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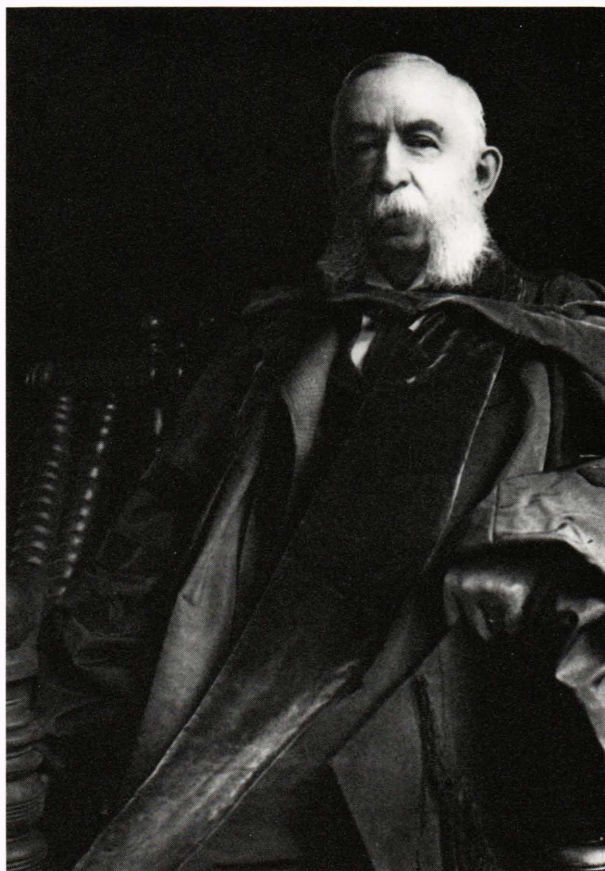
## THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCY TODAY: A WORD FOR THE INCUMBENTS

### *WHERE ARE THE GREAT COLLEGE PRESIDENTS OF TODAY?*

Few of us who lead major universities have escaped this question, asked in a plaintive—and implicitly accusatory—tone. The question, in fact, is not merely rhetorical—it constitutes an indictment. The questioner has in mind the Gilmans, Eliots, Hutchins, or Conants of the past; he sees only those of us who currently hold office and finds us wanting. We seem pleasant enough, the questioner may suggest reassuringly, even able, diligent, and competent; but none of us is a great leader, none the present voice or conscience or inspiration of the higher learning. We are perceived, our questioner will inform us with great courtesy, as lacking the aura, the eccentricity, the genius of greatness. We suffice rather than impress. We may stand tall, but we do not tower. We plod along in our loafers and fail to fill the giant footsteps of our predecessors. And—at least in my own experience—there is inevitably a ritual conclusion to this dialogue: “Well,” says my interlocutor with just the right blend of pity and comfort, “you must spend all your time raising money so that you cannot do much else—and you *do* raise a lot of money.”

Having now heard this with some frequency over the years, I have become more accepting both of my own inadequacies as well as those of my peers. Yet the question rankles. Where *are* the great college presidents of today? How inferior, compared to our legendary forebears, are those of us who occupy the presidencies of major universities? If it is true that none among us has attained the dominant stature, the mantle of national advocacy that is expected of at least one or some of us, why is this so? My answer—biased and self-serving as any response from someone in my position obviously has to be—is that we university presidents of today may very well be inferior to our predecessors, but that what we do, how we do it, and how we are perceived are so very different from their circumstances that their comparative superiority is not

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Daniel C. Gilman, President, The Johns Hopkins University, 1875-1901.

wholly self-evident. I do not challenge their greatness. I do not assert ours. Instead, I submit merely that the finest of our predecessors rose to an opportunity that may no longer exist for those of us who hold university presidencies today. At the risk of arguing only that we are mutants rather than pygmies, let me try to make my case.

