The American university today is curiously embattled. The pace and scope of changes occurring now and those that lie ahead are comparable to the revolution in higher education that followed the Civil War. The worldwide demand for higher education is exploding, the composition of the student body is being transformed, and market principles are forcefully asserting themselves in the academy. Using an evolution-based approach to reform, Susanne Lohmann, professor of political science and policy studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, examines why universities are structurally resistant to change and how we might foster their successful adaptation to higher education’s new environment.

"After Snow," Marsden Hartley.
The Phillips Collection,
Washington, DC
CTS AND DEFENSES

DARWINIAN MEDICINE FOR THE UNIVERSITY

The way the university works often comes across as dysfunctional. But effective university reform is difficult because much that looks like a defect of the university is in fact a defense. The distinction between defects and defenses is drawn from Darwinian medicine. A broken leg is a defect and should be fixed. A fever, on the other hand, is a defense: Despite the discomfort it brings, fever serves a useful function in keeping bacterial pathogens in check—a consideration that should be taken into account when planning treatment.

Eliminating the university’s defects is relatively easy. It is far more difficult to improve the university’s defenses, which may appear to be wasteful and senseless, but serve a useful function in an environment beset with complicated issues and problems. One such defense is tenure. Tenure is a compromise solution to a commitment problem. It typically takes about seven years of apprenticeship for a scholar to become an expert in his or her field. Earning a Ph.D. and working as a postdoc are costly investments in human capital; given extremely specialized knowledge and skills, it is difficult for a scholar to shift to another line of work. Yet scientific ideas and methods evolve quickly, and the specialized scholar is vulnerable to becoming outdated. Given future vulnerability, not many people would be willing to make the human capital investment that prepares them to do highly specialized research. Tenure addresses this problem, but with a downside: Scholars who are no longer productive or whose ideas and skills are obsolete cannot be fired, and their presence contributes to the ossification of the university.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY

The history of the university is one of intellectual and structural ossification punctuated by occasional bursts of vibrance. In the early European Middle Ages, the medieval university invented modern, democratic norms and institutions. The norms included ubique docendi (the right to teach in any university after receiving a degree from one university), open access and open information, and free inquiry. The institutions included decentralized federalist structures, bottom-up governance, complex voting procedures and representative assemblies, and institutionalized conflict resolution, or rule of law.

The innovative Middle Ages, however, were followed by centuries of stagnation. The medieval university missed the boat come the Renaissance. Instead, humanist ideas and methods were adopted by newly founded universities, especially those in Northern Europe. Then those universities were largely missing in action in the 18th century during the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, which occurred largely in academies and private societies.

During the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, Germany invented the specialized professor and the principles allowing the freedom to choose what to teach and learn. Deep specialization proved to be a powerful force, spurring the accumulation of research results and generating immense depth and sophistication in the research enterprise. German science and industry flourished. The German model was copied in many countries, including the United States. In the 20th century, however, the German university ossified.

In sum, the university has experienced limited bursts of intellectual vibrance during its 900-year history, but for most of that time it has been moribund.

OSSIFICATION

The university’s structures encourage ossification. They evolved to protect the university from the outside world and to protect its inhabitants from each other—to create safe spaces for free inquiry. The structures were useful at the time they were shaped, but continue to be locked in long after the demands of the outside world have changed.
rendering them dysfunctional. However, these structures are a defense, not a defect. Great care must be taken to ensure that university reform recognizes this important distinction.

The departmental structure of the university and its alignment with the discipline-based structure of scientific networks contributes to the intellectual ossification of the university. New ideas and methods are discouraged from entering the system because job markets and reward systems are controlled by the older generation and structured to promote old ways of thinking. At an individual level, deep specialization gives rise to ossification in the scholar's ideas and work. The flip side of the expert's ability to see in depth is the potential loss of the ability to see in breadth. The expert is frequently blind to aspects of the world that are patently visible to the amateur or to experts in other fields.

The greatest factor inhibiting structural and intellectual progress is intrauniversity hostility to change. For this reason, new structures and ideas typically emerge in the context of new fields of inquiry and new institutions. That is, change occurs through replacement as existing institutions stagnate and new ideas and methods find a home in newly founded fields and institutions.

CONDITIONS CONducive TO CHANGE: THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In historical and contemporaneous comparison, the American system of higher education stands out. The system has continuously reinvented itself and is doing so now. It is useful to conjecture what it is about the American system that allows it to thrive.

Three key characteristics of the American system generate flexibility and innovation:

First, the system is extremely competitive, and competition tends to promote performance. There are markets for students, markets for faculty, and markets for administrators, as well as the market entry of distance education and for-profit enterprises. Market competition can work wonders in forcing existing institutions to change. Such competition, however, has its dark side. Excellence is expensive—buying faculty stars and matching outside offers, for example, can quickly raise the stakes for all, as can building state-of-the-art dorms, food courts, gyms, and cutting-edge research facilities. Likewise, raising funds and winning outside grants become more urgent. From the perspective of some faculty members (typically those of the less well-endowed humanities and social sciences), these activities are seen as corrupting the academic enterprise.

Second, the American higher education system is extremely diverse. Diversity promotes experimentation and the dissemination of innovations, and it prevents the system from getting locked into outdated models and ways of thinking.

Third, the system is politically permeable. State institutions in particular are subject to pressures to change from the political world. The G.I. Bill of Rights, for example, led to the shift from elite to mass education in the United States. Congress was the driving force behind the G.I. bill, which was vigorously opposed by presidents of the leading universities of the time, concerned as they were about the effects of a tidal wave of “nontraditional” students on their comfortable campuses. On the other hand, higher education is also politically vulnerable, as today when state and federal governments intrude into the affairs of the university in an effort to improve performance and accountability by micromanaging and imposing simple quantitative standards.
CONCLUSION

History has shown that the world has a way of moving on while the university ossifies. When impetus for change neither stems from within nor is generated from without, institutions lose their relevance and are replaced by newly founded colleges and universities that embrace new ideas. In this regard, the American higher education system has key advantages, particularly those that allow the outside world to reach into the university and penetrate it with its values. The drawback to such a structure is that it creates a daunting array of internal and external conflicts and pressures for modern university leaders. Their task is to continually acknowledge, update, and sharpen institutional defenses while recognizing and ridding the university of its defects.

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