

## Chapter 7

# Past, present, future: re-thinking the social responsibility of US higher education in light of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter

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### INTRODUCTION

The founding purposes of colleges and universities in the United States, including colonial colleges, historically black colleges and universities, community colleges and research universities, focused on service and social responsibility.<sup>45</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd (and many others) and the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>46</sup> have graphically exposed the extreme poverty, persistent deprivation and pernicious structural racism embedded in 400 years of history afflicting communities across the United States. These developments have also raised troubling moral questions, including what is higher education's actual contribution to the public good?

In this chapter, we provide brief overviews of US higher education's responsibility to society from both a legal and an historical perspective. We conclude by proposing a strategy that would, in our judgment, better fulfil the university's social responsibility, significantly improve academic work and increase higher education's contributions to democracy.

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45. For an overview of US higher education and its different types of institution, see Helms et al. 2019.

46. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers (one in a long tally of Black Americans) in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 ignited a wave of national and international protest. Black Lives Matter, a global movement to help "eradicate white supremacy" and counter acts of "violence inflicted on Black communities", has been at the forefront of protests against racial injustice (see Black Lives Matter 2020).

## **TAX-EXEMPT STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND DEMOCRACY**

US higher education institutions, by and large, are tax-exempt, a status significant for their operation and survival. Higher education's tax exemption is based on its social responsibility and contributions to democracy. The educational purposes of colleges and universities, including research, teaching and service, are "recognized in federal law as critical to the well-being of our democratic society" (AAU 2019: 2). The federal law applies to the vast majority of public and private universities, providing important tax exemptions on corporate income tax, financial investments, gifts, property and more, while in turn requiring certain federal and state regulations and oversight (AAU 2019; Courant et al. 2006).

The modern federal role in US higher education finance took shape following the Second World War, beginning with the GI Bill of 1944 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (Zumeta et al. 2012). Both policies provided increased education opportunities across the income spectrum. By the mid-1970s, "Pell grants" (direct financial assistance to students) fully covered the costs of education at public universities and about one third of the cost at the average private four-year institution (Mettler 2014). The primary funding of public institutions through federal and state subsidies up until 1980 would indicate that society was seen as the primary beneficiary (Hossler 2006).

By the 1980s, however, things had begun to shift. Rising tuition levels, expansion of financial aid for middle- and upper-income families and the shift from grants to loans pointed to a new belief that individuals were the primary beneficiaries of higher education and should thus shoulder most of the costs. Moreover, continual decline in state appropriations since the early 1980s have led to increasing similarities in finance and function of public and private non-profit colleges and universities (Courant et al. 2006). Student debt has only escalated since that time (Mettler 2014). Financial aid advocates are again calling for a dramatic increase in federal Pell grants, given the economic crisis related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Murakami 2020a).

Covid-19 has also renewed debates in the US about the tax-exempt status of higher education institutions. It has increasingly been argued that elite private universities, in particular, should make Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT), in the form of voluntary payments to local governments, to reflect their use of local services without paying property taxes (Hanna 2020). The Trump Administration has also threatened to take away tax exemption (Murakami 2020b).

## **THE UNREALISED DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

The critical past and current roles of historically black colleges and universities, other minority-serving institutions, community colleges and state comprehensive institutions, in educating a majority of US undergraduate students (particularly minority populations) and serving their communities, cannot be overemphasised. Our primary focus, however, is on US research universities. This is not only because we work at

one but also because research universities are extraordinarily influential, significantly shaping how the rest of the higher education system functions (Benson et al. 2007).

The founding purpose of every colonial college – except for the University of Pennsylvania – was largely to educate ministers and religiously orthodox men capable of creating good communities built on religious denominational principles,<sup>47</sup> whereas Benjamin Franklin founded the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) as a secular institution to educate students in a variety of fields. In 1749, envisioning the institution that would become the University of Pennsylvania, he wrote of developing in students “an *Inclination* join’d with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one’s Country, Friends and Family; which *Ability*. .. should indeed be the great *Aim* and *End* of all Learning” (Franklin 1749: 150-1).

Franklin’s call to service is echoed in the founding documents of hundreds of private colleges established after the American Revolution, as well as in the speeches of many college presidents (Rudolph 1962). A similar blend of pragmatism and idealism found expression in the subsequent century in the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges and universities whose purpose was to advance the mechanical and agricultural sciences, expand access to higher education and cultivate citizenship. Using language typically found in documents from these institutions, the trustees of the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College (now The Ohio State University) in 1873 stated that they intended not just to educate students as “farmers or mechanics, but as men, fitted by education and attainments for the greater usefulness and higher duties of citizenship” (Boyte and Kari 2000: 47). Later, the University of Wisconsin’s “Wisconsin Idea” broadened the concept of civic engagement from preparing graduates for service to their communities to developing institutions intended to solve significant, practical problems that affected citizens across the state (McCarthy 1912; Maxwell 1956: 147-8; Stark 1995-6).

