

"Great Universities as Talent Snowballs"

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Jeffrey S. Lehman

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Good morning.

I am very grateful to the Shanghai Chinese Overseas Friendship Association and the Shanghai Overseas Returned Scholars Association for inviting me to speak with you this morning about talent generally, and about strategies that a great city can follow to develop talent. The first two speakers at this Plenary Session have focused their attention on primary and secondary education; I will be devoting my time to the subject of education at the university level.

Last week, it was my privilege to be at another conference, in another one of the world's great cities: Toronto, Canada. The conference was called "The Innovation City." It brought together government leaders, business leaders, and the heads of NGO's to discuss how cities can become catalysts for innovation, economic growth, and collaboration – all with the hope of creating a sustainable and satisfying future.

The discussion was very lively. People talked a lot about infrastructure – digital infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, and financial infrastructure. They talked about transportation and how new mobile technology can reduce congestion on roads. They talked about data, and how to make it more widely available to citizens. They talked about recruiting entrepreneurs to start new companies. They talked about foreign direct investment, and they talked about quality of life and sustainability.

It was a very good discussion. It reminded me of several conferences I have been to in China, where government leaders, business leaders, and professors have thought together about urbanization and economic development. I view today's conference as a continuation of an important global conversation, with a special focus on the domain of talent development.

In his excellent book, *Triumph of the City*, Professor Edward Glaeser wrote, “[A]ll successful cities have something in common. To thrive, cities must attract smart people and enable them to work collaboratively. There is no such thing as a successful city without human capital.”

I do not know of any country that, during the past thirty-five years, has been more focused than China on human capital and its development at the university level. Beginning in 1978, a key element of the policy of reform and opening up was the policy decision to send many of China's best and brightest young people overseas, where they could develop their talents effectively.

That policy was highly effective for the individuals who were identified. They had to overcome great hardships as they struggled to be successful in foreign cultures, often working in languages they did not speak at all. But in many ways that made their ultimate successes even more impressive. And they became great ambassadors for China around the world.

In my own country, the United States, I have been privileged to get to know an organization that all of you may know extremely well, called The Committee of 100. As an American who is not Chinese, I have been extremely impressed by the way that these highly accomplished Chinese people who hold American passports have worked to promote the image of China in the U.S., and have worked in Washington to improve U.S.-China relations.

And of course, the Overseas Chinese have made important contributions to life here in China. For example, for the past 4 years I have lived in the South, in Shenzhen. One of the very nicest neighborhoods in Shenzhen is named Overseas Chinese Town. It is a very high quality residential community that was built through investments by Overseas

Chinese. Indeed, everywhere we look in China, we see all kinds of development – business development, universities, anything you might imagine -- that was made possible only by the active participation of Overseas Chinese.

And yet, as important as the contributions of the Overseas Chinese community have been, they are not of the magnitude of the Chinese Returned Scholars. Even in the modern age of telecommunications, computers, and efficient transportation, there is really no substitute for being in a place. In terms of your outside effectiveness, you have more facts at your disposal and more people you can mobilize in support of a project. In terms of your inside feelings, it is much easier to feel a deep commitment to a location, and a deep willingness to sacrifice in order to help it improve, if every day you are walking in the streets, tasting the food, breathing the air, and interacting with the people who have lived their whole lives here.

That is why the government leaders have been so focused on building programs that will encourage talent to come back to China. They have recognized that coming back to China after many, many years away can bring to the returnees a second round of culture shock – almost as powerful as the culture shock they experienced when they first went abroad to study. They have thought about ways to help the returnees reduce and manage that shock. Organizations like the China Western Returned Scholars Association and the Shanghai Overseas Returned Scholars Association have made great contributions, helping returned scholars to be successful participants after they have come back.

Even more visibly, since 2008 the national government has launched several kinds of Thousand Talents Programs, designed to help recruit talent from overseas to participate in the next stage of China's efforts to move up the value chain of international development. Initially these programs were focused on recruiting overseas Chinese talents to return home. And last year the programs were supplemented by a new program focused on helping people who are not of Chinese descent to recognize that they can have a “Chinese Dream” – that they can be happy and make important contributions if they move here to China.

All of these programs are important. They recognize key issues on a very large scale – the need to develop talent to its highest potential, and the need to be sure that this developed talent will make a difference here in China – and then they make public investments in large programs to address those issues.

But in my remarks today, I want to focus in on a different strategy for ensuring that a city has the talent it needs to be a world leader. I want to focus in on how a city can do what Professor Glaeser described – attract smart people and help them to work collaboratively – by making itself the home to one of the world’s truly great universities.

