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Reflections on The Land Grant Idea

by

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Reflections on The Land Grant Idea *

Some 30 years ago, I sat where you do and wondered "what do senior faculty mean by 'Land Grant Mission' or 'Land Grant Philosophy'?" I never got an answer that I found satisfactory. The definitions provided were either too general or did not encompass all the things I saw going on around me.

I came from graduate work at Duke and then Harvard and I was the first member of my department who did not have a farm background. Somewhat baffled by my environment, I started reading histories of Land Grant colleges and the autobiographies and biographies of early pioneers such as Liberty Hyde Bailey and Isaiah Roberts. Let me share a little of what I think I learned.

Contrary to the beliefs of many faculty:

1. The Land Grant system of colleges did not spring into existence as a coherent idea or set of institutions in one decade or even one generation of leadership. The Land Grant College evolved as an idea and then as an institution over many decades between 1850 and 1920. There was a lot of trial and much error and it was not clear before the turn of this century whether the idea would be even a partial success or not.

The Land Grant University now appears to be evolving further along with the other agrarian institutions in whose company it developed.

2. The Land Grant Idea is not any specific set of organizations, such as the trilogy of the Experiment Station, the Extension Service and On-campus or Resident

* Presentation to the orientation for new faculty of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, 30 June 1993.

Instruction, which were designed to address a specific set of problems, mostly within agriculture.

3. The Land Grant Idea is not just access to higher education for those with limited resources. It is not just good science. It is not just science applied to practical problems. It is not just extension education for people of the state who have practical problems to solve. It was all of this and more.

So what is the Land Grant Idea? It is, indeed, an idea. *It is a set of beliefs about the social role of the university.* But what gave rise to this set of beliefs? And what are the beliefs that define the social role of the Land Grant University?

The history of the last half of the 19th Century shows that the Land Grant University arose out of an industrializing society's increasingly complex problems and needs (Brubacher and Rudy).

1. There was a growing need for more highly trained professionals, especially in the new science based fields necessary to address the complex requirements of an industrial society -- in engineering, business, architecture, public health, agriculture, etc. -- i.e. the professional schools of the modern university were needed and did not exist.
2. Secondly it arose out of an industrializing society's frustration with an unresponsive set of mostly private colleges providing a classical, "literary" education for a wealthy elite of less than 1% of the population. With few exceptions, U.S. colleges in this day were unwilling to sully their hands with society's common but real needs.
3. Thirdly it arose out of the concern of an industrializing society's middle classes that industrialization was destroying the "American dream" of unlimited

opportunities by creating, not only great wealth for some, but a large, disadvantaged working class population of poor farmers and industrial workers with no prospect of access to the skills and practical education necessary for a better life. It was, they believed, creating a trapped underclass of potential peasants and workers. This concern was not only for equality of opportunity for a disadvantaged population but arose as well from a middle class fear that democratic institutions and individual liberty, and thus survival of the middle class, were at stake in a society of growing economic inequality.

In partial response, society created a new kind of college or university: The Land Grant University or College was the most unique part of the 19th century public university movement (Nevins). The Land Grant University was devoted to science and education in the service of society by:

- 1) educating and training the professional cadres of an industrial, increasingly urban, society,
- 2) providing access to higher education to all, irrespective of wealth or social status, and
- 3) working to improve the welfare of the largest, then most disadvantaged groups in society -- farmers and industrial workers.

By the turn of this century, these were a well formed set of U.S. beliefs about the social role of the university. *This is the Land Grant Idea*. And it has, within the limits of society's resources, been generously supported by society for successfully pursuing these goals. Arnold Toynbee, the British historian, once observed that the Land Grant idea is the one original contribution of American higher education.

Within the colleges of agriculture, which were a major focus of success in pursuing these goals, this set of beliefs has translated into the organizations of the Experiment Stations (a national system), the Extension Service (really only state systems), the open access, low tuition, resident instruction function of the college -- plus an ever changing set of research and extension programs.

