

The Role of the University in a Changing World

Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College, Dublin

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IN A SPEECH TO THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY AT TRINITY COLLEGE IN DUBLIN, HARVARD PRESIDENT DREW FAUST ON WEDNESDAY (JUNE 30) SURVEYED "THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN A CHANGING WORLD." WHILE SHE CELEBRATED THE EXPANSION OF EDUCATION GLOBALLY, SHE WARNED OF THE RISING PRESSURES THREATENING TO UNDERCUT THAT TREND. WHILE SHE LAUDED THE CAREER-DEFINING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SHE DEFENDED THE ONGOING IMPORTANCE OF THE HUMANITIES.

FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF HER REMARKS:

Thank you, to my good friend Academy President Canny, to Provost Hegarty of Trinity College, members of the Royal Irish Academy, and honored guests. As I anticipated joining you here today, a story came to mind that involves the poet Robert Frost, when he was invited to read a poem at the presidential inauguration of John F. Kennedy, Harvard's most famous Irish-American graduate. At some point after the ceremony Frost supposedly leaned over to the new president and said, "You've something of Irish and something of Harvard. Let me advise you, be more Irish than Harvard." I fear that, with me, the balance tilts in the other direction and that you will be getting a great deal of Harvard-or at least of reflections my experience there has generated. But I want to take this moment, when so much attention is being focused on universities here in Ireland and elsewhere, to consider the place of the university in a changing and globalizing world. Your own Nicholas Canny in his September 2008 President's Report called for this Academy to play a role in the discussion of these critical issues, serving, as he put it, as a "university of the universities." I am honored to have the opportunity to be part of that conversation.

Prevailing discourse, familiar since at least the 1990s, emphasizes the university's place as a paramount player in a global system increasingly driven by knowledge, information and ideas. We live in a time when knowledge is ever more vital to our societies and economies, in a world of rapidly circulating capital and people and of revolutionary communication technologies. Knowledge is replacing other resources as the main driver of economic growth, and education has increasingly become the foundation for individual prosperity and social mobility. In the United States, a recent survey found that the proportion of individuals who believe higher education to be "absolutely necessary" for success increased from 31% in 2000 to 55% in 2009. Data supports these perceptions: A U.S. Census Bureau study in 2002 found that a college-educated American earns about twice as much over a lifetime as one with just a secondary diploma.

Higher education generates broader economic growth as well as individual success. For example, a recent study determined that universities contributed nearly 60 billion pounds to the economy of the United Kingdom in 2007-08. And, of course, this impact is not just national but global. A ferment of ideas and innovation accompanies proliferating exchanges of faculty and students. UNESCO reports a 57% increase in the numbers of those studying outside their home countries in just the past decade. At Harvard, we have seen a fourfold increase in study abroad during the undergraduate years. And now more international students come to us as well-20% of our total university-wide student population. In a digital age, ideas and aspirations respect few boundaries. The new knowledge economy is necessarily global, and the reach of universities must be so as well. Consider a few recent examples of this current of growth, exchange and collaboration:

- - The European Union's recently expanded study abroad program, Erasmus, sends hundreds of thousands of students and faculty to 4,000 institutions in 33 countries each year.
- - The Persian Gulf States have recruited international branch campuses with investments in the hundreds of millions of dollars - Education City in Doha involves six American universities on 14 square kilometers of land; New York University's new Abu Dhabi campus opens this fall, admitting just 2% of the applicant pool and enrolling students from 39 countries. We can count at least 162 branch campuses of Western universities in Asia and the Middle East-a 43% increase in just three years.
- - Singapore hosts 90,000 international students as well as a campus of INSEAD, the global business school, and programs with at least four American universities.
- - China has engineered an explosion in higher education, the most dramatic in human history. Between 1999 and 2005, the number of degree earners quadrupled-to more than 3 million. China is expected by the end of this calendar year to become the world's largest producer of Ph.D. scientists and engineers.
- - In India, the numbers attending universities doubled in the 1990s, and demand continues to surge. India's Human Resource Development Minister has stated that India needs 800 new institutions of higher education by 2020 in order to raise the age participation rate-the percentage of college-age population enrolled in institutions of higher education-from 12.4% to 30%.
- - Here in Ireland that age participation rate increased from 11% in 1965 to 57% in 2003. Your global outreach has expanded significantly as well. Your online portal for open-access research, RIAN, went live this month, inviting greater international collaboration; Trinity and University College Dublin's new Innovation Alliance, and this Academy's joint innovation venture,

leverage national and international connections, building on a well-established capacity for technological innovation and entrepreneurship at Irish universities.

