Social Engagement and the Transnational Research University

Keynote Address at the German-American Dialogue on the Future of the University

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It is a pleasure to welcome you to a German-American Dialogue on the Future of the University.

Great research universities are delightfully idiosyncratic beasts. They are quintessentially postmodern, signifying very different things to students, faculty, alumni, and government officials. And one of the many privileges that are accorded to university presidents is the opportunity to venture forth with messages about our institutions that might somehow resonate with all of those very different audiences.

When we speak of universities – at least when we are being responsible – our language is properly hedged and qualified:

We are competitive with one another. And we find that the language of our competition is at times uncomfortably strident for some of our faculty, but never adequately strident for some of our alumni.

We are independent. And we find that the tenor of our independence is at times too arrogant for some of our elected officials, but never sufficiently principled for some of our professors.

We respond to the needs of society. And we find that our vocabulary of service is at times insufficiently intellectual for some of our thinkers, but always too timid for leaders of our communities.

Indeed, in a world of customer service and branding, market segmentation and Powerpoint slides, we muddle along uncomfortably, recogniz-

ing that we live inside a larger culture while also recognizing our duty to be selective in our adaptations to that culture.

I thought that this morning I would speak in that hedged and uncomfortable way that we call "presidential" about how research universities are responding to some of the distinctive challenges of our age. I will first describe some of the conclusions that I have drawn during my first sixteen months as Cornell's president about the domains in which our university might make special contributions over the next decade. And I will draw some links between those domains and other propositions that I have asserted over the past year and a half about our evolution as a transnational university.

I will then link up my own thoughts to an essay that Peter Hohendahl prepared a few years back on the subject of the transnational university. It was not until quite recently that I had a chance to study Peter's essay, and it was somewhat startling for me to see how a set of ideas that I had been developing and pursuing – first during my time as dean of the University of Michigan Law School and then during the early stages of my presidency here – had been considered independently and with great care and had been, in part, already implicitly criticized by Peter. So I will use this occasion to reference a few key points from Peter's paper and to offer what might be the outline of the beginnings of a response.

So let me begin in the present. Today we are all living through a frightfully exciting but monumentally frightening age. Never before have so many lived so well and so long. Never before have we understood so much about so many different things. Everywhere we turn, mystery seems to recede before insight.

At the same time, our knowledge and our skill have brought us unprecedented danger. So many new ways to exterminate entire populations, entire species, an entire planet. The fruits of modernity distributed in ways that bypass shockingly high percentages of humanity. Primordial hatreds finding new, gruesome, lethal modes of expression. Anomic youth struggling with loneliness and despair.

One view of the university says that none of this should matter for what we do and who we are. That is rarely championed with full-

throated vigor these days, but it warrants attention because it defines one frame of reference for what we are all about. By this account, universities ought to be sanctuaries of pure reflection, sheltered from the world in order to define an alternative form of community, a proof of concept if you will, through which the dream of utopia can be kept alive. This is the pure autonomy perspective, and it privileges the ideal of independence from external control, whether governmental or corporate.

Whatever the merits of that view for some institutions, I have not spent much time with them here because Cornell's history is of a different sort. Our founders created this university in 1865, in the aftermath of Civil War and Industrial Revolution. They were avowedly of the world, committed to developing a new kind of American university, one that could unite seriousness of intellectual purpose with a society's practical needs. They wanted to train leaders for the industrial classes as well as the professional classes. They wanted to produce research that might enhance our understanding of pig breeding along with research that would enhance our understanding of Euripides.

They were utopian in their belief that this university might provide instruction for all persons, male and female, of all races and religions and nationalities, in all subjects, both theoretical and practical. But notwithstanding their choice of location for this university, they did not want to separate it from the world. Social engagement was primary. The path to autonomy would not be by renunciation of contact with the potential corruptions of the outside world.