The case consists mainly of a single point: The major research university of today is a radically different institution than its predecessor of three or four decades ago. The most obvious difference is size. As recently as the 1940s and even early 1950s, a universi-



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ty was not very much larger than a college. The question as to where the great *college* presidents of the present day are to be found assumes, in fact, that this is still the case. I speak, however, only of the presidencies of major research universities; and those institutions now are hugely different from colleges. Where once a university was a collegiate institution that granted the doctorate and harbored professional as well as undergraduate schools, there have now evolved in the United States between 50 and 100 major research universities that are megasize—numbering their students in tens of thousands, their faculties and administrative cadres in thousands, their buildings and their acreage in hundreds. True, colleges also are larger today than they used to be, but today's major research university differs as much from a college as an aircraft carrier from a frigate. And, to stay with the image, today's university has evolved from its own past as much as today's nuclear-powered behemoth aircraft carrier is a different vessel from the early flattops.

Much could now be said about the difference produced by size alone, but let me offer just a few observations about the impact of sheer size on the university presidency. To begin with, the president as a person is far less evident than before. He—and let me use “he” generically for the sake of readability, knowing that the word should be “he or she” throughout—cannot possibly know personally, nor be personally known by, the thousands upon thousands who compose the university community each year. He may be visible to all, at one time or another; he may work hard to know many. But to most, he remains an office rather than a person, a symbol more than a reality. Furthermore, though the president may still himself make the ultimate judgment on major decisions, sheer institutional size tends also to diminish personal presidential authority. To most of the people in the university, the decisions of greatest interest and relevance need to be made and are made at a level much closer to them than the apex of the central administration. The need to see the president, even directly to involve the office of the president, is relatively rare. And few decisions come to the president, or should come to him *de novo*. Staff effort—staff involvement—normally precedes presidential consideration or is called on at once to augment presidential initiative. The personality of the office still counts—so do the style and the articulation—but the size of the enterprise imposes the restraints of process. Perhaps the simplest effect of size on the presidency—and the greatest—is so obvious as to escape attention: It is the sheer volume of work required just to keep up with all the facets of so large

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an institution. The quantity of problems to be solved does in fact increase in direct proportion to the number of people involved. No president can be aware of everything that happens in the university, but no president can afford long to be in ignorance of most that happens; the result is endless presidential hours devoted to the effort of keeping track of the enormity of scope encompassed by the major research university.

Not size alone, however, sharply differentiates the university today from what it was but twoscore years ago. Complexity plays a competing role with size. The very research intensity that justifies “research university” as a descriptive name subjects the institution to the ultimate in the fragmentation of human knowledge. Because it attracts and fosters the most advanced and specialized talents among its professors and students, the research university offers a kaleidoscope of intricate inquiries that represents not coherence but the glitter and sparkle of a myriad of precious fragments that often seem to bear little relationship one to another. Much could be said on this subject as well; but for the university president, it presents the challenge of continually trying to learn what is happening to the very substance of the research and teaching enterprise. I have myself described my presidency as in part a never-ending seminar. One is blessed with the best of teachers; in my experience, no professor, even a Nobel Laureate, has ever failed when asked to make the effort to enlighten the university president as to the nature and significance of his or her research. But as one moves from lasers to restriction enzymes, from very large system integration to magnetic resonance imaging, from gender studies in East Asia to structuralism, from the nondestructive evaluation of materials to the impact of the space telescope on astrophysics, one may aspire at best to fatigued acquaintance with a great many wonders but never to confident or easy comprehension. Yet one must keep on trying—and across the board—even while discovery and innovation multiply faster than rabbits. How can one recruit some, while encouraging others to stay or leave, or authorize new laboratories or bless the creation of new departments, without at least a rudimentary sense of the work actually being done? When faculty achievements bring public acclaim, how could the president of the institution maintain a pose of blissful ignorance? And even more directly to the point, one wonders whether those who speak so fluently of fund-raising have ever thought that he who asks for support must know not



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only whom to ask, but also what to ask for and why a particular project is of importance and priority. Hours of hard learning in a bewildering array of unfamiliar subjects go into even elementary awareness of what merits support, and why.

