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### **Understanding the University's Role in American Culture and Society**

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*THE CASE FOR THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY*

*THE GRACE A. TANNER LECTURE  
IN HUMAN VALUES*

It is an honor to be delivering the 1993 Grace A. Tanner Lecture in Human Values at Southern Utah University, not only because of my quarter-of-a-century friendship with Grace Tanner and her husband Obert but also because of my regard for this University, which serves so well and with such effect, many of Utah's finest and most promising young people. It is also deserving of note that my father was born and grew up in Pine Valley, a small pioneer community to the south and west of here. My roots are here in southern Utah, and I am glad to be back.

I should say at the outset that there is simply no way I can fulfill my assignment today in any literal sense. American higher education is too large, too diverse and too decentralized to permit generalizations about the issues it confronts or to argue its case without stating so many caveats and qualifications that the intended spirit of my remarks would necessarily yield to a tediousness and pedantry that I prefer to avoid. What I hope to do, however, is: first, to convey a sense of the size and complexity of the system of higher education in the United States; second, to share my views on a handful of important issues that confront a significant number of American colleges and universities; and third, to argue in behalf of sustaining our system of higher education which, frankly, has no peer in its ambition to assure access to persons of talent and promise, at reasonable cost, and at levels of quality that are the object of envy worldwide.

The first thing to be said about American higher education is that it is not so much a system as it is a collection of colleges and universities. American higher education consists of many institutions—roughly 3,500—and enrolls nearly 9 million full-time and 4 million part time students. These institutions are highly

diverse: there are large research universities, small liberal arts colleges, church-affiliated institutions, vocational schools, professional schools—some aligned with a university and others not—two-year community colleges, publicly supported and privately supported institutions. As long ago as 1890 the United States had more institutions awarding bachelor's degrees, more law schools, and more medical schools than all of the countries of Europe combined.

It hardly needs to be said that these institutions vary greatly in quality. But their very variety reflects the national enthusiasm for founding new colleges or universities to meet changing conditions or distinctive local needs, a tradition with its roots in the very beginnings of American society. As a consequence, American colleges and universities developed in a very unsystematic way, without any grand design to guide their evolution, responding to the nature and character of a pluralistic, highly decentralized, geographically dispersed and mobile society.

A consistent characteristic of American higher education has been the absence of virtually any planning for it by the national government. Even the Federal Department of Education is concerned primarily with elementary and secondary education; and in any case its function is not to orchestrate a comprehensive national approach either to the schools or to higher education but to provide education with a voice at the Federal level and to administer Federally sponsored programs of interest to education, e.g., student financial aid programs, categorical programs and so forth. This arrangement—so surprising to foreign visitors—arises from the strong traditions of local control and individual initiative which have been such formative forces in American life.

This is not to say that the Federal government has no role in higher education, but only that it is one of several actors on the educational scene. The Federal government's contributions occur in three areas:

- First, the Federal government funds roughly half of all basic research performed in American universities—approximately 9 billion dollars a year, largely through contracts and grants administered not by a single entity but by a plethora of government agencies and awarded mostly to individual researchers and faculty members on the basis of peer review;
- Second, Federal support is made available for buildings, laboratories, equipment and instrumentation, library acquisitions, and other items necessary for scholarly and scientific work, regrettably less today than in earlier years, and overly often as the object of "pork barreling" among members of Congress, rather than on the basis of demonstrated merit or promise; and
- Third, the federal government funds most of the student financial aid programs available to students irrespective of their residence or home state and at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

These three areas—support for research, for buildings and equipment, and for student financial aid—are the major Federally funded programs for higher education in the United States.

Thus, it would be a mistake to assume that the Federal government plays the primary or most significant role in supporting American higher education, (but also a mistake to underestimate its importance). The Federal role has been to stimulate student access, to improve the quality of both developing and established universities, and to fund basic research, mostly in agriculture, medicine, engineering, and the basic sciences.

If the Federal government is not the major supplier of financial support for higher education, then who is? Again, the answer depends. For example, private *colleges* rely primarily for their sources of revenue on student-paid tuition and fees (many such students are in turn assisted financially by the Federal programs

referred to above and/or by similar aid programs sponsored by their home state), gifts from individuals, business, foundations, alumni, and friends (encouraged by government tax policies), and income from endowments. Private *universities*, in addition to those fund sources, depend heavily on contracts and grants from both Federal and corporate sponsors for their research and the fiscal viability of their graduate and professional schools, and on fees and revenues for many of their clinical programs, e.g., medicine and dentistry.

