The University and Society

We can and must help create a better world, but every opportunity pursued involves a wager on the future.

In choosing as the title of this volume A Larger Sense of Purpose: Higher Education and Society, I meant to convey the notion that universities, like other social institutions and even individuals, ought to serve interests that include but move beyond narrow self-serving concerns. The epigraph of this volume, the Latin phrase non nobis solum, “not for ourselves alone,” echoes this thought. To my regret, this is one of those ideas that, while applauded in principle, is easily lost in the challenge of meeting one’s day-to-day responsibilities. This makes it even more important to pause once in a while to adjust our sails and correct our course.

Public and Private Universities

All higher education institutions, both public and private, both nonprofit and for-profit, and from state colleges to research universities to community colleges to a wide variety of technical and professional schools, serve a public purpose. Considerable variation in quality, purpose, and aspirations exists in each of these sectors. Nevertheless, they each play a distinctive and important role. The resulting heterogeneity of America’s institutions of higher education not only matches the wide spectrum of achievement and aspiration of entering students, but is one of the principal sources of strength and vitality of American higher education. The opportunity for Americans to more fully realize their educational aspirations through a variety of paths and at a number of different points in their life cycle is an important and distinctive aspect of American higher education. The idea
that all young people develop in lockstep, so that at age eighteen we can sort this age cohort into their final positions within the educational opportunity system, runs counter to everything we know about human development and early childhood experience. The American system of higher education offers an unusually large variety of entry points, relatively speaking, to the so-called elite programs. If you do not do so well in high school, you can begin at a community college, but if you do well enough there you can transfer to an excellent university, and if you do well enough there you can participate in a distinguished graduate or professional program. Moreover, there is a healthy flow of human capital and ideas among these sectors. As a result, maintaining strength and quality in each of higher education’s sectors contributes to the strength of every component of the system. In my judgment it would be a mistake for each of these different sectors to lose their distinctiveness by, for example, becoming too much like one another or trying to emulate the so-called elite institutions. Although this tendency is understandable, I believe it should be resisted as a matter of public policy at both the state and the federal level.

Indeed, given the increasing globalization of our social, cultural, economic, and political environment, the quality of American higher education depends not only on sustaining its heterogeneity, but also on the strength and vitality of institutions of higher education elsewhere, which have their own distinctive approaches. The American university continues to be enriched by the flow of talent and ideas from abroad, and it increasingly depends on it, just as talent and ideas from abroad increasingly depend on us. The health and vitality of American higher education will remain unfulfilled if our counterparts abroad are not prospering.

In these lectures, however, I will focus primarily on the American research university, because this is an area of higher education in which I have spent my entire academic career and to which I have given my most careful consideration. Within this sector, however, I will not distinguish between the private and
public research universities because their differences, which are significant, are not central to the particular issues I have chosen to address. My view is that despite some significant contrasts, private and public research universities have an enormous amount in common. Most important, they are members of a common educational and scholarly community. Moreover, they are quite dependent on one another, and faculty, students, ideas, and even academic resources move quickly and relatively freely among them. For the most part, faculty and students who move from one to the other can adapt easily because the basic nature of their work will be largely unaffected. Though senior administrative officials need to relate to somewhat different constituencies, many constituencies, such as students, faculty, alumni, and the federal government, are the same. Of course, one key difference is the special relationship of university officials and trustees of public universities with state government officials.

As I reflect on my own experience first as president of the University of Michigan and then at Princeton, many obvious distinctions come to mind—their differences in size, their relative commitments to professional education, their different but overlapping constituencies. Less noticed, but equally important and interesting, were two important distinctions relating to presidential leadership and overall governance. For the president of a flagship state university such as the University of Michigan, a constant challenge was to convince those groups with political influence in the state (e.g., legislators and governors, various unions, important corporate interests, etc.) not only that their interests and the university’s interests overlapped at least somewhat, but that the university had legitimate objectives of its own that they should recognize and support because these interests also served the citizens of the state. As a result, the university’s objectives and exactly what the university was and who it should serve were always in the process of negotiation.

At Princeton the analogous challenge of mobilizing the university’s constituencies was somewhat different. By and large, the broader Princeton community shared a common set of objec-
tives. Thus the board’s discussions—or any intrauniversity negotiations—were more likely to focus on strategy as opposed to objectives. On the governance front, there were at least two interesting differences. First, Michigan’s regents were elected in partisan statewide elections, whereas Princeton’s were either elected by the alumni body or selected by the board itself. Second, the Michigan board met in public. In both cases, many dedicated and thoughtful persons came to occupy seats on the governing board. However, the Michigan board’s public meetings often provided a venue or platform for the discussion of largely irrelevant but popular public issues and causes that became confused with university business and priorities. Ironically, that meant that, in order to avoid certain public discussion, and as long as a certain level of trust existed between the board and the president, the Michigan board was more likely to delegate its authority to the president.

Trust between the president and the governing board is an essential ingredient in achieving the potential of any American university or college. The establishment and maintenance of this trust is the responsibility of the president and is primarily an educational function. In this respect it is important to acknowledge that although final authority over all matters rests with the board, the board’s responsibility is to use this authority wisely. The board may indeed be in charge, but they are in charge of an institution that serves a public purpose. Presidents must also act judiciously, but any time they believe that board actions present a serious threat to the institution’s informing values, they must say so publicly.

Finally, I return to the two most critical characteristics that public and private universities share: they serve society as both a responsive servant and a thoughtful critic. Thus, although the modern research university must serve society by providing the educational and other programs in high demand, the university must also raise questions that society does not want to ask and generate new ideas that help invent the future, at times even
“pushing” society toward it. In this latter respect the contemporary research university is a prototypical liberal institution, always looking for a better set of arrangements within a wide spectrum of our individual and community lives. These two roles define the nature of the university’s public trust, whether it is a public or private institution. In fact, many public universities have been rapidly privatizing some of their programs in the sense of substituting federal resources, private giving, and tuition revenues for state subsidies. This process, especially marked in areas of professional education such as law and business, has narrowed even further the difference between public and private research universities. We deployed this strategy among others in dealing with the financial crisis we faced in the early 1980s at the University of Michigan, although we seldom referred to it in these terms. Certainly, it was not our preferred path, but it was one line of attack within a broader overall program aimed at sustaining the quality of our programs.

Although public and private research universities meet their various obligations in somewhat different fashions, they share the same central responsibilities as public trusts. The idea of the public trust, in somewhat different form, preceded the research university. For example, in 1833, Harvard’s president, Josiah Quincy, in an appeal to the legislature of Massachusetts, made a point of emphasizing the public character of Harvard’s library assets while the relevant senate committee, in response to his petition, referred to the Corporation of Harvard University as trustees for the public interest. The character or shape of this public trust will change over time. It is shaped most importantly by the public policies, cultural and political traditions, and legal framework of the liberal democracy of which colleges and universities are a part. Thus, when we think about the priorities of the research university we must be attentive not only to its special privileges, from its intellectual and educational autonomy to its special tax status, but also to its public obligations. A private university such as Princeton is not some kind of private social
club conferring benefits, earned or unearned, on its members. The major decisions of private universities must take the public interest into account. Princeton, for example, needs to be continually conscious of how much of its assets, all of which exist to serve a public purpose, should be distributed for the benefit of the current faculty and student body, and how much should be preserved for future generations. The answer to this question should depend, in significant measure, on how this decision will help the university meet its public obligations. For example, it may depend on how accessible the university is currently to talented young people across all socioeconomic classes.

