
Can the University of Minnesota Become Truly “World Class”?

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I. Introduction

Does the University of Minnesota have the potential to be the kind of “world class” institution that many people, both on and off campus, have dreamt about and sought?

Better question: Are the politics and culture of the state of Minnesota amenable to such reaches in the first place?

Perhaps best question of all: At the end of the day, does it really matter if Minnesota’s flagship, land-grant university winds up ranked in the first tier, rather than in a nearby tier, of American research universities?

And if not the ultimate question, then one of the more important ones practically: What is it about the University of Minnesota that irritates taxpayers? What are the things that dissuade them from possibly supporting the place more generously?

The quick answers, expanded on below, are: “Most likely yes,” when it comes to the university’s makeup for greatness. “Probably not,” regarding the state’s inclination and capacity for such progress. “Clearly yes,” regarding the importance to Minnesota, economically and in other ways, of an even more outstanding university. And as one legislator recently said, “Let me

count the ways,” regarding how the “U” has been known to steam people off. But first, if I might be indulged, a personal note.

I came to the Twin Cities in 1974 to work and go to graduate school at the University of Minnesota. I was twenty-six and had been working at the State University of New York at Binghamton when its president, C. Peter Magrath, was appointed the new president of Minnesota’s giant land-grant institution.

On the day he was named, Peter graciously invited me to venture west, too, as his speechwriter, and I recall mulling the idea over for at least a half-second before accepting. It was one of the terrific moments of my life, and the job itself proved to be one of the most enjoyable and satisfying I’ve ever had. I revered the University of Minnesota during my time aboard, as I did the very idea—and usually the practice—of American higher education more generally.

I continued to work for Peter for another three years, until 1977, before finally biting a holster of bullets, retaking vows of poverty, and, on the cusp of turning thirty, enrolling in graduate school full time. I finished my doctorate three years later, in education, with a not-incidental focus on American colleges and universities and how they mesh with the rest of society.

I mention this because two contradictory cases can be made about the pages that follow. Either I’m one of the best people to write about the University of Minnesota. Or I’m one of the worst. Take your pick.

Either I know the institution from a gamut of angles and with intimacy. Or I’m not nearly disinterested enough to say anything objective. The fact, moreover, that I haven’t worked or studied there for more than two decades raises additional questions about whether a lot of old information is an even more dangerous commodity than a little up-to-date knowledge.

Back and forth, I’ve decided to write for several reasons.

Education debates, for years now, at both state and national levels, have focused substantially more on K-12 than on colleges and universities. Sure, there have been headlines about the University of Minnesota. But, risking only mild glibness, they have had more to do with basketball scandals and pricey presidential kitchens than with questions about its mission and main products.

Compare this to all the ways in which elementary and secondary schools, both in Minnesota and elsewhere, have been in a perpetual spotlight for core reasons ranging from curricular rigor, to teacher competence, to testing fairness, to parental choice—not to mention budgets and taxes. Think of the truckloads of books published in the last generation about school reform, and the way in which it wouldn’t take much more than an undergraduate’s U-Haul to cart away a similar collection about the “academy.” (I’ve always thought that far more people bought Allan Bloom’s dense and demanding *The Closing of the American Mind* as a prestigious coffee table book than as something actually to read.)

The situation in Minnesota has extra resonance. According to Steve Dornfeld of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, higher education funding as a percentage of state spending “has been on a downward spiral for fifteen years,” lagging behind not only states such as Wisconsin, Iowa, and Kansas, but also “a number of Southern states most Minnesotans would not regard as our peers.”¹

As for the University of Minnesota specifically, the proportion of state spending allocated to it has fallen from over 8 percent to about 5 percent over the past thirty years.² Shifts like these must be read with caution, because other state responsibilities, including health care and criminal justice, have grown quickly and inescapably. But the point and trend are clear.

