

Preface

Stimulated by federal initiatives such as the land grant acts and the GI Bill and supported and sustained by the investments of the states, the American public university has evolved into one of the most significant social institutions of contemporary society. Our nation's public colleges and universities have democratized higher education, extending the opportunities for a college education to all citizens, applying scholarship and research to serve the diverse needs of society, and engaging with local communities and regions to provide the knowledge and services critical to economic prosperity, public health, and national security.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century public higher education flourished, sustained by strong social policies and public investment aimed at providing educational access and opportunity to a growing population. Yet today public higher education faces numerous challenges. A changing student population, far more diverse in age, ethnic background, and economic circumstance than ever before, is demanding change in our institutions. An exponential increase in new knowledge coupled with intensifying needs for advanced education in the workplace are challenging traditional disciplines and methods of instruction. The rapidly evolving technologies of computers and the Internet are eroding constraints posed by the traditional college curriculum and stimulating new market forces for educational services. Furthermore, despite the growing educational needs of a knowledge-based society, public higher education frequently falls behind other social priorities such as health care, corrections, and K-12 education in its capacity to compete for limited tax dollars. Public policies aimed at access and opportunities have been replaced by concerns about educational cost, quality, and accountability.

More broadly, as we begin a new century, the public university faces the challenge of adapting to an era of rapid social, economic, and technological change. This book considers the future of the public university in America

from the perspective of two individuals who have served, respectively and together, as president and chief financial officer of one of the nation's leading public institutions, the University of Michigan. Beyond that, the two of us have spent our entire academic careers in public universities, jointly accumulating over sixty years of experience as faculty members, administrators, and leaders at the Universities of Michigan, North Carolina, and Arkansas.

The challenge of leading a public university during a time of great change is considerable, particularly when the institution has the prominence of a flagship state university. These institutions touch the lives of millions of people—students, parents, patients, alumni, sports fans, and, of course, taxpayers. Few, indeed, were the days at Michigan without a new crisis challenging the university and its executive leadership, whether arising from the complex activities and viewpoints of students and faculty or from the intensely political agendas of state legislatures, governing boards, and the media. To be sure, such crises were usually relatively minor within the broader context of the educational mission of the university and its long history of serving the state and the nation. Yet each had the potential to destabilize the institution or damage its reputation, and each required the immediate attention of the administration, even if that resulted in diverting attention from the core missions of the university—teaching, research, and service—and from high-priority yet long-term agendas such as the quality of educational programs. And each arose within the complex and unforgiving public policy and political environment characterizing the public university.

In this book we consider the challenges and issues facing the public university from strategic and reflective perspectives, no longer driven by the hour-to-hour pace of the pager and cellular phone. But we go beyond simply identifying challenges to provide a series of recommendations and strategies for the leaders and patrons of public universities. It is our hope that our perspectives will also be of interest to the broader audience of all those concerned about higher education in America. In this sense this book is intended as an operating manual for the public university, a treatise on lessons learned, shaped and fired in the furnaces of public university leadership.

Consistent with this objective, we have chosen an approach that is more personal and subjective in style than that adopted and preferred by many of our faculty colleagues. Furthermore, the issues and perspectives discussed in this book are heavily influenced by our experiences in leading public research

universities, that is, those with substantial graduate and professional programs. Of particular concern are the great state universities, which have served as models of truly public institutions, responsible for and responsive to the needs of the citizens who founded and supported them even while seeking to achieve quality comparable to that of the most distinguished private colleges and universities. Although sometimes different in scale and intensity, most of the challenges of public higher education in America are to be found in these flagship state universities. Hence, we believe our discussion will have relevance to other types of public colleges and universities. In any event the diversity of public higher education in America, from local community colleges to regional four-year institutions to doctoral universities to research universities, makes it difficult for us to deal in any but a very general fashion with the entire enterprise.

We begin with a brief introduction to the complexities of public higher education, considering the forces driving change in our society and in higher education in general but focusing on the challenges particular to the public university. Here we believe it is important to consider the characteristics that define the nature of the public university: its public purpose, legal status, governance, public accountability, and financing. We contrast public and private higher education and discuss the relationship between the two. In particular, we discuss the social contract between American society and the public university as higher education has evolved from being regarded as a public good, supported primarily by tax dollars, to being viewed increasingly as a private benefit, dependent upon a diverse array of stakeholders with unique and disparate needs. We also introduce a recurring theme that appears throughout the book: the declining role of public policy in determining the evolution of the public university, as first politics and then market forces have played increasingly dominant roles in shaping our public institutions.

Individual chapters focus on recommendations, strategies, and lessons learned concerning the various challenges and opportunities facing the public university. We begin by considering how the changing needs of our society are redefining the educational, scholarly, and service missions of the university and provide a framework for addressing these shifting roles. Both economic realities and rapidly evolving technology provide a particular challenge to the public university, and we provide a series of recommendations for how universities might finance their activities and prepare for the digital age. Key in this

effort is learning to cope with the rapidly intensifying market forces that threaten to erode the conventional monopolies of the higher education enterprise in America.

Much of the remaining discussion concerns the challenge of leading and governing the public university during this period of change. We identify and discuss the characteristics of the public university which make change particularly difficult: the diverse nature of its various campus communities—students, faculty, staff, and administration; the archaic manner in which it is governed; the ponderous nature of its management and decision-making processes; and the weakness of its leadership, particularly at the presidential level. Here we make the case for rethinking how the public university is governed and led, to make it possible for it to continue to serve our society. We go further to consider the difficult but essential process of university transformation.

Finally, we turn to the future of the public university in America. Here we draw from our experience to consider possible scenarios for the evolution of public higher education. We suggest a proactive approach that will enable public universities both to understand the challenges and opportunities before them and to determine their own paths to the future. In a similar spirit we suggest strategies at the state and federal level which we believe can strengthen public higher education as a resource for future generations.

We are convinced that, while the public university is more important than ever to the future of our nation, it can only maintain its long tradition of service by undergoing significant changes. It is time to move beyond simply analyzing the forces driving change in higher education and to focus instead on strategies that will enable our public universities to serve a rapidly changing America.