It is intimidating to preside over an institution so large as to be unknowable in terms of detail and personal familiarity and so complex as to be mysterious in most of the knowledge pursued and taught within it. A good-sized ego is required to cope with such intimidation; that I do possess and seem to find among my peers as well. But is there an ego large enough today to allow me or any of my peers to claim that we understand it all and speak for the whole enterprise of the major research university as if from Olympus? Even 40 years ago, our predecessors could still either believe or cherish the illusion that they understood at least the major facets of what was being done in their universities. Today this may not be altogether impossible for the president of an undergraduate college. It is no longer possible for the president of a major research university. My peers and I may not be naturally humble, but we may be presumed not to be actually stupid. Absent stupidity, we may be more sharply aware of the extent of our ignorance than were our predecessors, mostly because the limits of our knowledge are daily stretched, in anguish. And that may play a role in holding us back from grasping the mantle of national leadership even in our own domain of higher learning.

Sometimes it is said of us as university presidents that we have become merely managers. There is, I think, some truth in that, although the "merely" gives me pause. As chief executive officers of our institutions, we are, of course, expected to manage. There are all those people, in their thousands; all those buildings; all that research; and all that money. Our annual budgets are counted in the hundreds of millions of dollars. As presidents, we are apt to be nominal landlords to students who may number in the thousands and, in some cases, also to faculty and staff. We have responsibility as well for extracurricular activities—a multimillion dollar industry for most of my colleagues if, happily, not for me. And there are other managerial obligations: While I do not dispose of a small airline, as some of my peers do, I am responsible for a hotel, as many of them are; and I am ultimately responsible for the disposal of radioactive waste (from radiation treatment for cancer), the operation of a nonhuman

primate breeding facility, the maintenance of a small fleet of research vessels, and campuses overseas. There is the university press and the academic support services, especially the university library system. There is some responsibility for the teaching hospital—hospitals in the plural in my case—as well as prepaid health plans and HMOs. There is policy for and supervision of thousands of nonacademic personnel—nearly five thousand, in my case—without whom the institution would cease to function, just as surely as if all the faculty left or no students enrolled. So, yes, we are managers and—also, yes—we are expected to raise money as well. Our revered predecessors were of course managers as well. But there can be no doubt that the size, complexity, and diversity of the major research university place vastly greater managerial responsibilities in the hands of those of us who serve as president today than was true three or four decades ago.

Let me assume at this point that I have stated my case that there is a radical difference between the job of a major research university president now and in the earlier days of our great predecessors. By way of further reflection as to why none of us now in office has attained greater national stature, I have some thoughts to offer that involve circumstances in the world outside our institutions. One might by now assume that the demands of our assignment are so great that my peers and I have no time left for any other activity at all. However, this is not the case. We do quite a lot away from our campuses—in fact, probably more than we should; but much of it represents what I would like to refer to as distraction. We serve on boards and panels in the field of education; we testify before legislatures and other public bodies; we give speeches before a variety of public and academic audiences; we travel abroad to meet with our peers overseas and to become familiar with some of their universities; we meet with our alumni in major cities across the country, and even abroad; we call on foundations and other donors. Our predecessors did all these things also but not to the same extent. The problem today is that travel is so quick and—at least apparently—simple that we tend to agree to do too much, on an overly compressed schedule. One-day journeys from one coast to the other are stock-in-trade. Three- or four-day journeys to Europe are not infrequent. I am surely not unique among my peers with an alumni trip that took me to eight cities in five days. This kind of



mobility is useful: It widens our perspective, it provides some public exposure and the occasional opportunity for public advocacy, and it affords relief from the heavy day-to-day office schedule. It is, however, a major distraction as well—last-minute overloads before a trip and awful accumulations afterward; reports and papers read in haste on airplanes; fatigue produced by overcrowded schedules; and the tension of delays that frustrate tight and orderly planning.

