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Higher Education Issues and Trends: An Overview

This essay is adapted from "Remarks to the GVSU Academic Leadership Roundtable," January 23, 1996, by Adrian Tinsley, President, Bridgewater State College, Massachusetts.

It is always a pleasure to be invited back to Grand Valley State University, the home of my days as a young academic administrator, and—twenty-three years later—still the academic home of my heart. The development of Grand Valley State University, since I arrived in July of 1972 to be Dean of the new William James College, has exemplified the very best in both faculty and administrative leadership, and I am impressed with what Grand Valley has accomplished since its founding in those cornfields that I remember so well and still feel a connection to: one of my Bridgewater students visited me during my open office hours last week to tell me that his mother had been a member of Grand Valley's pioneer class.

A program like this Academic Leadership Roundtable has two important purposes. First, it provides an intellectual and personal context that can significantly aid the professional development of department chairs and directors at the university. And second, it provides a vehicle through which the external climate in which public higher education currently operates can be discussed on campus and in which the discussion of the political and cultural context of American higher education can be related to campus culture and campus goals.

As a public higher education president, I am a boundary person. My job is to represent and advocate for my college to the world: the governor, the executive branch of state government, the legislative branch, the corporate community, chambers of commerce, regional economic development organizations, alumni, parents, donors and friends. In a sense that part of the job is easy: Bridgewater State College is a good product, and it's fun to advocate for the good things we do. But while I'm talking, while I'm selling Bridgewater to the various constituents and communities we serve, it's also my job to listen, and, these days, that part of the job is not so much fun, as you will understand if I share with you some of the questions I'm asked.

- Why is public higher education important? Can't these services be provided just as effectively—or better—by the private sector?
- Who goes to your school? Are they qualified for college when you admit them? How much remedial work do you have to require of your students? I don't understand much about what you're teaching students these days. What exactly do they learn? What do they gain? How do you know?

- How many who enter your school graduate? How many who graduate get jobs in the fields they study?
- Who should pay for public higher education? And where should the money come from? Does the federal government have any obligation (e.g. financial aid? grants and sponsored projects)? What's the state's obligation? Should taxpayers be subsidizing the education of students whose families cannot document financial need? How much (or what percentage of the cost) should students and their parents pay? Can't corporations do more for public higher education? Can't private philanthropy do this job?
- Every other sector of the American economy has undergone massive structural changes in the last decade: mergers, consolidations, restructuring, downsizings. Higher education doesn't seem to have changed at all. Why not? Don't you think you'll have to change?
- Won't the possibilities offered by the new computing and telecommunications technology change things dramatically? I should think you'd be able to teach students much more cheaply and much more effectively via interactive TV or on the Internet. I hear that some universities already offer courses or even complete degrees on the Internet. Won't that be cheaper and better?
- I've never really known what faculty do, but since I was laid off, it's beginning to bother me more. Why should they get paid so much for working nine hours a week? And they get summers off too. Why should they have lifetime job security? Nobody I know has any job security at all.
- I was really enthusiastic about enrolling my daughter at your school, but now I hear that studying in the dormitory is nearly impossible. Seems like her roommate has guests at all hours, even overnight, and her friends seem to spend their time partying rather than studying. I know they drink too much. I understand they use drugs. Can't you do anything about this?

We could group these questions into the following topics, according to our academic lingo:

- Mission of public higher education
- Financing of public higher education
- Admissions standards, academic services and retention
- Curriculum and assessment of learning outcomes—the value of a college education
- Possibilities offered by the new technology
- Faculty work and faculty perks
- Student life
- Perception of public higher education by taxpayers, families and students—the people who pay the bills

We cannot talk meaningfully about these topics and the challenges confronting higher education if we do not first talk about the forces shaping life in our country and the current ideological drama playing on the national and local scenes with very real intensity. Our public colleges and universities do not operate in a vacuum, and we can not lead them effectively if we do not look hard at the public context which shapes them: the political, economic, social and technological conditions which surround us. We must say out loud to each other something which we do not really like to hear: the environment in which our public colleges and universities operate is increasingly hostile to the beliefs and values with which most of us—faculty and administrators alike—began our careers in public higher education ten or twenty or thirty or even forty years ago.