Nor would the needs of the larger society be defined in purely national terms. National interests have of coursed played an important role in the development of this university's activities – from our original land grant ideals up through Sputnik and the Mars rover expedition. Indeed, we have quoted with pride the description of Cornell as "the first American university." But our first president, Andrew Dickson White, was a cosmopolitan man who had lived and studied abroad, and from the beginning our university sought students and faculty from outside as well as within the United States. Early prominent faculty members such as Goldwyn Smith were avowed internationalists. And as early as 1925 we

were dispatching faculty members to Nanking to help develop a plant breeding and improvement program for China.

One of the things a new president does is to reflect on what makes his or her university distinctive. A few weeks ago, in my State of the University address, I spoke about Cornell's exceptional breadth of expertise. We know a lot about rice and a lot about critical theory, a lot about sheep and a lot about very large databases, a lot about East Asian languages and a lot about nanotechnology. And Cornell seems to have been able to sustain across large swaths of our university a remarkably healthy culture of mutually supportive, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Another thing university presidents do is to suggest ways to capitalize on their universities' distinctive qualities. For Cornell, I suggested that we should press ourselves to make important contributions to understanding three of the significant challenges that face humanity today.

Each of these challenges is important because it challenges us across the full range of intellectual disciplines. Each poses difficult scientific and technical challenges. At the same time, each also presents societal dilemmas that call for careful analysis by social scientists. And ultimately, each raises profound questions about the human condition that lend themselves to reflection through the characteristic methods of the humanities.

A first great challenge concerns life in the age of the genome. At the level of science, our new appreciation for the universal vocabulary of DNA has fused traditional biological research across plant and animal species with research in chemistry, computer science, engineering, medicine and physics. But this same revolution also calls for insights from the humanities and the social sciences -- to help us answer a new set of questions about our place in the universe, our relation to other species, and our relationships to one another. It is conceivable that we might contribute to the extension of the typical human lifespan to 100 years or more; we would do well to contribute to a deepened understanding of the significance of such an achievement at the level of the individual and at the level of societies of individuals.

A second great challenge concerns wisdom in an age of digital information. No aspect of human activity, individual or collective, has been immune to the transformative power of computing and information science. These technological developments open up the full range of possibilities for our future, from utopian to dystopian. We have a special duty to contribute to progress in this domain. I believe we also have special duties to participate in allied projects. Like helping people to transform ubiquitous and cheap information into human-centered wisdom. And like exploring what it means to have so completely structured our lives in symbiosis with complex electronic machines.

A third great challenge concerns sustainability in the age of global development. Today almost every domain of human economic and political activity presents one or another sustainability problem. We may worry about our dependence on resources that will be exhausted, or about the damage that technological processes inflict on our ecosystem, or about the fragility of certain social or political structures that underlie our economy. In each case, we are looking for a new, substitute approach that holds the promise of a longer time horizon of sustainability, we are looking for a minimally disruptive way to make a transition to that new approach, and we are looking for a mechanism to insure that the new approach is economically viable.

It is important to recognize that none of these challenges involves a matter that is confined to a single country. Whether we are thinking about the AIDS virus or a computer virus, about data pollution or water pollution, about transgenic papayas or liquid natural gas supplies, human beings everywhere are truly interdependent. And it is therefore consistent with a desire to make contributions on those challenges (although not dependent on that desire) that we should self-consciously understand ourselves as transnational institutions, in two distinct senses.

First, I have suggested that a transnational university should be taking a particular moral stance in the education of its students, nurturing within them a transnational perspective on the human condition.

Why might one be interested in other countries, their people, their societies? One reason is certainly comparativist. We believe, rightly, that

we will gain new insight into ourselves and our own society by better understanding how other societies and cultures have taken different paths to resolve similar social questions.

Yet I think an even more significant reason is fundamentally humanist. Even while we respect the importance of national borders, a core part of us subscribes to a community that includes all human beings. We are affirmed whenever we recognize ourselves in people from different cultures. We are ennobled when we appreciate that people everywhere share a joint responsibility to care for the planet we all inhabit.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written powerfully about the importance of educating today's students for world citizenship. In her recent book, Cultivating Humanity, she emphasized the way in which such an education must proceed: from a premise that elevates our shared identity as members of the human species above our identities as members of national or group communities. The goal is not to pretend that national or group identities do not exist; it is to allow us to appreciate them for the role they play in a larger drama. In Nussbaum's words, "Only a human identity that transcends these divisions shows us why we should look at one another with respect across them."

