

We Will

A Vision for a Revolution

Like it or not, we are about to be caught up in a whirlwind of revolutionary change in colleges and universities across the nation, a movement that will reinvent the American university as we now know it. There are no innocent bystanders in a revolution, only victims and victors. Everyone in our universities can and must play a crucial role in making sure that the revolution results in re-created and revitalized institutions.

Thirty years ago, when John Kennedy delivered his inaugural address, the nation stood at a crossroads that, in historical hindsight, can legitimately be described as the beginning of a revolution: a social revolution that would inspire the world, and change forever the way we view ourselves, our fellow inhabitants of this planet, and our institutions. We would never be the same.

Today, American higher education stands at a similar crossroads. To believe that we can preserve the American university of the last half-century is to ignore the reality of a vastly changed world, and its expectations of us. To ignore that reality is sheer folly. To stand idly by and allow the tide of events to overtake us is irresponsibility of the highest order—irresponsibility to our profession as guardians of the relentless pursuit of knowledge, and to our many patrons and stakeholders, who rely on us to light the path of civilization.

One of the great characteristics of the university is its stability. The university as an institution has withstood the tests of time: it is one of a precious few institutions that have survived, virtually intact, since the Reformation. While empires and civilizations crumbled, humanity has looked to the university as a rock to which we could all cling in a sea of chaos and change.

But that wondrous stability has become an encumbrance, an excuse to resist necessary change. In a swiftly evolving global society that waits for no institution to keep pace, we are in very real danger of becoming a historical anachronism, a bastion of arrogant irrelevance.

Our critics say, with more than a little justification, that America's colleges and universities have become self-indulgent; that we have, somehow, lost our vision and misplaced our priorities. We *have* rested far too long on our well-earned laurels. The American university is indeed unparalleled in the world. Its product may indeed be the sole remaining commodity for which this nation can claim a trade surplus in the global marketplace. But for how long?

Our self-satisfaction is exceeded only by our slowness to recognize that we have neglected the most central aspects of our enterprise: we have ignored our obligations to our most important clients, we have bloated our administrative structures, and we have blithely disregarded an international movement emphasizing quality and results. If we were the bellwethers of change and progress we claim to be, we should have led that movement. Instead, like aristocrats in a decaying civilization, we contented ourselves with pontificating from the sidelines.

My friend and colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, Robert Zemsky, puts it most eloquently when he says that we are coming to "the end of sanctuary" for higher education, the end of a time in which America's colleges and universities were sheltered from the cold winds that buffeted other institutions. Today American higher education can expect to be subjected to the same critical scrutiny and demands for accountability that all

other institutions face. If we do not respond now, and vigorously, to these challenges, we risk becoming the subjects of political demagoguery and tabloid journalism. Indeed, some of our sister institutions already have.

With the perfect vision of hindsight, nearly all of us would agree today that we should have behaved differently in the decade of the eighties had we known what the nineties would bring to American higher education. The eighties brought extraordinary growth in resources and programs to colleges and universities across the nation. We had an opportunity, during those boom years, to focus our new resources in the most innovative and imaginative ways. We failed to do so. We used our newfound wealth to create new and sometimes questionable programs, without cutting out the old, the outmoded, or the mediocre. Today we are paying the price. Many of us are now thinking, and some are now saying aloud: "If only we had half of that money from the eighties to spend now. If only we had planned strategically then. If only we had resisted the temptation to seize every opportunity and, instead, invested selectively."

My purpose is not to debate the question, "Who lost American higher education?" It is to ask, and to answer, the question, "Do we continue on our present path and invite decline, or do we choose a new path, one that will lead us to a reinvention of the American university, one that will make it again a vital engine of our society—an enterprise that is at once responsive and responsible to its citizens?"

I believe the answer is obvious. We must choose a new path! To paraphrase the words of another Penn colleague, Claire Fagin, we must learn to *choose*, not *chase* our future.

As we contemplate the task before us, it behooves us to remember Machiavelli's admonition in *The Prince*:

"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order."

We cannot afford to be lukewarm in our commitment to initiate a new order. Nor can we afford to approach the revolution with fear—the fear of criticism or the fear of that which is new. With firm conviction, and with the firm intention to succeed, we *will* take a new path.

No journey should begin without charting a course. Here, then, are some marching orders. There are only five:

First: **Educate**. That is our primary business. Indeed, in its broadest sense, it is our only business. In emphasizing the core values of nurturing minds, advancing knowledge, and elevating the human spirit, we dedicate ourselves to the essential business of higher education. What we are about is the creation, dissemination, and application of information and knowledge. Our product is learning.

Second: **Do it right, the first time**. In all that we do, quality will be our standard. This is the most fundamental transformation that we must expect from each and every institution and from everyone in it: to adopt "quality" as an essential characteristic of one's work, whatever it may be, and to create institutional cultures that place priority on educating and serving others over resource acquisition and elevation of status.

Third: **Go for results**. Collegial process is to be valued, but not as an end to itself. Endless debate without action accomplishes nothing. Show us the results you've achieved. Set meaningful objectives, and evaluate your performance on the basis of whether you achieved those objectives. Tangible outcomes, not process and methods, will bring eminence. Moreover, we cannot talk about focusing on tangible outcomes without dealing with accountability and assess-

ment of performance. I find it supremely ironic—and hypocritical—that we who have learned how to measure the distance to the farthest galaxy and to predict the outcomes of future elections insist that we cannot measure our own output. We must change that.

Fourth: *Tear down the walls*. We must break tired, old habits that inhibit creative and innovative solutions to new problems. We do too many things simply because “that’s how we’ve always done it.” We’ve always organized our colleges and universities into departments, schools, and campuses. Our administrators, faculty, and staff have always carried titles that contribute to a hierarchical view of everything. We have discrete job descriptions; we work through committees; faculty and administrators see each other as natural antagonists. It’s time to learn how to breach organizational barriers and find ways to organize ourselves in teams that focus on solving problems.

Fifth: *Simplify*. We must work together to reduce the bureaucratic complexity and constraints that limit our ability to do what really needs to be done. We must begin to prune the thicket of policies, rules, regulations, and guidelines that threaten to smother our universities and every creative employee within them. Too many rules intended to prevent everything bad from happening also keep anything good from happening. Every time we enact one of those, we cut off one more route we could have used to solve a problem. Rather than erect obstacles to failure, we need to create pathways to success. We cannot focus on results if we are mired in process and wallowing in red tape, regulations, and reports.

These five guiding principles are intended to empower each and every member of our universities. An old Chinese proverb says: “If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees. If you want one hundred years of prosperity, grow people.” We will grow people—not just ordinary people, mere time-servers and functionaries, but prophets, leaders, explorers, and builders. For this revolution, nothing else will do but revolutionaries. Let us adopt as our rallying cry, “*We will*.” Without fear of criticism, *we will* seek what is right. With vigor and integrity, *we will* achieve national eminence. With the spirit and cooperation of family, *we will* succeed.

In the year 1848, my great-great-grandfather left his native city of Weimar and emigrated to America. I like to imagine that, as a small boy, he may have encountered in the streets of Weimar one of its most distinguished citizens, a man from whom I would like to borrow my closing words. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, “Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

I envision a revolution in American higher education. Let us begin it.

Acknowledgment

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