Now More Than Ever, a Need for Bold Ambition

By C.L. Max Nikias and William G. Tierney

The problems that confront American higher education today are arguably the greatest in more than a generation. Both public and private institutions have faced significant budget cuts, decreased money for research from federal and state governments, and the specter of a decline in giving because of uncertainty in financial markets. One response, which unfortunately appears to be all too common, is to make modest across-the-board cuts, generally refrain from bold actions, and hope for better days. We suggest an alternative based on our belief that fiscal considerations should not be the sole determinant that drives an academic agenda.

American higher education did not become second to none through a bias toward caution or low expectations. John Henry Newman in his 1852 epic, The Idea of a University, wrote of the university's singular ability to "adjust views, and experiences, and habits of mind the most independent and dissimilar." At his inauguration as president of the Johns Hopkins University 24 years later, Daniel Coit Gilman spoke of the central role of the American university in helping the United States fulfill its democratic goals: "The academy should make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, ... less suffering in the hospital, less fraud in business," and "less folly in politics."
Such statements point to a vision of higher education in which those in the university have the freedom and courage to speak uncomfortable truths in the hope of creating a better world. The American research university flourished from such visions.

What would such bold ambitions, which are so worthy of the American research university, mean to us today? Here are some of the actions we believe are imperative to take:

• Revalue and reshape the traditional undergraduate experience. In an era when some people think an undergraduate education can be compressed into a briefer online experience because of fiscal considerations, we instead would call attention to a student’s particular intellectual and social needs between the ages of 17 and 23. During this season of life, attitudes and social identities can be forged most productively through a dynamic learning and living community. This happens best on a college campus rich in social networks supported by social media, rather than solely in cyberspace.

At a moment when cynics question the value of a four-year degree and others see inexpensive online education as a solution to the fiscal problems that beset us, we see value in making a five-year campus experience a more widely available option, with students entering college during what would normally be their senior year of high school, or staying an extra year on a campus to experience a 4+1 undergraduate and graduate program.

• Expand lifelong learning. The Greek playwright Aeschylus said 2,500 years ago: "Learning is ever in the freshness of its youth, even for the old." Such a statement is especially relevant today when our graduates must be ready to reinvent their careers numerous times through work on advanced degrees. This is where online learning can help with career change and advancement. The research university should make a compact with its undergraduates that worthwhile certificates and degrees of learning can be earned online 24/7, wherever they live, to boost their workplace skills and increase their marketability.

America has always been uniquely ambitious in its educational expectations: In the 19th century, Horace Mann called for universal education for all children when such a goal did not even exist in the more developed countries of Europe. And in the 21st century, we need to give consideration to enabling all college graduates to earn one or more master's degrees or advanced certificates.

• Preserve quality above all else. At the same moment we suggest that master's education be expanded, we also put forward one of the most politically delicate topics at any research university. Faculty like to teach graduate students, and to a certain extent, a university's prestige can be gauged by its attention to graduate programs. But graduate programs are costly, and not all are as effective as they should be. If you cannot do everything well, given limited finances, what can you do well and what can you stop doing? This is one of the chief examples where administrators must lead wisely by making difficult choices rather than enacting across-the-board cuts.
• Redefine, don’t retinker, the undergraduate curriculum. Every generation, faculties seek to rethink general education, inevitably adding but seldom subtracting requirements, increasing elective offerings, and adjusting course credits. The time is right to move beyond the curricular excesses of a previous era and accept the new realities of learning. The urgent press for skills development means that we must drop the simple accumulation of credits as a proxy for learning and instead develop reliable indicators of learning aimed at developing creative, inventive, and entrepreneurial graduates. The next generation of American and international leaders (many of whom are being educated at American research universities) must be grounded in timeless human values in order to create timely innovation. They must be grounded in not just the sciences or social sciences but also in the often-overlooked arts that fuel the human imagination. In this age of the supposed triumph of democracy, they must especially be wrestling with the history of the democratic experiment, going back to its Greco-Roman roots, going back to the lessons, successes, and mistakes of our democratic forebears, in order to translate democracy effectively into modern societies on every continent.

• Encourage our scholars to play a more active role beyond the ivy walls confining their narrow disciplines. The scholar of the future will be the one who knows how to work with his or her peers in other disciplines; who can build connections between the ivory tower and the town square; and who can translate ideas into innovations that benefit society.

At the core of the mission of great universities is the aim to build women and men who can make courageous and wise choices in moments of uncertainty. Yet our universities must first be able to make such choices themselves. We believe that the choices that we have suggested represent a starting point for a thoughtful discussion about how to make timely choices in a manner that unleashes the full, astonishing power of the American research university enterprise.

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