More important, all research universities, public or private, must constantly reevaluate whose interests are being served by their current policies and programs. Everyone’s interests cannot be served at the same time. At Princeton, for example, our most significant initiatives in financial aid and enrollment were driven by just such an examination of the status quo ante. We came to believe that in order to more fully meet our public purpose, we would need to dramatically expand our student financial aid program, substitute grants for loans, make our full financial aid program available to students from abroad, and provide additional opportunity through a modest expansion of our undergraduate enrollment. At Michigan during the difficult financial times of the early 1980s, our judgment was that we could best meet our public obligations by focusing on sustaining the quality of our programs, even at the cost of offering fewer programs. This judgment may or may not have been correct, but we approached the challenge in that spirit. Other institutions with their own distinctive traditions, resources, and aspirations, but facing similar or different challenges, might select quite different initiatives to meet their responsibilities as a public trust. Thus, although financial aid at Princeton is 100 percent need-based, many other research universities, both public and private, believe, quite appropriately, that some merit scholarships are essential to fulfilling their public responsibilities.
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THE DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIETY

It is hardly surprising that Western higher education has transformed itself and its relationship to society a number of times over the last millennium, given that society’s view of itself has also been transformed many times during this same period. A crisis in education is usually caused by a crisis in society that calls into question many existing ideas regarding the central issues of knowledge, culture, and society. The crisis fuels meaningful educational debates and propels changes in educational institutions such as universities. By meaningful debates I mean debates that lead to significant changes in the curriculum. Too often, long, drawn-out, and even bitter debates leave little trace on the learning experience of students. We often forget that it is not our internalized ideas regarding what we teach that matters, but what students learn, what they come to care about, and what they themselves become.

In a rapidly changing world, the social role and form of the university and its programs exist in an almost perpetual state of transition facing constant challenges of leadership and adaptability. For example, the future role of the university will depend, in part, on the particular shape taken by our evolving liberal democracy. Will democracy evolve by focusing its efforts on individual choice and open access, or on the direct provision of economic and social benefits of one kind or another? Alternatively, will our politics focus on trying to find a new position of political equipoise between group and individual rights? Or will the evolving policies of our government focus on the new moral, social, economic, and political issues that globalization is now putting before us? Clearly, many other foci and/or combinations of foci are possible within a broadly liberal democratic form of government. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the notion that scientific progress will bring progress in other dimensions of the human endeavor such as ethics and political arrangements
has any lasting vitality. Although I acknowledge the possibility, I do not in these pages consider the more sobering challenge that liberal democracy, in combination with modern capitalism and modern technology, eventually causes a nation to lose its soul and slide into some form of tyranny within an autocratic state. The key point is that public policies and priorities have an impact on universities. In these essays I have assumed not only that liberal politics will survive, but that whatever its future path, our particular version of liberal politics will continue to have a decisive influence on key aspects of American higher education.

Needless to say, the impetus for change in higher education may also be internal, arising from developments on the scholarly and educational frontier.

In contemporary times, a university education is almost a requirement of a fully expressed citizenship. The university is an essential supplier of products and services on which the society is highly dependent, such as advanced training, expertise of various types, and new ideas. However, the capacity of the university as we know it to maintain such a central role will always remain uncertain and depends on the university’s adaptability, its capacity for leadership, and the evolving nature of other key cultural and political ideas and institutions. The difficulty is that change and adaptation inevitably bring in their wake anxiety, loss, and controversy. Meaningful change generates not only winners and losers, but also a reconfiguration of the values and commitments of the university. There are always constituencies, internal and external, that think that the existing configuration is optimal. Thus, even thoughtful change creates controversy. It always requires courage and commitment from within the university leadership, whether at a department, a school, or a university. At the same time, errors are certain when selecting new paths, and leaders need both the courage to take risks and the wisdom to identify when a mistake has been made. Making the right choices in higher education is something like trying to understand which aspects of avant-garde art are simply different and
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transitory, and which aspects represent a more permanent addition to our cultural patrimony.

I recall with mixed feeling two initiatives, one at Princeton and one at Michigan. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as Michigan’s manufacturing sector faltered (after the “second energy shock”), the state of Michigan and the University of Michigan faced a serious financial crisis. At the University of Michigan we developed a response to this situation that could be loosely characterized as “smaller but better.” The idea was that, given external circumstances, the only way we could continue to enhance the quality of our programs was to have fewer of them. This involved both dropping our commitments to some perfectly reasonable and worthy activities and increasing our commitments to others. Although the general strategy was widely accepted in principle, it was extremely difficult to implement because few members of our community thought that they would be personally affected. When particular decisions were made there was fierce resistance among those negatively affected and little support from the strategy’s beneficiaries. In time, however, this approach was widely appreciated by most, but on a personal level it would have been much easier for leadership at all levels to simply let the average quality of our programs slowly diminish.

At Princeton in the early 1990s I began to think that, in order to sustain the quality of the undergraduate experience, we should increase the number of undergraduates from abroad. The reasons: increased globalization and the fact that many Princeton students had their first postgraduation experience abroad. Increasing the number of students from abroad would, in our judgment, improve the undergraduate experience for all our students. The vehicle we chose to accomplish this was to continue our competitive admissions process but fully open our financial aid program to students from abroad. Harvard had had such a practice for many years. The idea was immediately popular with our faculty and students, but because we were about to launch a capital campaign I went around the country explaining the idea to our alumni. The reaction was bimodal. Some thought
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such an initiative self-evident and overdue and offered to help by providing new endowments for the purpose. Others, however, became outraged, arguing that too many deserving American students might be deprived or that we could not get reliable financial information for our need-based financial aid program. The debate quickly became polarized. We decided, therefore, to approach our new objective in steps and see what happened. In the end, our alumni widely accepted the program but not before considerable acrimony and accusations of various sorts passed under the bridge.

At its best the contemporary American research university is a much more audacious idea than the Colonial college. It is a place where learning, knowledge, skills, and traditions are preserved, reevaluated, and transmitted; where new ideas, scholars, and teachers are born; and where interests and cultural commitments of all kinds meet and inform one another. From a more historical perspective, it is a place where the achievements, hopes, and interests of our recovered past meet and interact with those of the present as we shape our cultural traditions for the future. The contemporary research university, therefore, can also be thought of as holding a continuing conversation with both past and future generations regarding those matters that are truly significant.

In prosaic terms the three principal tasks of the university are the preservation, transmission, and advancement of knowledge. These tasks and the freedom to interpret what they mean, however, are always in transition. At times the university’s social role has been to serve as a bastion of the status quo and a defender of the interests and values of those currently in power. The medieval university, for example, after a relatively brief period of independence, quickly became captive to the interests of the church and ruling elites, although there were always some heroic souls who fought for the application of independent logical analysis in matters of scholarship. Their programs, attitudes, and commitments fully reflected this subservient status. To some extent the same could be said of America’s Colonial colleges. At
other times, however, universities have been a force for change, playing a significant role in society’s critical self-examination, helping to allow a shift in the allocation of resources and power. In these moments the university becomes a truly liberal and liberated institution. This was true, for example, for certain German universities during the first half of the nineteenth century and has been increasingly true of the American research university in the post–World War II era.

