Review Essay

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The Changing Academic Environment

Richard M. Freeland, *Academia's Golden Age: Universities in Massachusetts 1945-1970* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992) 532 pp.

Anyone familiar with the state of American higher education and its problems today knows that it has undergone unprecedented change and controversy over the past fifty years. With a clear commitment to academic life, Richard Freeland writes about this earlier period of educational history in his aptly titled *Academia's Golden Age*. The book deals with the period from 1930 to 1980, with special emphasis on 1945 to 1970. Clearly, this was an era when academic times were good, financial resources abundant, and research opportunities seemingly unlimited. Under these favorable conditions, the environment was friendly and for the most part hospitable. Indeed, the academic enterprise not only grew and prospered, but it also underwent significant change during these munificent years. It was a time when America put its colleges and universities on a pedestal. In short, it was the best of times. This ideal situation, however, was abruptly altered by the Vietnam War controversy and the social upheaval that ensued. Devastated by violent student riots and the disruption of university life, the environment suddenly turned hostile, and it became the worst of times. This sudden modification of normal conditions posed a grave threat to the security of the academy.

A professional administrator, Freeland is a historian and a former dean at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. The deanship afforded him an unusual position from which to view the change. At present, Freeland is the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at the City University of New York. My vantage point was also from UMass/Boston, initially as a junior faculty member in the political science department and now as a senior fellow at the McCormack Institute of Public Affairs. Both of us were participant-observers on the same campus, but we came from different academic backgrounds and disciplines. Thus, we saw things from somewhat different perspectives.

Reviewing Freeland's book, given its exceptional scope and depth, is a daunting task. Fundamentally, it is a serious and responsible defense of American higher education, which has been subjected to a host of attacks from both ends of the political spectrum. Over and beyond the compelling intellectual considerations that prompted this defense, Freeland provides a detailed analysis of eight universities that are located in Massachusetts. More specifically, he has undertaken to document the histories and evolution of Boston College, Boston University, Brandeis, Harvard, MIT, Northeastern, Tufts, and the University of Massachusetts. His selection of these particular schools is interesting. They are mostly elite research campuses, but they reflect the national scene and are dealt with and examined in this broader context. With the exception of the Amherst campus in western Massachusetts, which is considered a "public Ivy," all of them cluster around Boston in the eastern part of the state.

To be sure, Massachusetts is not an ordinary state when it comes to higher education. The Commonwealth has an international reputation for the distinction of its private colleges and universities, and it encompasses one of the largest educational concentrations in the country. Numerous elements produce change at the campus level. The three elements that Freeland addresses are: institutional ambition, academic ideas, and organizational dynamics. None of these operate in isola-

tion. They are interrelated and interconnected. There is every evidence to indicate that these forces combined to play a substantial role in bringing about change and innovation. All sorts of illustrations can be found. In my opinion, the evolutionary process was more a case of balancing tradition and change.

Through a series of fascinating and instructive case studies, Freeland skillfully traces the patterns of development, past and present, at these eight universities. Although they all grew in size and complexity, they tended to follow a similar pattern. It is important to stress that the "golden years" constituted an era of rapid educational expansion stimulated by the G.I. Bill, swollen by student enrollments of the "baby boom" generation and sustained through the 1960s by increased government funding. Congress and state legislatures appropriated vast sums to finance this enormous expansion. Nothing since has matched that period of accomplishment. Yet, managing change of this scale was not without its headaches and difficulties. The path was strewn with obstacles. Wise decisions only come from a deep and sensitive knowledge of an institution. Historically, of course, academic institutions have been highly resistant to change. For the reasons that Freeland identifies, they operate mainly out of self-interest.

After initial overview chapters where Freeland posits the history of higher education in Massachusetts before 1945, he documents the changes that took place at the great research universities of Harvard and MIT during the post-World War II era. These two Cambridge citadels are the most wealthy and the best known universities in the state. As the brightest stars in the Massachusetts galaxy, they set the standard against which the others are measured. Both Harvard and MIT placed primary emphasis on building strong research and graduate programs. Similarly, Tufts and Brandeis did pretty much the same thing, except that they emphasized undergraduate education and built what the author refers to as "college-centered universities." Classifying Boston University, Boston College, and Northeastern as urban institutions, Freeland traces their remarkable transformation from local commuter schools into regional universities. Finally, he devotes a separate chapter to the development of public higher education, focusing solely on the University of Massachusetts. All in all, these case studies enrich our understanding of organizational behavior in an academic setting.