The Second Morrill Act of 1890 required southern states to establish and fund what are known today as historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, as well as provide funding for research experiment stations (Dubb and Howard 2007; Thelin 2004). The land-grant institutions eventually came to adopt a three-part mission that included research, teaching, and extension for the public good (Dubb and Howard 2007; Fribourg 2005).

Political scientist Charles Anderson highlights the democratic purpose behind the creation of the research university in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

With deliberate defiance, those who created the American university (particularly the public university, though the commitment soon spread throughout the system) simply stood this [essentially aristocratic] idea of reason on its head. Now it was assumed that the widespread exercise of self-conscious, critical reason was essential to *democracy*. The truly remarkable belief arose that this system of government would flourish best if citizens would generally adopt the habits of thought hitherto supposed appropriate mainly for scholars and scientists.

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47. Harvard (Congregationalist), William and Mary (Anglican), Yale (Congregationalist), Princeton (Presbyterian), Columbia (Anglican), Brown (Baptist), Rutgers (Dutch Reformed) and Dartmouth (Congregationalist) were all created with religiously based service as a central purpose.

We vastly expanded access to higher education. We presumed it a general good, like transport, or power, part of the infrastructure of the civilization. (Anderson 1993: 7-8)

Simply put, strengthening democracy at the expense of old social hierarchies served as the central mission for the development of the US research university, including both land-grant institutions and urban universities. In 1876 Daniel Coit Gilman, in his inaugural address as the first President of Johns Hopkins, the first modern research university in the United States, expressed the hope that universities would “make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospital, less fraud in business, less folly in politics” (Long 1982: 184). Belief in the democratic purposes of the research university echoed throughout higher education at the turn of the 20th century. In 1908 Harvard’s President Charles Eliot wrote:

At bottom most of the American institutions of higher education are filled with the democratic spirit of serviceableness. Teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community. ..This is a thoroughly democratic conception of their function. (Veysey 1965/70: 119)

University presidents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries worked to develop major national institutions capable of meeting the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society. Imbued with boundless optimism and a belief that knowledge could change the world for the better, these “captains of erudition” (Veblen 1918) envisioned universities as leading the way towards a more effective, humane and democratic society for all, particularly for residents of the city. Academics at this time also viewed the city as their arena for study and action. They seized the opportunity to advance knowledge, teaching and learning by working to improve the quality of life in cities that were experiencing the traumatic effects of industrialisation, immigration and large-scale urbanisation. This animating mission to advance knowledge for the continuous improvement of the human condition is readily identified in the histories of leading urban universities at the turn of the 20th century, including Columbia University, the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>48</sup>

Few Progressive Era (1890-1920) university presidents and academics, however, viewed local communities as reciprocal partners from whom they and their students could learn in the complex process of identifying and solving strategic community problems. University–community engagement was essentially a one-way enterprise motivated by elitism and *noblesse oblige*. University “experts” armed with scientific knowledge would identify community problems and authoritatively prescribe solutions, not work collaboratively with community members in a mutual relationship from which both groups might benefit and to which both groups would contribute knowledge, ideas and insights. The expert’s role was to study and assist, not to learn from and with, the community (Benson et al. 2017).

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48. For detailed histories of these and other leading urban universities at the turn of the 20th century, see Benson et al. 2017 and Puckett and Lloyd 2015.

In 1899, W. E. B. Du Bois, in his classic study *The Philadelphia negro*, written while an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, succinctly captured the purpose of Progressive Era research "as the scientific basis of further study, and of practical reform" (Du Bois 1899/1996: 4). Yet, scholarship focused on producing direct and positive change had largely vanished from universities after 1918. The First World War was the catalyst for a full-scale retreat (Harkavy and Puckett 1994). The brutality and horror of that conflict ended the buoyant optimism and faith in human progress and societal improvement that had marked much of the so-called Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Ross 1991).