We have seen these borderless partnerships flourish in ways that truly matter—improving lives in dramatic ways. I had the privilege of witnessing one remarkable example of such an initiative firsthand when I travelled to Botswana last fall. A collaboration between Harvard and the government of Botswana has over a decade and a half made significant progress in AIDS prevention and treatment. One of its greatest successes has been in all but eliminating mother-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in a study population. It was an unforgettable lesson for this university president about the kind of difference our institutions can make—a lesson rendered powerfully real when I met with a group of the mothers and their healthy, bright-eyed children. When I asked one woman about her hopes for her three-year-old daughter, she smiled and replied, "I want her to go to Harvard." Often universities' international initiatives are framed as a competitive necessity—for the standing of our institutions, for the global success of our nations and their economies. But if these are competitions, they are ones in which everyone can win—through the partnerships they generate, in the opportunities they open, in the fields and the minds they expand. Indeed, as other institutions falter in dispiriting succession, universities nurture the hopes of the world: in solving challenges that cross borders; in unlocking and harnessing new knowledge; in building cultural and political understanding; and in modeling environments that promote dialogue and debate.

This description captures an essential part of what universities are and why we need them, why we have looked to them as zones of openness since the first *Studia Generalia* in Paris and Bologna attracted students from across medieval Europe to study law, theology, philosophy and medicine, disciplines that even then extended beyond nations and across borders.

Yet, in 2010, even as we marvel at the pace of expansion in higher education across the globe, even as we around the world collectively acknowledge its critical and ever-increasing importance, even as we recognize its necessarily global scope, we see its future imperiled. We find that the global economic crisis has slowed our cross-border momentum. The world seems a little less "flat," and some observers claim that the recession has driven globalization into retreat. As the world oscillates between openness and insularity, many worry that we are entering a more inward-looking period, when states begin to resurrect old boundaries and national concerns trump international aspirations. We saw some early indications of increased insularity in the months after 9/11, when tightened security imposed new hurdles for international students. We at Harvard worked to assist students with visa difficulties, but we still saw numbers diminish for a time, and international faculty encountered obstacles as well. The numbers of international students at Harvard and across the United States have now returned to

earlier levels, but security concerns continue to inhibit ease of movement for many who wish to cross borders to study or to undertake research collaborations.

Fears of economic competition from the global recession have also intensified resistance to immigration, sentiments powerfully demonstrated in the United States in the recent laws passed in Arizona that have sparked nationwide protests. Talent comes with many different passports, and as we at universities work to attract and nurture the most promising and creative minds, we find our purposes challenged by legislation that would limit access for such individuals or prohibit them from using their education to contribute to our society. Venture capitalist John Doerr, distressed at the requirement that so many international students are compelled to leave the United States after finishing their education, remarked that we ought to be stapling the "green cards" that permit extended U.S. residence and employment to the diploma of every foreign graduate. At Harvard we were forcefully reminded of these immigration issues just this month when one of our undergraduates was detained by the immigration authorities as he tried to board a plane. He was returning to work in a laboratory at Harvard for the summer from his home in Texas, where he had lived since his mother brought him to the country illegally when he was four years old. His story of achievement in face of daunting odds is a compelling one, and it garnered widespread support-not just from us at Harvard, but also from powerful voices in Washington, U.S. Senator Richard Durbin, and Massachusetts's Senator John Kerry and Congressman Michael Capuano. The immigration service has now determined it will not pursue any action against him for the time being. I, like a number of other university presidents, have been vocal in support of the DREAM Act, sponsored by Senator Richard Durbin, which would enable young people brought as children to the U.S. to qualify for citizenship through six-year provisional status to pursue higher education or military service, but this measure has not yet been passed. As these anxieties about both security and the economy feed resistance to aspects of globalization, we face the specter of heightened impediments to border crossings, both literal and metaphorical, at a moment when higher education more than ever requires the free flow of talent and ideas.