All that I mean to say here is that our pace is faster than that of our predecessors, and our geographic range is greater. And this, of course, is true not only of university presidents but of virtually all American professionals. It may well follow, then, that we are less serene than our predecessors, and I believe this indeed to be the case. It does not obviously follow, however, that we are less reflective, and I do not believe that this is necessarily so. Is what we say always so dull, so trivial, so insignificant that we attract little attention even though we are heard in public with some frequency? Maybe so—certainly so, all too often, in my own case. But to me it seems that there is another set of circumstances involved as well. Earlier I spoke of great former university presidents in terms of dominant stature, of national advocacy; I did so because that is the frame of reference in which the original question is asked. If greatness is equated with national stature, then part of the problem with today's university presidents may be that we are not media personalities.

In a society whose attention span has shrunk from earlier times and that reads less and less, national recognition derives primarily from national television and secondarily from newspapers and weeklies. On the one hand, the thoughtful—and lengthy—address, the colorful anecdote, and the detailed exposition of the complicated have been largely replaced by brief remarks, one-liners, and headlines or captions. On the other hand, prolonged and repeated national television exposure has elevated to national stature (greatness?) not only politicians but also television commentators, articulate athletes, and other entertainers. University presidents do not make news very often, and when they do, the news is often bad. We are not—most of us—showbiz. We do not star in our own commercials because our universities do not use commercials, at least not yet. But I do not doubt that if one of us were to narrate a popular weekly television program—perhaps on science or health—then a new star might be born and one of us might have, at last, the national stature of a Carl Sagan or of a Dr. Ruth. We may well be at fault in not attempting to use “the media”—television in particular—to greater advantage. The only point I wish to make here is that the path to national stature in our time is radically different from the one that was open to our predecessors.

But, having said all of the above, I have a still different and, to me, more satisfying answer to the question of why there are no great university presidents today. There may not be, is my answer, but there are

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still great universities. In fact, where there were perhaps a score of great universities four decades ago, there are now three or four times as many. The quality and scope of university research today make the research effort of 40 years ago look tiny in comparison. And someone does preside over each of these great major research universities. There was a time—in the '60s and early '70s—when the pressures of Vietnam and student unrest reduced presidential incumbencies to the point where many of our immediate predecessors held office for only a few years. Today, however, a goodly number of my peers and I have been in office for more than a decade and hope to serve somewhat longer still. We are charged to make decisions, and over the years we have made many, not all of them good or right. We have had a hand in great changes: new programs begun and older ones reduced, eliminated, or merged. We may be blessed with an end to the drastic growth in numbers of students and matching numbers of faculty and staff, but we may be cursed with stark reductions in support. We are presiding, still, over the transition of our institutions into an era of new communication—of knowledge stored, recalled, displayed, and manipulated in staggering quantity and with dazzling speed. Our scholars and graduates soar the heavens in rockets, plumb the depths of the seas, examine the microcosms of animate and inanimate matter, and probe the workings of the human brain and mind. Our pride is in the institutions that we serve and that, in turn, serve society—and serve well.

And, yes, we have our dreams of greatness—not for ourselves, but for our universities. We are—each of us—builders. Our task is to help to remodel our institutions for tomorrow—for the students who come anew each year, for scholars who will acquire knowledge that as yet eludes us, for discoveries and techniques that will enhance the human condition anew. Let us admit it: We are not great ourselves. But we serve great institutions with a great purpose, and that is no mean task. We lack the dash and daring of the single skipper at the helm; instead, we pace the automated captain's bridge of an ocean liner. But as we leave and enter port each academic year, there is still pleasure and satisfaction in the job done, and to be done again. No, there may be no great university presidents today. But there are great universities, greater than yesterday's. And the men and women who captain them are no unworthy breed.