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**Information for contributors** appears on page XI of the 26 June 1987 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Telephone: 202-326-6500.

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## The University Presidency Today

Where are the greatest college presidents of today? Few of us who lead major universities have escaped this question, asked in a plaintive—and implicitly accusatory—tone. The question, in fact, is not merely theoretical—it constitutes an indictment. The questioner has in mind the Gilmans, Eliots, Hutchins, or Conants of the past; he sees only those of us who currently hold office and finds us wanting. None of us is a great leader, none the present voice of conscience or inspiration of the highest learning. We are perceived, our questioner will inform us with great courtesy, as lacking the aura, the eccentricity, the genius of greatness.

If it is true that none among us has attained the dominant stature, the mantle of national advocacy, why is this so? My answer is that we university presidents of today may very well be inferior to our predecessors, but that what we do, how we do it, and how we are perceived are different from their circumstances. The finest of our predecessors rose to an opportunity that may no longer exist for those of us who hold university presidencies today. The case consists mainly of a single point: The major research university of today is a radically different institution than its predecessor of three or four decades ago. The most obvious difference is size. There have now evolved in the United States between 50 and 100 major research universities that are megasize—numbering their students in tens of thousands, their faculties and administrative cadres in thousands, their buildings and their acreage in hundreds.

Perhaps the simplest effect of size on the presidency—and the greatest—is the sheer volume of work required just to keep up with all the facets of so large an institution. No president can be aware of everything that happens in the university, but no president can afford long to be in ignorance of most that happens; the result is endless presidential hours devoted to the effort of keeping track of the enormity of scope encompassed by the major research university. Complexity plays a competing role with size. The very research intensity that justifies “research university” as a descriptive name subjects the institution to the ultimate in the fragmentation of human knowledge.

When faculty achievements bring public acclaim, how could the president of the institution maintain a post of blissful ignorance? And even more directly to the point, he who asks for support must know not only whom to ask, but also what to ask for and why a particular project is of importance and priority.

As chief executive officers of our institutions, we are, of course, expected to manage. There are all those people, in their thousands; all those buildings; all that research; and all that money. Our annual budgets are counted in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Our revered predecessors were of course managers as well. But the size, complexity, and diversity of the major research university place vastly greater managerial responsibilities in the hands of those of us who serve as president today than was true three or four decades ago.

If greatness is equated with national stature, then part of the problem with today's university presidents may be that we are not media personalities. In a society whose attention span has shrunk from earlier times and that reads less and less, national recognition derives primarily from national television. On the one hand, the thoughtful address, the detailed exposition of the complicated have been largely replaced by one-liners and headlines. On the other hand, prolonged and repeated national television exposure has elevated to national stature (greatness?) not only politicians but also television commentators, articulate athletes, and other entertainers. University presidents are not—most of us—show biz.

We have our dreams of greatness—not for ourselves, but for our universities. We are—each of us—builders. Our task is to help to remodel our institutions for tomorrow—for the students who come anew each year, for scholars who will acquire knowledge that as yet eludes us, for discoveries and techniques that will enhance the human condition anew. But as we leave and enter each academic year, there is still pleasure and satisfaction in the job done, and to be done again. There may be no great university presidents today. But there are great universities, greater than yesterday's. And the men and women who captain them are no unworthy breed. [Adapted from a Festschrift in tribute to Arthur M. Sackler]—STEVEN MULLER, *President, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21218*