Forty years ago I was a sophomore in college, switching my major from chemistry to philosophy, to the significant distress of my parents. Thirty years ago I was a graduate student struggling with a doctoral dissertation in English Literature and engrossed in the civil rights movement taking shape in Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi and beginning to come to national consciousness. Twenty years ago I was a young dean building a brand-new alternative college at a brand-new university, feeling expansive about my possibilities and my college's possibilities, and grateful to be participating in the second women's movement in this country and the new scholarship and activism of feminists.

All three of these environments in which I personally studied and worked could be characterized in three important ways.

- They were "liberal" environments in the sense that they were inclusionary. There was a strong desire to develop more human potential—to reach out to new students, returning adults, part-time students, students of color, women.
- It was a period of significant and dramatic institutional growth—more campuses, more buildings and physical plants, more programs, more faculty and staff; Grand Valley itself stands witness to that period of dramatic institutional growth.
- There was a climate of public respect for and approval of higher education: a general sense that the faculty and students on our campuses were engaged in activities which contributed in some fashion (perhaps not clearly determined) to progress in this country, and to the social good.

I don't want to oversimplify those times. They were not simple, and they were not characterized by peace and harmony.

In 1970 for example—when I was an assistant professor—my students and I were out on Route 1 in College Park, Maryland, being tear-gassed. A great deal was being questioned: the Vietnam War; drug regulation; corporate mission and structures; racial injustice; gender roles; hierarchies of all sorts. I had a bumper sticker on my car that said "Question Authority" (now, alas, I am "authority"—perhaps that has also happened to you). But the purpose and value of higher education were

never questioned, not by me, who worked in it, and not by the society higher education served. Our situation, as we know, is very different now.

Think back to Tuesday, November 8, 1994—fourteen months ago this month, election day throughout the country, a day of many surprises. In a victory of major and unexpected proportions, the Republican Party took control of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. Republicans also regained control of the Senate, which the Democrats had held since the mid-1980s. The Republicans came to office with a clear agenda—tax cuts, balanced budgets, welfare reform, the downsizing of the federal government and the devolution of power back to the state and local levels. And, even as we meet here today, this new agenda is shaping public policy at both federal and state levels. It is no exaggeration to say that the November 1996 election will be, in fact, a national referendum on this change in direction.

On that same election day in 1994, in California, Proposition 187 was on the ballot, an initiative which sought to discourage illegal immigration to California and to punish illegals already living in that state by denying them many public services. Proposition 187 also required public officials—teachers, social workers, public health doctors and nurses—to inform immigration officials of the whereabouts of illegal aliens should they come across them in their professional practice. Proposition 187 passed overwhelmingly, although its immediate implementation was stayed by a series of legal challenges.

I remind you of these two events—we could all make a list of similar events—because they are reference points to the changing external environment that is impacting higher education and every other sector of our society. The public wants lower taxes, a balanced budget, a smaller federal bureaucracy, and the devolution of power. But the public is also in a mean and xenophobic mood, supporting tight restrictions on immigrants, welfare recipients, and the "undeserving poor." The public mood has turned against affirmative action and special programs to help members of minority groups and women. Recent actions by the Supreme Court have made it possible to question or eliminate programs designed to assist underrepresented populations.

Think about the federal budget. However the federal budget is balanced in seven years, federal spending is going to decrease sharply, federal financial aid is likely to continue to take very significant cuts, and recent legislation is capping the direct lending program at only ten percent. Obviously, these changes will have a negative impact on the ability of many students—both middle class and poor—to go to college. The effects on institutional enrollments and revenues can only be surmised.

But even before the Republican budget became a reality, public colleges and universities were facing major fiscal problems. Over a ten-year period, state and local support for public higher education has fallen from 7.6% of state and local tax revenues to 6.2% (it is just over 3% in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts). In Fiscal Year '93, state funding for medicaid exceeded tax-financed funding for higher education for the first time. And, for the third year in a row, corrections has received more new state dollars than has higher education. For most public colleges and

universities, these decreases translate into higher tuition, reduced spending on buildings, equipment, and library acquisitions, and higher productivity among non-faculty employees (that is, fewer people performing the same functions).

Why did this happen? Some of the problem stems from the economy. Although many parts of the country have emerged from the economic doldrums, times are still tough and competition for tax dollars is intense. If health and welfare programs formerly handled by the federal government are block-granted to the state (at 70-80% cost), competition for tax dollars will be still more intense, and so will the question of why states should subsidize higher education for students and families who have the ability to pay full cost.