In retrospect, it is quite startling how effectively the Colonial colleges, the early land grant universities, and other entirely new private institutions such as Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Chicago, and Cal Tech mobilized themselves in the later nineteenth century to provide an ever broader set of services. They expanded and redefined undergraduate education and moved quickly to monopolize a good deal of advanced professional education, becoming barely a half-century later key components of the nation’s research and development enterprise. None of these developments was preordained. Indeed, American higher education on the eve of the Civil War seemed an unlikely foundation for such developments. Left to their own devices without the strong leadership of the newer institutions, it is unlikely that the Colonial colleges would have responded in such an agile and imperialistic fashion.

For the foreseeable future, existing colleges and universities will be faced with the challenge of sustaining society’s most important values, demonstrating sufficient adaptability to fill new and/or modified roles, and exerting sufficient leadership to help society shape new cultural commitments and expand others. Although this portfolio of responsibilities represents a significant challenge for faculty, administrators, and trustees, a great deal is at stake, namely, the continued social relevance of institutions of higher education. If such leadership should falter, it would not be the first time that a significant social institution was replaced, in whole or in part, by other institutions better able to articulate and meet society’s evolving needs. Will the current American research university have the will and the courage to
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respond as thoughtfully to the changes that are surely ahead of us? Within universities the forces protecting the status quo are always strong and ready with a portfolio of reasons why change is too risky. The more distinguished the university, the stronger these forces. However, in a society such as ours, sustained distinction requires a sustained commitment to change.

At any historical moment, a great deal about society’s views can be learned from that society’s particular array of institutions of higher education and their programs. By observing admission and enrollment decisions we can learn who society believes should receive the most advanced education. By observing the educational and scholarly commitments we can learn something of the importance of traditional values, the weight attached to innovation, the most vital sources of knowledge and wisdom, the value placed on particular cognitive abilities, the most highly prized virtues, and the nature of the broad hopes and aspirations of the society itself.

Typically, in a liberal democracy different groups in society have quite diverse educational objectives. These different objectives are a critical reflection of our pluralistic and rapidly changing community, but our society cannot support a range of institutions as wide as our varied preferences. Conflicts between satisfying individual needs and the fulfillment of social obligations are inevitable. A liberal society is always in the process of locating the precarious balance between protecting individual freedom and ensuring sufficient solidarity. Even a liberal society cannot accommodate the entire spectrum of diverse beliefs because almost every right involves a claim against others. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that there is ongoing controversy regarding the appropriate shape of the curricula and scholarly commitments of the institutions of higher education. Nor is it astonishing that these controversies are most heated in societies, such as ours, characterized by rapid change and a rapidly accumulating knowledge base, in which higher education has become almost a requirement to be eligible for a full set of opportunities.
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Given the current pace of change and the complex contemporary mission of the American research university, certain continuing pressures on these institutions are inevitable, including the tensions between and among:

1. Current circumstances and aspirations
2. The university’s role as educator (requiring closeness and responsiveness to society) and critic (requiring distance from and skepticism of the status quo)
3. Specialization and integration
4. The demands for scholarship, the demands for education, and the demands for other services the university provides
5. Demands for diversity and independence vis-à-vis rising demands for social solidarity, responsiveness, and community.

The “right” profile of any university will vary by institution and geography, but in all cases will remain elusive and controversial. In a sector as heterogeneous as contemporary U.S. higher education, the idea of civic purposes must be understood as requiring different responses from differently situated institutions. However, none of these institutions should be misconstrued as institutions designed to preserve a portfolio of special entitlements granted to students, teachers, and scholars, yet withheld from other citizens. The special freedoms and privileges enjoyed by university communities, whether public or private, must be seen as mechanisms to enable universities to meet their responsibilities more effectively and more equitably. The intellectual and educational autonomy granted the university and the privilege of tenure are hardly ancient rights or rites, but rather instruments through which the university can more effectively pursue its public purpose. Tenure, for example, is an instrument to protect the faculty from inappropriate interference with the freedom to pursue their intellectual and educational agenda. Correspondingly, it is the faculty’s responsibility to use this freedom to critically reexamine our current set of beliefs and commitments in their areas of expertise. Lapses in fulfilling this responsibility undermine the future of this idea more, in my judgment, than the occa-
sion. A professional misinformed critique of tenure as simple job security. The intellectual and educational autonomy of the university and the faculty should be viewed in a similar fashion, not as an ancient right that must be defended but rather in terms of its current public purpose. That is, in what way does the autonomy of universities and their faculty serve and promote the underlying civic responsibilities of higher education? There are compelling reasons for society to continue to support these so-called privileges, but they are seldom publicly articulated.

Moreover, in the evolving world environment, the civic functions or public purposes of universities are perceived by many to have crossed national boundaries. Many universities, therefore, have become increasingly international institutions, especially as regards their student bodies, their faculty, and their research programs. For good or ill, however, their support base has remained much more local. It is the responsibility of the university community to exert the moral and intellectual energy necessary to convince its local supporters that this transformation serves everyone’s interests. Indeed, I believe that the growing interdependency between the American research university and its counterparts abroad provides a useful model for other American institutions in an emerging world environment in which economic, intellectual, and cultural leadership will be much more widely and uniformly distributed across the globe.

As one imagines the future of the American university, it is quite clear that its functions and responsibilities will once again be transformed, at least partially, by new advances in science and technology, by our changing understanding of the human condition, by changing perspectives on how to live a meaningful life, by new ideas regarding our responsibilities and relationships with societies elsewhere in the world, and by evolving social views regarding the importance and use of new knowledge and advanced training. The historical record makes clear that eventually no facet of higher education is exempt from the impact of social change. The institutional history of American higher education reflects at its very base the need for a continuing exam-
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ination of the relationship between the polity and the educational institution. Unlike many of the great European universities, the first American colleges were established not by independent groups of faculty and students or by royal initiative, but by private and public communities, and they were meant to serve important civic purposes. This was, perhaps, the first of the distinctively American contributions to the social structure of higher education.

One key characteristic of the American research university that I believe must be retained whatever the changes that lie ahead is its dual role as both society’s servant and society’s critic. These universities must, therefore, continue to provide programs that the society itself has identified as important as well as raising those questions and issues that society does not want to address. In some ways, universities can meet their responsibilities only by being a nuisance to the existing order of things. Given that for the research university there are no uncontested ideas, it may well be inevitable that it will continue to exist in an unresolved state of anxiety with the status quo. The university will need to continue to provide those programs demanded by the society that supports it, while resisting the temptation to simply mold the younger generation in the image of its elders. Inherent in such a concept is the belief that the future is a carrier of new possibilities for humankind.

RETAINING OUR SPECIAL ROLE: THE CHALLENGE OF NEW PARTNERS, NEW SPONSORS, NEW ARRANGEMENTS, AND COMMERCIALIZATION

One of the more serious issues many universities now face is the growing sway of private for-profit entities in the worlds of education and scholarship. Perhaps the most notable sources of this influence in recent years have come from the increase in joint ventures between universities and for-profit enterprises in engineering, biomedical research, and, increasingly, teaching. These
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Alliances have also been facilitated by institutional developments and/or speculative environments in capital markets of the 1990s that allowed early-stage ideas to be transformed into hard cash rather quickly. Finally, there is the cautionary tale of “big time” intercollegiate athletics, which has become a thoroughly integrated component of the nation’s commercial entertainment business. Indeed, in certain areas we in higher education are experiencing an almost relentless growth in the commercialization of education and scholarship.