For public colleges and universities — the institutions that educate the vast majority of American students — the major source of financial support is state government, and to a lesser extent, local government within the states. As one might expect, patterns of state support vary considerably from state to state, as to levels and adequacy of funding, variations being powerfully influenced by the public attitudes toward higher education, patterns of governance, the economic vitality of the individual state, and custom. California, for example, has a strong tradition of public support for education at all levels and, until three years ago, a vital, healthy economy. These have combined over the years to afford that state the means to sustain not only colleges and universities of very high quality but also universal student access to these institutions, and student mobility among and between them. Most independent colleges and universities have also flourished in this environment. California's recent social, economic and fiscal problems, however, are presently threatening the state's public and private institutions of higher education in very real and potentially enduring ways.

American higher education, then, is an extremely large, highly diverse patchwork of institutions that differ greatly in quality, in character and purpose, in size and complexity, in fiscal stability, and in sources of funding. It is a non-system that by custom and public expectation is dedicated to the principle of broad student access and to the idea that higher education serves both the

private needs of students and the large social goals of the nation and society.

It is against this background and brief explanation of American higher education that I now turn to the issues.

In recent years, America's colleges and universities have been subjected to two major influences, one demographic and the other economic. Demographically, the pool of prospective students, expressed in terms of the number of high school graduates, tended to level off in recent years, but is now poised for significant growth by the mid-to-late nineties. Economically, the nation's recent troubles have made major inroads on the ability of Federal, state and local governments to support education, on the capacity of students and their families to defray the growing costs of higher education, and on the ability of our universities and colleges to maintain the scale and scope of their academic programs, their grounds and buildings, their libraries and equipment, and their appeal to present and prospective faculty members.

The institutional impact of these developments, of course, is far from even. Some sections of the country are expected to be affected more than others—the Northeast and Midwest may permanently lose enrollments. At the same time, it is anticipated that the West and the South will undergo significant increases in the numbers of high school graduates. In the Rocky Mountain states, instead of declines there will continue to be increases in the pertinent age cohort. (It should be noted that the growing numbers of part-time, non-traditional, and adult students entering American colleges and universities makes it difficult to be confident about these estimates, just as rising tuitions and fees and uncertain Federal financial aid policies further complicate the matter.)

Migration patterns from state to state and region to region also influence these projections. These are significant and are only partially related to economic factors. The Northeast and Midwest — home of many traditional heavy industries, such as automo-

biles and steel — recently lost population; the West and the South are gaining it. What this means is that some colleges and universities are faced with managing an environment of decline; some with a steady state and others with one of expansion, depending on such variables as location, nature of the academic program, size, sources of funds, cost to students, history, and so forth. Generally speaking, highly selective universities with reputations for academic excellence are expected not only to survive but to do quite well; small, independent, less selective, and more geographically remote colleges are considered most likely to be threatened. I believe Utah is an exception to this general statement as its cohort of college age students continues to grow along with a state commitment to find places for them in Utah's higher education system.

The first demographic factor, then, has to do with numbers. The second aspect is much more complex; it involves the changing *character* of the American population, in both ethnic and social terms.

The population of the United States is becoming more ethnically diverse. The United States is, of course, a pluralistic society ethnically. It always has been. What is new is the enormous wave of immigration presently flowing into the United States. Indeed, it resembles the flood of persons who came to the United States from Europe at the turn of the century. Today, however, the immigrants are principally from Pacific Rim countries—Mexico, Central and South America, and East and South Asia. Nearly one-third of these newcomers settle in California, and by the year 2000 or shortly thereafter, California's population is expected to consist of roughly one-half ethnic and racial minorities, chiefly Hispanic and Asian.

But California is not the only state with a population that is rapidly changing ethnically. Half of the states have public school student populations that are currently more than 25 percent Black, Hispanic, and Asian. Each of our nation's 25 largest city

school systems has a majority of minority students. This is also true of the entering freshman classes at three of the University of California's eight general campuses. Educationally, Black and Hispanic children do not complete high school at nearly the same rates as the rest of the population, thus adversely affecting their representation in colleges and universities and their participation in the economic and political life of the country. At the same time, American society is in the midst of changes in the structure of the nuclear family, changes that cut across ethnic lines. In 1955, 60 percent of American households consisted of a working father, a homemaker mother, and two or more school age children. In 1985, such households represented only 7 percent of American homes, reflecting a major increase in the number of women who work outside the home, a general decline in child-bearing, and a dramatic increase in the number of households headed by a single parent. Of those American children born in 1983, for example, 59 percent will live with only one parent before reaching the age of 18, if present trends continue.