The global recession has of course produced an even more direct threat to the growth and health of higher education-a financial one. While the knowledge economy drives and indeed requires the unprecedented growth of higher education, in many places university budgets decline, and courses, faculty and opportunities are cut back, even as enrollments and expectations rise. In the United States, perhaps the most dramatic example involves the University of California system, the gold standard of American public higher education. Shortfalls in state revenues led to a 20% cut in the universities' budgets this past fiscal year. Faculty and staff have faced furloughs, layoffs and salary reductions; students have seen significant tuition increases and diminished numbers of available places. You have experienced these budgetary pressures in Ireland, and as I am sure you know well, higher education in the United Kingdom faces similar challenges. Last week's

emergency budget generated fears of funding reductions of as much as 25%. We are caught in the paradox of celebrating the global knowledge economy and simultaneously undermining its very foundations.

The same survey I described earlier that charted the growing sense that university education is an "absolute necessity" reported that increasing percentages of respondents also believe that opportunities for college are unaffordable. As they desire it more and more, they perceive it as less attainable. At Harvard we have recently built on our long traditions of "need-based" assistance to introduce a significantly expanded undergraduate financial aid program intended to combat these pressures for lower- and middle-income families and to ensure that Harvard is-and is understood to be-accessible and affordable for talented students regardless of their economic circumstances. But serious challenges about the cost of higher education persist in the United States, just as they are manifest in the vigorous current debates about fees in both Great Britain and Ireland. The nature of the controversies about costs and budget reductions can alert us to another threat. This is not so much that the global knowledge economy will weaken or falter in the ways I have just described, although those perils are real. I am concerned with assumptions that rest within the very concept of the global knowledge economy itself. There is a danger that the focus on higher education as the fundamental engine of economic growth is proving so powerful that it will distort our understanding of all that universities should and must be. Such assumptions can, for example, encourage a devaluation of basic scientific research, of investigation that may not yield immediate payoffs or solve concrete problems. There is widespread concern in the United States at present about patterns of government research funding that advantage conventional, risk-free proposals-what Thomas Kuhn might have called "normal science"-over less predictable, more ambitious and possibly paradigm-shifting endeavors. The intensely competitive global economy has driven governments, everywhere critical partners to higher education, to demand more immediate, tangible returns on their investments. Too often such an emphasis on the short term can mean especially painful cuts for disciplines whose value, though harder to measure, is no less real. In a series of passionate recent exchanges in the press, British and American scholars have deplored cost-saving measures that have eliminated Britain's only professorship of paleography, terminated offerings in philosophy at Middlesex University, and dramatically cut back the teaching of history prior to 1900 at Sussex. The eminent Oxford historian Keith Thomas concludes in the Sunday Times that "the position of non STEM [science, technology, engineering, math] subjects is seriously threatened." Yet as Salters Sterling recently reminded us in the Irish Times, "Any government worth its salt must be every bit as concerned with the humanities as with technologies."

As stewards of centuries-old traditions of higher learning, we must work to assure that the understandable effort to promote what is valuable not eclipse our support for what is invaluable. When we define higher education's role principally as driving economic

development and solving society's most urgent problems, we risk losing sight of broader questions, of the kinds of inquiry that enable the critical stance, that build the humane perspective, that foster the restless skepticism and unbounded curiosity from which our profoundest understandings so often emerge. Too narrow a focus on the present can come at the expense of the past and future, of the long view that has always been higher learning's special concern. How can we create minds capable of innovation if they are unable to imagine a world different from the one in which we live now? History teaches contingency; it demonstrates that the world has been different and could and will be different again. Anthropology can show that societies are and have been different elsewhere-across space as well as time. Literature can teach us many things, but not the least of these is empathy-how to picture ourselves inside another person's head, life, experience-how to see the world through a different lens, which is what the study of the arts offers us as well. Economic growth and scientific and technological advances are necessary but not sufficient purposes for a university. And within the domain of science, universities have a distinctive obligation to nurture and fulfill the deep human desire to understand ourselves and the world we inhabit and inherit, from the smallest elementary particle to the sweep of the galaxies-even when there is no practical application close in view and even as we rightly accelerate our efforts to harvest new technologies from knowledge in its most basic form. It is worth remembering that the most transformatively useful of scientific discoveries often trace their origins to research born of sheer curiosity about who we are and how we can fathom the most intriguing mysteries of the natural world.