The Land Grant Idea and the University Today

I used to believe that neither society nor university faculty understood the Land Grant Idea. But today, I am convinced that it is worse than that. It is the University as an historical institution that is not understood -- even by faculty. Remarkably, the reason is that academics (for all of their intellectual and analytic capacities) never reflect on it, or study it -- or so few do. Rather we mostly take it for granted and believe it has pretty much always had the same roles and functions, as when we entered it as faculty. In addition:

- * Most faculty believe that it has only the "harmoniously integrated" roles that each of us play within the university -- that the University was created in ones "own image and likeness."
- * The fact is, different faculty play very different roles. Their beliefs are in stark contrast to the complex often conflicting reality of the many roles actually being performed across a large university, the management of which is very difficult.
- * Nor are these multiple roles a recent phenomenon. Many are in fact ancient.

Evolution of the University and Its Social Roles

The university has many roles. These have accumulated over the centuries, without dropping the earlier roles.

The university was a Medieval creation of the 12th century (Rashdall, Rudy). Before it was anything else, the Medieval University was a Professional School:

- * That taught theology and provided the vocational training of priests -- some of whom constituted the society's only educated elite.
- * Law and Medicine developed later in the Middle Ages as roles of the university.
- * These schools conserved and transmitted knowledge for future generations.
- * The Liberal Arts developed late as a preparation for law and especially medicine.
- * All of these roles were responses to Medieval societal needs.

With the rise of the Renaissance University in the 14th century:

- * Education of a lay elite for societal leadership evolved as a significant role.
- * Humanistic studies and scholarship developed with the revival of classical Greek and Roman learning in Renaissance Europe.
- * Even these Renaissance roles were motivated by society's perceived practical needs.

The pursuit of knowledge for its own, rather than God's, or in the Renaissance, man's sake did not become a major force in European scholarship until well into the 17th and 18th Centuries. Until this time, all scholarly study tended to be devoted to religion, vocational and other perceived practical societal needs.

The "Scientific Revolution" began a fundamental transformation of society and its institutions, including the university, in the 19th and 20th centuries (Ashby). Science as an enterprise runs back to earlier centuries but did not have a major presence in the university until the 19th Century. Higher education in the U.S.:

- * Began in the 17th and 18th centuries as an undergraduate teaching enterprise copied from the British Oxford version of the Liberal Arts model from the Renaissance.
- * The U.S. graduate education and research enterprise was introduced in the 19th century. It was modeled on the German University that evolved out of Wilhelm von Humbolt's reforms of German higher education. This is the so-called modern Research University model, which is imposed on top of the undergraduate college. These two models involve very different goals and values and thus social roles that often conflict. Some faculty are devoted to one, some to the other, some to both.

It is difficult to imagine today the complexity of this evolution, the confusing combat of beliefs and values and the resulting diversity in U.S. higher education by the early decades of this century (Veysey). Today we face a new configuration of equally complex conflicts and confusions, some new, but many ancient (Brubacher).

Conclusion

From its earliest days the university has had several, very different roles, the scholarly pursuit of knowledge for God and man's sake, general or liberal education of clerical and later lay elites, and professional and vocational training. These constitute responses to major needs of Medieval and Renaissance society and thus primary social roles of the university. Scholarship contributed to the cultural capacity and knowledge of the society and kept the university intellectually vital. It was valued then as today more by academics than by the supporting society, though an increasingly better educated elite, lay and clerical, did share in and sponsor these values.

Modern academics frequently demonstrate considerable ignorance about these historical roles. Stout denials to the contrary notwithstanding, vocational training has always been a function of the university (Paulsen). How else does one view the Medieval and Renaissance university training of priests, medical doctors and lawyers? It does no good to argue that these are professions and thus different. The university took them as vocations and professionalized them. They are no less vocations for it.

It is quite clear historically that the university has served society in every epoch by training and professionalizing those vocations that society judged critical to its functioning. This not only stabilizes training and establishes common standards of professional performance but bestows an enlarged social status upon the vocation increasing its access in and capacity to serve society and the ability of the profession to attract talented individuals. The university continues to this day to professionalize those vocations that the ordering of society makes essential, as for example in engineering, agriculture, business, primary and secondary education, journalism, social work, hotel and restaurant management, industrial relations, police administration, and on and on.