This development has many interrelated causes. In part it is a result of the growth of for-profit institutions of higher education that have found educational niches that do not require direct subsidization, although their students are often dependent on the availability of federal and state financial aid. In part it is a result of developments on the scientific frontier and in financial markets that are changing the balance of forces between for-profit and not-for-profit research enterprises. In the last two decades, for example, industry’s sponsorship of the nation’s research and development has grown from a share of less than half to more than two-thirds. Within the university, the share of research sponsored by corporations has almost doubled during this same period. This increase is partly a result of explicit public policies aimed at the elimination of barriers between academic and industrial research, and partly a result of the increasing commercialization of intellectual property. In the period 1995–2000, industrial expenditures on research and development grew almost threefold while university expenditures for research and development grew by only one-third! This commercialization is creating both new opportunities and new barriers to free and open communication among members of the scientific community. Substantial disagreement remains as to where, as a matter of principle or social utility, to lodge the ownership of new ideas. Does it belong more with society at large or with individual proprietors? The resolution of this matter depends in part on whether or not the private ownership of new ideas, in either copyright or patent form, is defined as a temporary or quasi-permanent privilege. Finally, the greater presence of for-profit
enterprises within the academy results from the never-ending quest of both faculty and administrators, acting in isolation from each other and from colleagues at other universities, to multiply the resources at their disposal.

For any university acting alone it is a relatively straightforward matter to define expected costs and benefits. Such calculations ignore, however, the costs for higher education as whole. Moreover, it is easier for the university acting alone to identify the benefits of increasing its involvement with private markets—which are mainly internal and accrue in the short run—than to identify the costs, which are more difficult to assess, lie further in the future, and are more likely to fall on the shoulders of the community of research universities as a whole rather than on individual institutions. This is especially the case in a radically decentralized higher education system such as ours. As a result, important collective goods that are central to the ability of the academic community as a whole to meet its responsibilities to the worlds of education and scholarship could be compromised or lost. There is nothing wrong in principle with joint efforts between universities and for-profit enterprises. Indeed, substantial societal benefits may result from such cooperation. Nonetheless, however, seductive these activities may be, we must examine them carefully, because although the short-term costs are minimal, the possible long-term costs are easy to overlook.

For good or ill, the increased presence of for-profit entities in education and research has altered the incentive structures in an arena where until recently universities had been enjoying a quasi monopoly of sorts. Of course new ideas have always come from a variety of sources and there have always been a variety of venues for advanced training. The problems with these new arrangements however, go beyond the natural controversy about the just distribution of costs and benefits between partners in a joint venture. There are reasons why for-profit and not-for-profit institutions were set up under different arrangements: either because their social roles were different or because the incentives of private markets were not thought to be appropriate to the public purpose of certain entities. Simply put, not all activities
and relationships in our society are appropriately situated in the commercial realm. I am particularly concerned with the impact of these joint ventures on the roles of the university as an independent source of knowledge and as a thoughtful critic of society. In the biomedical sciences, for example, it is very difficult to find disinterested researchers to evaluate new research. In short, society may not always be well served by merging the interests and priorities of the university with those of for-profit enterprises. Markets may maximize output and provide unparalleled efficiency and they may help preserve the “natural” rights to private property and freedom from coercion, but they cannot provide for important public goods and may, in fact, generate ethically unacceptable outcomes.

At the same time, it may be healthy to remind ourselves that in the early 1950s, many within the university community worried whether their increasing dependence on the federal government, especially in the area of research, would threaten the intellectual and educational independence of universities and faculty. This joint venture is now about fifty years old, and most observers believe that it has been beneficial to both parties. Perhaps the independence of universities has been somewhat protected by the competitive, open peer-review system under which federal sponsorship of research is allocated in the United States. Some critics of this system maintain that those already at the federal trough are setting the rules for the benefit of the current generation of “established” investigators and institutions. There is some truth to this, but it also provides the country with much greater assurance both that government resources are being well used and that the independence of universities is at least somewhat protected.

**Biomedical Research**

Consider first the growing influence of private for-profit activities in the arena of biomedical research. As the twenty-first century begins to unfold, both the nature and context of biomedical science are changing dramatically. In part the nature of biomed-
cal science is being transformed by the imperatives arising on the scientific frontier. In addition, the context of the biomedical sciences is being reshaped by changes in the structure of those institutions that sponsor and/or nurture the entire enterprise. The resulting structure of opportunities and incentives facing biomedical scientists has the potential to change the relationships among the communities of biomedical investigators in academia, industry, and government, as well as between investigators and the institutions nurturing their work.

On the scientific frontier, a great deal of cutting-edge work now requires, for example, more expensive instruments and highly specialized facilities, high-throughput technologies and the assembling of large interdisciplinary teams. The availability of sequence databases, for example, is revolutionizing the manner in which the structure and function of bio-molecules are studied. Large databases and biological repositories and the associated software tools have become essential resources for investigators. As a result biocomputing and bioinformatics infrastructures have become indispensable tools for processing vast amounts of data as well as for modeling biological processes.

It seems clear from these few examples that the nature of scientific developments on the biomedical frontier requires new approaches as well as new institutional arrangements. Perhaps responsibilities within the biomedical enterprise should be distributed differently among the key actors—universities, academic health centers, pharmaceutical companies, government laboratories and agencies, federal sponsors, and nonprofit research groups. For example, should projects involving the use of high-throughput technologies be left to industry? Perhaps the current disciplinary organization of the biomedical sciences should be abandoned. I have some sympathy for the idea that developments across the scientific frontier require the reorientation of a good deal of science and science education. Nowadays more and more scientists need to feel at home with biology, mathematics, and computation as well as the physical sciences. Moreover, substantial aspects of our research efforts in biology now require cooperation and participation as well with the so-
cial sciences and even philosophy. Contemporary developments in genetics, after all, may not only change our understanding of the notions of human identity, human equality, and human freedom, but cause us to rethink the standards and norms through which we organize our society. All these matters certainly need to be informed by science, but must also be informed by resources from other areas of human understanding.

It is claimed by some that the rapidly increased sponsorship of research by for-profit companies at the nation’s academic health centers threatens to undermine the faculty’s academic freedom in biomedical science. Some suggest that the research agenda of the university faculty has become dominated by purely commercial considerations as opposed to intellectual values and the public good. Whether the public welfare is best served by a research agenda shaped by contemporary market forces or by the scholarly priorities of a relatively independent professoriate is an open issue. I am convinced that there are social benefits to a mixed strategy that retains a role for both. Although I find quite astonishing the degree to which university faculty have protected the academic interests of their institutions and colleagues, it is difficult to find any faculty member in the biomedical sciences who does not have a link to a for-profit entity, either as a recipient of research funds or as a consultant regarding the development of new products. Moreover, the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, which allows universities to patent inventions that were financed by funds from governmental sources such as the National Institutes of Health, has catapulted universities and segments of their faculty deeply into the commercial sector, changing the very nature and extent of university-industry relations. Although the impact of these factors can be exaggerated, it is clear that academic medicine, for example, is no longer as autonomous as it once was. Academia’s relationship with for-profit enterprises now extends well beyond the individual scientific investigator to include a large cohort of important university decision makers, including presidents and trustees. Nevertheless, there are few rules, regulations, or well-established precedents to provide appropriate
oversight to the inevitable financial conflicts of interest for both institutions and institutional decision makers.

