

FERMENT AND CHANGE IN THE MODERN UNIVERSITY:

WHAT LIES AHEAD¹

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INTRODUCTION

My perspective on today's topic comes from spending thirty-five years in higher education, both as a professor and as an administrator. I have taught at five different universities, and have served as provost at Pepperdine University for the last eight years. Perhaps these three and one-half decades of experience entitle me to make the following observations about ferment and change in the academy. First, a few thoughts about the nature of the university.

The university, of all institutions, is one of the most remarkable in its resiliency, its longevity, and its centrality to human well being. No wonder every great society protects and nurtures its universities. If there are thriving civilizations without great universities, I do not know about them. While corporations come and go with amazing rapidity, great universities survive through the ages. Consider the fact that Al-Kraouine University, Morocco, was founded in A.D. 859. Al-Azhar University, Cairo, was founded A.D. 975, and the University of Bologna, Italy, was established in A.D. 1088. The longevity of academic institutions is due to a paradox, namely, their willingness to adapt and change. John Henry Newman, author of *The Idea of the University*, once said that, "In order for a thing to remain the same, it must change often." Paradoxically, universities do well through the tides of history because they simultaneously hold on to

certain core values and purposes, while remaining flexible as they are buffeted by changing external circumstances. Paradoxically, they remain the same; yet they change often.

There is reason to worry about the state of the university today. The world-wide recession is placing severe pressure on universities. As the economic and demographic environment shifts, colleges and universities must necessarily change; but the trick is to do it in a way that does not damage their essence. Where should our institutions of higher learning go? How should they respond to the powerful forces of the current era? The answer is not easy because of the very diversity of higher education in the U.S. The fact is, there are nearly 4,000 institutions of higher learning in the our country, and they represent enormous variety. A great strength of U.S. education is this great diversity: public and private, secular and religious, community college and research university. In this country higher education is not *one* thing, but many things. While it is, therefore, risky to predict the future of higher education in the U.S., I believe one can detect common thread and common threats.

To frame my remarks I wish to call on the assistance of Daniel Yankelovich, one of America's finest public policy analysts and social science researchers. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he considered the key questions: "What will higher education look like 10 years from now . . . ? What external forces will reshape colleges and universities by 2015, if allowed to do so?"² In this presentation, I will summarize four of his key findings, and I will offer my own commentary and reflections.

TREND 1: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS: CHANGING LIFE CYCLES OF AN AGING POPULATION

Yankelovich observes: “While life expectancy in the United States in 1900 was a mere 47 years, people in the 21st century are expected to live to be almost 90 — a whopping extra 40 years of life. . . . [W]hen life expectancy was short, children moved to adult responsibilities without prolonged adolescence. In the 1950s it was expected that marriage, child raising, and jobs and careers would take place quickly after age 21, and that retirement and old age would occur by age 65.”

“Of particular relevance to colleges is the stage between the ages of 18 and 30. The old pattern of attending college from 18 to 22 and then going directly to a job, career, marriage, child rearing, and "settling down" is evaporating before our eyes.” Yankelovich reminds us that three-fourths of today’s students are nontraditional: “they delay enrollment after high school, attend college part time, or are considered financially independent. Many are already working, and more than a quarter are parents.” These shifts require us to ask: Will our universities adapt to the needs of future students? According to Yankelovich, “The old distinction between “*education*,” the task assigned to schools and colleges, and ‘*training*’, the task assigned to the workplace or to professional trainers. . . . is often artificial and inefficient” (my emphasis).

At Pepperdine, we are addressing these changes head-on: through service-learning at our undergraduate college, externships in our Law School, in our Education to Business (E2B) programs at the Graziadio School of Business and Management which links students with real-world business problems with great success. In a variety of ways

we are seeking to blend real-world service and work experience with the best academic training possible—not through sequencing and separation, but through blending and integration.

There is another challenge: dealing with older people. According to Yankelovich: “Retirement . . . no longer means total withdrawal from work but rather an opportunity to find forms of fulfillment that one's job did not provide. . . . and the chance to ‘give something back.’ Whether driven by ‘nostalgia for their college years’ or a ‘chance to overcome a perceived deficit in their education,’ people ‘want to make up for what they missed.’ Yet most universities are ill suited for the challenge of dealing with these seniors.” Furthermore, the pool of 18 year olds will decline over the next few years. Successful colleges will see this shrinking pool as a wake up call to deal creatively with the other populations that are sizable and growing. Such older, non-traditional students will not only help universities financially; their maturity, creativity, and experiential knowledge will add value to campus life.

