flourished in tandem. But they aren't the same idea. Mass higher education, conceptually, is practical, low-cost, skills-oriented, and mainly concerned with teaching. It caught on because state legislatures and businesses saw it as a means of economic development and a supplier of personnel, and because families saw it as a way of ensuring a place in the middle class for their children. Research universities, on the other hand, grant extraordinary freedom and empowerment to a small, elaborately trained and selected group of people whose mission is to pursue knowledge and understanding without the constraints of immediate practical applicability under which most of the rest of the world has to operate. Some of their work is subsidized directly, by the federal government and by private donors, but they also live under the economic protection that very large and successful institutions can provide to some of their component parts.

I have an immigrant's perspective on higher education, having spent most of my adult life working for news organizations and then, through a series of happy accidents, having become a dean at a major research university in middle age. No matter how much you think you understand how central research is to the university, you can't truly feel its centrality until you have experienced university life from the inside, at a fairly high level. Of the many stakeholder groups in higher education, the most powerful, at least at research universities, is the tenured faculty, and the ticket for admission to that group is first-rate research. Very-high-achieving people who have devoted the main energies of their careers to research, and who use evaluations of research quality to perform ongoing, fairly merciless evaluations of their peers and would-be peers, will naturally see research as the central activity of their institutions. Research is a major income generator for the top universities. Research is central to the immensely appealing conception of the university as an au-

tonomous institution with the freedom to make its own rules.

It's also the case that university leaders, when speaking to the nonuniversity world, rarely present research as the clear central purpose of the university. Tens of millions of Americans have a direct connection to higher education, and probably only a tiny minority of them are even familiar with the term "research university." So universities themselves have contributed to the lack of public understanding of the centrality of research.

At the Higher Education Summit that Carnegie Corporation of New York and *TIME* magazine co-sponsored in September 2013, the disconnect between the views of the research university from inside and outside was vividly on display. A procession of highly distinguished leaders of higher education mainly emphasized the need to protect—in particular, to fund adequately—the university's research mission. A procession of equally distinguished outsiders, including the U.S. secretary of education, mainly emphasized the need to make higher education more cost-effective for its students and their families, which almost inevitably entails twisting the dial away from research and toward the emphasis on skills instruction that characterizes the mass higher education model. *TIME*'s own cover story that followed from the conference hardly mentioned research (it was mainly about how much economically useful material students are learning), even though the research university was explicitly the main focus of the conference. At the conference itself, there was a lot of talk about maintaining American "competitiveness" in the global economy as the main justification for the university's research mission—and the idea of a crisis was pervasive. But how the crisis was defined depended on who was defining it: those who don't work in higher education usually see it as a crisis of high cost and impracticality, and those who do work in higher education usually see it as a crisis of insufficient resources. An unschooled observer who wandered into the conference might leave feeling impressed with many of the specific ideas she heard, but confused about what the overall situation is.

The Ur-text about higher education, at least for educators, is *The Idea of a University*, by John Henry Newman. It is an odd choice: it's a disjointed, incomplete series of lectures from the 1850s, mainly devoted to an issue nobody worries about much any more (the independence of universities from organized religion), and it is explicitly opposed to the research-university ideal, which was beginning to emerge at the time. Newman was making a case, essentially, for Oxford as University in the early nineteenth century: a university for aristocrats and scholars, unscientific, undemocratic, highly personalized, gloriously impractical. And yet such eminent twentieth-century writers on higher education as Alfred North Whitehead, Abraham Flexner, and Clark Kerr all demonstrated in their writings a deep debt to Newman. In 1992 the distinguished historian Jaroslav Pelikan published a book called *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination*, which is a lecture-by-lecture update of Newman.

Why is Newman so enduringly appealing? Part of the reason is that, because universities are so large and do so many different things, very few people have been able succinctly and persuasively to state their central purpose. Part is Newman's wise and elegant writing style. And part is Newman's core idea that the university should be a self-governing institution, set apart and protected from the other main institutions of society that will always try to bend it to their own purposes, devoted to knowledge as an end in itself. "Here are two methods of Education;" he wrote. "The end of the one is to be philosophical, or the other to be mechanical; the one rises toward general ideas, the other is exhausted upon what is particular and external…. Knowledge, in proportion as it tends to be more and more particular, ceases to be Knowledge."

