



CREATING A UNIVERSITY OF DISTINCTION

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The universities of the western tradition serve as some of the most enduring hallmarks of our civilization. Originally places where scholars offered their knowledge to others, they grew to become institutions which prepared the intellectual, cultural, and professional leadership of future generations. They moved from being scholarly guilds to religious institutions and then became training grounds for social elites. The last great development in this history was an American creation: the public university charged with providing intellectual enlightenment to the common man. Even then universities took a long time to become broadly egalitarian institutions providing opportunity for personal growth and advancement.

All along in this process, however, one thing remained constant: great universities are known by the quality of their contributions to human knowledge. While the social, economic and political goals of universities have changed with the vicissitudes of time, and will continue to do so, the mark of distinction of any university will continue to be its record of scholarly contribution to the greater good of society. John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University* (1873) holds that the sole reason for universities is to create knowledge. He envisioned a community of scholars—faculty members as well as their stu-

dents—whose efforts were to make a mark on the sum total of human knowledge and by that means make the world a better place. There are many who now find Newman’s ideas passé, particularly so as we now see the university as an important tool of social engineering.

There is some merit to the formal criticism of Newman’s idea, not the least of which is that the Oxford of his day was as undemocratic an institution as one could imagine. It admitted no women and typically accepted only the sons of the narrowly privileged and powerful. But this does not mean that his essential assertion about the university is not still applicable today. No matter how much we have retooled universities, it is impossible to deny that our notion of an institution of distinction is still tethered to how much and how well an institution contributes to human knowledge. Today there are public universities such as Berkeley, Virginia and Michigan whose scholarship¹ more than meets the standards of great private institutions. Football might well explain how many know of Michigan, but its international reputation has nothing to do with the fortunes of its athletic department. No, it is a universal fact that the reputations of universities are still marked by their scholarly contribution to humanity and any university which does not seek in some way to distinguish itself in the arena of ideas can never be much more than a training academy.

A public university some half a century old in this country, George Mason University, in Fairfax County, Virginia, was chartered in its state’s wealthiest and fastest growing county. It was launched as a branch campus of its state’s flagship institution before becoming independent in 1972. George

¹ I choose this term over the more limited term “research” as the word *scholarship*, is broader and more appropriate. *Scholarship* includes research as well as artistic creation, scholarly criticism, and enlightenment of all kinds and does not exclude a whole host of activities associated with universities for a millenia or more.

Mason University had grand ideas about being a different kind of school that would serve a unique mission within its state. Fifty years later it has grown and has begun to achieve academic distinction, with over 30,000 students, a world-renowned department of economics (especially in political economy), a distinguished reputation in neuroscience and computational sciences, and a nationally ranked School of Public Policy. Over the last twenty years, it has consciously sought to hire accomplished faculty members away from other universities in order to establish itself in a state with two world-famous institutions of higher learning: Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary. It has grown despite a state history of general neglect of higher education (until relatively recently) and despite its location in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, an area rife with major private and public universities of some distinction.

Oakland University was founded at virtually the same time and had many of the same opportunities as George Mason did, but things have gone very differently here. A number of faculty have published reflections about their experiences over the past fifty years here in *The Oakland Journal*. What has perhaps been missing in these accounts is Oakland University's willful lack of growth, particularly in the 1980s, a policy agreed to apparently by most faculty and the administration, and with that lack of growth was the collective failure to create a university known for its scholarship. Such successes in scholarship and research as there have been, seem to have been driven mostly by some faculty's personal interest more than as a result of stated university agendas or goals. When I arrived here, many faculty and more than a few administrators were content with the status quo at Oakland and in some departments there existed either an outright hostility to faculty who pursued the scholar's life or a willful ignorance of why scholarship is the very lifeblood of any university. Service on the College's CAP, FRPC and the University Research Com-

mittee revealed wildly different expectations on this issue among departments and schools.

Since the arrival of President Gary Russi we finally moved away from the stasis mentality which so dominated things here just twenty years ago. At last, we have taken up our responsibility to grow the institution and meet the needs of the public. We are growing in numbers of students and new buildings. We have hired more administrators and even some additional faculty. This was all necessary and the President is to be credited with this. While not everyone can agree that we need to get to twenty-five thousand or more students, it must be admitted that a school too often mistaken for OCC in the past now has a higher public profile. However, with all of this “improvement” has this university seen a commensurate rise in its scholarly reputation?