Please allow me to be very precise about what I am not talking about. First, I am not talking about universities that are designed to educate the typical student. In the modern knowledge economy, it is a key priority to ensure that large numbers of people receive education beyond high school, so that they develop the skills they will need to succeed in the workforce. And large numbers of universities are needed to provide that kind of training.

My own career has been spent working within the small group of universities that are sometimes called “elite” universities. I have had the very special honor of teaching at the University of Michigan, Yale University, Cornell University, Peking University, and now New York University. These institutions are not designed to provide the most efficient form of higher education to the greatest number of students. Rather, they are intended to prepare the most exceptional students for lives of leadership and special service. That is the kind of university I am focused on today.

Second, I am not talking about the ways that these elite universities can contribute to economic development through their research. In some parts of the world, such as France, Germany, and India, academic research and teaching are generally not combined in a single institution. In others, such as China, the U.S., and the U.K., the same institutions that teach the best students are also charged with responsibility for advancing the frontiers of fundamental research.

Obviously, new research discoveries can give enormous benefits to the city where the university happens to be located. It can be the basis for new businesses that want to be located where the research is being done. And it can be the basis for improvements in the quality of city life, from transportation to the environment. But once again that is not my focus this morning.

For while the topics of how “mass higher education” can help a city, and how academic research can help a city, are definitely worthy of an extended discussion, I would like to focus our attention on a third topic: how a great university can help a city by providing it with a supply of exceptional talent.

A great university can provide a city with exceptional talent in three forms: professors, students, and neighbors. I will talk about these three forms one at a time.

When you want to evaluate how good a university is, the very first thing you look to is the quality of the professors. Are they brilliant researchers who change the way we understand our world, win prizes for their contributions, and inspire their students to think in new ways? Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have such people as my colleagues. And I have considered it a privilege to be a university administrator who helps to create an environment where people like that can be most productive.

I would like to make two points about the pool of faculty talent.

The first point is that the very best professors like to be around other professors who are also the very best. You might think that such people would rather be around people who are not quite as good as they are, so they would stand out as the very best. But in my experience that is not the psychology of the great professor.

The very best scholars like to be around people who are also outstanding. They feel that they will be inspired to do their own best work when they have the chance to discuss it with people who have the ability to understand it, criticize it, and help to make it better. That is the model of a university as what is called a “community of scholars.” That is the

model that inspired the very first universities, in Bologna, Italy, and Oxford, England.

This means that, for an academic administrator like me, recruiting a superstar talent has what we call a “snowball effect.” A snowball starts with a small core, and it gets bigger and bigger as more snow packs in around that core. When professors hear that a superstar is going to a new university, they feel a strong impulse to say, “I want to pack myself around that professor! I want to become part of that community of scholars!”

The second point about the pool of faculty talent is that – among the three pools of talent I am discussing this morning – it in fact has the smallest direct effect on the city where it is located. The best professors generally do not spend much time giving public lectures. They generally do not spend much time on television. They generally do not spend much time starting businesses. They will do some of those things, a little bit, but almost all their time is spent on their research and on their teaching.

The impact that these very special professors have on their cities is instead indirect.

One indirect benefit comes from the impact that special professors have on the supply of student talent to the city.

I cannot say enough about the impact that the most special students have on a city. Even while they are students, they add energy and ideas to the local community. But the bigger impact comes after they graduate. Going to school in a city creates a knowledge of and an affection for that city, and it creates a momentum to work in that city after graduation. In the first 5 to 10 years after they graduate, they will be the creative innovators – the ones who start the new enterprises that keep a community growing and becoming ever more prosperous. They will help businesses and governments and NGO’s to be the very best that they can be.

A great university, with great professors, provides a city with student talent through both recruitment and development. It recruits the very

best raw talent to study there. And then it develops that raw talent to its full potential.

Great universities invest enormous energy in their efforts to recruit the very best students to study with them. That is because high quality students are a key part of the talent snowball. Great professors enjoy teaching the very best students, so attracting great students can help to attract the best professors. And, at the same time, high quality students enjoy being with other high quality students. They believe their own personal reputations will be enhanced if they attend a school that is known to have great students. And just as importantly, they know that university students learn from one another as well as from their teachers. They will learn the most if their classmates are strong, serious students.

Of course, a great university's contribution to the students' development goes far beyond the act of surrounding them with excellent fellow students. Great universities teach. Great universities teach the right things, in the right ways.

Having been a part of higher education for the past 25 years, I can tell you with certainty that the quality of a university's teaching can make all the difference in a student's life after graduation. Poor teaching can leave raw talent undeveloped. Naturally brilliant and creative people fail to innovate in the ways they are capable of innovating. Great teaching enables talent to flourish. It helps young people to become the adults they were meant to be.