As our close colleague Lee Benson observed in 1997:

In the decades after World Wars I and II, American higher education ... increasingly concentrated on essentially scholastic, inside-the-Academy problems and conflicts rather than on the very hard, very complex problems involved in helping American society realize the democratic promise of American life for all Americans.<sup>49</sup>

As a result, they increasingly abandoned the public mission and societal engagement that had powerfully, productively inspired and energized them during their pre-World War I formative period of great intellectual growth and development. (Benson 1997: 2)

Since the end of the Cold War, there has fortunately been a substantive and public re-emergence of what might be termed "engaged scholarship" designed to contribute to democracy. The academic benefits of community engagement have been illustrated in practice – and the intellectual case for engagement effectively made (Bok 1990; Boyer 1990; Cantor 2018; Gutmann 1999; Padrón 2013). That case, simply stated, is that higher education institutions would better fulfil their core academic functions, including advancing knowledge, teaching and learning, if they focused on improving conditions in their societies, including their local communities.

More broadly, a burgeoning democratic, civic and community engagement movement has developed across higher education in the United States to better educate students for democratic citizenship and to improve schooling and the quality of life. Service learning, engaged scholarship, community-based participatory research, volunteer projects and community economic development initiatives are some of the means that have been used to create mutually beneficial partnerships designed to make a positive difference in the community and on the campus (Benson et al. 2017). In addition, the impacts of increased black presence on campus and student unrest, beginning in 1968 in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, also helped pave the way for the civic and community engagement movement in higher education (Taylor and McGlynn 2008).

Granting that progress, university engagement has been, in our judgment, woefully insufficient.

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49. The phrase "promise of American life" is taken from Herbert Croly's 1909 progressive manifesto, *The promise of American life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In the early 1990s, one of us (Harkavy) wrote that “[Universities] can no longer try to remain an oasis of affluence in a desert of urban despair” (Benson and Harkavy 1991: 14). The impacts of Covid-19 and the powerful lessons of Black Lives Matter, among other things, make this statement seem even more true today.

Conditions in Philadelphia – the city where the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), our home institution, is located – are an example of a more general phenomenon of severe distress. At 25.7%, the poverty rate is the highest among the country’s 10 largest cities. About 400 000 residents – including roughly 37% of the city’s children under the age of 18 – live below the federal poverty line, which is an annual income of US\$19 337 for an adult living with two children. In addition, nearly half of all poor residents are in deep poverty, which is defined as having an income of 50% below the federal poverty line. African Americans in Philadelphia account for 40% of the total population but over half of the coronavirus-related deaths (City of Philadelphia 2020). At the same time, Philadelphia (like many other cities) is home to a key resource that can help to change these conditions. It has one of the highest concentrations of anchor institutions, with higher education institutions and academic medical centres or hospitals representing 12 of the 15 largest private employers, and the Philadelphia metropolitan area contains more than 100 colleges and universities (Select Greater Philadelphia Council 2016; Pew Charitable Trusts 2017).<sup>50</sup>

As indicated by the above data, there is simply no “return to normal” in the post-Covid-19 world, because “normal” was abnormally cruel and degrading. Among the institutions that must change, do better and do things differently are universities, including our own. To begin with, changes in “doing” will require recognition by higher education institutions that, as they now function, they – particularly research universities – have not made the kind of contribution they could and should to improving human life for the better. In fact they, albeit often unintentionally, contribute to racial and socio-economic inequalities and systemic racism. Among other indicators of the work left to be done, a 2017 *New York Times* study revealed that at least 38 elite universities in the US, including Penn and four other Ivy League institutions, enrolled more students from the top 1% of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60% (Aisch et al. 2017). Analysis by the *New York Times* also revealed that, at the top 100 US colleges and universities, Black and Hispanic students are even more under-represented than they were in 1980 (Ashkenas, Park and Pearce 2017).

Stated directly, social responsibility needs to be, as Chis Brink has argued, “the soul of the university”, not rhetorically, but in practice (Brink 2018). We are applying John Dewey’s seminal proposition that major advances in knowledge tend to

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50. The significant role of anchor institutions, particularly colleges and universities, in working in and with their local communities has been increasingly recognised. For the Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF), see AITF 2020. The Council of Europe, in collaboration with AITF, has held conferences in Rome (2017), Dublin (2018) and Strasbourg (2019) to discuss creating a European entity inspired by AITF.

occur when human beings consciously work to solve the central, highly complex problems confronting their society (Benson et al. 2007). The main priority of higher education, in our judgment, should be eradicating injustice and racism on campus and in the community through democratic, mutually transformative partnerships with their neighbours. If US colleges and universities were to adopt and act on that priority, they would realise their historic purpose, better advance research, teaching and learning, fulfil their social responsibility and make a powerful contribution to creating a genuinely inclusive, equitable, democratic society where Black Lives finally Matter.

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