TREND 2: GROWING VULNERABILITY IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Yankelovich explains: “To an extraordinary degree, our nation's fate depends on maintaining our world leadership in science and technology. . . . Yet, for a variety of reasons, young people in the Western industrialized nations, especially in the United States, are not flocking to study science and technology like their counterparts in other countries. In Japan, 66 percent of undergraduates receive their degrees in science and engineering, and in China, 59 percent. . . . That compares with only 32 percent in the United States.”

A number of factors compound the problem: a shortage of well trained teachers in math and science and poor methods of teaching these disciplines. Additionally, popular culture does not generally treat the study of math and science with much respect. Hollywood stereotypes them. According to Yankelovich: “An American study found that schoolchildren stereotyped scientists as socially inept, eccentric, and mad.” It’s so serious that the Sloan Foundation, committed to the advancement of science, has for years given awards to film makers who will make movies showing science in a positive light. Since universities are responsible for producing K-12 teachers, and since we have great influence over curriculum and pedagogy, we must do more, and we must do it better. Pepperdine is one of the largest producers of teachers in Southern California. It is our obligation to be a leader in transforming K-12 math and science instruction. We hope to be an important part of the solution in the coming decade.

TREND 3: THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND OTHER CULTURES AND LANGUAGES More than ever, world events are teaching us the importance of escaping our own cultural bubble—to transcend our ethnocentrism—to understand the points of view of those who happen to live beyond our borders. What happens in China or India, Pakistan, or Iraq has much to do with us. We must build better bridges of understanding. A college that fails to produce graduates able to deal with people from other countries and cultures is simply not doing its job. At Pepperdine, we are committed to international education. Of the major universities in the U.S. we are 7th in terms of the number of our students who study abroad. 57% of all our students have a study abroad experience, which places our institution ahead of every other university in California. We want our students to know other cultures experientially, personally. Our students study in Europe, yes, but also in

Africa, China, southeast Asia, and South America. Very importantly, we do not leave out religious and cultural understanding—for to understand another culture, truly, one must consider its most deeply held convictions.

It is true that global business can give us the sense that the world is “flat.” But international commerce alone is limited in its power to bring us together. Trade does not guarantee mutual understanding. As Yankelovich reminds us: “The world remains . . . polarized. Ethnic, racial, national, and religious divisions may be growing even more important, not less. . . . New programs [should] spring up that study all facets of other cultures, especially Islam, in ways that enhance our understanding of how those cultures see the world.”

Universities must take responsibility to increase the knowledge and understanding of all major world cultures, Islam in particular. Dialogue and understanding occur most effectively when there is a pre-existing disposition of respect—a positive framework that inspires and motivates understanding. Sadly, when two different cultures encounter one another, it is not automatic that they will welcome one another. The very capacity to welcome the other often *presupposes* certain beliefs—trust in the inherent worth of the other; or faith in our common humanity, for example. The centrality of love (“with malice towards none, with charity for all,” as Abraham Lincoln said) can transform cultural encounters. At Pepperdine, we believe that international understanding will occur more likely if we not only educate the head, but we educate the heart as well, for facts alone do not ensure understanding or mutual respect.

TREND 4: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING

Yankelovich writes: “In higher education, the organization of knowledge and pursuit of truth has grown increasingly specialized and systematic. The advantages are self-evident in the explosion of knowledge and the spectacular success of the scientific enterprise. And yet doubt creeps in. The logic of the Enlightenment that informed the founding of our nation assumed that as science gained ground, *other ways of knowing and finding truth — particularly religious belief — would lose ground* [my emphasis]. But in our American culture, that has not happened. While higher education has grown more scientific in its quest for knowledge, the American people at large have grown more religious, more fretful about moral ‘truths,’ and more polarized in their struggle to find political and existential truth.”

He goes on to point out that “*The public believes that science does not have, and cannot have, all the answers, and that other ways of knowing are also legitimate* [my emphasis] Scientists acknowledge that they do not have all the answers and that the success of science is due, at least in part, to its selectivity. Science concerns itself with aspects of reality that can be measured and are knowable though its [peculiar, limited] methods.” The scientific method limits itself, in other words, to what can be quantified and verified. It cannot explain “what makes life meaningful.”

Historically, the great universities have understood the breadth of their enterprise. The very word *university* (from *universus* = entirety, whole, the world as a whole) declares the majestic scope of the institution. The university has always sought scientific knowledge, yes; but it has never been limited to that special form of knowledge. A few weeks ago, at the invitation and sponsorship of the Pacifica Institute, I was privileged to

stand before the great library of Celsus in ancient Ephesus, completed in A.D. 117. In four niches in the library's front stands four statues representing *sophia*, *arête*, *ennoia*, and *episteme* – that is *wisdom*, *virtue*, *intellect*, and *knowledge*. In the honoring of these four virtues you see what these ancient people respected. Interestingly, two of those ancient virtues continue to be honored in the modern Western university today—intellect (*ennoia*) and knowledge (*episteme*). But what has happened to the devotion to virtue and wisdom?