Maybe American colleges and universities are taken for granted because they comprise the best system of higher education in the world and, thereby, pose fewer headaches than do American elementary and secondary schools. But at bottom, there may not be much difference between glossing over an institution on the one hand, and failing to appreciate it with adequate self-interest on the other. And I start from the premise that a first-rate University of Minnesota is very much in this state’s self-interest.

Also animating the essay is the disconcerting fact that it’s easy to be angered by large bureaucracies, of which the University of Minnesota is an academic prototype (and, as such, probably doesn’t use every tax dollar entrusted in its care wisely). It’s easy to vent on a

regular basis about *something* the university either does or doesn’t do—even if one’s heart has been known to swell and miss beats to the beats of the “Rouser.”

The litany of peeves, real or imagined, is familiar. The university is arrogant. It’s not accountable. It spends too much money. It resists setting priorities. It tries to be all things to all people. It helps business too little. It helps dishonored basketball coaches too much. Its professors teach too few classes. Its students routinely drop out of school before taking enough classes. It may be one of the most politically correct—which is to say, intellectually cramped—fortresses of learning in the country. And, for good measure, parking on the Twin Cities campus can be a big-ten pain—though in fairness, not nearly as much of a pain as it once was. Ah, progress.

Who harbors and voices charges of this sort? Many people, spanning an expanse of worldviews and local views. Though to be fair and accurate again, complaints like these often represent the beefs of conservatives especially.

I would argue this: The University of Minnesota is an exquisitely human institution in the sense that it’s far from perfect. And as with all human institutions—tax-supported ones leading the list—it has a responsibility to do better. But it is also true that the university is not uniformly guilty of all the sins that critics regularly level at it. And that it’s only at our own peril and shortchanging as a state that we allow such charges to result in discounting and gainsaying the place. Because

when all is said and done, when all the accounting of costs and contributions is tallied, Minnesota's well-being is inseparable from that of its flagship university.

As already implied, whatever I have to say about the University of Minnesota should be taken more as interpretation than heavier-duty analysis. This is the case because I've been gone so long. It's also because I have made no effort to scour archives for reams written and contended about the university since my departure. But there is another reason why this essay should be viewed more as personal reflection than piercing light: the university has been around more than long enough, and it's more than complicated enough, so that virtually all manner of evidence can be found in its record.

If I were to claim, for example, that high-tech entrepreneurs are only tepid in their satisfaction with the university's commitment to technology transfer, campus officials would have no trouble rounding up dozens of high-tech leaders to aver otherwise. Similarly, if I were to argue that there is a decreasing emotional tie between the university and people throughout the state, officials would be quick to point to the immense success of their current billion-dollar-plus capital campaign. There has to be some tingling, they would correctly claim, for so many people to write so many large checks.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows.

Section II discusses how the University of Minnesota, as well as other American colleges and universities, is

often screwed into censorious pretzels by political correctness, postmodernism, deconstructionism, and their similarly absurd like. Of all my arguments with the University of Minnesota, my biggest lies here and, I assume, with many others as well. It can be a major stumbling block to warmer embraces and more bountiful support.

Section III examines the ceaseless tension between Minnesota's bone-deep fidelity to access and egalitarianism and its often less certain allegiance to unabashed excellence. The reference here is to both the state of Minnesota and its land-grant university.

Section IV considers whether the university really is opposed to setting priorities and scaling back programs. Is it an empire builder? Is it, as some claim, really unaccountable?

Section V makes a case for the University of Minnesota with as few catalog clichés as possible. How strong is the university already? Why is it essential for it to get stronger? What must it do to reach next levels? What must the rest of the state do to assure such improvements? Presuming that improvements at the university actually come to be reflected in national rankings, such as those by the National Research Council, do such ratings matter?

And Section VI sums up.

