

Change and the Indispensable University

Given the demand for the university's indispensable services, there is good reason to feel now as A. Lawrence Lowell did one hundred years ago: that the college of the future has a great work to do. The need for universities' discoveries, memories, and mentoring is greater than ever, and their capacity to perform those functions is unique.

Yet Lowell would also see in traditional higher education now what he did then, the need for change. It is not just that online technology is producing competitive disruption and threatening universities from without. American universities rose to preeminence by voluntarily embracing innovation. They changed when the great European universities of the day did not. Innovation was not a defensive reaction but a strategy for success. Lowell, like his predecessor Charles Eliot, believed that Harvard's most persistent tradition was the tradition of change.¹

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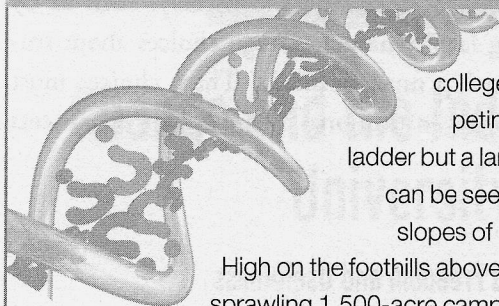
deployed innovatively against the jobs of discovery, memory, and mentoring. It won't be enough to change superficially, such as by cutting budgets or working faculty harder. Tough choices about students, subjects, and scholarship must be made. These choices must be reflected in the university's institutional DNA and in its success measures.

Enhanced Freedom and Usefulness

Administrators and faculty should not fear a loss of freedom in this process. Though the new technological and competitive environment threatens the higher education status quo, it also holds the potential to make universities not only more appreciated by students and society but also freer. Competition is increasing, but success no longer depends on imitation, and more universities can "win." Institutions need not be subject to one-size-fits-all, hierarchical classifications and rankings. Faculty need not be bound by the narrow constraints of the publish-or-perish system.

As university communities make the choices necessary to win their constituents' loyalty, they can succeed regardless of the opinions of third parties. In the future the most successful institutions will be those that lift their students furthest and fastest and that share their scholarship most broadly. Universities will be recognized for the learning they impart rather than for admitting the smartest students. The impact of their scholarship will be judged by not only those who cite it but those who integrate, apply, and teach it. Traditional academic classifications and rankings will mean less in a world of satisfied students and external supporters. Every university that satisfies its chosen constituents can be indispensable.

NOT A LADDER BUT A LANDSCAPE



Successful universities and colleges view themselves as competing not on a higher education ladder but a landscape. Such a landscape can be seen—literally—on the western slopes of Utah's Wasatch Mountains.

High on the foothills above the Salt Lake Valley sits the sprawling 1,500-acre campus of the University of Utah.

Visible from any point on the valley floor are its research park, medical complex, and distinctive football and basketball stadiums, the former host to the 2002 Winter Olympics and the latter a frequent regional venue for the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

The university serves a large undergraduate population, including many Utah students, and its hospital and research activities make a significant contribution to the local economy. Many students and faculty members come from outside the state, drawn by the opportunity to do world-class research in an attractive recreational and residential environment.

Farther down the hill, Westminster College fills both a literal and a figurative niche. Its campus comprises just 27 acres, but every square foot supports a dedicated student-learning environment. Two-thirds of Westminster students live either on or adjacent to the campus. Still, thanks to the college's innovative teaching and learning strategies, its campus extends in a virtual sense into the surrounding city and, via online learning technology, to the world.

Lower in the valley, Western Governors University (WGU) operates its entirely virtual and truly global campus from a multistory glass building in a commercial office park. The closest that any WGU student is likely to get to this headquarters building is the University of Utah's Kingsbury Hall, a performing arts center where WGU's semi-annual commencement exercises are held for graduates hailing from all fifty states and many overseas military stations.

Farther south, the campus of Utah Valley University (UVU) straddles Interstate 15, an ideal location for an institution with more than 30,000

students and no dormitories. UVU represents the high road for young students seeking a face-to-face learning experience of good quality and low cost. Like the University of Utah, Westminster College, and Western Governors University, UVU's focus on strategically chosen students, subjects, and scholarly endeavors allows it to compete not against those other institutions but against its own definition of success.

Our Cautious Optimism

We, the authors of this book, are cautiously optimistic about the future of traditional institutions of higher education. The caution stems from Clayton's research, which shows how difficult it is for established organizations to respond to disruptive innovation of the kind occurring now. If traditional universities and colleges can change their DNA quickly enough to avoid serious disruption they will have defied a huge amount of experience and data.

Our optimism flows from personal experiences in higher education that can't be quantified but are powerfully felt. Universities—and especially university professors—changed our lives for the better when we were students. We both left business careers to return to academic life. We believe that if anyone can beat the odds against being disrupted it is our remarkably capable and committed colleagues in higher education.

The world desperately needs its university communities. They can and should be its teachers and meaning makers. Of all institutions they are best positioned to integrate new discoveries with the wisdom of the past and to show how those dis-

What an opportunity it is to have the privilege of being a teacher, the greatest of all vocations, for it keeps us anchored in the world of youth, ideas, and research.²

—C. Roland Christensen

coveries can improve current practice. They can be conservators and promulgators of great ideas, including moral truths. Above all, they are uniquely positioned to mentor students on their campuses.

In addition to performing the tasks of discovery, memory, and mentoring in the university environment, traditional universities can wield greater influence beyond their walls. They can create curriculum that will help high schools prepare their students for college. They can help technical and community colleges improve their liberal education offerings and increase the percentage of students who continue for a four-year degree. They can export higher education opportunities to less developed countries. They can invite the world to join their learning communities and share in ideas for solving pressing social and economic problems. Their scholarly activities can, as Conant hoped they would, continue to have great relevance.³

The technology necessary to accomplish these things has been discovered, much of it in universities. Though it threatens the old order, it vastly expands the university's capacity. Eliot's view of technology, as expressed in his 1869 inaugural address, suggests that he would have jumped at the opportunity to use it:

The revolutions accomplished in other fields have a lesson for teachers In education, there is a great hungry multitude to be fed It is for this American generation to invent, or to accept from abroad, better tools than the old; to devise or transplant . . . prompter and more comprehensive means than the prevailing, and to command more intelligent labor, in order to gather rapidly and surely the best fruit . . . and have time for other harvests.⁴

Pruning and Focusing

At his inauguration Eliot also prophesied, "It will be generations before the best of American institutions of education get growth enough to bear pruning."⁵ Some five generations later, the time for pruning has come. Even the strongest universities will do well to refocus their activities. Most university communities will need to go further, asking fundamental questions about what they can

do well and abandoning much of what they have undertaken in a spirit of imitation. Those that continue to imperfectly imitate Harvard's strategy will find their costs increasing and their market share shrinking, whether they like the logic of the marketplace or not.

*If... there are no trade-offs [institutions] will never achieve a sustainable advantage. They will have to run faster and faster just to stay in place.... The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.*⁶

—Michael Porter

On the other hand, those communities that commit to real innovation, to changing their DNA from the inside out, may find extraordinary rewards. One key is to understand and build upon past achievements while being forward-looking. Lawrence Lowell spoke of looking fifty years into the future as he led Harvard.⁷ The universities that survive near-term challenges will be those that recognize and honor their strengths while innovating with optimism.

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University communities that focus their activities and measure success in terms of absolute performance rather than relative rank can enjoy a bright future. If they suppress the compulsion to have everything and instead play to their unique strengths they can achieve much more than they do now. They can be "the best" in the eyes of their own students, faculty members, and public and private supporters. They can serve more of their chosen students at higher levels of quality. They can become more expert in their chosen subjects and practice more individually customized and more influential scholarship. They can contribute more to the intellectual, economic, and moral vitality of the country and the world. If they embrace innovation and give up the ambition to have it all, they can have much, much more.