It should be noted at the outset that Freeland's analysis ends in the 1970s. As a result, he does not cover several important developments that have occurred since then. This includes the work done by the blue ribbon Saxon Commission, which called for the building of a "world class" public university. Ironically, the Commission never defined what it meant by that term. Nor did it provide any other model except world class. Released publicly in March of 1989, the Saxon report also called for securing financial stability through formula funding and tuition retention. Its recommendations on structure resulted in the legislative enactment of a reorganization proposal that brought both the University of Lowell and Southeastern Massachusetts University under the umbrella of the state university in 1991. This merger unified the entire public university component and enlarged UMass from a three to a five-campus system.

What is fascinating about the evolution of these eight institutions is the way in which they impacted each other. Perhaps there is no better illustration of this phenomenon than the opening of a branch campus at UMass/Boston in 1964. In due course, this institution became the prototype of the new urban university that thrives on pluralism and diversity and is community service oriented. It is both in and of the City of Boston. That focus did not come naturally, for there was a strong body of

opinion that wanted to emphasize undergraduate liberal arts education, more on the "college-centered university" model than that of the "research university." Many of the key founders, including Provost Paul Gagnon, had been at Amherst at the time it was evolving into a research university and sought a different vision at Boston.

This picture changed dramatically with the chaos, emotional turmoil, and politically charged atmosphere of the Vietnam War crisis. Racked by the distractions of student riots and the disarray of faculty under attack, campus radicals and conservatives at UMass/Boston frequently clashed over issues dealing with the importance of teaching and undergraduate education and the inclination of academic institution builders to stress research and graduate programs. Faculty meetings were known for their heated debate as well as their lack of simple civility and courtesy. One faculty member described them as tribal warfare. In these critical years, gaining access to the "University Year for Action" and other federally funded programs; reaching out to urban schools, especially in Boston; and demonstrating a commitment to their graduates through an affective preparatory program were essential in establishing a distinctive mission for the Boston campus. Creating an experimental College of Public and Community Service and marketing it as an agent of change and social responsibility was also part of this picture. Convinced that a new direction was needed, Chancellor Francis Broderick, formerly a director of the Peace Corps in Ghana and an academic dean at Lawrence University in Wisconsin, oversaw much of this change.

Although Freeland describes this turbulent era in considerable detail, in my view, he downplays the intensity of the campus conflict and its disruption to academic life. More to the point, he is equivocal about the harm that was done to the well-being of the university as it began to unravel and disassemble. As with all case studies, illuminating and useful as they may be for education and scholarship, the case-writer is almost bound to overlook some critical facts or events. Freeland, for instance, fails to mention a student break-in that occurred at UMass in April of 1971. This student crisis was occasioned by President Nixon's Cambodian "incursion," which campus radicals saw as an outrageous act. They protested vehemently.

On April 30, 1971, a band of about 250 students invaded the sixth floor of the office building in downtown Boston, where the president's temporary offices were located. They broke through the receptionist's glass window, climbed over her desk, and raced through the corridors to the somewhat shabby corner office, where they found university president Robert Wood working at his desk. The students demanded an immediate end to the Vietnam War, to racism and sexism, and to the adoption of a universal pass-fail grading system for the university. Outside, sirens heralded the arrival of the Boston police tactical force. At that crucial moment, Wood pushed through the crowd of students and ran toward the stairs. He shouted at them to follow him. They did. The building emptied. No one was arrested.

Unwittingly, Wood had played a hero's role in quelling the immediate riot. The fact that the students followed him excluded the Boston police. Looking back at this event several years later, Wood confessed, "I didn't know that shouting at a student mob and running away would be misperceived by many of them as signifying "leadership," and I didn't recognize that simple acting — even without thinking — requires interpretation on the part of all involved and powerfully enhances the quality of ambiguity in a political act."