Moreover, the United States today is facing an increase in the number of unmarried teenage pregnancies—with predictable consequences for the mother's economic circumstances, and her dampened prospects for further education. Single parent households tend more than others to fall below poverty levels, and this fact also diminishes the children's prospects for education, employment, and a hopeful future.

These changes in American society pose formidable challenges for the schools, for higher education, and for the nation generally. For example, many schools in California enroll students whose first language at home is not English, but is instead any one of some twenty to thirty different languages. Thus, mastering English for such students and teaching in English are fairly pressing problems for students and schools alike. Moreover, many students will need help academically and financially to undertake the demands of a college education. And many will simply

never make it to college because they will not complete high school.

One thing is clear. For reasons having to do with self-interest and with concern for the welfare of American society, higher education in the United States must make greater efforts to assist the schools and these new citizens, if they are to follow the pattern of other immigrant groups over the years who, through education, found their opportunities and entered the social political, and economic mainstream of American life.

The third issue concerns the financing of American higher education.

For the private or independent sector, tuition levels are increasingly inelastic, except for a handful of the most sought after and prestigious research universities and leading liberal arts colleges; and it is to student tuitions and fees that these institutions must look to fund their basic instructional costs. These institutions are deeply concerned about their futures, especially as state government fails to keep up with programs of financial aid that are intended to help students meet the costs of attending private colleges and universities. The Federal government's intentions are unclear, although some significant changes are most likely under the Clinton administration. What is clear, however, is that in recent years, the Federal programs of student financial aid have relied more heavily than before on loans than on grants. And for private research universities, the overhead share of Federally sponsored research will continue to go down, thus making them even more dependent on student tuition and fees to offset these losses. It is going to be rough going for the independent sector in the coming years, at least for most of them. It is already rough going for over half of our public universities and colleges. From 1990 onward, it has been a losing fight for most of the nation's public institutions of higher learning. The country's economic downturn, the rising demand for welfare and medical care, high unemployment and immigration, the increase in

crime and numbers of persons incarcerated in federal and state prisons, and the growth in many states of K-12 enrollments have all combined to shift state funding away from higher education.

In California, for example, 87 percent of the state's budget is, for all practical purposes, locked-up for welfare, health care, K-12 and community colleges, and the prison system. That percentage rises every year as expenditures in these four areas are in double digits while revenue increases are in single digits; and each of those programs excepting prisons, enjoys legislative or constitutional protections at the state and/or Federal levels. It is estimated that by the year 2000, 100 percent of the state's revenue will go to those four program areas, with nothing left for higher education, state operations, mental health, and an array of other state-funded activities.

The consequences of this trend, in California and elsewhere, have been dramatically rising tuitions and fees, rising costs for room and board, stable salaries for faculty and staff (a polite way of saying less competitive salaries), program shrinkage and elimination, cancelled courses, crowded classes and access denied to otherwise qualified students.

These circumstances must, of course, be corrected; and they surely will be. The only question is how much damage will be done in the intervening time.

These are of course, formidable challenges—demographic, social and fiscal—and as our colleges and universities seek to cope with them, there is a rising tide of public unhappiness about, indeed, even resentment of, higher education itself—almost a classic "blame the victim" syndrome.

Open any newspaper—and a growing number of books—and one is likely to find some new criticism of America's colleges and universities; misuse of federal research funds; athletic scandals; spiraling student fees and tuition; racial preferences in admission policies and faculty appointments; so-called hate speech on campuses and contention over what to do about it; what is being

taught to undergraduates and how well it is being taught; and, of course, the durable debate over political correctness.

Criticism is to be expected and even welcomed. Higher education should be no more immune from it than business, government or any other human endeavor, and indeed, has much to gain from criticism, however painful, that hits a real target. But there is a disturbing and little-noted dimension in the current debate on higher education that serves no public interest: the tone of voice and the inordinate pleasure with which that criticism is being leveled.