Despite the persistence of misunderstanding and conflict, I believe that we are witnessing the evolutionary development of a truly transnational pluralistic culture – a culture that includes profoundly important universal aspirations while retaining equally important regional, national, and local variation. And great universities should prepare their students to prosper in such a culture by holding a transnational perspective on the human condition.

What does such a perspective entail? In its essence, a transnational perspective must be open and engaged. Open to new ideas, new ways of thinking, new ways of feeling. A transnational perspective must recognize the world's radically varied texture without rushing to presume some variants superior and others inferior. A transnational perspective is different from a global perspective because it transcends nationalism without insisting on a unitary global substitute. It embodies a vision of universalism that reinforces and is reinforced by pluralism.

Such a vision entails much more than a detached acceptance of alternative perspectives, however. A transnational perspective implies a willingness to engage. To participate in the efforts of people everywhere to better understand the world and to improve the conditions of their lives. To advocate for certain humanist values, even while listening carefully and respectfully to those who might reject those values.

To nurture such a perspective in our students, we must first construct our campuses as diverse communities. And we must then press our students to live actively integrated lives within those communities.

Constructing our campuses as diverse communities means recruiting and enrolling students from around the world. It means developing faculties that study the histories, cultures, politics, and economies of every part of the world. It means ensuring that our curricula are rich with offerings about foreign languages and cultures as well as the many languages and cultures that are found within our own particular nations.

But it is not enough simply to construct our campuses as diverse communities. The natural wariness of people means that we must actively press our students to take advantage of all aspects of our communities' diversity, encourage them to reach out across boundaries to meet one another, challenge them to see the world through the eyes of others. We must sustain environments in which their daily lives are characterized by a constant ebb and flow between people like themselves and people who are different.

To understand ourselves as transnational institutions, however, we should be thinking about more than just our role as teachers to our students. We should think also about our role as research institutions. We should act to further the development of a unified worldwide community of researchers.

Now you might well protest that we already have such a community. That every discipline has a structure of worldwide peer review, international conferences, and multinational research teams. That universities recruit faculty from every corner of the planet. And that every professor quickly learns who the stars of her or his field might be, no matter where in the world they might happen to be located.

And yet I believe that is not quite right. That idealized description is not yet fully realized in any field of inquiry, and in some domains we have only just begun to move. Linguistic subcommunities largely define research subcommunities. And those subcommunities are themselves often further subdivided, often as a result of geographic distance.

And here I believe that universities, as institutions, have a role to play. For we are more than just aggregations of individual faculty members who participate in distinct fields that have experienced varying degrees of internationalization. We have our own collective identities, we attract resources to the collectivity, and we champion values and goals for the community.

I believe that we should understand ourselves today as nodes on a global research network, a network whose communication properties are changing. We should accept our shared responsibility for that network, and for the manner in which its communication properties evolved. If you will indulge me the right to extend the metaphor just one more step, we should work together to increase the bandwidth on our network.

What might that entail? First and foremost, it would entail finding and committing the resources to move people – students and teachers – from node to node on the network.

This work calls for opportunism. It recognizes that some movements of people can be presented as promoting a particular project that would attract support from a singular nation's government. Other movements of people might be funded by pooling grants from more than one country. Still others might appeal to the philanthropic impulses of private citizens. However it is funded, the frequent movement of people from node to node is essential if we are to establish a system in which individuals and ideas move freely, sustaining a true transnational academic culture.

Earlier this week, I was in China, signing agreements that will establish two new programs that will move students and faculty between Ithaca and Beijing. In one agreement, Cornell and Tsinghua University will be using internal funds to cover the costs of moving a small number

of faculty back and forth. In a second, we will be relying on private philanthropy to cover the costs of moving students from Ithaca to Beijing.

