

Anatomy of the Urban University

America needs a new concept of the urban university—a concept that sharply focuses on teaching and learning, on research and applied study, on scholarship and shared learning, and on community service with a reflective component. To do all this, the university needs to get organized. It will be hard to do this alone; it needs the help of the surrounding community. There is an urgency on the campus and in society at large. The world is changing and so must the university.

Urban institutions have several common features that make them a prime target for development. They are sizeable, mainly new, full of older students, yet young by university standards. They are not yet sure of themselves. Their traditions are not so formed that they are barnacled, so they have a great opportunity to chart a course that serves American society.

A New Concept of the University

There are some specific things the urban university can do now to design this new future. Some are peculiar to the urban setting and some represent useful ideas for any university.

If we start with what is peculiar to the urban setting, the first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that the urban institution is tied to the future of cities. Only two decades ago, the popular press was asking: "Will the city survive?" The media foretold a future of overexpanding subunits within a central wasteland surrounded by corridors of roads. Then, somehow, cities revived themselves. People all across the country made investments in their cities to make sure that kind of future wouldn't happen.

Yet for all the renewed vitality of cities, their problems are even more urgent. The problems are very familiar to those who live and work in the cities. There is also a new urgency in solving these problems, lest they become so urgent we can no longer reverse them and they drive away the very citizens we need.

People and corporations today have the ability to live and work where they wish. The Mobile Corporation moves from New York to Northern Virginia; Sears-Roebuck moves from Chicago to the suburbs. As society

changes, we must develop an ability not just to adapt, but to continue to adapt. And as the city is continuing to change, the university must change with it. The operative form of the verb here is not *has changed* but, *is continuing to change*.

Issues Peculiar to the Urban Setting

One of the advantages of being at the helm of the urban university is that the leaders can see into the workings of society with considerable clarity. But applying that insight and bringing about change in the university is what takes skill and courage. Four central issues face the leadership of urban universities.

First is the question of minority achievement. The urban university has a long tradition of welcoming new populations whom others did not see as the “right” kind of students. Today’s cities are going to be led by minorities, so what is needed is not simply more access, but achievement. The question of achievement will be fraught with political peril, but this should not deter us from taking the necessary actions.

Second, the urban university must get more involved in the transformation of public education. The greatest reform effort in the history of American education is happening right now. Yet, with the exception of a handful of university people, the urban university is not playing a significant role. Universities tend to assume that if “they” would just do “their job,” then things would change. What needs to be done more broadly is to create coalitions of business and educators who understand their joint responsibilities to education at all levels. It is “all one system.”

Third, the urban university no longer has the luxury of ignoring the question of health care. While a great deal of expertise is needed to even begin to grapple with the problem, one aspect of child health needs to be talked about by educators. We have discovered that as many as 12 percent of today’s young children are learning-impaired, many of them seriously damaged prenatally through fetal alcohol syndrome, AIDS, and tobacco; others damaged in early childhood through malnutrition, child abuse, and lead poisoning. The consequences of learning impairment for schools and for society are enormous. A whole new set of university champions will need to come forward to bring awareness to these issues.

A final concern has to do with the whole issue of values. For too long universities have abandoned open support of values. The disciplines see themselves as value-free—just teaching and researching psychology, or chemistry, or history. This is compounded by faculty fear of “ideology.” But we have found that there are values like integrity, search for truth, and the need, in a democratic society, to participate in community service. Yet we have failed to get involved in these ethical concerns. We *are* responsible for

the development of the whole student, who must become a whole citizen. Where else will the city get its leaders, let alone its followers?

This is not an easy set of issues. The urban university must accept its mission to live in the broader marketplace of ideas, resources, and responsibilities.

Emerging Needs

Two particular needs emerge from all this. First, in the applied area, the urban university needs to look more closely at the transformation of schools. This requires greater creativity than we have given to it in the past. Recently an attempt was made to rate the best and worst fields of university applied work. The best was medicine and the worst education. In the technical fields, we are making gains, but only grudgingly. Federal and state centers are expanding, while universities protest. What is needed is a new way to rank the university—a ranking system that judges the university on its intellect, its policies, and its openness to change.

The second need that emerges is a focus on teaching. More reflective teaching is needed, particularly in math and science. With grounding in math and science, students can still be accepted by the most selective colleges. But new college applicants look different from their peers of past decades; the supermarket curriculum is failing to produce the kind of literate graduate that society needs and expects. Teaching is also different. What is driving the university is *not* teaching and learning, *not* the whole student, *not* even society's needs, but publication. There is too little contact with students and too much lecturing going on in the classroom.

Given the current conditions of self-focus within the university, its future course is open for new ideas. Leadership is needed to overcome the obstacles. We can begin by looking at models of success, by raising the whole issue of the uses of power and prestige. Society is demanding more from urban universities. Universities need to be prepared to respond.



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