

***Designing the New American University*, by Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars. Johns Hopkins University Press (2015). Hardback , 360 pages, ISBN: 9781421417233**

Thomas Tunstall

Senior Research Director

The University of Texas at San Antonio, Institute for Economic Development

Corresponding author: Thomas Tunstall: Thomas.Tunstall@utsa.edu

Starting with the founding of Harvard in 1636, Michael Crow - the current president of Arizona State University (ASU) - and William Dabars chart the evolution of the modern university in the U.S. If Harvard represents the start of the first wave of the modern university, the second was the inception of regional public colleges devoted largely to teaching. The third wave of colleges in the U.S. consisted of the establishment of applied research universities devoted primarily to agriculture and local industry as a result of the Morrill Act in 1862, which formed the basis for land-grant colleges and universities. From this foundation evolved the current approximately one-hundred research-extensive and another one-hundred research-intensive American research universities across the U.S., which constitutes the fourth wave.

Yet this world-class research excellence is maintained by a relatively few elite institutions and does not sufficiently engage the larger segments of society. Additionally, over the years, leading U.S. institutions have more and more defined their status based on admissions practices of exclusion, a.k.a. selectivity. Overall success for U.S. academic institutions has become a contest defined as excellence in a relative handful of elite institutions. This means that only the top 5 percent of students benefit from the innovation and learning associated with matriculation to leading edge universities. Unfortunately this leaves out the more broadly-defined and capable top 25 percent of students - many of whom are from underprivileged populations.

American research universities remain the envy of the world. However, through selectivity many of them are now exacerbating the growing inequality in the U.S. that is driving so much of the political discourse in 2016. The necessary fifth wave as a model for higher education is now at hand and vividly described in *Designing the New American University*. In addition to the emphasis on exclusivity at top universities in the U.S., the authors point to increasingly narrow research specializations and lack of public outreach and engagement.

One of the reasons that research has become so specialized is because it continues to be developed almost exclusively within academic silos. But without robust interdisciplinary collaboration, we will likely fail to see many emergent, nonlinear and unpredictable complexities associated with global issues. In particular, melding the hard sciences with those disciplines in the social, political and economic realms will become essential approaches to progress in the coming decades. "Mutual intelligibility" across disciplines will be foundational to the academic enterprise.

The authors make the case that institutions of higher education should be more engaged with their communities, particularly in regard to economic development. Regions that enjoy top tier universities are associated with more business start-ups, more patent applications, higher quality PhDs, and more federal research dollars. Yet the potential for increased economic development that universities can and should facilitate remains significantly untapped.

The impacts remain embedded in economic statistics, where the authors demonstrate strong correlations between post-secondary enrollment and individual income quintiles. As a society, we can no longer simply shrug off the lack of educational attainment for poor and minority populations. Something systematic is at work, and if we are to tap the full potential of society, the model for higher education must be re-examined.

Key measures of success at ASU now include degree production, socioeconomic diversity, minority enrollment, and freshman persistence. The university offers admission to all academically qualified state residents regardless of financial need.

Rather than focusing on selectivity as a means to increase prestige, ASU has expanded capacity to meet enrollment demand. The university's stated goals are to be a leader in academic excellence and accessibility, achieve national standing of academic quality in every field, become a global center for interdisciplinary research, and to have a positive impact on local economic development.

The authors readily admit that there is no "one-size-fits-all" model, but there are clearly overarching themes. While it will be up to each institution to chart its own specific course, one key to success will be the formation of greater numbers of university-industry-government partnerships in order to foster and disseminate innovation.

However compelling the case, the transition is certainly a work in process. Clearly the authors are in a hurry to get this all done, but while they argue for a "substantive and rapid rather than incremental and cumulative change," one might counter that while U.S. universities may have struggled in recent decades, a change in culture is already underway in many quarters - which necessarily takes time. Perhaps such a transformation will be both deliberate and generational instead. The authors also devote limited discussion to P-16 (Pre-K through college) intervention efforts. Yet without doubt, college readiness remains an ongoing challenge for most second-tier universities.

It is worthwhile to note that higher education in the U.S. has been egalitarian in nature, with traditions predating the Constitution - though it has run in cycles. In relatively recent history, a key inflection point was achieved with the passage of the G.I. Bill after World War II, which paid all college expenses for millions of veterans to pursue higher education. By 1947, veterans made up 49 percent of student enrollment at U.S. universities. The percentage of U.S. citizens with college degrees increased significantly as a result, and is one of the key drivers of what has been called the Great Compression that occurred from 1945-1975, when income inequality fell dramatically. Since 1975, income inequality in the U.S. has been increasing, as it also did from the 1890s through the 1920s.

The period of expansion of U.S. universities in the years following World War II has been dubbed the "Golden Age" of American higher education by Louis Menand (2001). Yet, despite the success of the public funding model for higher education, funding from states and municipalities has declined steadily over the years. Ultimately, we will pay a price for that. As the authors note, knowledge is a renewable resource and has positive spillover effects:

"The science-based technological innovation and industrial application that are the products of academic research are widely held to have been requisite to the trajectory of economic development that led the United States in the second half of the twentieth century to become a predominant superpower." [page 22]

Perhaps, as Crow and Dabars suggest, we need to ask more of the right questions. Either way, the New American University model unapologetically seeks fundamental change in the definition of excellence of institutions of higher education. Indeed, it may very well be time once again for universities to be judged not by how many they exclude, but by how many they include.

References

- Manand, Louis. (2001, October 18) "College: The End of the Golden Age," *New York Review of Books*.
-