



Johnson, M. (2005). Review of *The Future of the Public University in America: Beyond the Crossroads*. *Workplace*, 12, 111- 114.

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**REVIEW OF *THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN AMERICA:
BEYOND THE CROSSROADS***

by James J. Duderstadt and Farris W. Womack

Duderstadt and Womack define the crossroads of their subtitle early: "As public higher education enters a new era, the powerful forces of a changing world have pushed universities beyond the crossroads of leisurely choice and decision making and toward a future that we can only dimly perceive and are being challenged to understand" (9). The sentence reveals—and assumes, as the authors do throughout—that the ship of "leisurely choice and decision making" (the hallmarks of effective faculty governance) has sailed, never to return. Their answer to the many and complex problems facing public universities is clear: dump the unwieldy shared governance system in favor of a top-down "pyramid" corporate governance structure of the sort "faculty members resist—indeed, deplore" (131). Politicized governing boards, athletics-obsessed alumni, authority-challenging students, and over-specialized faculty need to get out of the way and entrust "the enterprise" to visionary administrators. These last, innocent of politics and self-interest, alone possess the unbiased view of problems and their difficult yet courageous solutions; further, our authors consider such administrators' ideas *ipso facto* superior to those of their lessers, and the administrators themselves so untainted by careerism that the issue need never arise. "Faculties prefer to debate parking over principles, just as our governing boards prefer politics to policy" (202). Like another world ruler, an administrator "simply must cut through the Gordian knot of shared governance, of indecision and inaction" (180).

Unbalanced as a SWOT analysis, the book—by a former president and chief financial officer, respectively, of the University of Michigan—emphasizes weaknesses and threats and speaks only vaguely about strengths and opportunities. Worse, despite their title the authors ignore the strengths and weaknesses of the full range of American public universities and deal only with flagship schools. The book's greatest strength is its analysis of the financial dilemma facing universities, including a useful if limited historico-political overview. Tracing the shift in government support over recent decades from grants to scholarships to tax credits articulates the largely undebated transition in emphasis from university-controlled financing and greater access for indigent students to consumer-driven financing and aid directed toward upper middle class students (38-41, 95-96). Our authors attempt to link this transition to the issue of access and the importance of higher education in an increasingly knowledge-based democracy. They also display an informed knowledge of the consequences of structurally flawed federal and state budgets (103). Their assumptions again need to be questioned, however. Perhaps because of their rarified focus on flagship universities, they ignore or do not recognize that our economy, particularly employers, students, and their parents, demands not education but training. The assumptions drive their argument because education relates to "leisurely choice," whereas training seems to be what their agenda

is pointing toward. Further, the historico-political overview focuses on that period of massive public investment in higher education that only lasted from the era of the G.I. Bill or perhaps Sputnik until the first oil crisis. Prior to that time, college education for everyone was not even a dream. Since that period, funding for public education has, like real wages, stagnated to the point that we abuse the language when we refer to public supported universities. Public encouraged, maybe. Maybe.

Unfortunately, Duderstadt and Womack's views of constituent groups ("stakeholders") skew their solutions toward the unrealistic and simplistic. Evidently frustrated by their personal experiences in Ann Arbor, Duderstadt and Womack let their useful analysis of the problems dissipate into a conglomeration: a handbook for would-be presidents; a lecture for new legislators or university governors; condescending treatments of governing boards' "political and personal agendas" (175) and "unworkable, . . . even irrelevant" (179, 206) faculty governance; and a curious mix of bleakness and wistful idealism. Substituting repetition (down to cut-and-paste phrasing) for development (passim, but e.g. 67 and 93, 132 and 135, 179 and 206) does not substantiate their argument.

The real agenda is a transformation of university culture so complete as to make it unrecognizable. To their credit, the authors are clear:

Although it is perhaps impolitic to be so blunt, the simple fact is that the contemporary university is a public corporation that must be governed, led, and managed with competence and accountability in order to benefit its stakeholders. The academic tradition of extensive consultation, debate, and consensus building before any substantive decision can be made or action taken poses a particular challenge, since this process is simply incapable of keeping pace with the profound changes facing effective governance of the public university. . . . The leadership of the university should be provided with the same degree of authority to take actions, to select leadership, and to take risks and move with deliberate speed that their counterparts in business and government possess. (173-174)