Recent critiques of the American university suggest something has gone wrong. Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard College recently wrote a book entitled *Excellence Without Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, suggesting that one great institution has forgotten these virtues. Similarly, Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University has written in *Our Underachieving Colleges* suggesting that many of America's greatest colleges have forgotten how to impart moral character to students. Only about half of the faculty in American colleges report that it is very important or essential "to develop moral character" in students.³ David Brooks writes in the *New York Times*:

Highly educated young people are tutored, taught and monitored in all aspects of their lives, except the most important, which is character building. When it comes to this, most universities leave them alone. And they find themselves in a world of unprecedented ambiguity, where it's not clear . . . if anything can be said to be absolutely true."⁴

At Pepperdine, we continue to believe in and dedicate ourselves to the advancement of scientific knowledge, but we also encourage the cultivation of virtue, ethical conduct, and wisdom. We believe it is our responsibility to help our students learn to live well in the world. It is one of our central purposes. The great universities of our day must advance scientific knowledge, certainly, but they must also be centers of moral insight and ethical instruction as well. How much of today's financial crisis is the product of persons, lacking any kind of moral compass, but with enormous financial power, making decisions on Wall Street? Power without ethics is profoundly dangerous.

As he viewed the landscape of America, Daniel Yankelovich concludes that Americans sense that the country “*has lost its way and must now rediscover the path of truth* [my emphasis]. For all its power and cogency, there is little that science and conventional academic knowledge can do to light this path.” Interestingly, the research at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute concludes that a deep spiritual hunger and restlessness pervade our campuses. The majority of today's students are asking questions about meaning and purpose, and yet universities generally have established a climate in which faculty feel ill equipped to engage the big questions of meaning, purpose, and value.

A holistic education is called for—at least as *one* of the salient options on the menu of possibilities. I believe that the traditions of understanding developed by the great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam offer the best hope for dealing with the central questions that science cannot answer. In the words of Jürgen Habermas, arguably the world's greatest living philosopher: “when reason reflects on its deepest

foundations, it discovers that it owes its origin to something else.”⁵ On philosophical grounds, Habermas counsels respect for religion, religious traditions, and religious ways of knowing. Scientific world views, he argues, “do not in the least enjoy a *prima facie* advantage over competing world views or religious understandings.”

CONCLUSION

Yankelovich summarizes: “Pressured by powerful trends such as those that I’ve discussed [and given the economic crisis that has recently befallen the academy with great speed and force], higher education has entered a new era of ferment and change. But it is an era that also offers enhanced importance and opportunity for colleges and universities.”

The challenges to higher education today are large. But universities have stood the test of time—some for centuries, a few for more than a millennium. Societies flourish best when they have vibrant universities. We must do all that we can to ensure—not only their survival—but their flourishing. And we must strive to make them better. That means that we encourage them to deal with *all* the issues that are important to humanity—scientific and material well being for sure; care for the environment, yes. But also support for the aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual traditions that not only make life beautiful and meaningful, but even possible.

The founder of our university, George Pepperdine, said in 1937, “*If we educate a man’s mind and improve his intellect with all the scientific knowledge men have discovered and do not educate the heart . . . that man is dangerous.*” That ideal still

permeates Pepperdine University and makes it a rare, if not a unique, expression of higher education today.

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¹ A version of this speech was first delivered to the Pacifica Institute, Los Angeles, on Dec. 18, 2008.

² Daniel Yankelovich, “Ferment and Change: Higher Education in 2015,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, ...

³ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006): 170.

⁴ Qtd. in Bok: 146. David Brooks, “‘Moral Suicide’ à la Wolfe,” *New York Times* 16 Nov. 2004: A27.

⁵ Ratzinger and Habermas: 40. Eminent Cambridge physicist John Polkinghorne also argues science’s modest capacity to explain itself or the world that lies beyond its methodological limits: “Nowhere is the self-transcendent character of individual academic specialties more evident than in the sciences. Indeed, it is interesting and significant that some of the questions that take us beyond science actually arise out of the experience of doing science, even if they transcend its ability to furnish their answers. We may call them ‘limit questions,’ or ‘metaquestions,’ carrying us outside the borders of the simply scientific.” “Christian Interdisciplinarity” in *Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community*, eds. Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006): 54.