Thoughts on Leading Change in Public Higher Education: Dr. James Duderstadt’s Vision

In his 2012 annual address to the university community, UW President Michael Young spoke about the need to focus on major changes sweeping higher education today (video of address). Quite simply, as he noted, it’s imperative that we lead change in public higher education. In this increasingly global knowledge economy, where innovation and technology drive rapid change, educated people and their skills will be essential to American prosperity, as will institutions such as universities that create and apply new knowledge.

As part of addressing the President’s vision for “Tomorrow’s University Today,” we invited Dr. James Duderstadt, a visionary educational leader and former president of the University of Michigan, to visit the University of Washington on November 2, 2012, as a Jessie and John Danz lecturer. His talk was titled “Higher Education in the 21st Century: Global Imperatives, Regional Challenges, National Responsibilities, and Emerging Opportunities.” In preparation for his visit, this summary of his vision was provided to campus.

Professor Duderstadt’s vision for re-inventing higher education was set out in his 2011 paper “A Master Plan for Higher Education in the Midwest: A Roadmap to the Future of the Nation’s Heartland,” published by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (link to .pdf). While the paper is directed towards a Midwestern audience, Dr. Duderstadt’s insights and recommendations resonate within other regional contexts, including our own. Dr. Duderstadt encourages us to face the huge challenges of our time; like President Young, he is convinced that “the future belongs to those who face it squarely.” The key points of his paper include:

- **There are many pressures on the American higher education system as we know it and universities must adapt to meet them.** While American research universities remain global leaders in scholarship and advanced education, the American higher education system as a whole is struggling to adapt to new challenges and uncertainties. Globalization, new technologies, competition from new for-profit and non-profit educational providers, and changing student demographics demand institutional evolution, while hurdles such as funding challenges and institutional inertia have made adaptation more difficult. In order to respond to these challenges and ensure that teaching and research remain “rich, relevant, and accessible,” universities should consider three strategic priorities:

1. **Act regionally, think globally.** While institutions of higher education have traditionally focused locally, technological innovations and increasing global interdependence should encourage universities to reach across state and national borders. Due to existing international ties, American universities are well positioned to develop global partnerships and focus on solving global problems.

2. **Collaborate, don’t just compete.** Rather than seeing local, regional, or national peer institutions as competitors, universities should focus on developing their own “unique core competencies” and partner with others that complement their strengths.
3. Grow regional knowledge ecosystems.
In order to promote economic development, expand access and foster innovation, higher education institutions should plan strategically to create a “market-responsive seamless web” of resources that meets the needs of all students and citizens in their region. Private-sector partnerships, increased investment in STEM, and the development of an “innovation infrastructure” of educational institutions, laboratories, broadband networks, and supportive tax and intellectual property policies should be core features of this “knowledge ecology.”

- Universities must be proactive and creative in supporting and expanding access to lifelong learning.
While most universities focus on providing education and services to the young, the rapidly changing economy will require education beyond a college degree. Additional degrees, retraining, or “intellectual retooling” will be necessary to remain competitive in the workforce. “Technology-mediated distance learning,” facilitated by rapid developments in communications technology, will be the key to serving adult learners. The proliferation of access to affordable, convenient, and effective asynchronous online learning opportunities will be essential both to students and to university business models.

- Learning communities will never become obsolete, but their form may change dramatically.
Learning and scholarly communities are no longer bound by the walls of the ivory tower as digital technology improves, allowing quality remote interaction and the creation of dispersed learning communities. “[P]erhaps we should not bind teaching and scholarship too tightly to buildings and grounds. Certainly, both learning and scholarship will continue to depend heavily upon the existence of communities... Yet, as these communities are increasingly global in extent... we should not assume that the scholarly communities of our times would necessarily dictate the future of our universities.”

- The university of the future, in Dr. Duderstadt’s words.
“Perhaps this, then, is the most exciting vision for the future of knowledge and learning organizations, such as the university, no longer constrained by space, time, monopoly, or archaic laws, but rather responsive to the needs of a global, knowledge society and unleashed by technology to empower and serve all of humankind. And all of this is likely to happen during the lives of today’s students. These possibilities must inform and shape the manner in which we view, support, and lead higher education. Now is not the time to back into the future.”

We welcome your comments, questions and suggestions. Please email edtrends@uw.edu.