The question remains: Are these changes, on balance, a good or a bad thing? From one perspective, this increase in collaboration is a good thing in that it more fully integrates the nation’s biomedical and other resources in a joint effort to combat disease and otherwise improve the human condition. From another perspective, it creates a virtual flood of conflicts of interest within academic institutions, where it becomes less and less clear whose interests are being served by the collaboration. Certainly, the new alliance undermines traditional notions of faculty and university independence, the full participation of faculty in the intellectual commons, and the role of university faculty as disinterested creators and arbiters of knowledge. It may ultimately undermine the reputation of universities for independence and openness and eventually reduce public trust in the entire university enterprise. Indeed, as more and more scientists occupy roles in both academia and industry, the public, increasingly concerned about possible sources of bias in “expert” opinion, has become less certain where to turn for truly disinterested opinions.

There can be little doubt that the increasing number of alliances between faculty and universities and various commercial entities, particularly pharmaceutical companies and biotechnology ventures, supported by venture capital has accelerated the transfer of scientific discoveries into practice. As a result, the flow of money to investigators and universities has increased, creating incentives for ever more vigorous pursuit of intellectual property rights. Understandably, this has increased the desire of many faculty and their universities to increase the likelihood of financial gain from their participation in the biomedical arena. Reinforcing these trends is the diminishing capacity of academic health centers to finance their own faculty’s research.

One result of all this is an incentive for university-based investigators to make overly optimistic claims about real and potential discoveries. Another, more important one is the refusal of faculty to share material with colleagues, the sale of licenses be-
coming the primary vehicle to share knowledge. The biomedical enterprise, in other words, is undergoing a general retreat from the very idea of the commons of the mind, which for decades had defined both it and the university. This retreat has become serious enough to provide a number of serious academic based efforts to reopen the scientific literature and promote the greater sharing of intellectual and other scientific resources. For example, the Public Library of Science is a recently formed nonprofit organization of scientists now publishing its own journals and committed to making new scientific ideas, methods, results, and conclusions freely available to the public. There is widespread recognition that the vitality of the scientific enterprise requires access to the evolving knowledge base. Indeed, in 1992 the International Network for the Availability of Publication was formed to support such access on an international basis. Other forces, however, continue to pull in the opposite direction. In the public policy arena, for example, the U.S. government is using legislation and trade agreements to strengthen patent and copyright protection even further.

In summary, the extraordinarily rapid growth in science and technology, together with the closing temporal distance between certain traditional academic activities and commercial opportunities, has placed some strain on existing mores and practices in higher education, perhaps undermining the university’s role as society’s independent critic and arbiter. Given the character of current research practices, the necessity of disentangling individual versus community claims to intellectual property has become ever more pressing.

Although issues surrounding claims to intellectual property within a university context remain contested, I believe that the development of intellectual property is best thought of as the joint effort of many members of the university community and beyond, as well as the university itself, which has usually invested considerable resources in the matter. We often forget that even the idea of personal property is historically and culturally contingent, and may or may not be just. Our notions of personal
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property, of what we consider private, and of what we consider public matters are not culturally or economically neutral. Similarly, the notion that ideas can be appropriated as private intellectual property is also historically and socially contingent. As with personal property, it may be either a productive or an unproductive social concept. A good deal depends on our objectives. My own view is that the development of new knowledge is for the most part a collective social enterprise and we should use caution in assigning personal property rights in this arena.

In any case, as with all new ideas developed as joint projects, it remains difficult to assign relative weights to the various property claims. Still, reasonable solutions should be available if we can keep our attention focused on the needs of the academic community and society as a whole.

We should understand that these basic problems arise because the teaching and research activities of the faculty are now perceived to have substantial monetary value to interests outside the university. This value raises the question not only of the equitable allocation of potential revenues, but also of the legitimate stake of the university and members of the university community in the allegiance of the faculty to the institution. The university has a legitimate obligation to protect the intellectual capital of the community against expropriation by institutions or individuals who seek a free ride on the work and resources of the entire community.

In an earlier time, when revenue streams, if any, were more speculative or relatively abstract concepts, there seemed little point in worrying about these matters. Indeed, in more innocent times these incentives were often thought to help support the university’s overall mission. Today, however, no financial incentive exists to induce any party to rebalance the status quo. Meanwhile, there are too few leaders in positions within the faculty or administration pushing to revitalize the university’s most important academic values. On a less sobering note, what now threatens to happen within academic science has already happened in intercollegiate athletics. Here, commercial interests
have become dominant and no one has any financial incentive to change the situation; meanwhile, few seem to place enough value on the accumulating dangers to the university’s most distinctive social functions to call for some change. I will return to this issue later in this essay.

Teaching

A somewhat analogous situation has arisen in the arena of teaching. Developments in computing and information technologies, which are beginning to enrich pedagogy on campus in important ways, also offer the prospect that campus-based faculty can effectively teach others “at a distance.” To the extent that these latter activities proceed under the sponsorship of external organizations, a number of thorny issues may arise regarding the ownership of the intellectual property involved, the use of the university’s name, quality control, conflicts of interest and/or commitment, and the accommodation of competing claims to any revenue streams involved.

The nation’s faculties have built up an enormous store of materials and ideas that provide the overall structure and content of their courses. Given the new technological capacity to convert this capital into instructional programs to be delivered over the Internet, private interests have mobilized the financial capital needed to capture a new revenue stream from students unable to study on campus. This reformation is in some ways similar to the new horizons opened to the nation’s recording companies when a new technology made it possible and profitable to convert their accumulated library of recordings into the new compact disk format. A closer analogy, using an old technology that also provides a format for teaching “at a distance,” is the writing of textbooks by faculty. In this latter case, long-established traditions treat the intellectual property involved as belonging exclusively to the faculty member involved. This arrangement has worked well, although it has always been understood that the intellectual property incorporated in the textbook was at least
partly a social product that included many contributions from colleagues and students as well.

The new technology supporting the Internet and the new possibilities it creates for “teaching at a distance” are sufficiently radical that many believe it useful to revisit existing traditions regarding the ownership of the intellectual property involved. The particular question arises: Who owns the accumulated instructional capital now ready to be converted into a radically new format?

Typically, two sets of university policies are involved in this issue. First is the set of policies that speak to conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment. Second is the set of policies that deal with copyright and patents. Copyright and patent policies of universities are not completely coherent or consistent because they have been shaped by “historic rights” of quite different sorts. I have already outlined the policy with respect to textbooks. The policy with respect to patents has quite a different form, because historically universities have claimed ownership of this form of intellectual property. The property claim with respect to patents stems from the university’s role as the legal entity that receives funds from external sources and serves as a kind of trustee on behalf of both sponsor and researcher particularly in the area of scientific and engineering research. Thus we live with two polar solutions: In the case of books and other copyrightable materials, the individual faculty are granted ownership of the intellectual property, whereas in the case of patents, ownership is presumed to fall to the university itself. Given these remarkably different approaches plus the ambiguity concerning whether software is copyrightable or patentable, it is clear that university policies regarding copyright and patent as well as conflict of commitment/interest may now need clarification, reinterpretation, and/or modification.