It was in this volatile environment, contrasting sharply with the orderly 1950s, that UMass/Boston was initially formed and shaped. From the start, it was staunchly opposed by the private urban universities, like Boston University and Northeastern,

which saw it as a potential rival. They feared that it would drain students away from them. In fact, Father Michael Walsh, who headed Boston College from 1958 to 1968, was the only private college president to testify in favor of it being located in Boston. Since Walsh presided over what was still a commuter college for the poor and the marginally deprived lower-middle classes, he was more than willing to let UMass/Boston take over that function. As a result, Walsh was able to position Boston College to challenge Notre Dame's supremacy among Catholic schools.

Subsequently, in 1983, Boston State Teachers College was merged with UMass/Boston. Actually, the Willis-Harrington Commission, which was established in the early 1960s, represented a major effort at rationalizing the public sector. But the Boston State merger, coming almost two decades later, was an important step in that direction. This consolidation was painful and by no means perfect, but it has worked. If anything, as Freeland points out, Massachusetts has been dogged by repeated efforts to reorganize the system without ever truly committing the resources to have a first class system under any form of organization.

In analysis which deftly summarizes the goals and objectives of change, through problems and solutions, Freeland sketches a comparative profile of the eight universities and introduces new details and insights. Drawing on his lucid command of history, he marshals his evidence to support his conclusions. My main criticism is that Freeland is long on description and short on theory. He also develops a short personality profile of the key university leaders, who directed and managed these major institutional reconfigurations. Of those presidents who had a significant long-term impact on their campuses, Freeland singles out and gives the most credit to James Conant at Harvard; Karl Compton and James Killian at MIT; Abram Sachar at Brandeis; Nils Wessell at Tufts; Carl Ell and Asa Knowles at Northeastern; and Michael Walsh at Boston College. These presidencies are no longer lifelong positions. The fact of the matter is that a person can only do them effectively for a limited number of years. Frequent turnover is now quite common.

There are two notable exceptions, namely, Father Donald Monan at Boston College and John Silber at Boston University. The impressive managerial records they forged deserve special comment. Both men assumed their presidencies in the early 1970s, and both are amazingly still at the helm. They have retained an astonishing vitality in what have been strenuous times. Their sharply contrasting leadership styles and personalities provide a rationale for treating them differently.

Pleasant in manner, articulate, and clear in his positions, Father Monan is a self-effacing administrator, but firm in his managerial convictions. Aside from the controversy over enlarging Boston College's football stadium, which aroused the ire of its neighbors, he has elicited trust and performed well. Monan's critics contend that he has been secularizing Boston College and that the school has gone through an identity crisis. This criticism, however, does not square with Freeland's analysis. The author depicts Monan as someone trying to position Boston College as a distinctively Catholic enterprise following the secularizing tendencies under Walsh. Nonetheless, Father Monan recently incurred the wrath of Cardinal Bernard Law, when he allowed pro-choice advocates to speak on campus. To this day, Monan remains a man of influence and consequence.

Silber's style is the opposite. He is not a consultative type leader. Haughty and given to irony and bitter sarcasm, Silber is a commanding personality. He is outspoken, self-assured and at times very blunt. His stormy tenure at BU has not proved attractive to academics. A figure of controversy from the outset of his career, Silber has ridden roughshod over the BU faculty and its union for the past

twenty-three years. His capacity to perplex, confuse, and alienate people is perhaps best exemplified in his unsuccessful bid for the governorship of Massachusetts in 1990. Some of his critics argue that he has stayed too long at BU. Others contend that he has become a major drag on higher education. Whatever one may think of him, no one can deny that Silber has put BU on the national map, but the price has been very costly.

One of the striking consequences of academia's golden age was the intense competition for prestige and resources. According to Freeland, this inter-institutional rivalry has deep historical roots that are anchored in class, religion, and ethnicity. In an increasingly polarized society, these cultural and class distinctions are readily apparent. As Freeland elaborates, "Beneath surface similarities of function and commitment, area universities continued to manifest distinctive cultural strains: the Catholic character of Boston College, the Jewish culture of Brandeis, the pragmatic, working-class atmosphere of Northeastern, the localistic qualities of UMass/Boston, the technocratic orientation of MIT, and the cosmopolitan, upper-middle-class sheen of Harvard."