II. P. C.

Shortly after September 11 last year, Lisa Ruddick, an associate professor of English at the University of Chicago, wrote a thoughtful and telling essay on the difficulty she and her colleagues faced in bridging what

she described as a “chasm.” By chasm, she meant the gulf between her field’s inability to nourish students and their heightened need to “sustain a humane connection” to a world that was “overwhelming” them.³

For years, she acknowledged, literary scholarship has been running away **from**, not searching **for**, humane connections. She cited a soon-to-be Ph.D. who “confessed” that she couldn’t blame people who look at their discipline and wonder, “If you’re not getting at anything that sustains people, **what’s the point?**”

It’s a good question. Of all academic fields, one would imagine that English literature would reign at or near the top in concerning itself with person-to-person ties. One would imagine that those who shape the discipline would take it as gospel that a main point and blessing of great books, plays, and poetry is that they help mortals better understand what is most human about the human condition—with humanity universally defined.

But as Ruddick wrote, that’s not the way the field has come to be conceived by the keepers of its professional norms. She told of a bad time spent writing about *Ulysses* and Joyce’s “insight into the touching human need to bury, burn, or otherwise take care of the bodies of the dead.” But she never submitted the article for publication as she was afraid of being attacked by colleagues for the high crime of “essentializing”—for daring to suppose that there are “shared features that constitute the essence of being human.” Such a catholic notion, after all, is heretical to more “correct”

and “progressive” articles of faith in chunks of higher education in which humans are demarcated from one another, hard and fast, by allegedly immutable categories of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, and so on.

The very phrase “what sustains people,” she said, might provoke questions such as “Which people are you presuming to speak for?” and “Is everyone sustained by the same things?” These are crucial questions, she agreed, “but they tend to be framed as accusations rather than as prompts to a real exchange.”

Ruddick noted that such fears and inhibitions could be “utterly compelling” (read: effectively silencing), especially if a scholar’s viewpoint could be dismissed as having “something in common with ideas widely held on the political right.”

The dread and shame of it all! Supposedly enlightened souls fearful that other supposedly enlightened souls might condemn their careers to academic hell for the felony of intellectually sidling up to, what? An occasional Republican? Or perhaps even worse, for entertaining the idea that all life stories and dramas can’t be reduced to recitations of Western civilization’s presumed vendetta against every group and individual not “privileged” to be born white and male.

Yet it’s exactly these kinds of extraterrestrial nonsense that have come to poison swaths of American higher education, the University of Minnesota included. Mary Ellen Ashcroft, for instance, in recalling her own time teaching English on the Twin Cities campus, has written:

“Some faculty members talked about Christianity as if its only manifestation was snake handling.”⁴

How caught up and captured in this kind of stuff *is* the University of Minnesota? Philosopher and social critic Christina Hoff Sommers, for one, has described the women’s studies program there as one of the most skewed and intolerant in the nation.⁵ Parents, she has warned, only half-facetiously, ought to think “very carefully” before sending their daughters to a program like Minnesota’s. This, for reasons over and above what a professor in the department once said of my American Experiment colleague Katherine Kersten, who has written about being a “conservative feminist.”

Kathy, the faculty member told a reporter, would never be hired by the program because her “use of the term *feminist* is disingenuous.” To be a real feminist, the professor continued, is to “recognize that gender is a source of oppression.”⁶ Evidently, to update matters, being a girl or a woman under the Taliban (in the eyes of “real” feminists) is on a par with being female in Tonka Bay. So much for real diversity in a program ostensibly dedicated to it.

Sommers is not the only scholar ever to say that the University of Minnesota ranks especially rank on the P.C. meter. A former law professor there, Suzanna Sherry, charged several years ago that “it has become almost impossible to talk about certain issues, and it’s no longer possible to oppose a minority or a woman candidate for employment without being called a racist or sexist.”⁷

Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, two scholars who have investigated constraints on intellectual liberty across the country, have written that public universities in Minnesota (not just the University of Minnesota) “act like partisan political seminaries and have almost no concern for the most fundamental issues of free speech. In a state once known for protecting dissidents, a sorry pall of orthodoxy now prevails.”⁸

Is the U of M really *that* bad? I would like to think not, but I have beefs of my own. Here’s but a short and eclectic sampling.