For example, existing policies that limit the amount of teaching faculty can do outside the university need to be clarified in relation to “distance or Internet learning.” Also, do these policies apply to teaching outside the academic year? As with all new
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situations, I believe we should approach these and associated questions in a flexible manner; although we may not yet fully understand the issues, we should not be paralyzed while awaiting fuller understanding. For example, it may be useful to ask ourselves which of these nontraditional faculty teaching activities require mere disclosure to departmental leadership and which require a more formal agreement between the university and the faculty member involved. Similarly, we need to clarify how to apply the university’s copyright and patent policies to “distance teaching,” especially when such programs require some ongoing interaction with faculty and/or students, or to “courseware” more generally. In addition, we may need to broaden our definition of teaching if we are to be confident that these new activities support rather than undermine the university’s core mission.

Regardless of the technology used, the mere fact that a university faculty member teaches elsewhere potentially undermines demand for the institution’s campus-based offerings. Perhaps the key dividing line with such “conflicts of commitment” is whether faculty interaction and feedback is required to carry the instruction forward. With respect to copyright ownership of the materials, perhaps the key distinction is whether the university has made a specific additional commitment of resources to that particular project. When it has not, ownership of copyright would remain with the faculty member(s). In either case, appropriate recognition of the joint nature of the product should be recognized by some type of formal agreement and/or policy. Meanwhile, the university should remember that asserting even partial ownership claims over materials such as books, in which the faculty has enjoyed certain “historic rights,” is much more difficult than asserting copyright claims where new technologies are involved.

To summarize: In the area of copyright material, one could assume faculty ownership whereas in the area of patents, one could assume university ownership—except for unusual circum-

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stances in either case. Such circumstances would include situations where substantial additional university resources have been invested in the project; special university-owned collections have been used; the university’s name is being used to promote the distribution of the product; or the university’s approval is implied. (The university should probably require both disclosure and permission for the use of its name in any form.)

To me, the key objective is to find some way to locate the mutually beneficial arrangements between faculty and university that promote their interests in tandem. Any policy ought to include a dispute resolution mechanism that involves representatives of the faculty.

Further confusing the issue is the current ambiguity of the nation’s patent and copyright laws regarding intellectual property in diverse areas such as text, software, algorithms, and/or DNA molecules. It is not yet clear whether our current patent system can adapt successfully to the new technologies being developed, distinguish between the claims of novelty and utility and their reality, provide appropriate incentives for the growing service sector, insure the dissemination of knowledge, and achieve a level of harmonization with the patent systems that govern our trading partners. The extraordinary pace of innovation at both the laboratory and institutional level certainly raises serious concerns. Patents are more eagerly sought and defended than ever, even though they are more expensive to acquire and protect against infringement. In fact, there is great uncertainty regarding the ultimate impact of our traditional patent system outside traditional areas such as manufacturing and agricultural chemicals. Moreover there is great uncertainty about what kinds of innovation might be eligible for patent protection and the increasing costs of patent litigation. Taken together, these costs and uncertainties could discourage innovation and investment. Indeed, economic theory is ambivalent about the impact of the patent system on innovation and overall economic welfare. My main point, however, is that the drive by faculty and their universities
to gain the fullest economic benefits of any discovery within a university setting even though they are already heavily subsidized greatly complicates existing relationship by generating serious conflicts of interest. This is one more area where the actions of a single university or group of universities can have important effects on other institutions. Some novel ideas to deal with these new factors are urgently required.

**Intercollegiate Athletics**

In terms of revenue and expenditure, “big time” intercollegiate athletics is getting bigger and bigger. Overall, however, there are many more financial losers than winners among intercollegiate athletic programs. Too many university presidents and their boards overestimate the probability that their programs will be financially successful. Moreover, the evidence suggests that even successful programs generate little in the way of increasing philanthropy or improving the university’s ability to attract better students. Increased revenues and expenditures can be traced primarily to the increased commercialization of intercollegiate athletics. Although “big time” intercollegiate athletics has become a major commercial activity relatively recently, it has been a source of angst within the academic community for many years.

The appropriate role of athletics in higher education depends on a variety of cultural factors that derive not only from one’s view of athletics, but from one’s view of the role and function of universities. There are, therefore, a variety of views regarding the place of athletics in institutions of higher education. For some, athletics is, at most, just another extracurricular activity no different than the glee club or student newspaper. For them, intercollegiate or intramural athletic programs are appropriate parts of the university community but hardly deserving of the resources devoted to them and certainly not with the risks involved in allowing them to become integrated with the nation’s commercial entertainment business. To others, athletics is one of the performing arts, perhaps like dance, opera, or musical
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performances. For them, it actually has a certain academic value delivered to the mind, and body. As such it should be supported (i.e., subsidized) in the same manner as other academic programs, and should aim for distinction but need have no connection to the nation’s commercial entertainment network. For still others, athletics may be seen as professional training intimately tied to the demands of professional athletes. In this case, however, it is not at all clear why it should be part of higher education. Indeed, none of these approaches require tying intercollegiate athletics to the commercial entertainment business, and because it is always a challenge to accommodate both commercial and academic interests, it remains a puzzle how the current structure arose. The explanation, I believe, lies in the university’s inexhaustible demand for resources and the desire of university leadership to be regarded as a successful participant in an important American enthusiasm.

In truth, why should an institution whose primary devotion to education and scholarship devote so much effort to competitive athletics? To many, the cultural process that led to this result is a mystery. To others, sport and physical fitness have had an association since the time of Plato’s academy (which was located next to the gymnasium). Indeed, the ancient Greek notion that physical fitness supported intellectual acuity and even moral fitness still has resonance. Yet such Greek ideals were absent from the minds and hearts of the founders of both the medieval universities and the Colonial universities of America. The extent to which intercollegiate athletics has become such a prominent aspect of American universities’ public image and the unusual devotion of so many of its students, staff, alumni, citizens, and even faculty are distinctive and new. Many in the American academic community believe that intercollegiate athletics, however valuable for both participants and spectators, exists on the margins of university life. Yet no other university activity takes up as much printed space in the daily newspapers, occupies as much verbal space in conversations of alumni, state legislatures, and citizens, or inspires such widespread fervor. Competitive sports
are popular everywhere, but only in America are they so closely associated with universities.

So what, many may note, if intercollegiate athletics takes the lion’s share of space in the popular media? They take up a small part of the budgets and staffs of most universities, and the core missions of American higher education have prospered; indeed, many believe that the United States has developed the best system of higher education in the world. Indeed, it is my strong impression that although most of my presidential colleagues are acutely aware of the problems in intercollegiate athletics, they also perceive that the cost of dealing with both external and internal constituencies on these matters is not worth the benefit. Better by far to focus on improving the university’s education and research programs. Other observers from the academic community, however, feel that even relatively small activities that undermine the integrity or basic values of an institution represent a threat to its social legitimacy. A little history may help clarify some of these issues.