As a historian, Freeland seems to view this trend with mixed emotions. On the one hand, he remains skeptical of the similarities that such competition produced. To a large extent, the eight universities copied each other with their "cookie cutter" approach to development. None of them were as truly innovative as Hampshire College in western Massachusetts and Evergreen State College in Washington, which disbanded with academic departments and the grading system. On the other hand, Freeland is equally impressed "with the complexity of universities as human constructions, capable of engaging simultaneously in a multiplicity of activities, some in apparent opposition to others, and of pursuing behavior that is at once self-interested and idealistic, institutionally aggrandizing and socially helpful." Therein lies the crux of his argument.

Unless one understands the dichotomy between the political and academic cultures of Massachusetts, one cannot fully comprehend how friendly or hostile is the environment. This dichotomy dates back to colonial days, when Harvard's original mission was to train a Yankee social elite. Attendance at college then was a mark of high status which only the most privileged families could afford. This meant that only white, upper class, Protestant students were admitted. The primary purpose of higher education in the eighteenth century was not so much to transmit knowledge, but rather to produce virtuous men who would assume leadership of society. Personal conduct was far more important than curriculum.

In the nineteenth century, the new private colleges that appeared on the scene continued to serve this same purpose, but they received preferential treatment over their fledgling public counterparts. By the mid-twentieth century, the public sector was still small, underdeveloped, and financially malnourished. During the golden age, the publics grew by leaps and bounds as they struggled to play catch-up vis-a-vis the privates. Competing for the same federal funds, the privates engaged in open warfare with the publics, which has proven to be particularly damaging to the prospects for educational reform.

In this century, the public arena became the central battleground for successive waves of ethnic struggle — first Yankee versus Irish, and later Irish versus Italian. These immigrant conflicts reflect divisions in the society that run deep. They have importance for the future as other urban minorities such as African-American, Asian, and Hispanic students pursue their struggle for educational opportunity. Some of this conflict inevitably spills over into the academic community. This is especially

true in the public sector, where academic and political forces frequently collide over issues related to admissions, institutional autonomy and line authority in the governance of higher education.

To his credit, Freeland accurately depicts the long-standing dispute between Governor Michael Dukakis and UMass President Robert Wood in the mid-1970s. Shrewdly attuned to the temper of the times, Wood was a transformational leader, who brought about much change and innovation at the state university. Having previously served as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the Lyndon Johnson administration in Washington, he was no stranger to the world of politics. The governor, a graduate of Swarthmore and Harvard Law School, showed little or no concern for the state university. He not only drastically cut its budget, but he also impounded funds that had been appropriated by the state legislature for the construction of buildings at Boston and then tried to stop the Medical School from occupying its new facilities in Worcester. Wood succeeded in getting the legislature to restore most of these budget cuts and he fought Dukakis tenaciously on the other issues. Both men were practitioners of hardball politics. In the spring of 1977, when the governor finally gained control of the UMass Board of Trustees, Dukakis forced Wood from office.

The number of battles and war stories is substantial. Going beyond the scope of Freeland's study, I can recall the major public battle that erupted in 1986, when the state Board of Regents ignored the recommendations of its blue ribbon search committee and appointed James Collins, a state legislator and nonacademic, as the new Chancellor of Higher Education. From Governor Dukakis' perspective, the nature of the problem he had identified and probed clearly required executive intervention if the integrity of the search process was not to be compromised. Within the next few weeks, he fired the chairman of the Board of Regents, appointed three new members to the board, and with their help, he removed Collins from office. The governor replaced him with Franklyn Jenifer, a Rutgers biologist and former associate chancellor of the New Jersey System. The political fallout from this fierce power struggle threatened the viability of the Board of Regents itself, and eventually led to its demise in 1991.