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Abraham Flexner's *Universities: American English German*, published in 1930 in a mood of celebration of the successful importation of the German research university model to the United States over the preceding generation, begins with a tribute to Newman, but dramatically departs from the territory Newman delineated for the university. Flexner's ideal university was deeply engaged with the world, especially through the new social sciences. What

Newman meant when he used the term knowledge was the accumulation, not of information and skill, but of understanding and perspective. Flexner's ideal was the similar-sounding but actually quite different "advancement of knowledge," for which he imagined substantial outside-world applications. That and "solution of problems," he wrote, he considered to be "interchangeable phrases." Universities were uniquely well suited to make the world a better place.

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But Flexner was aware that in proposing that universities have a far more utilitarian mission than the one Newman had in mind, he was entering a realm of potential peril: universities might be turned into entirely practical institutions, put at the immediate service of every outside entity and social need. "A university should not be a weather vane, responsive to every variation of popular whim," he wrote. "Universities must at times give society, not what society wants, but what it needs. Inertia and resistance have their uses, provided they be based on reasonable analysis, on a sense of values, not on mere habit." Flexner was especially skeptical of universities undertaking to teach their students anything practical: "The pursuit of science and scholarship belongs to the university. What else belongs? Assuredly neither secondary, technical, vocational, nor popular education. Of course, these are important; of course, society must create appropriate agencies to deal with them; but they must not be permitted to distract the university." Flexner disapproved, for example, of research universities being home to any form of professional education except in law and medicine, including business schools, journalism schools, schools of education, and denominational divinity schools. That is why, even for him, Newman served as a valuable anchor to windward.

Clark Kerr delivered the Godkin Lectures at Harvard half a century ago, in the spring of 1963, during what looks in retrospect like the historical high-water mark of American optimism. That mood pervades the lectures. Kerr gave the book version of the lectures a title that explicitly echoes, but also rejects, Newman: *The Uses of the University*. (Newman didn't want universities to have uses.) The book has been through a series of new editions over the years, and it still stands as about the best concise, coherent, nonbloviating explanation of what an American university is supposed to be. Kerr shared with Newman a passion for the university as an independent, almost magically self-contained institution, and he shared with Flexner a devotion to the research-university ideal. But he was willing to go much further than Flexner in suggesting that the university could safely take on a wide range of educational and social missions—hence the term he coined for it, the "multiversity." After delineating how conceptually different the mass higher education and research-university ideas were, Kerr confidently asserted that they had "turned out to be more compatible than might at first appear."

Flexner was writing as an intellectual; Newman and Kerr were both writing as intellectuals who were also administrators. In Kerr's case, he was, as president of the University of California, chief administrator of the world's largest higher-education institution, and he was well aware that the compatibility he saw between the two dominant university missions needed, at the very least, some minding. Kerr wrote that there were only 20 true research universities in the United States, and he didn't complain that that was too few. In California, the state colleges were constantly lobbying the state legislature to be upgraded to the alluring status of universities. Kerr's response to this was to persuade the legislature to pass a sweeping master plan for higher education, built around a grand bargain between the two models: on the democratizing side, everyone in California would have the right to a tuition-free higher education, and on the research side, nobody in the vast system except a handful of elite, well-funded universities would be permitted to offer doctoral programs.

Kerr's historic achievement began unraveling almost immediately. In the short run, the Free Speech Movement protests at Berkeley, which came the year after the Godkin Lectures, unpleasantly surprised him. The election of Ronald Reagan as governor of California in 1966, partly because Reagan had tapped into the public's resentment of the student protests, was another surprise. And shortly after taking office, Reagan arranged for Kerr to be fired. In the longer run, both of the key elements of the master plan were abrogated. The California state college system is now the California state university system, and public higher education in California has not been tuition-free for decades. It is still an outstanding system, but not quite so paradisaical or conceptually neat as Kerr believed it could be.

