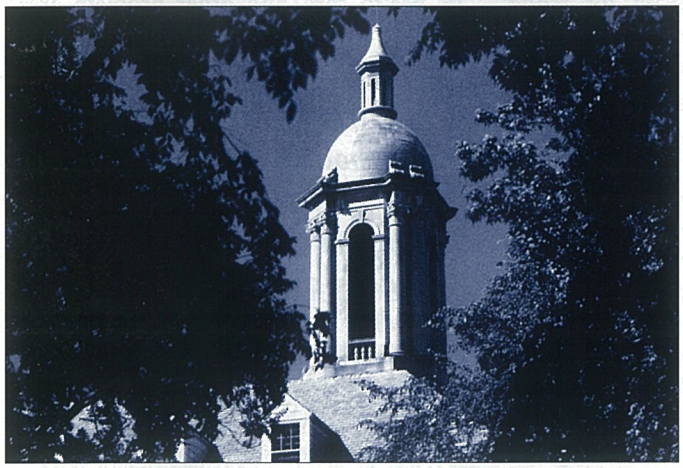
TAKING CHARGE of Change



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IMMERSED IN AN UNCERTAIN SEA OF CHANGE BROUGHT ON BY SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS, INADEQUATE STATE SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES, INCREASES IN COMPETITION, AND THE EVOLUTION IN TECHNOLOGY, UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE BEEN REEVALUATING, REORGANIZING AND REFOCUSING THEIR MISSIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.

In the 1980s, some dismal predictions were made about the future of American higher education, in part because of an expected decline in the number of students of college-going age. But new jobs in service-related fields, the technology sector, and science-based industries elevated the demand for more postsecondary education opportunities. Industrial jobs, once the backbone of the American economy and requiring no postsecondary education, are now available to just 10 percent of the workforce. In fact, as recently as a few years ago, most U.S. citizens believed that too many people were going to college. Now, three out of four think the country cannot have too many college graduates.

College education in the U.S. is provided by a diverse set of public and private institutions. Currently, nearly 4,000 colleges and universities are educating more than 14.5 million students. In the past 50 years, college attendance in the U.S. has ballooned from roughly 25 percent to 60 percent of each high school graduating class. By 2015, our nation must be prepared to educate over 4 million more students than it educated in 1995 — simply because of population growth.

I believe higher education is clearly at a turning point — a point that requires not just the commitment to change from institutions themselves, but also a commitment from business leaders, government, and the American public to make lifelong learning a national priority.

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Recently, I had the opportunity to lead a commission of 24 presidents and chancellors of public higher education institutions from across the United States in what amounted to a four-year study of issues affecting higher education. Known as the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, this group came together to discuss, confront and take charge of the unprecedented change facing institutions.

Determined not to "sugar-coat" the issues, the commission concluded that higher education institutions needed to reaffirm their mission to advance the common good. Through their work, commission members recommitted their institutions to America and outlined a broad-based agenda for sustaining this renewed covenant. The commission also delivered a warning: "Institutions ignore a changing environment at their own peril."

The many issues identified as part of the commission's efforts are a blend of long-standing challenges, such as accessibility and funding, and newer complexities brought on by advances in technology and a global economy. Highlighted here are just five topics that I believe are impacting and shaping the future of higher education and America.

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Colleges and universities have long been vehicles for conveying values, principles and traditions to each new generation. Entrusted with a great responsibility, institutions of higher education must continue to develop character, civility, conscience, citizenship and social responsibility in students. Higher education as a whole has an obligation to teach students that they are part of a larger social fabric that requires their fullest participation.

In my view, the development of students as citizens of the world is one of the biggest challenges facing higher education today, and university leaders must be more open in discussing the importance of building student character. Included in this discussion must be frank talk about excessive student drinking and the behaviors that surround it. Many of our undergraduates come to us as experienced drinkers, and the toll of these behaviors is substantial — academically, financially and socially.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Traditionally organized by departments based on academic disciplines, our universities have been reluctant to break this mold of compartmentalization. But we must realize that many of the most profound discoveries in science, technology and other branches of learning are occurring at the boundaries between disciplines. I believe that we must facilitate such opportunities for collaboration. Many of the most exciting advances in medicine, science, genetics, engineering, literature, the arts and other areas will only occur in those areas between the sharp dividing lines of disciplines. Fields of study that have evolved slowly and separately over time and kept researchers and scholars isolated must more seamlessly meld with other disciplines if our scholarship is to realize its full potential.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The discoveries, inventions and creations that come from our institutions have great value to the health and prosperity of society. Today, higher education is still seen as the engine of discovery and intellectual force behind the economic vitality of our nation.

As one of the primary producers of intellectual property, universities have a vested interest in nurturing and protecting these discoveries and in ensuring that this new knowledge reaches society. But the rapid deployment of new information technologies, changes in copyright law, and a growing interest in university-developed intellectual property demand that institutions review their current approach to knowledge creation and protection. In today's Internet world, most everything can be easily reproduced and distributed to a vast audience. We must find an appropriate balance between the interests of the creators of this intellectual property and its users.

THE DIGITAL AGE

The rapidity with which information technology has penetrated higher education has left us little time to understand fully its impact or to anticipate what may come next. Powerful new technologies — many of them the products of our own research labs — are changing the fabric of institutional activities. All higher education institutions are facing the escalating challenge of developing and using these new digital tools to augment, enrich and support their missions.

We now have the technological means to make lifelong learning a reality, but accompanying these new opportunities are also issues related to connectivity and the financial challenges that go along with providing anytime, anywhere learning. Institutions that fall behind in providing adequate infrastructure will find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide and risk losing students to other educational providers.

Technology is also greatly impacting the structure of courses and programs. Instructional integration of these new tools is the greatest information technology challenge identified by colleges and universities today.

In addition, the Internet has brought higher education competition that was unimaginable just a few years ago. Not only do these new enterprises compete for students; they also compete for our faculty. Leaders of institutions must be well-versed in all aspects of information technology in order for their institutions to continue effectively serving students.

ONLINE LEARNING

While technology is enabling us to reach students where and when they are available to learn, I do not believe that online learning will replace resident instruction. Although continuing and distance education is the most rapid expansion area in higher education today, I believe it is the convergence of online learning and resident instruction that will provide some of the most interesting educational opportunities in the next decade.

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Right now, more than a third of U.S. colleges offer online degrees. And over the next several years, distance education is expected to experience a compound annual growth rate of 33 percent.

This growth is definitely having an impact on resident instruction, encouraging the use of technology at all levels. In 2000, almost 60 percent of college courses used e-mail for instructional purposes, compared to just 10 percent in 1994. More than 30 percent of courses now use a Web site, up from 7 percent six years ago. Institutions of higher learning must restructure and work to change policy and academic culture to take advantage of the immense potential of these opportunities.

Universities in the 21st century will be increasingly global in scope, aided by technology and involved with the pressing issues of society. How we respond today to the many challenges that line our path and how successful we are at integrating technology into the overall picture of higher education will be vitally important to our continuing leadership in the future.