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# EDITORIAL

## Universities Are Our Responsibility

Even in our skeptical technology-driven era, universities are monuments to the hope that through education and deeper understanding we can create better lives for ourselves and our children. In this respect they are, like the great Gothic cathedrals, symbols of the aspirations of an age. Those of us who work in these national treasures have a responsibility to understand the requirements of a changing environment and to act so as to keep universities alive and well.

After World War II, the modern research university evolved as a new institutional species. The environment was favorable; education had proved its worth, and policy-makers wanted knowledgeable, technically skilled citizens. Families were willing to sacrifice to educate their children. Scientific opportunities abounded, and Americans had faith that science (based largely in the universities) would produce a steady supply of boons. Support for research universities flowed generously from federal and state governments, foundations, corporations, and public-spirited citizens. Budgets grew and programs multiplied.

Today, opportunities are outrunning resources. Increased knowledge holds no less promise, but science and scholarship are expensive, the rewards are often long delayed, and other societal needs press on policy-makers. When nutrients are in short supply, an institution (like any living organism) must gather them more effectively, survive on less, or pursue both strategies simultaneously.

The hunting and gathering skills of universities are already highly developed, for during the long growth period, success depended on an increasing supply of financial resources. Today, university presidents and faculty, as well as officers of associations representing them, ply the halls of Congress and state legislatures and work closely with executive branches. Ever-larger fundraising campaigns are successfully executed, tuitions rise, and grant requests become more elaborate. Further improvement is possible, but large gains are unlikely.

On the other hand, the skills universities need to do well with limited resources have atrophied from disuse. Most institutions are working to remedy this situation, and one hears terms borrowed from business, such as "restructuring," "downsizing," and "prioritizing." Such efforts can yield results, but success in the long run will depend less on these strategies than on the foresight, commitment, and will of faculty and staff.

The duty of presidents, chancellors, and deans to promote the well-being of their institutions is clear, but in recent decades, many faculty, especially scientists, have given their primary loyalty to disciplines and to national and international professional groups. This tendency is not new, but it has been magnified by the focus on outside resources and on an international reputation as a criterion for tenure.

If it was ever true that faculty members' pursuit of individual interests automatically created a great university, it is certainly not so now. Rather, the loosening of institutional ties has become a major risk, for today's successful university requires effective internal operations aimed at agreed-upon goals. Because faculty do the essential work of teaching and research, their participation and leadership are key. Also, faculty must embody and serve as guardians of the values that should permeate the institutional culture, including, at a minimum, freedom of exploration and expression, commitment to excellence in scholarship and teaching, and tolerance for differences. Promotion of such values requires time, effort, and devotion.

Some in business foresee a work force with loose, and even temporary, ties to organizations. Universities spring from a different culture. Faculty are citizens of their institutions as well as employees, citizens who deserve the loyalty of the institution even as the institution asks for theirs.

Whether universities adapt successfully to the present environment will, in my view, depend on whether individual faculty members correctly read the needs of the era and take personal responsibility for the success of their institutions. I can think of nothing more important or rewarding than to help preserve our research universities for the next generations, so that they may continue to represent the highest aspirations of the American people.

William H. Danforth

William H. Danforth is chairman of the board of Washington University in St. Louis, MO.