Intercollegiate athletics was not always such an integral part of American higher education. Indeed, in the Colonial college, organized competitive athletics was actively frowned on, and the first intercollegiate games were student-sponsored events often played in quasi-secret locations. The growing prominence of intercollegiate athletics is a twentieth-century phenomena. It coincided with the gradual transformation of the antebellum college into the more secular, vastly expanded institutions of American higher education that we know today. Leaders of American higher education in the early years of the twentieth century were probably as astonished at the drawing power of competitive sports and its grasp on the imagination of their constituencies as they were of the rapid secularization of their institutions. In any case, they soon became addicted to it. For decades, colleges and universities have systematically expanded their commitment to intercollegiate athletics. In the process, they have formed groups such as the various athletic conferences and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to regulate competition.
and to award memberships in particular coalitions. Although such self-regulation may be quite sensible, the perceived value of winning has always provided an incentive to explore how the agreed-on rules of engagement could be “bent.” In retrospect, it seems clear that whatever the source of the incentive to “bend” the rules or otherwise behave hypocritically, universities have shown an almost relentless determination to do so and the cumulative effect has undoubtedly damaged their integrity.

Some consider the development of intercollegiate athletics, whatever its other problems and/or dividends, a successful strategy of responding to a major American passion in order to gain public support for colleges and universities that they must otherwise forgo. If this particular dividend allows us to pursue our primary objectives in education and scholarship, should we not perhaps overlook the inconveniences relating to our integrity?

In the years that I was president of the University of Michigan, I traveled around the state a great deal. Everywhere I went, I found children playing in schoolyards wearing University of Michigan jerseys; often they imagined themselves representing the University of Michigan at some crucial juncture in a key athletic contest. The same was true of teenagers and many adults. This identification through sports was perhaps the only way for the University to remain part of the daily imagination of alumni as well as a wide spectrum of citizens of the state of Michigan.

I vividly recall several trips to Pasadena when Michigan was playing in the Rose Bowl. In the evening preceding the game, a pep rally would be held in one of the large ballrooms in Los Angeles. The highlight of the evening was the truly talented 250-person Michigan marching band playing, at full volume, endless repetitions of the Michigan fight song while five thousand sophisticated alumni from every walk of life pleaded with them not to stop! Somehow Nobel prizes do not elicit such animation . . . although I hope they elicit even greater admiration.

When I became president of Princeton, one of my first surprises was the amount of alumni mail I received from Princeton alumni on the subject of intercollegiate athletics. I had assumed,
quite naively, that intercollegiate athletics in the Ivy League would have a lower profile. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, although the issues were quite different from those I had encountered in the Big Ten. Indeed, it quickly became apparent that in some ways intercollegiate athletics was much more important at Princeton than at Michigan! On reflection, the reasons were simple. Princeton fielded many more teams than Michigan did, with an undergraduate student body about one-sixth the size. As a result, the number both of athletes recruited and of students participating in intercollegiate athletics formed a much higher proportion of the student body than at Michigan, and the proportion of Princeton alumni who had participated in intercollegiate athletics was also much larger than that of Michigan alumni. The proportion of participating students is critically important, because its relative size determines its potential impact on the institution’s academic program. For institutions such as Princeton, sustaining the quality of their academic program places considerably more constraints on the academic profile of recruited intercollegiate athletes and, therefore, on the possibility of being competitive at the national level, because usually there is a negative correlation between athletic ability/motivation/talent and its academic equivalent.

Organized and competitive college athletics unquestionably benefits many young men and women and other members of the broader community. Enthusiasts claim that participation in intercollegiate sports can build admirable qualities of character such as self-sacrifice, discipline, focus, and the capacity to work with others toward a common objective. I have no doubt that this is often the case, although such traits can also be achieved in intramural sports, alternative athletic pursuits, and many other activities that require dedication, teamwork, and hard work. Moreover, competitive athletes may also cultivate other less admirable traits such as the determination to win at any cost (including the use of banned substances to enhance performance), and a rejection of the university’s core academic values. In fact, I believe there are unavoidable tensions between the commercial
for-profit entertainment world of which “big time” intercollegiate athletics has become an integral part and an academic world that takes seriously its role to provide independent intellectual and moral leadership.

An ample and growing body of evidence indicates that this tension has already led many universities not only to adopt hypocritical attitudes and double standards in dealing with different members of their community, but to tolerate, over considerable periods of time, a good deal of antisocial and immoral behavior. Students are quite expert at understanding the difference between what we profess and what we do. The moral lessons we teach on our campuses come from actions, not propaganda. Athletics gets a good deal of public attention, but so do the many ethical lapses of students, coaches, administrators, university trustees, and occasionally faculty as they relate to the university’s athletic programs.

The fact is that it may be impossible to be competitive in the athletic/entertainment business and also to stay true to the stated rules and principles of intercollegiate athletics. Commercial incentives in a “winner-take-all” marketplace not only may overwhelm the academic and moral integrity of the institutions involved, but also may involve the serious exploitation of some student athletes. Finally, as long as antitrust laws seem to prohibit the NCAA or other joint university efforts from regulating the commercial activities of its members, there may be no effective vehicle for reform. The Supreme Court has already opined that “big time” intercollegiate athletics is a commercial activity connected to the entertainment business. With almost sixty universities recording annual expenditures between twenty and sixty million dollars financed by university subsidies, ticket sales, television revenue, bowl game revenues, and various franchise arrangements, it certainly sounds like a commercial activity to me. Thus the very success of the enterprise as a commercial activity may eventually undermine the capacity of universities to place cooperative limits of any kind on the nature of the competition involved.
Despite the extraordinary growth in revenues generated by intercollegiate athletics, almost all universities and colleges must still subsidize their athletic programs. The vast majority of the increased revenues have gone to the expansion of intercollegiate program expenses stemming from the increased length of the season, increased travel budgets, increased salaries for coaches, increased athletic department staffs, and, in the last two decades, the expansion of the number of women’s teams. Thus, although there is a great deal of rhetoric regarding the vast sums of money that intercollegiate athletics generates for the university, the facts are considerably more complex. It seems to me that if anyone is exploited in this process, it is probably the athletes in the so-called “big time” or revenue-generating sports, particularly football and men’s basketball. Do these athletes receive what they deserve from the enterprise? I expect the answer would be different depending on the institution.

Although we may yet find a way to mitigate the worst aspects of the current system in “big time” intercollegiate athletics, it remains a cautionary tale regarding the difficulty of merging the interests of two different sectors of our society. Universities and for-profit organizations were set up under different arrangements for a reason, and merging them may or may not work. In any event, universities need to proceed cautiously with clear, nonnegotiable commitments to their most important values. In this area, as in many others, we must be clear about what we will not do, even for the money. My concern is that the rapidly increased commercialization of athletics at all levels may now pose a serious threat to the underlying integrity and independence of the university. It may also be a threat to itself, because there is also a growing danger that the long-cherished notion of an athletically gifted group of full-time students representing their alma mater in a high-spirited game will be revealed as illusory. If so, a separation may develop between the nation’s elite athletes and higher education. An analogous separation between the best teenage athletes and the athletic programs of the nation’s high schools is already well underway in many sports, a
development driven by the increasing commercialization, professionalization, and specialization of youth sports. In my view, it is not possible to deal with the controversial issues in intercollegiate athletics without understanding the revolution that has taken place in the way youth sports are organized in our country. Because of this “revolution,” athletes recruited for intercollegiate programs arrive on the nation’s campuses with quite different notions of their purpose in attending university than was the case a generation ago; universities themselves have quite different expectations, whether stated or unstated.

