

A DRIFT TOWARD ELITISM BY THE 'PEOPLES' UNIVERSITIES'

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Many land-grant universities, mine among them, face a dilemma today as they try to retain their commitment to be accessible "people's universities" while being driven by forces, both internal and external, to become increasingly selective in admissions.

The land-grant tradition was forged in America's Jacksonian age, the era of the common man, to serve what would soon be called the "industrial classes" that did not have access to higher education. For roughly 120 years following the Morrill Act of 1862, land grants were largely true to their mandate and focused on providing educational value for ordinary people. Through their teaching, research, and outreach services, they played a significant role in advancing social justice, enhancing economic development, and therefore in securing American democracy.

But many observers, myself included, fear that in recent decades land-grant institutions have drifted toward a more elitist approach to recruiting and admitting students. In so doing, they are becoming more like filters than ladders.

The drift toward recruiting a more selective student body is, of course, not unique to land grants. Statistics indicate that the country's top colleges are not serving socio-economically disadvantaged students well. The drift, however, raises particularly vexing concerns for land grants. If the institutions specifically created to serve the common student do not do so, who will?

Land-grant institutions and other public colleges face unique pressures. In states like New Mexico, our political leaders are increasingly concerned about our retention and graduation rates. Statistical evidence suggests that the simplest way to increase those rates is to recruit white, middle-class to upper-middle-class students from suburban areas. But that runs counter to our mandate and to society's needs.

Further, the costs of meeting the needs of an academically and socio-economically diverse student body are high and rising. Offering transitional or remedial programs in areas like mathematics and English, most effectively in small classes and personalized programs, stretches already tight budgets. In New Mexico, where the most recent census data show a population that is 42 percent Hispanic and 10 percent American Indian, we face a special challenge of welcoming, transitioning, and advancing students who are not typically well prepared for higher education. Then too, teaching and, particularly, advising students from diverse backgrounds takes time and effort on the part of faculty

members, some of whom would rather spend their time on research, graduate-level teaching, or other professional ventures.

If state legislatures do not provide sufficient funds to meet those special challenges, universities will seek to lower costs by being more selective. Faculty members, pressured to publish as well as to teach and advise, will themselves be more selective in the students they choose to devote the most time to. And so the trend away from the land-grant mandate will continue.

But one could certainly make the case that the measure of a college's quality should not be where its students start but how far on an educational journey it takes them. That is, a college may best be judged based on the educational value it adds.

That is where land-grant and other public institutions need to remember their roots. With all due respect to our elite sister institutions, I would contend that taking an A high-school student and turning out an A college graduate is less challenging, and perhaps less important, than taking in a C high-school student and turning out a B+ graduate. And that matters for the nature of our democratic society.

The country today needs, as much as it did when land-grant institutions were founded, a system that provides high-quality, accessible, and inclusive higher education. That need is clear and unambiguous in places like New Mexico, with its rapid growth of minority populations. We face the prospect of creating a large underclass with limited capabilities to contribute to economic, social, and cultural development -- a class that will add much more in costs to society than in benefits. While many factors lead us down that path, our search for selectivity and status contribute. Moreover, simple arithmetic tells us that there are not enough "top 20 percent" students to go around. Universities now wastefully compete to attract those elite students, often ending up subsidizing the education of those who need subsidies least.

What should be done? First and foremost, we land grants should reaffirm our mandate and commitment to be the "people's universities" in a 21st-century context. That can and should include forging new partnerships with community colleges and creating new programs that bridge the transitional gap for underprepared admittees. It may mean offering well-designed, five-year bachelor's degrees that blend traditional course work with remedial work during the first two years. To publicly articulate and celebrate the value-added nature of our educational contributions, we should enlist our national organizations in developing better measures of the educational distance our students travel, rather than only final outcomes.

In the final analysis, we should embrace diversity and create academic institutions that will attract and serve students who would not otherwise have access to higher education. A good place to start is by rethinking how we have been changing our criteria for admissions. And we must foster a new cadre of admissions professionals who can identify, attract, and assist students who come from across the spectrum of educational

and socio-economic backgrounds. If that could be done in 1862, it can certainly be done in 2005.

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