Interestingly enough, over recent centuries there has been resentment within the university that this vocational and professionalizing role should exist. This attitude arises out of academic values that honor the pursuit of intellectually pure over applied knowledge -- for that which has no obvious value in immediate material use, whatever its intellectual meaning. This latter more extreme form of the attitude arises from the 17th and 18th century ethic of the leisured, aristocratic European gentleman turned scientist or academic, which was further reinforced by the aristocratic resentment of the growing social and economic power of the practical minded, rising commercial middle class.

In any case, the primary values of the academic vocation are determinedly intellectual. Sustaining the integrity of these values against the every day pressures of the world and from outside meddling in the affairs of the university is not an easy task -- as a personal or an institutional matter. In defense of its intellectual values academic life tends to produce a culture which in its extreme form rejects as inappropriate all involvement in the affairs of the world and even denies that the university as an institution has any social role. This, of course, is wishful but hardly clear thought. Some kind of balance of multiple roles is necessary, along with respect for those who pursue the roles of the university that we do not ourselves pursue.

All academic protestation to the contrary does not change the historical fact that any institution that has survived for nearly a millennia is inevitably a social institution. Society has secured its survival simply because of the university's utility in society, i.e. its social roles. In fact, the university from its inception has been preeminently a social institution, a creature of its society and time (Paulsen). To deny this is to deny the history of every epoch of the university's existence. The real question is one of defining or redefining the social role of the university for each age and society so that legitimate needs are met while the university's intellectual integrity (and therefore, its long run vitality as a social institution) is protected from external encroachment. Sir Eric Ashby has concluded that "What has survived and is significant is the social purpose of the university, its independence from Church and State, and its peculiar method of internal government." Not only is the social role of the university one of its preeminent dimensions, but it is a role that by nature is in slow but continuous evolution. The social role of the Medieval university was different from that of the great Renaissance university and further still from that of the modern university, which was formed in the crucible of the scientific revolution of the 19th Century. As the nature of the society that sustains the

university changes in fundamental ways, the social role of the university will also change in response to that new social reality.

This keeps many academics thoroughly confused, for just as they begin to grasp the reality of their university, that reality changes. This can be most confusing in an organization with multiple roles in which any one academic's experience may extend to only one or a few of those roles. There is a predictable response. Reaching out for what they know, academics will use their bit of academic "turf" as a model of "the university," and substitute the values and norms of their own activities for those of the university as a whole. Thus, the individual, for example, from the humanities, or one whose commitment lies primarily in undergraduate teaching will argue the primacy of the humanistic values of the Renaissance university.

The bench scientist and the graduate and professional school teacher will often assert the exclusive claim of the values of the 19th Century German University model, even when unaware of their historical origin. This idea of the university is devoted all but exclusively to the creation of knowledge of the material world and to graduate education rooted in that search for new knowledge. Both the humanistic Renaissance university idea and the German or Research University idea are inherently elitist in intellectual terms, which, in practice, often deteriorates into a social elitism that is anti-democratic.

The Land Grant Idea at its best is determinedly democratic in a social sense, while intellectually elitist. It requires a commitment to first class science and scholarship (intellectual elitism). But science is applied to the practical problems of society. This combines with equality of access to scientific and scholarly knowledge which is socially democratic or egalitarian both in research and education. This creates a tension that must be managed.

The science beliefs of the Land Grant Idea were put well almost six decades ago by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. At Harvard's tercentenary celebration of its founding, he said:

In the process of learning there should be present, in some sense or other, a subordinate activity of application. In fact, the applications are part of the knowledge. For the very meaning of things known is wrapped up in the relationships beyond themselves. Thus, unapplied knowledge is knowledge shorn of its meaning. Careful shielding of a university from the activities of the world around is the best way to chill interest and to defeat progress.

The Research (or German) University Idea was introduced in the U.S. simultaneously with the development of the Land Grant College. They were merged in the Land Grant University creating a constructive tension between knowledge creation and its use in society, and between the elitist values of intellectual life, and the egalitarian values of a democratic society. Thus, it is with good reason our Provost speaks today of MSU as a "Research Intensive, Land Grant University with International Scope."

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