The crisis in higher education, it should be noted, is not like the 2008 financial crisis, or the crisis in the big-city newspaper business that many journalists like to use as a point of comparison when discussing higher education. It is more prospective than actual; colleges and universities aren't going out of business en masse, or even, across the board, significantly curtailing their operations. Because higher education is expected to do so many things—teach everything from prison administration to philosophy, operate winning sports programs, provide in-person management of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, make local economies prosper, be direct providers of medical care, and on and on—it can't possibly do all of them at peak efficiency all the time. The word "crisis," denoting a wide variety of specific problems, has appeared consistently in discussions of higher education, even when, in retrospect, higher education was not in crisis.

What seems to be at the core of today's perception of crisis is cost. Tuition, especially at research universities, has risen more rapidly than inflation for many years. The price of anything is, ultimately, what people are willing to pay for it, and there is a sense among both educators and the public that the wonderfully (from the universities' point of view) inelastic demand of recent decades may have run its course. To say this requires a series of immediate caveats. First, at private colleges and universities the stated tuition is frequently abated by scholarship aid and discounting, and shouldn't be understood as what people actually pay. Second, the scary statistics you see about student debt are usually cherry-picked to produce numbers that overstate the national per-student average. Third, increased costs at public universities are substantially the result of significant cuts in state legislative funding, not of universities gold-plating their operations. Fourth, for each individual American family, obtaining college and university degrees continues to be the one thing most likely to improve its children's economic fortunes. Still the sense that something fundamental may be changing in the economic compact between higher education and the public is palpable.

Why is this? The overall statistical economic case for higher education is at war with a widespread fear that membership in the middle class is getting harder and harder for the rising generation to achieve—especially for those who study the humanities or the nonquantitative social sciences in college. The idea that any family resources devoted to higher education will pay off economically may be going the way of the idea that all single-family homes will rise in value every year. In the nonacademic world, technological advances have made many products and services cheaper. It seems impossible that the same can't be true in higher education—especially with the advent of online courses.

On the other side of the transaction, it is very difficult for institutions of higher education, especially research universities, to reduce their costs. The "cost disease" in talent-based organizations that offer in-person services, which William Baumol identified back in the 1960s, means that universities have to keep paying their professors more without getting productivity increases in return. Competing for faculty members (often in the hope of getting research money as a payoff) is expensive, and so is competing for students by offering them more and more amenities. As nonprofit, large, complex institutions, universities wind up shouldering costly social burdens. Most of them still maintain the kind of benefits for employees (retirement accounts, generous health plans, job security, and so on) that are disappearing in private companies, and much of the substantial recent increase in the number of administrators has to do with some admirable additional missions (community outreach, faculty diversity, environmental stewardship, student counseling) that the university has taken on. The more fortunate universities have substantial endowments, but as nonprofits they aren't supposed to manage themselves such that income far exceeds expense, so they operate on very slim cash margins.

Underlying all of this, though, is the fundamental problem of the country's having adopted two noncongruent ideals of higher education at the same time. With only a few exceptions, like the National Science Foundation, most of the stakeholders that provide resources to universities—including parents, students, alumni donors, legislatures, businesses, and foundations—believe what they are paying for is skills-conferring, teaching-centric institutions. And most of the senior leadership of universities believes that their institutions' core mission is research. Presidents and provosts know that raising the research status of their university is what would make their peers judge them as successful. Faculty members know that the quality of their research is the prime determinant of the course of their careers.

Research is expensive. In the sciences it requires laboratories. In all fields it drives teaching loads down, and therefore payrolls up. The intellectual model it implies pushes the better colleges and universities to operate dozens of academic departments, some of them lightly populated by students. The research university model is designed to make it difficult for schools to react in real time to changes in conditions, in the way that for-profit businesses try to do. If there is an imperative to reduce

costs, research universities are not built to respond to it naturally and swiftly.

One can say, and be partly right, that better communication about research could lessen the cost pressure. Presidents, provosts, and deans, as they incessantly bustle about from event to event, face a constant temptation to deal with each constituency group on the level at which it interacts with the university. Why talk to the athletic boosters about the classics department, or try to sell the business council on tenure, or tell students that it's not really in their interest to have faculty members who do nothing but teach? As no one can fail to have noticed, it is possible on the very rare occasions when the whole university community gathers, like commencement ceremonies, for the senior leadership to power through by delivering a series of inoffensive bromides. This is a temptation to be resisted. The research-university model will be subjected to increasing challenges, and university leaders have a responsibility to talk more openly to the public about the centrality of research to the university mission. Ideally, when they do so, they should not confine their sales pitch only to the most obviously beneficial products of university research—silicon chips and vaccines and so on—but also to the more essential and also more difficult idea of the university as a realm not entirely devoted to what seems at the moment to be most practical.

