By Clara M. Lovett

Prestige, Power, and Wealth

At the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), we are busy planning the 2005 National Conference on Higher Education. As I lead this marvelous process, I have flashbacks of conferences past. At one national conference in the late 1980s, a major topic of discussion among participants was the perceived and deeply felt lack of public recognition of higher education's achievements. The common wisdom in those days was that higher education leaders were not doing enough to persuade fellow citizens and the media to pay attention to higher education and appreciate its contributions to society.

At a plenary session, one participant cautioned all of us to be careful what we wished for. The late Hoke Smith, a philosopher and at that time president of Towson University in Maryland, predicted that someday we would look back nostalgically to the days when our role in society was marginal and when genteel poverty was our lot. It was true, Smith observed, that we lacked wealth and power, but it was also true that we enjoyed an abundance of intellectual freedom and institutional autonomy. He noted that there was a positive side to the benign neglect we were complaining about: the lack of close scrutiny. Would we still enjoy the benefits of benign neglect, Smith asked, if at some point in the future, higher education became central to the progress of the United States, if higher education found its place among society's power brokers, if higher education accumulated large assets and endowments?

Smith lived long enough to see his prediction come true. The status of higher education in U.S. society has changed greatly; the days of marginality and genteel poverty are definitely behind us. At every opportunity, the country's leaders tout the central role of colleges and universities in a knowledge-based society. We are, and we are perceived to be, both the producers of new knowledge and the gatekeepers on pathways to well-paid jobs in a knowledge economy. We honor our tradition of genteel poverty, but we seek material rewards comparable to those of other professions. We resist, and perhaps do not even recognize, the new obligations accruing to an enterprise that indeed now plays a critical role in the development of society. Rhetorically, we cling to the old culture, while in practice, we go after large federal research grants and congressional earmarks, enter joint ventures with corporate partners, and build massive facilities and endowments.

It is time for a new conversation about our changed status in U.S. society, about what it means for institutions of higher learning to be key players in the nation's economy, influential power brokers in many communities, and members of an enterprise with enormous intellectual and material assets. We need leaders—especially scholars, presidents, and trustees—who understand the additional responsibilities and the intense public scrutiny that come with the changed status.

Today, higher education leaders face two kinds of challenges. One is to *hold themselves and their institutions accountable* as never before for outcomes, especially improved student learning, and to make information about outcomes available in the public domain. Another challenge is to *lead other sectors of society* in areas where higher education has tremendous capacity, particularly the capacity to transform organizations, processes, and services through technology for the purpose of attaining improved performance and lower production costs. A prerequisite to meet the first challenge is the ability, still in short supply, to see higher education through the eyes of its external stakeholders rather than through the lens of academic tradition and dogma. A prerequisite to meet the second challenge is the ability to discern and address internal contradictions, which become more evident to outsiders as our enterprise grows in size and in importance to society.

Consider, for instance, the contradictions in the relationships between higher education and the public. We demand respect and gratitude for what we often describe as "higher education's success story": the large percentage of adult citizens we educate, the quality and breadth of our graduate programs, and the world-class researchers we attract from every part of the globe. Some of us bask in the sunlight of media attention, despite the occasional pain that this sunlight can inflict on the innocent and the unprepared. We take it for granted that an increasing percentage of our fellow citizens are becoming dependent, psychologically as well as financially, on what our institutions have to offer. Yet we bristle when our stakeholders ask questions or voice concerns and criticisms to which we are not accustomed. Our responses vary from disingenuous (e.g., when students question our scheduling practices and we invoke academic freedom) to irrelevant (e.g., when legislators ask questions about "yield" [the percentage of admitted applicants who earn their degrees within a given time frame] and we respond with explanations of how accreditation works).

There are also remarkable contradictions in the way we organize and govern our institutions. The theories and tools that in the past twenty years have revolutionized production and communication in every sector of the U.S. economy and in most government functions were almost entirely generated by research teams at elite universities. Yet those theories and tools have thus far had only a modest impact on management practices at colleges and universities themselves and almost no impact on campus governance models that privilege small cadres of tenured senior faculty and marginalize all other academic professionals, no matter how much they contribute to our institutions.

Who is asking the tough questions about these aspects of our organizational culture? Often, the critics are business leaders who value higher education but cannot fathom why any contemporary organization would want to use its human and physical resources and serve its clients in the same way that it did forty years ago. To a degree, these critics smile at the harmless eccentricities of the academy. But smiles give way to scrutiny and even scorn when our business supporters, rightly or wrongly, make the connection between our eccentric organizational behaviors and the inadequate preparation of our graduates or the rising cost of the services we provide.

Most important for our enterprise, we struggle with contradictions around the critical issues of teaching and learning. In the 1980s, Patricia Hutchings launched the Teaching Initiative at AAHE, and Lee Shulman, at Stanford University, challenged us to think of teaching as community property—peer reviewed and open to scrutiny. Research on student learning flourished in many graduate departments, and hundreds of colleges participated in projects to apply the research findings.

Arguably, the overall quality of college-level teaching has improved since the 1980s. Unquestionably, college and university faculty have access to research findings that were not available twenty years ago. At the course, program, and department levels, the scholarship of teaching and learning has made a positive difference on many campuses. It is not clear, however, that these incremental and isolated changes will eventually lead to systemic change. On the contrary, the experience of some institutions that pay particularly close attention to learning outcomes (e.g., Western Governors University) suggests that our industrial age

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system, which measures seat-time and time-on-task rather than learning, is like a large boulder in the middle of a stream. Currents swirl all around it, but the system does not move.

Until quite recently, only higher education researchers cared whether or not their findings on student learning were applied to practice. But that is no longer the case. Educated laypeople—including parents, reporters, and legislators—are asking questions they did not ask twenty years ago. They ask questions about learning environments for students, about what works and does not work with different populations of students, and about the outcomes of degree programs. And our students are also asking us new questions. "Given what you know about the ways we learn, why do you still offer lecture courses in sterile and even uncomfortable rooms? Why do you still require three hours of seat-time weekly to award three credits? And why are you so reluctant to assess what we have learned outside the classroom and outside your institution?"

It is tempting to dismiss these questions, and the people who ask them, as simplistic and unsophisticated. But the voices we hear will not fall silent. Our stakeholders no longer accept stock answer #1 ("What we do works; get off our backs") or stock answer #2 ("We know what we do does not work well for most students; give us a lot more money, and we'll fix the problem").

As recently as the 1990s, these contradictions inside academic culture, essentially failures to reshape our enterprise in ways consistent with our own research findings, were the academy's dirty little secrets. Either our stakeholders did not see the contradictions or they trusted us to resolve the problems. This is no longer the case. Business and political leaders and the media are probing, to an unprecedented extent, into our traditions and behaviors. Their most serious concerns—student learning outcomes and the cost of attending college—lead to questions about how we use information and communication technologies in our core functions, especially teaching.

Informed stakeholders know how much the academy has contributed to the transformation of other sectors through technology R&D and the development of applications. Thus, they find it odd, to say the least, that we have tended slowly and halfheartedly to the transformation of our own enterprise. In the current climate, with all eyes on the effectiveness and the cost of higher education, the stakeholders demand action. Our leaders are called to lead. Hoke Smith had it right: life was easier in the age of benign neglect. But there is no turning back.

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