The separation of the nation’s most gifted young athletes from the athletic programs of academic institutions may or may not be a useful development. On the one hand, lessening the association of academic institutions with the nation’s most gifted young athletes could serve the interests of both academic institutions and the athletes themselves. Indeed, many athletes, their families, and various commercial interests have already taken this path by pursuing their athletic goals outside the nation’s intercollegiate programs. On the other hand, the nation’s universities are understandably loath to give up their connection to a popular American enthusiasm. It seems clear to me that it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish intercollegiate athletics from professional athletics. Increasingly coaches and players are being recruited from a common pool, and intercollegiate athletics is increasingly governed by the values and needs of the commercial entertainment industry. Lessening universities’ association with “big time” athletics would have its costs and benefits, but it is high time we started being more honest and realistic about the costs of “big time” athletics to the academic community, because the prospective benefits are easy to both enjoy and exaggerate.

Past history suggests that America’s universities will opt for as strong a continuing association with athletics as they can muster. They will continue to pursue increased commercial revenues, making the compromises needed to achieve this objective, with a simultaneous if less focused effort to achieve certain “reforms” that might limit the most serious compromises of academic val-
ues. Such reforms include attempts to limit practice times, increase revenue sharing between winners and losers, shift the structure of athletic scholarships, stiffen admissions requirements somewhat, and occasionally limit the expansion of season lengths in particular sports. Although such reforms are certainly useful, over time they will probably have a very limited impact and will be overwhelmed by the desire to win and to raise more revenue. Moreover, I would predict that both the cost of tickets and the level of institutional subsidy will increase substantially as efforts to contain costs prove ineffective.

My own view is that the only reforms that might enable the nation’s universities to find a better balance among their business, educational, and political interests would be, first, to provide more genuine transparency so that everyone understands exactly what compromises have been made in the service of being “competitive”; second, to pursue more meaningful academic standards for all their students; third, to abandon the annual search for a national champion (see immediately below); and, finally, to find a more effective mechanism for collective action. The NCAA has performed and continues to perform many extremely valuable services for intercollegiate athletics, but as I have already noted, the courts now allow the NCAA rather limited authority to act on commercial matters and intercollegiate athletics is decidedly a commercial activity. Perhaps the existing structure could be “saved” if the NCAA received an exemption from antitrust regulation; this development appears quite unlikely. More likely is that an individual conference of like-minded schools would pursue new strategies. This would necessitate giving up on the idea of national champions that seems to underlie a good deal of the commercial revenues enjoyed by intercollegiate athletics. Nevertheless, I believe that if we restricted our aspirations to regional or conference-based championships, we might have many more happy fans, and even the media might have more fun trying to decide just who was best. In such an environment there might be six or eight teams who thought of themselves as national champions. I fail to see
what harm would come from this. Failing such a proposal, which may strike many as naive, I return to the idea of greater transparency. At least that way, all constituencies can understand better the costs and benefits of the entire enterprise and either continue to support current trends or push for a realignment of values and aspirations. Social institutions have a complex array of privileges and responsibilities to the society that they serve and they are often required to compromise certain values in the pursuit of larger, but not purely self-serving objectives. Universities do this all the time as they search for a position of uneasy equipoise among the competing objectives that they wish to pursue. Perhaps intercollegiate athletics will remain an aspect of such a compromise.

CONCLUSION

In an environment that is changing, the university will inevitably be the subject of debates about the relationship of its existing programs’ connectedness with its commitments to the changing needs of society. We must not avoid such discussions. In particular, we cannot view such an ongoing dialogue as undermining our traditional values and autonomy. Rather, it is through this dialogue that our most important traditional values, such as autonomy, can be reinforced. Indeed, autonomy implies a level of responsibility and thoughtful responsiveness that make such a dialogue imperative. Such a dialogue can also help reach a social consensus on the structure of the scholarly and educational agenda and the appropriate use of our ever-expanding knowledge base. In addition, such dialogues support the university’s continuing role as both society’s thoughtful but responsive servant and society’s thoughtful but demanding critic.

In this regard it is also important to recall that any institution of education gains social legitimacy only by fulfilling the specific responsibility of providing the next generation with the capacities, beliefs, and commitments thought necessary to ensure soci-
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ety’s goals. The nature of the particular array of institutions of higher education that society supports at any moment reveals a great deal about that society’s views. Simply put, the set of educational arrangements put in place at any moment is directly related to the nature of the society we wish to sustain or to the agreements we citizens have made about how we ought to relate to each other and what we value about the individual and his/her work. For example, the nature of undergraduate education for citizens of an emerging liberal democracy, with its increasing focus on individual autonomy and the inherent rights of all people to self-determination and its associated desire to find new and better arrangements in both science and society, must be quite distinct from the analogous set of arrangements in societies that have quite different political, cultural, and social objectives. Little wonder, therefore, that controversy—often socially productive controversy—usually surrounds these institutions.

In one critical respect universities must assume the leadership in the much-needed dialogue or conversation with other parts of society. In particular, it is up to the leadership of the research universities to sustain support for the notion that the research university cannot fully meet its responsibilities if its intellectual independence is lost or compromised. In my judgment university leaders can do so only by demonstrating that the nation’s research universities are playing a significant role in moving society forward and that the universities’ scholarly achievements are attentive to the innate human need to understand our place in the larger scheme of things. What gives human beings their distinctiveness is not simply their desire to know, understand, and give shape to their place and time on this planet, but also their complementary desire to give their efforts greater meaning. The university’s intellectual independence comes with responsibilities not only to the world of scholarship, but also to the cultural and social aspirations we have for ourselves and our descendants.

For example, as American universities look ahead, there is no avoiding the fact that our society will continue to deal with the full implications of numerous forces such as globalization, the
increasing interdependence of a wide array of institutions and their attachments to private market forces, and the constitutional status of group rights. In this context, universities will need to define their own role in enabling our increasingly interdependent and diverse societies to define themselves in constitutional, political, and socioeconomic terms. This will bring new responsibilities to the university both for the development of ideas (e.g., resolving the tension between the individual, various groups, and “the” community in a new context) and for understanding the curricular implications and scholarly imperatives of this new era. In our emerging environment, universities not only need a constantly refreshed vision of their role that reflects the emerging reality of their times, but also the intellectual energy to pursue their vision and to convince society to continue to envision them as an important component of society’s own vitality. The distinguished university, like the biosphere, is in a constant state of evolution characterized by an ever-changing kaleidoscope of both opportunities and constraints. For the most distinguished of the nation’s universities, the greatest challenge is not to fall victim to the dangers of entrenched success by failing to remember that no university is as distinguished as it says (or believes) it is, or as distinguished as it should be. Change may appear to be unnecessarily risky, but universities need to maintain a certain anxiety or uneasiness regarding whether or not their programs are continuing to meet their responsibilities in education and scholarship. Such anxieties and the honest self-examination they ought to occasion are essential ingredients in a university’s capacity to build and maintain its excellence. In the decades ahead, anxiety, courage, energy, adaptation, leadership, and change are the price of continued distinction and relevance in higher education.