Reflecting on the five presidential searches that have taken place at UMass between 1970 and 1992, I cannot help but notice that Freeland barely touches upon them, even the three that were within the time-frame of his study. The outcome of these border skirmishes I have described elsewhere. Again, the dichotomy of academic life and politics comes into play. These disputes served to remind me that public colleges and universities are creatures of the state, and as such, they are publicly accountable. They reinforced the simple truth that one cannot separate state politics and public higher education and that reasoned argument was only part of the process. Most of all they reminded me that the prime objective of the process was not to optimize any particular value, but rather to find a promising and effective leader. As one observer concludes, "Border wars can find acceptable resolution, be accidentally begun and ended, or be intolerable and completely destructive. In no instance, however, do they yield to pure reason." Suffice it to say that political interference of this kind makes it exceedingly difficult to govern and manage the public system. The central political task is one of truly keeping the peace.

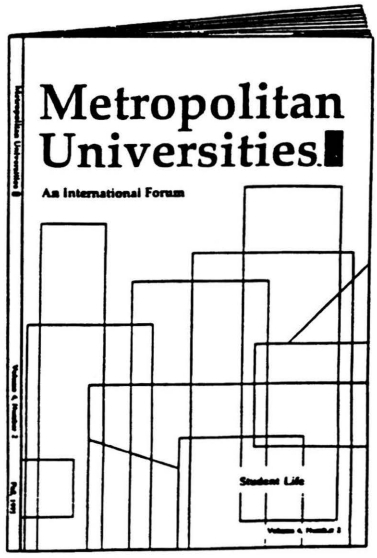
At this juncture, I think it is appropriate to discuss what has happened in the public sector after the period Freeland describes. The worst case scenario has to do with the economic recession that devastated the public sector during the late 1980s, when the economy turned sour, resources suddenly became more constrained, and

academics sang the blues. Between 1988 and 1991, UMass suffered a disastrous budget crisis as state officials slashed its funds by nearly 30 percent. A similar fate befell the nine state colleges and the fifteen community colleges. Student tuition and fees increased sharply, while the combined budgets dropped precipitously. These fiscal constraints served to put the public system under considerable stress. That stress intensified during those four years and strained the system almost to the breaking point. Faculty became seriously alienated and are now facing an uncertain future. A recent increase in state funding has not substantially altered this picture.

More disturbing is the fact that the self-serving behavior of universities in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the golden age ultimately damaged public confidence in higher education. In the decade of the 1990s, we are currently paying a major price for this pattern of behavior. This, I believe, is the relevance of Freeland's study. Those of us who have been participant-observers or observant participants extensively if intermittently over the years, I think would concur substantially with him. Certainly, my experience indicates as much.

The environment in Massachusetts today is perceived as mostly hostile so far as opinion makers are concerned, notwithstanding generally favorable public opinion polls. Our critics are mostly discontented academics and sensation thinking media. Reinforcing this critique is the disillusionment that spills over from the national discontent with K-12 education and our still structured national economy. Admittedly, professional administrators in the public sector seem hampered and frustrated by their inability to alleviate the fiscal austerity. Simply "asking for more" is not a persuasive strategy for public higher education. In the din of the political tumult, it is easy to lose sight of the reality outside. As the Pew Higher Education Roundtable recently observed: "No institution will emerge unscathed from its confrontation with an external environment that is substantially altered and in many ways more hostile to colleges and universities."

With this caveat in mind, it makes sense for all components of the public sector in Massachusetts — the university, the state and community colleges — to seek opportunities for collaboration with their private counterparts. The consortium of five colleges that are clustered around the town of Amherst in the western part of the state serves as a model that works. Much more can be done by way of public-private collaboration. Also, a greater effort needs to be made in the adaptation of technology to university life. In sum, we need to have faith in the public sector and try to lay to rest the bias of private education. No longer can we afford to engage in open warfare. The stakes in providing better education in the Commonwealth are too high. In the post-Saxon era, we are now at the point where we have to find some basis of agreement for making certain adjustments that can be transformed into feasible policy so that the public sector can go forward and prosper. Devising options and strategies for change is the easy part, but implementing the tough choices is difficult and often painful. Informed and enlightened political leadership can point the way.



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