The university’s Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs regularly brings in major world figures to address large audiences in Northrop Auditorium. I still vividly recall convocations with Jeane Kirkpatrick in about 1983 and then Vice President George H. W. Bush in about 1987. Both were heckled throughout and otherwise treated atrociously by cadres of spectators who made the event miserable and embarrassing for everyone else.

Yes, the cadres were relatively small. No, I don’t know how many of them actually were University of Minnesota students or employees. Yes, the moderator each time said right things about manners and the free exchange of ideas. And no, I’m not under any impression that the Twin Cities campus was the only American institution of higher learning back then to greet members of the Reagan administration much as they would Third Reich murderers. (If that’s an overstatement, it’s not by much.)

But what bothered me as much as the disruptions themselves were reactions afterwards. Sure, a lot of people said proper things about how such behavior has no place in an academic institution. But I could never lose the sense that if it had been liberal, instead of conservative, politicians and icons who had been verbally assaulted on stage, the university community would have risen up more passionately in outrage and apology.

Do I have proof for this claim? No, it's speculation. But I'm reasonably confident that if it had been someone like Coretta Scott King or Ted Kennedy who had been demeaned, this time by right-wing fools, the moral outrage across campus would have been more piercing and the collective remorse more abject.

Since starting American Experiment in 1990, I've been asked several times each year to speak to college classes around Minnesota, including at the University of Minnesota, about issues like education, families, and poverty. I very much appreciate these invitations and only wish I had more.

I appreciate, more specifically, the fact that faculty who extend the invitations recognize that their reading lists and class conversations on questions such as school choice and family structure don't always do justice to conservative and free-market ideas, and they want to be as intellectually fair and comprehensive as possible. Great.

But the question persists: Why aren't their reading lists and class conversations reasonably fair and comprehensive to begin with? I make no hard

claims or accusations about the University of Minnesota's thousands of syllabi, as that wouldn't be fair or empirical. Actually, it would smack of something uglier than that. But if I had to venture a guess, I would say that what many professors conceive as "alternative" points of view on questions such as affirmative action and welfare reform are the very opinions held by majorities and pluralities of Americans.

Is challenging prevailing assumptions and orthodoxies a main job of colleges and universities? Of course. But why do places like the University of Minnesota leave the impression that the only assumptions and orthodoxies worth challenging are the ones that my colleagues and I—and perhaps most other Americans—like?

How do students fare in this environment? My sense over the years is that many students who do hold more traditional and conservative views, particularly on issues involving race, sexual orientation, and such, opt to keep their mouths shut in class, lest they be accused of "insensitivity" or worse. Or, as is also likely the case, many students wind up simply not knowing what they're missing.

I was asked a number of years ago to speak about families to an undergraduate ethics class at the University of Minnesota. At no time over the first ninety minutes of the long class did any of the approximately twenty-five juniors and seniors agree in any substantial way with anything I had said. Quite the opposite was true, as those who spoke suggested that I was harking

back to sexist yesteryears, that I was insufficiently multicultural, and so on.

It finally occurred to me to ask for a show of hands: Who in class, I asked, was of the mind that the American family had changed beneficially over the previous quarter century? And who thought that changes—especially the great increase in the number of children growing up without their biological or adoptive fathers in their homes—had been a bad thing? Even though every single student who had the gumption to offer an opinion over the prior hour and a half had disagreed with me, not a single hand was raised in support of the idea that families had changed for the better. In fact, about half the hands in the room went up in support of the second notion: that families and children had suffered. Remaining hands stayed in laps and under rumps, either too confused or too frightened to move.

Why, I asked, had no one agreed with me during the discussion when it was clear that half the class did concur, at least in part, as demonstrated by the relative anonymity and safety of their show of hands? No one answered. By that stage, there was neither a boo nor a peep.