Having spent the last 10 years as dean of a journalism school, in one of the more skills-oriented domains in higher education, I am familiar with the arguments against keeping the university at a distance from the rest of the world. Why wouldn't you want to make the university resemble the professional workplace as closely as possible? (One of the leading American journalism schools uses the advertising slogan, "Our Classrooms are Newsrooms.") Why would you want to be taught by professors who devote a substantial part of their time to writing projects, instead of working professionals whose only role at the university is to teach? Why shouldn't the curriculum be devoted to imparting the most up-to-the-minute skills, the ones that will have most value in the employment market? Embedded in those questions is a view that a high-quality apprenticeship under an attentive mentor, instead of a university education, would represent no loss, and possibly an improvement.

Universities are just about the only institutions that are set up to transcend the limits of time, location, and immediate circumstance that constrain just about all workplaces. If they take full advantage of that, they can impart to the mind an ability to achieve dispassionate distance, to assess, to contextualize, to connect—as John Henry Newman put it, "a power of judging of passing events, and of all events, and a conscious superiority over them, which before it did not possess." Universities can bring the world from two dimensions into three. I can't resist quoting Newman again, at some length:

> *"That perfection of the Intellect, which is the result of Education, and its* beau ideal*, to be imparted to individuals in their respective measures, is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things, as far as the finite mind can embrace them, each in its place, and with its own characteristics upon it. It is almost prophetic from its knowledge of history; it is almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has almost supernatural charity from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has almost the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres."*

This may sound luxurious, and it is. It may also sound impractical, but it's not. (What can be impractical is using one's time at a university to acquire skills that may turn out to be valuable only for a short time.) To be able to come closer than most people can to seeing things deeply and as they really are is an enormous advantage in life, including in a career. One can get meaningfully closer to this state by studying literature or theology, if they are taught properly, as well as by studying computer science and economics. Faculty who are deeply engaged in intellectual production will be far better at getting their students there than faculty who see their mission as conferring a set of specific skills or facts. When university leaders, in making the case for the research university, emphasize its practical utility because they believe that will be the only persuasive argument, they are leaving an important part of their mission undone.

If things proceed on the course they seem to be on now and cost really is a big problem, then universities will change—and the universities whose supporters are the most price sensitive are the ones that will change the most. Many of them will change not through any orderly and planned process, but through budget-cutting exercises that financial necessity has imposed on them. And it's obvious what the direction of these changes will be: away from the research-university idea, toward the "mechanic arts." There will be fewer humanities departments, fewer doctoral programs, a smaller proportion of faculty who do research and have tenure, less individual instruction, less campus residency by students, curricula canted toward job skills—in

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Newman's terms, more emphasis on learning, less on knowledge. That's not a nightmarish outcome, but it will mean that the lucky minority of students who get to attend true research universities will have a profoundly different, and profoundly more advantageous, education than the majority who don't. It was America's democratizing tendency, not the intent of the leading planners of the higher education system, that brought us a substantial number of nonelite universities with research aspirations. If cost pressures extinguish those aspirations, then the resulting system will be less democratic.

Universities can be counted on to advocate for themselves. They will always ask for more independence and more resources. They may or may not try to get out ahead of events and change voluntarily, calmly, in a noncrisis atmosphere. But if they did, what should they do? Most of the changes that are coming will be necessities, imposed from without. What changes would be desirable, and ought to come from within?

I have already said that I've been struck by how little most of the university's stakeholders—everybody, really, except faculty, senior administration, and research funders—understand and embrace the research mission of the university. What has struck me about the people who do embrace research is a fundamental difference among them in institutional orientation. Most people work for their employer. Faculty members at research universities work for their discipline. If you want to advance in your career, your stature within your discipline is far more determinative than your status within your university. A faculty member at a research university will self-identify by discipline, not by university: "I'm an economist," not "I work for the University of Alabama."