And this brings me to Peter Hohendahl's paper. In his essay, Professor Hohendahl describes the set of forces that make it difficult to maintain a top quality university as a national university, wedded to the welfare of one nation-state. Nation-states have, as a general matter, decreased their commitments to universities, at the same time that disciplines came to transcend universities by structuring themselves around universalist theories and methodologies. Administratively, the decline of state support drove many universities to emphasize efficiency and financial accountability along corporate lines.

Professor Hohendahl argues that the new, more corporate university, is less likely to promote a particular Bildung or cultural norm, preferring instead to emphasize more professional training. He argues that this is driven by a number of different factors.

Professor Hohendahl points to the expectations and desires of students and their parents, who come to see higher education in utilitarian terms and who come to have greater power over the definition of the university as universities become more dependent on their tuition dollars. He also notes the change in the funding of big science: governments cut back, multinational corporations stepped forward, and an elite set of largely American institutions amassed private endowment wealth from philanthropy and market investments.

Professor Hohendahl argues that these shifts portend serious challenges for research universities as they try to redefine themselves. He suggests that whereas the nation-state offered up a fairly well-defined public sphere with a coherent culture of criticism towards which national universities could align themselves, the larger worldwide public spheres of today do not offer the same service to transnational universities. And to the extent they do, it is not clear that they are particularly critical or democratic in their orientation. While, in its ideal form, the structure of universal academic disciplines and the power of a transnational critical academic research network would seem to promote hope for a critical,

self-reflective transnational university, it is not clear that this hope will be realized.

Professor Hohendahl holds out some hope for the transnational university. He notes that the national university catalyzed social change through its research and through the contagious force of its democratic critical culture. He argues that the transnational university could also catalyze social change in the same manner, through its research activities and through the internationalization of its faculty and student body. Yet such a possibility is imperiled by the forces of bureaucratic corporatization and the dependence of the institution on external sources of support. At best, Professor Hohendahl foresees only a healthy tension between the risks of lost autonomy on the one hand and the risks of abstract irrelevance and financial unsustainability on the other.

Now let me say that I find much to admire in Professor Hohendahl's analysis. But as should be evident from my comments at the outset, I am overall an optimist about the possibility that transnational universities can successfully emerge in the current era.

I believe that the risks that university education will become ever more narrowly professionalized in response to pressure from parent and student consumers are overdrawn. First, I believe that the "product" of a broad-gauged, critical, liberal education retains extraordinary utilitarian value. Last year, I called upon our worldwide community of students, faculty, and alumni to share with me their thoughts on what we should be teaching, and the sentiment for a well-rounded education as vital to the future career goals of today's students was overwhelming.

Second, I believe that universities retain extraordinary power in the marketplace to define the "product" they choose to offer. Demands from students and parents, and criticisms of our practices, are good things, as long as they are taken as critical arguments rather than edicts. The supply of outstanding students who are willing to defer to our true considered judgment of what they should be learning is, as a general matter, more than adequate to sustain our institutions.

The one caveat I would note here has to do with the possible emergence of a hysterical cultural deference to magazine rankings of dubious

methodological soundness. One could imagine a world in which universities abandoned their own judgments of how best to prepare their students for adult life in order to respond slavishly to rankings-based incentives. I would suggest, however, that, despite occasional moves in that direction at the margin, the central tendency of university behavior remains healthily independent.

And I do believe that there is the possibility for the emergence of a new transnational Bildung, grounded in a transnational perspective on the human condition, a critical pluralist vision that is both engaged and humanist. I believe that such an approach can be honestly defended in utilitarian terms for those prospective students who need that kind of reassurance.

At the same time, I believe that the need to sustain our activities economically argues for, rather than against, the effective strengthening of the transnational research network. Greater bandwidth will promote the more effective responses to the challenges facing an interdependent worldwide community of people. That prospect is, I believe, one that will appeal to a global community of patrons and sponsors – individual, nonprofit, government, and corporate. If we organize ourselves to address in the most effective way possible the critical needs of our species, then I am confident that those who have access to the greatest wealth in the history of humanity will step forward to provide the material resources we need to get the job done.