

Book Review

The Challenge for Urban Public Universities: A Review of *Beyond the Crossroads—The Future of the Public University in America*

Authors James J. Duderstadt and Farris W. Womack
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In many ways, the urban public university in the United States is a remarkably adaptive institution. Its response to social events over the past century helped define the national landscape. Millions of returning veterans received a college education due to the GI Bill. Important advances in medicine and health have been developed by scientists trained at the nation's public universities. Such institutions have "grown up with the nation," write Duderstadt, Womack, and Ingraham in the book, *Beyond the Crossroads: The Future of the Public University in America*. "This extraordinary social institution...has transformed the very society it serves" (9).

How can the urban public university, which has long shown remarkable resiliency and flexibility in the face of change, adapt to the turbulent social and political forces of the twenty-first century? The question, crucial to those involved in higher education, is considered by Duderstadt and Womack in this provocative and engaging book. The answer, according to the authors, is that change is possible and indeed imperative, and must be accomplished through an evaluation of the very nature of the urban public university.

Even compared to the massive influx of students post-World War II and the turbulent atmosphere of the 1960s, public universities are confronted with complex and powerful social and political issues in the new century. The changing nature of funding, for example, forces urban public universities to consistently evaluate budget, tuition, and student aid. Growth in state higher education appropriations was near zero in fiscal year 2003, due to declining state revenue and a shift in policy priorities. To fill the budget gaps, public universities increased student tuition and fees, an average of nine percent from 2001 to 2002 (AASCU 2003).

In addition, urban public universities face a burgeoning enrollment growth with a student body more diverse than at any other time in American history: a higher number of women than men (56%), an increasing percentage of minority students (28%), and

70 percent of first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergraduates receiving financial aid (NCES-IPEDS 2000).

Each chapter in *Beyond the Crossroads* defines an element of the changing social needs which affect the urban public university. The title reflects the authors' opinion that public universities have long passed the crossroads in terms of considering change. Change is not an optional activity for administrators, faculty, students, and governing boards. Instead, the true challenge is to ensure that such change is purposeful and strategic, rather than reactionary and defensive.

The authors explore technology, market pressures, finances, university leadership, and governance as key forces driving change in public universities. The chapter on university leadership (Chapter Seven), for example, is written from the background of the authors' lengthy tenures as president and chief financial officer, respectively, of the University of Michigan, and is the strongest of the book.

In terms of leadership, the authors maintain that "the current environment on many public campuses today neither tolerates nor supports strong, visionary leadership" (130). Many urban public university presidents may share this opinion, but are not in a position to verbally express it. The chapter proceeds to examine exactly why leadership is such a scarce resource for the public university. In large part, it is because of the complex nature of the institution. The constituents are many, the money is scarce, and the demand for responsiveness and change can be deafening.

The book benefits from Womack as a second author. Womack, who served as chief financial officer of the University of Michigan under Duderstadt, provides a strong basis for Chapter Six, "Financing the Public University." In the attempt to meet diverse public demands and provide multiple programs for service to the community, public universities can be hobbled by what the authors label as "mission creep," a situation where "[an increasing amount of funds] are diverted away from academic programs to other activities" (105). The growth of the higher education periphery has resulted in a weakening of the academic core, especially for urban public universities.

Collis has identified a "paradox of scope," wherein the traditional mission of the university (academics) is blurred by the layered increase of peripheral activities (Collis, in press). The paradox of scope is complicated in the urban public university, where there are multiple stakeholders and a lack of clear leadership involved in the governance process. It is little wonder, as Duderstadt and Womack note, that public universities are afflicted with a "growing epidemic of presidential turnover...both a consequence of these problems and a factor that contributes to them" (132). If leadership is inherently a process concerned with fostering change, it is clear to see why leadership and change are so difficult in an urban public university (Astin and Astin 2000).

Duderstadt and Womack contend that the inherent political nature of the public university governing board “not only distract boards from their important responsibilities and stewardship... [but can also] trample on academic values and micromanage institutions into mediocrity” (151).

The conclusion drawn by the authors is that the public university cannot survive in its present form. Rather than compose a death knell, however, they conclude their work with two chapters on university transformation and the future. Given the layered and complicated forces shaping public universities, how is change possible? The authors never claim that the public university is on the verge of extinction. “The most fundamental transformation,” they assert, “involves changing the character and the mission of universities” (184).

Their recommended strategies include assessing the how and why of institutional activities. Such strategic change offends those traditionalists of the university, who maintain that university trademarks such as departmental organizational structure and a core liberal arts education are essential to academic and social development. But such changes are meant to enhance, not destroy, what has always been essential to higher education. The urban public university’s commitment to access, diversity, and knowledge is not called into question. Instead, Duderstadt and Womack advocate protecting and preserving key institutional values, engaging the stakeholders, building alliances, and having the confidence to experiment.

It can be difficult to experiment with a social institution with a centuries-old history that is one of the cornerstones of American society. Experimentation, however, is imperative. “As society becomes ever more knowledge intensive, it becomes ever more dependent upon social institutions such as the university which...educate people, and provide them with knowledge and learning resources throughout their lives,” say the authors (207). The public university will be saved by adaptation and evolution. The challenge for such an evolution, however, is letting go of the traditional paradigm and structure of the university.

Urban public universities face a unique challenge in providing the best education possible for students while also working to support the infrastructure of their community. In doing so, the university is committed to using all of its strengths—research, public service, social awareness. Such an effort dispels the “growing spirit of cynicism towards higher education” (156). If we are truly evolving into a society of learning, then it is the responsibility and the challenge of urban public universities to ensure their community is not left behind.

References

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