Of all institutions, colleges and universities ought to be the first place to talk about tough issues. Sometimes, though, they're just about the last.

This quick rundown has ignored some of the University of Minnesota's most glaring P.C. transgressions, such as the time when student Republicans were banned from handing out literature at an orientation fair. One reason,

other than brevity, for not detailing such cases is that such over-the-top examples seem to be cropping up less frequently. If this is true, the university deserves credit, as does President Mark Yudof, whose training as a constitutional scholar and whose First Amendment commitments likely have had something to do with the improved news. Yet if vividly bad excesses have waned, the atmospherics of the place still can be stifling. I recently asked a faculty friend to describe his frustrations (and joys) with the university. Here are excerpts from his trenchant memo.

The University of Minnesota, he wrote, "has been the best imaginable place" for him to spend the past two decades. "It is a remarkable organization that has the ability to hire good people and not get in their way."

To the extent that he has problems with the university, they are "basically with the political left," which propounds "postmodern" ideas grounded in three mistaken premises: "Personal worth" derives solely from membership in a racial, sexual, or similar group. There is "no such thing as objective truth." And "morality is just an expression of power."

Yet, he added, "if you suggested that promulgation of that worldview was a problem at the University of Minnesota, the vast majority of faculty wouldn't know what you were talking about," as it may be difficult for outsiders to realize "what a small part of the university is affected by it."

What is more troubling than "loopy ideas," he continued, is the "way in

which fruitful discussion either is censored or self-censored. In my experience, there is no more conversation about what constitutes good versus evil at the university (and maybe less) than there is at Starbucks.”

Public colleges and universities are extraordinary places, as they are given billions of tax dollars to do many things, one of which is to challenge the most deeply held values and beliefs of the very taxpayers who foot the bills. This speaks well of our maturity. Yet wouldn't it be nice and novel (I'm fantasizing here) if this spring of contrariness, at least on occasion, sprung not from the left, but from the vicinity of the right?

I could recommend that more conservatives consider academic careers. I might even urge affirmative action programs for them, as just about every other “underrepresented” group on American campuses is covered by some preference. But in a concluding spirit of realism and conciliation, I would be halfway mollified if presidents and other priests of America's most prestigious colleges and universities, including the University of Minnesota, simply and honorably conceded that their institutions are not always the intellectually open sanctuaries they're advertised to be.

III. Access and Excellence

Peter Magrath is a politically astute political scientist. Upon being named the eleventh president of the University of Minnesota in 1974, he concluded that being chauffeured around in a fancy black car, as his predecessor

sometimes was, was not a good idea in what he quickly understood to be a fundamentally populist state. So in one of his first decisions, he ordered a red Ford. It was a flashy red Ford, to be sure, but still a Ford. And to the extent that he sometimes needed someone to drive him someplace, he made certain it was by an old-shoe guy in civvies rather than a decked-out chap named Jeeves. (Not that I have any idea, to be fair, how Moos's driver was attired or what his name might have been.)

Think of Magrath's perceptive choice of transportation as reflective not just of the nonelitist tenor of the state, but also of the egalitarian way in which Minnesotans view their land-grant university.

Mary Jane Smetanka of the Minneapolis-based *Star Tribune* captured this sensibility perfectly in a February 2001 story.⁹

“Minnesotans want excellence,” she wrote, “but not if it means average students can't get in. They want quality—but not if it means cutting programs from their 'U.'”

She quoted an unnamed professor who reputedly said, “Minnesota likes mediocrity—as long as it's done well.” It's a wonderful line in the Wobegon spirit of another comment, by a legislator this time, who allegedly once told former president Ken Keller that having the University of Minnesota rank in the top thirty among its national peers was just as good as having it rank in the top ten. No big deal or uff-da.

D. Bruce Johnstone, a Minnesota native and graduate of the university, as well as a former chancellor of the

State University of New York system, told Smetanka that raising admission standards—or limiting access by raising tuition—would, in fact, lift the U of M's rankings. The Twin Cities campus, he said, is an "oddity," clinging, as it does, to a mission that in virtually every other state has been assumed by state colleges and community colleges.