Universities must be run as businesses in "a postsecondary knowledge industry" (87). Although informational technology will likely be a "democratizing force" (68), the pace of change illogically requires decisive top-down leadership from the president and provost (69-70). The authors propose shifting from "strongly political" lay boards to more professional boards "similar to those in the private sector" (175); indeed, an ideal board would represent "certain constituencies such as alumni, students, business, and labor," and of course university presidents should have influence and even veto power over such governors, "just as their colleagues in private universities and CEOs in the corporate sector do" (176-177). (Presumably, Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco had not yet exploded when this went through page proofs.) A "controversial variation on the theme" would include faculty representatives on the board, but only with "a clear sense of accountability and liability," whereby faculty become "advocates for the faculty position but would be responsible to the entire institution" (177). While marveling at the assumed distinction, one wonders just whom or what such faculty representatives would "represent." When the authors further suggest that "the academic practice of tenure also presents a challenge" (167), that parochial faculty "rarely have a deep understanding or responsibility for the many other missions of the university in modern society" (145), that "shared governance and limited authority for line officers make cost containment and productivity enhancement very difficult" (104), that universities would benefit from having the flexible human resource policies of corporations "to reorganize rapidly" (189), and that "faculty suffer from a chronic shortage of information—and hence understanding—about how a university really works," in part because administrators "have attempted to *shield* faculty and the academic programs from the forces of economic, social, and technology [sic] change raging beyond the campus" (166-167, italics mine), this reader begins to doubt that the principal cause of Dr. Duderstadt's emeritus status was his rumored rifts with powerful supporters of Michigan athletics.

When Duderstadt and Womack do articulate key questions—"All organizations, whether in higher education, commerce, or government, face a quandary: should they centralize, through growth or mergers, becoming conglomerates to take advantage of economies of scale, standardization, and globalization? Or should they decentralize, seeking autonomy, empowerment, and flexibility at the level of unit execution while encouraging diversity, localization, and customization? Which path should they choose?"—they dissolve into platitudes: "Actually, both—yet neither" (70). A few other notable examples may briefly illustrate my critique. Their argument about the role and structure of governing boards and then faculty governance is both repetitive and banal, perhaps written in some other context to educate (train?) new governors or legislators (161-163). Later, our authors repeat their assumptions about "ineffective faculty governance," which they see as "encumbered" with rules and regulations. It seems that "the best faculty are frequently disenfranchised, outshouted by their less productive colleagues, who have the time and inclination to engage in campus politics." An equally incisive bromide immediately follows this unsubstantiated general insult: "It will require determination and resourcefulness to break this stranglehold of process and free the very best minds" (193). One final example of muddled (wishful?) thinking. The authors concede that "[t]o some degree strong resistance to change is both understandable and appropriate. After all, the university is one of the most enduring social institutions of our civilization in part because its ancient traditions and values have been protected and sustained." Two sentences into the subsequent paragraph, however, we are told (as opposed to persuaded), "Greater effort should be made to link accountability with privilege on campuses, perhaps by redefining tenure as the protection of academic freedom rather than lifetime employment security [sic, though that doesn't do this justice]," and that "[t]here is a clear need to consider the restructuring of university governance, particularly the character of lay governing boards and the process of shared governance among boards, faculties, and administrations, so that universities are better able to respond to the changing needs of society rather than defending and perpetuating an obsolete past" (201). No less clear for being implied here is just who should get to distinguish between an ancient tradition and the obsolete past.

This book is worth skimming for attempted forays into real issues such as faculty loyalty to discipline over university (167), students' preference for credentials over education (91), the general public's choice of price over quality (110), and some of the ramifications of a "dark, driven future" in which commercial concerns lead to mediocrity and the residential campus becomes "the gated community" of higher education, "available only to the rich and privileged" (96). But our authors never put the pieces together. They never interrogate the dialectic of problem and solution, or, more darkly, they do not want their readers to do so, nor do they seem to want to confront what motivates such issues. For instance, as we have seen, they deride "parochial" faculty, but the agenda our authors serve forces faculty to become hyperterritorial entrepreneurs and then blames them for being so. The larger genius of "starving the beast" as economic and social policy is that it becomes its own argument for greater starvation: the more you cut revenues, the more you are forced to cut university funding or public health services, or the more you are forced to privatize universities or, say, Social Security. The closest our authors come to an overarching vision results in an oxymoron, the "privately financed public university," which they recognize is an option only to top tier universities (127-128); and at such times it becomes more clear, as noted already, that despite their book's title the flagship university is their only focus anyway (see also 185, 195).

Setting their insights about the political, financial, and cultural ramifications of state and federal support for higher education in a larger context might have sharpened Duderstadt and Womack's view of possible solutions. Grants-to-scholarships-to-tax credits parallels similar transitions across the culture: indirect subsidies such as tax deductions for corporate pensions and health care programs, retirement savings programs like IRAs and 401(k)s, home mortgage interest, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. All except the last are heavily tilted toward the more affluent; only 16% of workers in the bottom quintile of the nation receive pension benefits, and only 24% receive health benefits, while 70% of workers in the top quintile receive both (Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State*, Cambridge UP, 2002).

Duderstadt and Womack frequently cite the areas "competing" with education for scarce government funds: health care, welfare, Medicare, mental health services, roads and other infrastructure, prisons. In an aside, they argue that universal public health insurance would benefit universities as well as all other employers whose health insurance costs subsidize those who have no health insurance at all. They were on the brink of a breakthrough argument: that greater social justice in all such areas would strengthen their case (209) for more recognition and support of education as one major infrastructure of our modern economy. Instead, they embrace the corporate model and ignore (never knew?) that one of a university's greatest strengths is its conservative nature, that very considered reflection and consensus-building process they so resist—indeed, deplore.