Our current situation brings to mind the observation of Harvard's distinguished and beloved scholar of Irish history and literature John Kelleher, whose quick wit some of you might remember. Professor Kelleher once commented as he reviewed a folder for the admissions committee, "This student is exceptionally well-rounded. But the radius is very narrow." I am not sure exactly what the student lacked, but his proportions were clearly off, a principle that appeals to our intuitions about what education is for.

The ideal and breadth of liberal education that embraces the humanities and arts as well as the social and natural sciences is at the core of Harvard's philosophy of undergraduate education and is embodied in the "General Education" requirements that account for a quarter to a third of each student's course work. But this liberal arts ideal confronts challenges in the United States as it does elsewhere in a world so intent on bottom lines and measures of utility.

Ironically, matters seem to be moving in a rather different direction in China. As we risk eroding our support for the humanities, prominent institutions in China are turning to embrace them. At lunch with a dozen or so Chinese university leaders in Shanghai last March, I was surprised to find that what was foremost in their minds, what they most wanted to discuss, was the humanities-the need to expand and strengthen them, the need to address questions of meaning and value even within those institutions primarily

focused on science. Curricular reform under way at a number of Chinese universities is requiring a broad range of course offerings, and university leaders are committed to enhancing the teaching of philosophy, history and literature. Fudan University in Shanghai has introduced a residential college structure like that of Harvard, Cambridge or Oxford; Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou has established a liberal arts college for a small test group of students. Two-thirds of Chinese undergraduate students pursue degrees in the sciences; fewer than one-third of American students do. Perhaps we are each worried about what our students might be neglecting. But as we marvel at the growth of higher education and the emerging strength of science in China, we should note as well the increasing interest and attention of the Chinese to the humanities.

At the heart of the liberal arts and fundamental to the humanities-and indeed central to much of scientific thought-is the capacity for interpretation, for making meaning and making sense out of the world around us. We are all bombarded with information. That is a defining aspect of the new global knowledge economy and the digital platforms on which it rests. American students spend almost every waking hour attached to some information-generating device-a cell phone, an iPhone, a BlackBerry, an iPad. They are tweeting or googling or instant messaging or e-mailing. What are they meant to do with all this information? How do they digest and evaluate it? If we are to depend on a knowledge economy, how are we to understand what is actually knowledge-or, we might say, signal-as contrasted with what is mere information-what we would call noise?

Education measured only as an instrument of economic growth neglects the importance of developing such capacities. It misses the fact that we are all interpreters; it ignores that some things are not about "facts" but about understanding and meaning. Let me offer some examples of the contrast:

The first example is in the field of law-which constantly requires the re-assessment of facts as their significance changes with a changing world. That is how former Supreme Court Justice David Souter described it at Harvard's Commencement a few weeks ago, showing as false the notion that judges decide cases simply by viewing facts objectively and reading fairly. He continued by saying, "Judges have to choose between the good things that the Constitution approves...values...that compete with each other" such as liberty and equality, and, I continue to quote, "they have to choose, not on the basis of measurement, but of meaning."

The second example is in the realm of economics. In all fields we are tempted to over-apply our models, when our desire for certainty runs past our understanding. Which of us does not have this impulse? And as Paul Volcker, chairman of the U.S. Economic Recovery Advisory Board, recently observed, a basic flaw underlying the recent economic crisis was the notion that, and I quote, the "thinking embedded in mathematics and physics could be directly adapted to financial markets," which, as he put it, are "not driven by changes in natural forces but by human phenomena, with all their implications for herd behavior...swings in emotion, and ...political ... uncertainties." Markets, in other

words, demand a certain level of interpretation. Economists themselves have come to recognize that humans do not necessarily act rationally-in terms of perceived and unambiguous advantage-and so we have seen the emergence of the new field of behavioral economics.