"No one would begin a great public research university in this day and age," Johnstone argued, "and assign it those roles" (by which he meant a multiplicity of nonselective undergraduate responsibilities). "If there is plenty of money, it doesn't matter that much. But there is never enough money."

Gordon Gee, a former president of Ohio State University, argued similarly: the University of Minnesota "cannot maintain high research functions if it's overpowered by numbers." Great public universities, he said, must focus, increase standards, and enroll only those who are capable of a rigorous education. The trick, he concluded, is how to "convince the mothers and fathers and sons and daughters that it is an honor to be rejected by the University of Minnesota."

A big reason, however, that Peter Magrath was elected president by the Board of Regents almost thirty years ago is that he didn't buy the kind of distinction claimed by Johnstone and Gee: a hard division between high intellectual aspirations on the one hand, and the university's covenant with the sons and daughters of all those rank-and-file Minnesota fathers and mothers on the other. Magrath didn't

buy talk of crippling cross-pressures then, and he still doesn't.

The "tension" that marks the university's attempt to balance access with excellence, Magrath did concede last year to Smetanka, is both its "agony and [its] ecstasy." But he was quick to add that educating lots of students is not an inescapable barrier to having top-of-the-line research programs.¹⁰ (I recall his saying how the day would come when Harvard would aspire to become the "University of Minnesota of the east." It was soon after he was elected, and I suspect he was having a very good day.)

Mark Yudof was named president of the university in 1997 for a variety of good reasons, including the fact that he was the lone candidate still standing on the day of the vote. But one of the other prime reasons assuredly was a spirit and commitment that are kindred to Magrath's. Smetanka quoted him saying something quite similar in her story last year.

"We've been a land-grant institution for 150 years," Yudof said, "and we pride ourselves on being the best combination of quality and access in the country." He argued that as long as the university continued to offer good undergraduate education at low prices, Minnesota taxpayers would be willing to support the institution's more elite programs, by which he presumably meant expensive graduate and research activities. "But if they think we're the Ivy League in some other form, they're all over us."

Higher tuition or tighter access, Yudof summed up, are "more radical

solutions than people think. To me, the traditional culture [of Minnesota] and my own sort of populist ethos tell me it's not the right way to go."

The classic example in recent years of critics jumping "all over" the university, charging it with going Ivy, was in 1996, when President Nils Hasselmo's administration raised the possibility of shutting down General College, a longtime program aimed at serving underprepared undergraduates. It was during one of the repeated periods over the last several decades in which senior officials, including the Board of Regents, saw the need to "clarify strategic direction" because of "great financial pressure[s]."¹¹ Given the fact that the Twin Cities metropolitan area had grown awash in community colleges, and that Greater Minnesota had grown similarly thick with both community colleges and state university campuses, in cities stretching from Moorhead to Winona, proponents of closing General College could safely argue that doing so would not result in the denial of access in any undemocratic way.

Granted, some portion of the high-octane controversy was the result of clumsiness on the part of regents and administrators, as officials were insufficiently in sync with each other, and key constituencies were not alerted early enough to what might be in store. But most flames burst from objections that the plan "tended toward elitism" and that it posed a particularly harmful threat to "students of color."¹²

"Classism" and "racism." The number of Minnesota leaders, within or without the university, who are willing

to take on such charges—never mind surmounting them—is small to the point of tiny, even when staff work is top notch.