What is great teaching? I believe that, in the modern world, a great university must be committed to helping its students develop as many of ten essential intellectual qualities as possible. I do not have time to discuss those qualities at length, but I will at least list them for you. Five are what might be called "on-the-ground" skills and knowledge. Five are what might be called more abstract qualities of mind:

So what are the five on-the-ground qualities that make a worker especially valuable today?

First, Expertise: Mastery of the tools of an academic *discipline* (such as economics or engineering), and, in addition, deep knowledge

about a particular *domain* of life (such as contemporary China or urban transportation);

Second, Numeracy: Mastery of the tools of mathematical analysis;

Third, Multilingualism: Proficiency in more than one language;

Fourth, Focus: The ability to direct sustained concentration to a task, such as reading a book or listening to a speaker, without being distracted by the pulls of our multitasking world; and

Fifth, Multicultural Effectiveness: The ability to be maximally productive in working with people from other cultures.

These five on-the-ground qualities are important, but if anything the next five, somewhat more abstract qualities, are even more important.

First, Logic: The ability to think with critical precision about one's own ideas and the ideas of others;

Second, Curiosity: A burning hunger to experience and understand all manner of new things;

Third, Empathy: The ability to feel what others feel, and to understand who they are and how they think;

Fourth, "Negative Capability": The ability, well articulated by the poet John Keats, to hold two opposing ideas in one's mind at the same time, without rushing to say that one must be right and the other must be wrong; and

Fifth, Creativity: The ability to do more than simply repeat what one has heard or read from others, and instead to take the risk of putting forward something fresh, something one knows might end up being wrong.

Notice one important thing about this list. Among these ten items, at most only the first four can be nourished through a system of teaching that relies only on reading assignments, lectures, self-study, and examinations. The other six key qualities need to be developed through other teaching methodologies. And, in truth, other teaching methodologies can also help students to do a better job with the first four qualities as well.

When a great university develops these ten key qualities in its students, they are well prepared to have an important impact on the world. For that reason, great universities work hard to ensure that their teaching is as effective as possible.

And yet, as important as students are, they are not the biggest contribution that a great university can make to its community. That contribution lies in a great university's ability to attract outstanding neighbors.

Everyone in this room knows about Silicon Valley. You may not know, however, that Silicon Valley is what it is today because of a man named Tom Ford.

Tom Ford was a lawyer who worked in the real estate department of Stanford University. He noticed that there was a lot of inexpensive land right near Stanford University, and he decided to quit his job and become a real estate developer. But Tom Ford did not want to be just any kind of real estate developer. He wanted to create an environment where high-tech start-up businesses could flourish.

The world of Silicon Valley is an ecosystem. It is the habitat for several different elements of an entrepreneurial economy that work together in harmony. Those elements include entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, technologists, and lawyers. Tom Ford realized that if he developed a series of beautiful campuses along a street called Sand Hill Road, right next to the Stanford campus, all of those elements would want to move into the neighborhood. They would want to be neighbors to Stanford, so that they could hire students as interns and new graduates. And they would also want to be neighbors to each other. Just as talent snowballs among faculty, and among students, talent snowballs in the neighborhood.

This is an example of how a great university can make a defining contribution to the development of a city. By gathering together exceptional professors who teach in a highly effective way, it can attract the best pool of raw student talent in the world and develop within them the qualities they will need to succeed. By working closely with the surrounding community, the university can ensure that this pool of student talent is a

natural catalyst that brings together all the necessary ingredients for a high-value-added entrepreneurial economy.

As a strategy for talent development, this is ultimately much more efficient than a strategy that requires young people to go overseas for their education and then requires massive efforts to persuade them to come home. It draws talent into the city at the moment when talent is most mobile, and most impressionable.

I believe that NYU-Shanghai will play this kind of special catalytic role for Shanghai. The visionary leaders of this city have asked us to create a new kind of education for China, on a new campus that we are building in Pudong. We will be bringing to that campus the very best teachers in the world. We will be bringing to that campus the very best students – from across China and from around the world. And we will be providing them the kind of education through which they can develop their talents, nurturing the ten essential qualities that will prepare them to be world leaders after they graduate.

We will do that through our curriculum and how we teach. And we will do it by requiring our students to spend part of their student years in other parts of the world, on other campuses that are part of New York University's global network of campuses.

At the same time, we will be actively engaged with the larger community of this remarkable city. The other academic institutions in Shanghai, the business sector, the government, and the city's social institutions are our natural colleagues. Shanghai is well educated, entrepreneurial, and multicultural. It is the perfect environment for a school like ours, the perfect place to start a new talent snowball. I am delighted to have been asked to lead this effort, which holds so much promise for this city, for this nation, and for the world.