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The Wealth of Universities: A Source of American Greatness?

Few scholars, critics, and students today would question that U.S. universities are the most preeminent centers of higher learning in the world. These institutions entice many of the most brilliant minds, nationally and internationally, with their renowned faculty, outstanding laboratories and libraries, and generous financial resources. Some parents even hold an Ivy League education for their children so dear that they are willing to pay a fortune to students from such institutions to live with them simply in the hope that the ivy might rub off. In light of such phenomena, anyone with a healthy dose of intellectual curiosity and skepticism should ask: Why are universities in the United States so great? How did they become so in the first place? Are they in jeopardy today? And how can these institutions ensure their greatness in the future? It is precisely these questions that Jonathan R. Cole, the former provost of Columbia University, a distinguished commentator on higher education in the United States, and noted sociologist, attempts to answer in his magisterial *The Great American University.* Cole's book is part of a wave of scholarly work appearing recently that engages with the history of the research university; the crisis of U.S. higher education today; and, of course, remedies and perspectives.[1] Yet the insight, authority, and balance with which Cole presents his case make his contribution unique and persuasive.

Cole's book contends that U.S. universities, namely, research ones, are unique historically speaking because they form a key backbone of the intellectual, technological, and cultural dominance that the United States has exerted globally over the last sixty years and continues to do so today. For Cole, universities' preeminence lies in the fact that they do not simply transmit knowledge but rather are at the forefront of creating it, constantly injecting original ideas and discoveries in the academic nexus. This was certainly not the case before World War II, when most of the best minds in the United States went abroad to Europe, especially Germany, in the nineteenth century, to pursue advanced studies. Yet these institutions are nevertheless threatened. These challenges do not arise from foreign competition but rather, Cole argues, from internal factors. Overcoming these challenges and suggesting ways to ensure the preeminence of the United States in higher learning in the future are the purposes driving Cole's endeavor.

Cole organizes and presents his case for the greatness of U.S. universities and the necessity of preserving them in three parts. Part 1 is a fascinating and highly informative, though at times necessarily sweeping, historical-sociological overview of the development of universities in the United States. Geared toward the general reader, this section is likely to be very familiar to those well acquainted with nineteenth-century history of higher education. He argues that the fusion of the English residential undergraduate college (the original base for the earliest universities in the United States) with the research-oriented German university made the nation's universities unique. By 1930, U.S. universities had either transformed themselves or had been founded on such a template. Whether detailing the tenures of Vannevar Bush at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Frederick Terman at Stanford University, Cole weaves together the contextual factors and preconditions, such as corporate framework, property, demographic changes, institutional autonomy, and visionary leadership that enabled these institutions to become the nation's elite universities. The arrival of scholars from Europe, such as Albert Einstein and Paul Lazarsfeld (to name only a few of many famous émigrés), helped to infuse new dynamism into U.S. intellectual life and give institutions the prestige that they had lacked before. Coupled with conscientious governmental support for education (e.g., the G.I. Bill of 1944) and scientific research financially and institutionally during and after World War II, it is no sur-

prise for Cole that U.S. universities are ranked almost overwhelming higher than those of other countries. Still, Cole stresses that research universities are an exceptional achievement and require a fragile balance of long-term and continuous financial and institutional support.

Part 2 shows precisely why universities in the United States had such an effect on society, domestically and globally. Cole examines the discoveries and innovations made by university researchers that have transformed everyday lives and the way we, as U.S. citizens, think about the world; for instance, the bar code, Gatorade, congestion charging, and Google. Indeed, all of these emerged from the support network or umbrella of the United States' elite research universities. Cole emphasizes the necessity of meta-epistemological reflection (i.e., what do we, as humans, know about what we know and what do we do with this knowledge?), a practice that social scientists and humanists frequently engage in their respective disciplines on groundbreaking discoveries in biological and physical sciences. Indeed, this type of reflection, which illustrates a productive point of collaboration between the humanities and sciences, helps to avoid blind focus on short-term results from research and the pressure to publish prematurely. Cole's basic point, nevertheless, remains the same: the work of universities disproportionately has and continues to influence society and people's everyday lives.