Regents, who had told Hasselmo that they wanted him to be bold in proposing ways of refocusing the university ("Bring us your tough decisions and we will provide you air cover"), wound up scuttling his General College proposal in midstream, nine to one.¹³

Hasselmo had succeeded Ken Keller as president. Keller resigned in 1988 following a series of bureaucratic and public relations mess ups—committed by a host of people, not just Keller—that were closer to trivial than consequential. This is not the occasion for a rehash of how remodeling the kitchen in Eastcliff, the university president's residence, turned out to be more expensive (for understandable reasons) than some people anticipated. Or the poorly timed discovery of a \$67 million reserve fund. Or the fact that Keller chose to vacation in Hawaii at an unpolitic moment. Perhaps even in larger measure, Keller lost support and was forced to quit because his signature plan, intended to bring greater clarity to the university's mission, could never escape the inaccurate "elitist" slam.

Keller's road map, which he pulled together at the prodding of Governor Rudy Perpich, was called "Commitment to Focus." It was no accident, as they say, that Hasselmo, building on Keller's efforts, named his own plan "Access to Excellence" not long afterwards.

In what other ways do populist impulses play themselves out in this state?

How else to explain how the three big political jobs in Minnesota were held until recently, all at the same time, by the ideologically centrifugal Paul Wellstone, Rod Grams, and Jesse Ventura? A very liberal guy, a very conservative guy, and a very different guy, all claiming to be foursquare for common guys. Or how to explain how Minnesota taxpayers are known to spend buckets of money on assortments of things, but hardly a cent on baseball parks or football stadiums, lest some rich owners and athletes benefit.

The pertinent question raised by this discussion is whether a big and messy land-grant university such as the University of Minnesota—with its tradition of outreach and service, and its originating obligations to working-class and middle-class students—can ever be a truly “world class” research university. I personally fall somewhere between Peter Magrath’s confidence and Bruce Johnstone’s and Gordon Gee’s skepticism.

In fairness, Magrath has long understood that “big and messy” does not mean undisciplined or boundless when it comes to land-grant institutions. Starting with his tenure as president of SUNY-Binghamton, he has been a national leader in pushing for priorities. “Planning will be one of the magic words of the 1980s,” he said back then. “If educators do not plan, then someone else will surely do it for them.”¹⁴ Yudof, likewise, and notwithstanding his own everyman ethos, recognizes that it’s essential for institutions like the University of Minnesota to set crisper priorities. Otherwise, enough dollars can never be freed for more

paramount ends. This is the key budgetary dynamic in the pursuit of improved achievement and rankings: no reallocation of resources, no appreciable rise in quality or reputation. (One legislative leader says that Yudof indeed “gets it” when it comes to the need to pare. I would agree.)

Yet even assuming that the editing and slicing that Yudof envisions for the university is less than severe, will the politics and culture of Minnesota prove amenable to them? Will politicians and average citizens of the state, when push gets to both shove and cuts, accept such changes if they mean downsizing or abandoning valued—especially close-to-the-ground—activities? Nearer the heart, are politicians and citizens sufficiently animated by the very idea of an unquestionably “great” University of Minnesota to begin with? I have my doubts.

IV. Empires and Accountability

Another way of framing these last points and assertions is that it’s less a matter of the University of Minnesota seeking to maintain and expand its alleged empire (as the charge is often issued) and more a matter of people outside of the institution not wanting it to relinquish any of their favorite programs. Recall, for instance, a brief episode in the mid-1980s when a faculty task force, as part of Ken Keller’s Commitment to Focus, recommended eliminating the schools of dentistry and veterinary medicine.¹⁵

Led by a physics professor, Charles Campbell, the committee concluded

that the arts and science foundation of the institution was at risk, and that the only way of bolstering it was to find millions of new dollars by deleting portions of the university's "periphery." What was required was getting rid of things that weren't part of the institution's "core." Somehow, the task force deemed dentistry and veterinary medicine insufficiently central and, thereby, fit for off-loading.

Task force members marshaled information suggesting that closing the two schools would not harmfully reduce the number of veterinarians and dentists available to fill national needs. They also pointed to the existence of other schools across the country in which dentists and veterinarians could be trained. Maybe their data were, in fact, sound, but their political judgment was not. (Needless to say, their tin-eared idea was not what Keller had in mind. When he was presented with their report in 1987, he reputedly paled and said, "You just killed me," as he understood how the episode would play out in cafés and other trenches around the state.)