Many governors (including my Governor Weld) are seeking to downsize and privatize public institutions in response to a changing public mood. The crises currently facing the SUNY and CUNY systems, and the reorganization of state services we are seeing in many states, illustrate aggressive gubernatorial responses to the current economic and political climate.

It is clear that the economy alone does not explain public higher education's situation. More critical is the public's demonstrable loss of confidence in what we, as academic professionals, do. And this takes us back to the questions I began with.

We who work in academic institutions must be willing to hear the criticism not just of political leaders but, increasingly, of the public at large: that higher education is a problem that cannot be fixed; that higher education is not adaptable; that higher education does not serve our society for its long-term needs; that higher education has not restructured itself, as all other economic sectors in American society have done, and that it cannot restructure itself; that higher education is not competitive in its ability to prepare our students for the "knowledge society" of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, our most successful graduates are often our severest critics. They tell us that our "degrees" have become little more than a collection of courses that serve an ill-defined or perhaps undefined purpose. They see that in many instances the collection of courses leading toward a particular degree has been arrived at politically, within and between our academic departments, and that links are unclear between the courses offered and what the students need to know and be able to do. As former Governor Keane of New Jersey, now president of Drew University, has said, "people are questioning our mission . . . they claim we cost too much, spend carelessly, teach poorly, plan myopically, and when we are questioned act defensively."

We do not like to hear these criticisms, and for the most part, we have not listened. And yet there is some truth to them. We do not talk about them on our campuses; unhappily we have few if any structures through which we can talk about them, even if we desire to do so. We would do well to look to one another in the eye and say, "Yes, there's some truth here."

Another element which has changed higher education's situation is the explosion of computing and telecommunications technology and the developing role of the Internet. I've read that the total of humankind's information doubles at least one time every five years, and that by the year 2000, 97% of what we know will have been

discovered or invented since those of us here today were born. I've seen a projection that, by the year 2020, the information available to humankind will double every 73 days.

I'm one who believes that the new information technology and the enormously expanded potential for access to information has positive—not negative—implications for our students, but we have just begun to understand how teaching and learning can be enhanced by this technology. We are at the first steps even for simple applications such as e-mail connections between student and instructor, list-servs for class discussion, faxes for delivering and returning papers, the potential to provide syllabi, readings, links to multitudes of information sources, and even quizzes and exams via the Internet, and the potential for experts to join the class via the Internet.

I think in this context of Jim O'Donnell, a classicist at the University of Pennsylvania, who taught his graduate seminar on Aquinas on the Internet with twelve graduate students registered at Penn and 500 auditors around the country and the world. This is the same professor who did a seminar on Boethius, downloading the Latin text to high school teachers all around the country—a high school Latin teacher in, for example, Laramie, Wyoming, is one of the most isolated professionals one can well imagine. If you want a good look at what's currently possible, check out James O'Donnell's web page.

The explosion of computing and telecommunications technology is a revolution which has already happened, and it has serious implications for higher education and for the work lives of faculty. We have lost our monopoly as the source of information; we have lost our function as information-transmitters; and we have lost our geographic boundaries. Access, on the other hand, and the possibilities for communication with students, are dramatically enhanced. Being present at the revolution can be exciting, and I find it exciting, but the faculty role is changing rapidly—from information provider to advisor, guide and coach. Increasingly, our professional lives will be about teaching students how to find information on their own, how to process and evaluate it, and how to make sense of or give meaning to the information they acquire—how to act on what they know.

In short, what electronic technology will enable us to do in the next century is—finally—to individualize mass higher education, to accommodate the information needs and learning styles of the increasing variety of students and publics we serve. But there is a downside to the potential of the new technology as well, and that is the possibility that it will be used to reduce, not expand, the options available to our students. Last November, for example, eleven of the sixteen governors of the Western states met to explore the creation of a "virtual university" in their region, a university that would deliver courses through computer networks, television and other technologies, and would award degrees on its own. According to Governor Romer of Colorado, the goal would be to give "academic legitimacy" to new kinds of learning that technology now makes possible. The effect would be to credential learning without the public expense of academic buildings, classrooms and faculty.