A third example is in my own field of history: One aspect of being a historian is pursuing new discoveries-the unknown material in a neglected archive, the data or detail previously overlooked, the historical event never before noticed or analyzed. But history is of course not just an accumulation of information; it is ineluctably interpretive. Data does not stand on its own; history does not actually "tell" us anything. The historian tells us about history. My most recent work on the American Civil War, for example, grew out of the long and widely accepted statistic of 620,000 war dead-approximately 2% of the U.S. population, the proportional equivalent of a stunning 6 million deaths in the United States today. But no one had really asked about the implications of that fact. How were they buried? Commemorated? Mourned? Remembered? But most of all I wanted to know what all of that meant to those who lived through it and thus what it might mean about how we live and die today. The foundation of the book is investigative-it ends with 50 pages of footnotes-but the force of the book is interpretive.

This kind of understanding lies at the essence of a university. Meaning is about interpretation. It is about understanding the world and ourselves not only through invention and discovery, but also through the rigors of re-inventing, re-examining, reconsidering. To borrow a phrase often attributed to Albert Einstein, it is about figuring out what counts as well as what can be counted. Meaning is about remembering what we have forgotten, now in a new context; it is about hearing and seeing what is right in front of us that we could not before hear or see; it is about wisdom that must be stirred and awakened time and again, even in the wise.

An overly instrumental model of the university misses the genius of its capacity. It devalues the zone of patience and contemplation the university creates in a world all but overwhelmed by stimulation. It diminishes its role as an asker of fundamental questions in a world hurrying to fix its most urgent problems. We need both.

There is no one model for a university's success, no disembodied "global research university" to which we all should aspire. Our variety supports our strength. Nor, as my colleague Louis Menand has noted, is the practical the enemy of the true. From the beginning, universities have drawn power from the creative tension between the search for applied knowledge and the devotion to knowledge pursued for its own sake, for the simple satisfaction of curiosity. As early as 1862, the American government addressed this tension at the heart of higher education with the Morrill Act, which founded the land grant colleges that have evolved into our great public universities. The measure explicitly sought to balance what it called "liberal and practical education," encouraging "agriculture and mechanic arts" while preserving "scientific and classical studies."

Humans have an insatiable appetite for understanding and for meaning. It is, in no small part, what makes us human. A testament to that hunger is the remarkable response to Professor Michael Sandel's moral reasoning course at Harvard called "Justice." This course, taught in Socratic style, has long been among the most popular of our undergraduate offerings. Recently, it has been filmed and distributed online, and now people around the world can experience the course. They can engage with the contemporary moral dilemmas it confronts and with the traditions of philosophy that have addressed similar questions from ancient times to the present. The course has, astonishingly, become a worldwide phenomenon: The series has had more than a million viewers. It is so popular in Japan that the Wall Street Journal wrote last week of the newest Japanese TV craze: philosophers.

I have learned that modern Ireland chose as the designated word for "professor" the old Irish term "ollamh", the name for the highest rank of ancient Gaelic poets. I do not know the reason, but I can guess. Poets are acute interpreters, fluent in meaning. Among the best of our time is Seamus Heaney, Harvard's former Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, beloved in Massachusetts as in Ireland-something of Irish and something of Harvard.

In 1986, Seamus Heaney composed a villanelle in honor of Harvard's 350th anniversary and read it before those assembled to celebrate. The poem begins with a spirit-the spirit of John Harvard-walking Harvard Yard. In the convention of the villanelle form, its first stanza, then its third and fifth, each end with the same line: "The books stood open and the gates unbarred." But in the poem's last line, the conclusion of the sixth stanza, Heaney breaks convention by changing the verb tense of the refrain from past to present: "The books stand open and the gates unbarred." The shift unites the past and present of learning, of higher education and of America's first university. Heaney's deviation from form suggests to me that he may have indeed intended to emphasize what I am disposed to see-the perpetuity of these essential foundations-this immortal spirit-of openness, inquiry and access that have defined and must continue to define universities. In the seventeenth century, long before science split the atom, before America's triumphal expansion to a distant western coast, a tiny college on the edge of the wilderness, product of this earlier age of global expansion, offered the freedom of learning, the open gates of access to knowledge. And today, one year short of 375 years later, centuries' more knowledge has opened for argument; gates have widened to all from around the world. "Begin again," Heaney urges, "where frosts and tests were hard./ Find yourself." Look to the past to help create the future. Look to science and to poetry. Combine innovation and interpretation. We need the best of both. And it is universities that best provide them.

Thank you.

- **DREW GILPIN FAUST**