Part 3, the most engaging and provocative section of the book, examines more closely many of the challenges that threaten central values and strengths of universities. Cole details the turbulent history of academic freedom, government surveillance and vetting of professors, and the unwelcome and harmful (in Cole's opinion) involvement of the Bush (the younger) administration in the area of scientific research. Still U.S. universities continue to hold a comparative advantage structurally over European and Chinese ones. On the one hand, a lack of competition among universities and proper financial support of the European system prevents its best ones from rising to the top. On the other hand, a lack of academic freedom and open dialogue hinders Chinese institutions, despite generous state backing financially. Consequently, both fail to produce the high level of innovation present at universities in the United States. Ironically, however, Cole views the vast and continually increasing wealth of the United States' elite universities as one of the most serious problems facing higher learning in the nation. Put bluntly, the top research universities, such as Yale, Stanford, and Harvard universities, are too rich, are too big, and wield too much sway on the educational and research landscape. Cole fears that a potential monopoly of research in the hands of a few large universities with such vast financial resources could stifle innovation, competition, and the overall quality of education by stealing away intellectual talent from other top-tier but less wealthy schools. Quite boldly, Cole goes as far as to suggest a redistribution "tax" of wealthy universities to prevent such a possibility, a suggestion that would cause an outcry and a decrease in giving among the alumni of any of these institutions in a heartbeat. Furthermore, he points out quite rightfully the unbelievable gap in public spending for education, especially in comparison to defense (625 billion dollars in 2008, according to Cole), and the need for continued investment in a sector that does more to enhance U.S. society and image abroad than any other. The takeaway message that Cole is trying to send is that the greatest potential enemies to U.S. universities are the universities, governmental policy, and U.S. citizens themselves.

Cole's tome shines most brightly when he shares his insights and wisdom as a former administrator. The distillation of his experiences are epitomized in his list of core values that he considers characteristic of the best universities in the United States and prerequisite for others aspiring to greatness. These values are, in many respects, Cole's overarching recommendations on how to fix or preserve great universities and are touched on all levels within these institutions. More abstractly, he stresses the promotion of universalism that favors merit and impersonal criteria in establishing scientific facts and of organized skepticism that challenges dogmatism. Furthermore, Cole stresses the importance of the creation of new knowledge, with the aid of proper facilities, as well as the free and open communication of ideas; disinterestedness on the part of individual scholars; and promotion of free inquiry and academic freedom. He turns to the products and producers of academic life by stating that research should be based on international communities (i.e., a republic of letters) that interact and share information freely; are evaluated by peer-review systems, and are directed toward the common good (i.e., a more intelligent public). To ensure this, Cole believes that a university must be governed with authority, not force, allowing faculty to have an important voice in managing their institutions. In turn, academics must nurture effectively and carefully intellectual progeny for the benefit of future generations. Finally, the university must continually promote the intellectual vitality of its community by becoming the stomping ground for "young people with exceptional minds who are capable of producing novel, sometimes disconcerting, ideas" (p. 68). If an institution embraces these core values as their mantras, in addition

to navigating a variety of financial, geographic, logistical, and structural factors, it will certainly succeed.

Still, Cole is no utopian and acknowledges the difficulties and potential hazards involved in implementing or preserving such corporate values. It may seem at times that Cole is offering a cornucopia of very sensible advice that seems either too obvious or unfeasible to put into practice. Owing to the generality of many of his recommendations, one could fault Cole for failing to explain why such advice has failed to take root in many institutions and state bureaucracies or how one could actually implement it in specific cases. Nevertheless, Cole's suggestions are deliberately broad to elicit thought and provoke discussion on their implementation in particular educational settings. Cole's remedies for universities' ethos are not so much medicinal cures but rather holistic changes in lifestyle on the part of administrators, state officials, and the general public.

The richness of Cole's ideas and materials in his book prompt further discussion in light of recent developments. The first issue is the widening gap between research and teaching at large, elite universities. Cole insists that great teaching yields great research and vice versa, yet he admits that teaching and students are beyond the scope of his book. Teaching and research cannot be divorced so easily in such discussion. Can we, as scholars, categorize undergraduate education and the production of new knowledge at research universities separately, for example? Louis Menand, in a recent article, has suggested that U.S. undergraduate education should be a transformative experience that enables its recipients to benefit not only financially but also socially and personally.[2] Perhaps making the undergraduate educational space a place of knowledge creation could enable the creation not only of new knowledge but also of potential intellectual progeny, one suitably prepared for graduate school.

The other issue is whether universities are the only places that can produce great research and discoveries. Skeptics might ask whether the achievements that Cole lists could be accomplished in a different administrative structure than a university. The military, also an important inventor and innovator, might be an example. Finally, given the high hopes that he set out for the Obama administration, Cole would be undoubtedly dismayed by recent developments in education over the past few years. Most specifically, the 40 percent slash in Title VI funding has meant the (hopefully temporary) suspension of such scholarships as the Fulbright-Hays programs. "Overly wealthy" universities, such as Harvard, even have imposed self-enforced cuts after seeing their endowments plummet. For all of those involved in restructuring universities to account for these losses and the slow recovery, Cole's book is likely to be a tremendously useful read. In sum, Cole's book is a well-written and well-informed book for anyone, from the academic to the general reader, deeply concerned with the future of higher education in the United States. Although the last three years have seen many developments that Cole could not necessarily have envisaged, his book remains thought provoking and an important intervention both in the history of universities and plans for their futures.

Notes

[1]. Such scholarly work includes Roger L. Geiger, *Tapping the Riches of Science: Universities and the Promise of Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); and Mark C. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[2]. Louis Menand, "Live and Learn: Why Have College," *New Yorker*, June 6, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/06/06/110606crat_atla currentPage=all (accessed June 20, 2011).

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