Collectively, academic disciplines represent an amazing achievement. They are robust, global, intensely networked, and collaborative communities. They are self-governing and highly productive. They are also an excellent example of how to make a socially useful nonmarket activity economically self-sustaining—partly through outside funding, and partly through the disciplines' having made their internal peer valuations into the hiring and promotion standards of universities. Disciplines can't pay salaries, but universities do.

This system is not especially advantageous for presidents, provosts, and deans, who must answer to additional constituencies and who are paid to look after entire schools and universities. A research university is often, in the aggregate, a stunning collection of expertise and talent across a dazzling range, which is not getting full advantage from its own intellectual resources because they are situated inside departments and schools that are more oriented toward the same departments and schools at other universities than toward their local colleagues in other disciplines. Because the reward system for faculty members at research universities so strongly privileges research over teaching, students are often not getting the full advantage of the faculty talent that surrounds them either.

If university research were more oriented toward the institution where it takes place, and less toward the discipline, there would be a number of powerful benefits. It is very expensive for colleges and universities to compete ferociously with each other, school by school and department by department, for incremental advantages in research prestige. If, as Columbia University's former provost, Jonathan Cole, has been suggesting lately, individual universities were able to specialize more by forming alliances that would concentrate expertise in one location rather than trying to replicate it everywhere, that could be a way to control costs. As specialties were parceled out, online education would make it possible for students in one university in the alliance to take locally unavailable courses from another university in the alliance.

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Within each university, more cooperation across disciplines could generate new intellectual ferment that could produce both research breakthroughs and a richer, more interconnected curriculum. It could also lead to more collaboration on research applications with the outside world, either locally in the university's hometown, or globally. That would make it much easier for university leadership to make the public case for research. And making research more institution-oriented would also give universities a way to make teaching a more genuine determinant of faculty careers, rather than a mainly notional one, and to explore more vigorously the pedagogical potential on online education, including for resident students.

The academic disciplines became so strong thanks to a set of structures that were designed artfully enough that over time they were able to become quite powerful. These include each individual disciplinary association, with its all-important annual convention where careers can be meaningfully advanced; the key academic journals within each discipline; the university presses; the logistical substructure that makes it easy for professors to move around from institution to institution, such as the retirement-account system, uniform student admissions tests, and systemic means of handling library resources (all of these were creations of the Carnegie educational philanthropies); and the practice of making tenure decisions substantially on the basis of evaluations of published work by within-discipline colleagues at other universities. For all the talk about higher education not getting the Internet, the advent of the online world has tremendously strengthened disciplinary life by making the global peer-to-peer communication that has always been one of its key features so much easier.

To orient academic research more—not completely, but more—toward the needs of the home institution would require not just exhortation, but the building of a similar set of structures that alter the incentives for individual faculty members. These would fall into two broad categories: hiring and promotion (especially tenure) standards, and enabling mechanisms for conducting and disseminating research. The first of these could give special weight to interdisciplinary or applicable research, to written evaluations of intellectual quality from people in other, related disciplines, and to advances in pedagogical technique. The second could provide funding from university-resident sources and create prestigious new publishing venues for valuable research that the traditional discipline-resident funding and publication venues would be unlikely to support.

Clark Kerr remarked that the oldest European research universities, established during the Middle Ages, were among the least changed institutions in all of human experience. He meant that as praise, mostly; in the current moment of reverence for innovation, people would hear it as a rebuke. In any event, it is inescapable that universities' peculiar survivability and their slow-moving quality are inextricably linked. They ignore almost no important development in society, but they assimilate no single development instantly and totally. So predictions that some aspect of higher education is about to change systemically in a dramatic, utterly landscape-altering fashion should be treated with skepticism. (The rhetoric linking the advent of massive open online courses to academic institutional apocalypse is already cooling off, for example.) What I am proposing here is meant as an incremental change of the kind that is always taking place in higher education. I don't want to say, ominously, that if it doesn't happen, there will be dire consequences. But I do believe that integrating the research life of universities more fully into the way society understands and experiences these wondrous institutions would be the best way of maximizing their benefit, and of securing their future. ■