There are pockets of outstanding scholarship in this institution. Physics’ faculty members have an outstanding record of funding, a number of our professors have truly first-rate international reputations as scholars, one humanities department has produced more than twenty books in the past fifteen years. But some of us are troubled by the lack of institutional support for these endeavors. Our university consistently underfunds new hires in the sciences and engineering, while there is no institutional support for non-sciences scholarship whatsoever. Perhaps more troubling is the feeling that scholarship (particularly that which has little access to grant monies) is undervalued. When this university touts its accomplishments it rarely cites scholarly accomplishments as an area of distinction.

Can a university achieve distinction without a record of scholarly achievement? There are reasons to applaud our accessibility and recent growth but it is unlikely that these will be the firm foundation of a distinctive reputation. It is only when the culture of this institution publicly champions scholarship, comes to understand what is and is not important and distinctive work, and perhaps actively seeks to retain productive schol-

ars² and recruit them as well, that one can be sure Oakland University has set its foot on the well-trodden and proven path of distinction. We need to have an administration that talks about scholarship, recognizes those places where faculty keep the name of the university before the public and the academic world, and we must demand more of ourselves.

I would suggest that one way to move things in this direction is to rethink *The Oakland Journal*. One of the hallmarks of any university is that it publishes things that other people want to read. *The Journal* has fulfilled a role as we moved from that static institution of years gone by to the present one and the efforts of its editors are to be appreciated. Nevertheless, it is time that this institution publishes something which furthers its academic mission. Perhaps it is time to publish a journal which establishes itself in the broader academic arena and with less focus on remembering when Woody Varner roamed classrooms and those good old days when Matilda Dodge-Wilson held teas for undergraduates at Meadowbrook Hall. Might we not think of changing the *Journal's* emphasis? What if *The Oakland Journal* became a publication of the literature of the Great Lakes region? What if it became a place where scientists could publish “think” pieces about science which would not be publishable in research driven scientific journals? What if we made it a place to publish the essay form, with content of serious high intellectual scope, but kept a small section of it for **truly outstanding** undergraduate writing? What about it being a se-

² The Big Ten schools often lose some of their most distinguished scholars to the Ivies or Stanford or even to Oxford and Cambridge. Over the past twenty years there have been a number of faculty with real accomplishments who have left OU not because they wanted to but because the university would not make even the smallest efforts to retain them. In the History Department we have seen nine people leave over the past twenty years. All but one went to “better” jobs (Maryland, Texas, Purdue, VMI, Haverford e.g.), but several tried to find ways to stay only to have the administration refuse to entertain offers to keep them. While losing people is perhaps inevitable, the consistent unwillingness to try to keep them is nothing short of mind-boggling.

rious review of scholarly books of all stripes? What if each issue was dedicated to an area of inquiry or a theme and sent out invitations to universities throughout the state for submissions?

It is time for Oakland University to set a scholarly course and one way to do so is with a truly distinctive scholarly publication. This would require not just the revamping of *The Journal* but would require a commitment of money and effort from the administration. There has to be a way that we could figure out some way to make it available electronically should we have the will to do so, thus avoiding some of the costs of publication and perhaps widening its audience.

But I think that the benefits here, while often intangible, would be undeniable. Available to libraries and the media, the name of Oakland University would spread and if a commitment is made to produce a publication with high standards it would help us begin to establish ourselves on the only academic stage that means anything in the long run.

We might be late out of the gate but it is high time this university makes a commitment to be a mature institution in all areas of academic life. George Mason made that commitment some years ago when its administration told its faculty that the future of the institution would be tied to an increasingly scholarly profile. It has hired, tenured and funded faculty with that goal in mind. In the process it sought to raise the scholarly reputation of the university in all areas of endeavor. Can we not do this too?

The goal here should be to finally find a will and a way to do so.

[Editor's Note: the *Oakland Journal* is archived and available on-line through the Oakland University website. Current issues are typically archived within a few weeks of the hard copy publication and distribution. The link is <http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/>]