This is an interesting development, and the technology now exists to make it possible. There is very little interest in the 1990s in building new college and university campuses, and yet population is growing significantly in many states. In Utah, for example, college enrollment is expected to grow from 80,000 students to 150,000 students within the next twelve to fifteen years. "The money doesn't exist to build ourselves out of this environment," says Governor Levitt.

Now I come to my final point. The "big picture" I have been describing in these remarks—the changes in the U.S. economy, political structure and public mood, and the exploding capabilities of the new electronic technology—will require corresponding changes in our own work: changes in how we conceptualize and teach both professional programs and the academic disciplines; changes in our current notions of what constitutes a "class"; changes in our current notions about where and how learning takes place—in short, changes in our current understanding of faculty work. I am not describing add-ons or peripheral changes that will need to be made. I am describing changes in the core.

Unfortunately for us, college and university faculty and staff—and I very much include myself in this description—live in a very insulated environment. Most of us resent the idea that political, economic, social and technological changes should have any negative impact on our professional careers and comfort. Many of us are protected from fundamental changes in the educational marketplace by tenure or by long-term contracts. Few of us are risk-takers. Change, if it comes at all to our institutions, comes very slowly, and only after even the most minor alteration of the status quo has been reviewed and re-reviewed and re-re-reviewed. Yet change—at the very core of what we do, not at the periphery—is accelerating, and will continue to do accelerate, even if we desire to hold it back.

There are some things, I believe, that we can and should do if we choose—in a real way—to take responsibility for higher public education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: We can choose to lead, rather than follow; to shape, rather than complain.

First, and without question most important, I believe that each of us needs to spend some private time clarifying our personal responses to the climate in which higher education now operates. We need to articulate for ourselves, individually, one by one, how this new climate affects the work we do. Most of us chose this work precisely because it offered us the chance to express our values in action. But we made that choice in different times. If we stay in higher education, we should know why we have choose to do so.

I live in Massachusetts now, and I come out where Tip O'Neill always came out: "All politics is local." For me, it is in local institutions, places on the human scale of Bridgewater, or Grand Valley, that people actually have the opportunity to express values in action, to make a difference to the institution, and to the people whose lives it touches. "Think globally, act locally" is a slogan I learned in the sixties and tried to act on at William James in the seventies, and it still seems to me a pretty good guide to what is important in life.

Second, we must work to develop, on each campus, a shared understanding of the economic, political, social and technological environments in which we operate. We cannot continue to develop our institutions without a shared understanding of the context in which we work, and that shared understanding—probably because it involves facing criticism and uncertainty—is extremely difficult to build. As I've said, most colleges and universities do not have existing organizational structures equal to the task. Nor is it clear how the self-interests of various constituent groups on our campuses are served by taking up the task.

Last, and perhaps most important, we must have leadership throughout the institution to engage the discussion of change. For obvious reasons, it will not happen spontaneously. Academic departments are the natural locus for this discussion; research shows that academic departments are where "faculty actually live their lives." But academic departments are not sufficient, because the academic department is also isolated; new structures must be conceptualized and created that break down departmental isolation; and that can happen only if there is leadership at all levels of the academy, willingness to open the windows—even if the view outside is not as great as we remember it—and willingness to consider a future less predictable, and probably less comfortable, than the present.

If we could find ways seriously to engage this discussion—ways that questioned and sharpened our values, commitments, purposes and tasks—we would, I really believe, reinvigorate "academic community," and we'd be the better for it, individually as well as organizationally. That's why I'm so excited about the possibilities provided by this Academic Leadership Roundtable, and I may copy it on my campus immediately.

In the end, it is the privilege of articulating a vision, of inspiring, challenging, questioning and reasoning that gives purpose to what we do. If we sincerely believe in the fundamental value and liberating influence of education; if we see higher education as addressing some of the basic questions which perplex our nation and our world; if we acknowledge that America's class-bound society is most easily permeated through the vehicle of education; if we continue to care about these issues, and continue to work to improve what we do; then we are in the right line of work. We are likely to persist; to answer the questions being asked of public higher education; to have conversations necessary to develop a shared commitment to changing how we do what we do; to make the changes necessary to serve our students as well in the next century as Grand Valley has served them since the college was a vision, some muddy cornfields, and blue flowers along the dirt roads that I still remember fondly.

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