Sure, the dentistry and vet med programs mobilized on their own to save their respective hides. They were not pacifists. But they had more than enough noisy help around the state, as it was universally understood that the two programs, with their critical and intimate reach, were as "core" as anything gets in a big Midwestern land-grant university. This was probably even more the case in Greater Minnesota, where there is nothing peripheral about health

professionals who commit themselves to serving small towns.

Then there was Waseca. This was an instance in which President Nils Hasselmo and the Board of Regents crunched down on a bullet, held on bravely, and shut down the university's two-year agricultural campus there in 1992. The school, in southern Minnesota, was having enrollment difficulties, and the goal was to reassign students and faculty elsewhere in the system, after which millions of dollars could be reallocated to higher-priority programs. I don't know whether the closing has ever saved the university as much money as originally projected. Yet even if it has, freed-up dollars have little to do with a main lesson from what was a contentious and painful exercise.

Some time after Waseca, the Minnesota State College and University System (MnSCU) sought to close one of its campuses, Anoka-Hennepin Technical College. However, that plan disintegrated (goes the story according to a legislator who was there), when DFLers in the state Senate and Republicans in the House of Representatives each sought to protect a member of their own caucus whose district included the campus. If the school wound up falling by the wayside, went the fear, the two vulnerable legislators would wind up finished, too. So the legislature opted to scratch not the school, but the plan itself.

This failure by the Senate and House to chomp down on a bullet of their own has not exactly encouraged

the University of Minnesota to take additional and unilateral runs at amputating its own arms.

This is not to suggest that the university would have turned into a profile of streamlining zeal if legislators had been more courageous in the case of Anoka-Hennepin. But the truth is that the university has been cutting and shifting for a long time. One old colleague recently asked plaintively, “Don’t we get any credit for thirty years of R and R [retrenchment and reallocation]?” From 1998 to 2001, the university’s official figure for “reduced and internally redistributed funds” is a not meager \$97 million.¹⁶

It’s time to scratch the cliché that the University of Minnesota is dismissive of limits. The university hasn’t been oblivious to reality over the past three decades of on-and-off state budget shortfalls and their cost-cutting demands. Nor has it been blind to the flowering of MnSCU campuses and their growing capacity to serve large numbers of students—students for whom the University of Minnesota used to be much more the only public game in town.

But what about accountability? Is the University of Minnesota “accountable” and accommodating to legislators and other state officials? Allegations that the university is not always responsive also have a long track record.

I haven’t attended a legislative hearing regarding the university in years, so I no longer have a firsthand feel for the question. I do know that only one legislator I talked to in

researching this paper argued that the university does a poor job of providing adequate information on its performance. Otherwise, the lawmakers I spoke to believe the university plays it open and straight, providing them with as much information as is sought and attainable.

This is certainly my recollection of how things worked when I was in the president’s office in the mid-1970s. Why, in fact, would any university leader go out of his or her way to irritate the very people—arbiters of the public purse—who decide how much state money it gets to spend?

This is not to say that regents, administrators, and faculty don’t view the university as an intrinsically different and special type of state “agency,” because they do. Thus, they’ve been known to come across as a bit more sovereign than other public officials. Is such a sensibility “arrogant,” as is sometimes charged? By some definition, sure it is. But it’s an outlook generally rooted not in haughtiness, but in conviction that places like the University of Minnesota, for all their shortcomings, are as sacred as any secular institution can ever get, and that those who hold fiduciary responsibility for them are keepers of an exceptional trust.

It’s a view, not incidentally, that I share.

V. The Case for a Superior University of Minnesota

The University of Minnesota is already very good. Is it outstanding? What about “great”? Of course it is. It’s

all those things, although trying to capture such an immense and complicated institution in a few adjectives is not a terribly substantial or useful exercise.

Suffice it to say that the University of Minnesota is a remarkable place. