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Universities: The Next Iteration?

Universities are among the slowest changing institutions in society. They are agents of intellectual change but resist reshaping their own institutional boundaries. Witness the difficulties when any attempts to break down disciplinary walls are made, when new administrative shapes are proposed, when old autonomies or empires are threatened. "We haven't done it that way before" is the solemn refuge of the faculty, of department heads, deans, and other leaders. To outsiders, this curious kind of resistance seems absurd in those who work in places devoted to pushing back the boundaries of ignorance, to honing fresh minds, and to demanding skepticism in accepting any prescribed truths. Why should the shape of our universities be so sanctified, so inviolate?

Habit, history, and hubris are some of the reasons. American veneration of European institutions helped set our academic concrete. But events are chipping away at this foundation. The price of an education is requiring new responses from institutional boards, faculties, and administrations. Taxpayers should, and will, demand economies of organization to allow expanded educational scope in America. Recession has caused much agonized reappraisal on U.S. campuses. But some change has been thrust upon us. That may stimulate imaginative shifts in educational approaches.

It is vital that the universities take a serious look at their futures. New directions are opening while universities are merely plying their daily business. Charting a course of institutional development for the next generation of research universities is perhaps the most urgent need facing higher education at this time. Networks of research and instruction in high technology may be one way to begin, with alliances developing through the interaction of faculty and students.

University consortiums, coalitions that provide opportunities for faculty interchange, cooperative purchasing of equipment and books, and some cross-listing of courses signal one change. Consortiums may be the outline of what universities will become in the next century. Intellectually or geographically kindred campuses that are linked by agreements might be able cooperatively to exchange people, courses, and equipment to achieve a matrix organization that would provide wider research and educational opportunities to students and faculties while still preserving separate campus identities and loyalties. Universities in Britain have, for years, exchanged examiners so that graduates have been measured by comprehensive standards.

Universities should lead the way toward a regional response to academic needs, toward a new alliance of campuses that will make possible the strongest base for research and learning. If this happens, there will be a real chance to create world universities, institutional matrices capable of cooperative, even international approaches to technological challenges and to such fundamental problems as war, famine, pestilence, and death.

There are logical congeries of campuses that come to mind—in the Boston–New York corridor, in California, in the upper mid-West, in Texas and the Southwest. Some alumni may fear closer cooperation as a threat to identity. That worry will dissipate as their institutions thrive despite slimmer resources, grow in outreach and impact, and as their degrees are enhanced.

Those of us in America's educational enterprise ought to be flexible enough to achieve this new network of talent and opportunity. Will we?

—FRANK E. VANDIVER, *President, Texas A&M University, College Station 77843*