Universities: Venerable and Valuable

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Elite research universities in the United States remain the envy of the world. In the five most recent global rankings, American institutions of higher education received 7-8 of the top 10 spots; 11-16 of the top 20; and 28-32 of the top 50.

The "secrets" of their success, according to James Axtell, an emeritus professor of the humanities at the College of William and Mary, "are not secrets at all." At least not to scholars and historians.

At a time in which colleges and universities have come under sustained attack, however, it may well be useful to explain to those outside the academy how American institutions became preeminent and why they continue to play an essential role at the center of modernity's infrastructure.

In Wisdom's Workshop, Axtell does just that. Drawing on the vast literature on higher education, he provides an informative and engaging (albeit at times meandering) account of the evolution of the research university, from its origins in England, Italy, and France in the Middle Ages to the emergence of the "multiversity" in the United States in the last half century.

More than two hundred years after the founding of Harvard, Axtell indicates, colleges and universities were not meeting the economic and social needs of a nation that was spanning the continent. As long as the United States lacked a robust secondary school system, institutions of higher education could not raise standards of admission and graduation. And most professors were little more than "all-purpose schoolmasters," drilling collegians in the rudiments of ancient
languages, mathematics and science.

The modern university, Axtell reminds us, emerged in the late nineteenth century. American educators borrowed extensively from Germany, whose universities put a premium on research and published scholarship; freedom for students and professors to learn and teach what they thought best without outside interference; and training in advanced studies (in laboratories and seminars), leading to Ph.Ds., as well as general culture.

That said, Americans did not adopt the German system wholesome. "Fittingly for a laissez faire economy and a democratic polity," Axtell writes, the emerging system in the United States was, by and large, not the product of federal or state legislation (or mandates), but of voluntary agreement, alumni support, institutional autonomy, and intense competition (which promoted the drive for excellence).

By the middle of the twentieth century, Axtell reports, elite universities were embedded in "an ecosystem of research," driven by the Cold War, that featured government support of basic research, especially in "Big Science," through such agencies as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Office of Naval Research. In the ensuing decades, Cal Tech got 84% of its funding from the U.S. government; MIT 78%; Princeton 54%.

Modern universities, Axtell emphasizes, serve multiple purposes and multiple constituencies. They sort people, provide ladders of mobility, and credential professionals. They are custodians of culture. They maintain academic freedom. They promote public service. But their "primary, unifying purpose" is the creation, transmission and application of knowledge. And knowledge production costs lots of money.

Because they are relatively autonomous and face more competition than their counterparts in other countries, Axtell concludes, American universities remain the gold standard.

But there are clouds on the horizon. Much to the dismay of alumni, parents, and students, teaching in many institutions has taken a back seat to research. Jobs, these days, are not as readily available to college graduates as they once were. The humanities have come under blistering criticism as frills, unworthy of taxpayer support. And for decades now, in response to the high cost of research, flat or declining appropriations from state legislatures, and dramatic increases in financial aid, tuition has risen faster than the rate of inflation.

Axtell does not see "any great chance that America's elite universities will cease to crowd the upper reaches of the global rankings of research universities." He may be right - for the top 10 or 20, who are protected by their endowments. For the rest, colleges and universities alike, times are tough. Absent major structural changes, it is by no means certain that they can continue to serve multiple purposes and multiple constituencies as well or better than they have for so many years.