Nevertheless, American higher education, despite its shortcomings and imperfections, is respected worldwide for the breadth and depth of its accomplishments (as the steady stream of the world's brightest undergraduate and graduate students to our universities demonstrates). And so it is a curious fact about our society that we seem today to be taking uncommon pleasure in finding fault with one of our nation's most durable and successful institutions, one that—far from being an ivory tower of popular myth — is on the cutting edge of the major intellectual, cultural, scientific, technological and social forces shaping our world.

The modern American university was forged in the latter half of the 19th century as three broad forces came together—the British undergraduate, liberal arts tradition, the German research university with its emphasis on graduate studies and empiricism, and the uniquely American concept of public service coupled with a much broadened and more applied curriculum for an expanded cohort of college age students as embodied in the Morrill Act (Land Grant Act) of 1862.

This institution became the object of worldwide envy. It was sought after by the world's best students, and by a disproportionate share of the world's most brilliant professors. It accumulated honors and awards without peer. Its doors were open to persons of talent and ability whatever their financial circum-

stances, social standing and, recently, irrespective of race or religion. I attempted to make this point in my preface to a recently published book celebrating the University of California's 125th Anniversary:

The University of California now comprises nine campuses, five teaching hospitals, more than 200 laboratories and research centers, more than 100 libraries and an impressive array of teaching, research and public service programs. More than a quarter of a million people attend the university as students or work for it as faculty, administrators and staff. Research ships from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography explore the world's oceans; astronomers at the Keck Observatory operate the world's largest telescope; archeologists uncover the past, layer by fascinating layer, during excavations in ancient lands. UC carries out roughly 11 percent of the basic research funded by the federal government that is conducted in our nation's universities. It graduates about 10 percent of all Ph.D.s in the United States every year, and more women and minority Ph.D.s than any other university. Its faculty includes more than 250 members of the National Academy of Sciences, about one-sixth of the total membership. Through the years, 29 UC faculty members have won Nobel prizes, and 18 of those laureates remain active on the faculty.

Whether they know it or not, the people of California are touched by their university every day. UC-trained architects and engineers design the buildings we live in and the roads we travel. Graduates of the schools and colleges in the health sciences care for us when we are ill and discover the miracle drugs that give us hope in the fight against disease. UC's faculty educates talented young people in the high standards of commitment and performance essential to the quality of the professions, from architecture to law. California's oldest

industry—agriculture—has been revolutionized and its youngest—biotechnology—virtually created by researchers at the University of California.

The University has been called the state's crowning jewel, and with good reason: it is the principal point of access for people of talent and ambition, a quiet force from which most of California's economic power and strength derive, one of the world's great intellectual treasure houses, the repository of much of our cultural heritage, a cauldron of discovery, a marketplace of ideas — in short, one of the greatest centers of learning the world has ever known.

One should tread softly in dealing with such an institution, seeking in criticism to improve rather than to endanger, careful to cultivate, rather than merely to condemn. The unrelenting cascade of criticism directed against American Higher Education today is creating an adversarial climate in which an objective sorting out of what needs to be fixed and what needs to be left alone is taking a back seat to invective and name-calling.

What the debate over higher education desperately needs right now is an injection of mutual respect and civility, along with a recognition that universities are neither always wrong nor always right, but simply institutions subject to the same potential for mistakes and problems as every other institution in our highly pluralistic, democratic and demanding society.

The American college and university has a right to be proud of its accomplishments; and the people of America should take comparable pride in the fact they created these institutions and sustain them financially, politically and morally. These institutions are the creations of the people of our country and one needs always to remember that enduring fact. And yet, our colleges and universities must have and, do by and large, enjoy, a high degree of autonomy and independence to conduct their own affairs,

deciding who should be admitted, what they should study, who should teach and who should be counted as worthy of a degree. These are not trivial matters for any society to cede to universities which are dependent on the good will and support of those who freely grant them such institutional liberties. The social contract between these institutions and the people they serve has worked well and to the gain of all.

Whatever its shortcomings and whatever its problems, American colleges and universities have, in general and over time, and more than any other in the world, opened their doors to all who would profit from entering and, for those who entered, provided minds, facilities, and ideas fitted to the task of educating a remarkably diverse people in a free and open environment, and, we should be reminded, in most instances at modest cost to the student and to the larger society. Let us hope we can hold onto them.

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*Portions of this lecture formed the basis of remarks made by Dr. Gardner at the Seventh General Conference of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, France, 1984; and at the University of Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France, 1988; appeared in "Issues Confronting American Higher Education", Higher Education Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 229-232; and in "Institutions Besieged by Invective", Los Angeles Times, July 30, 1991.*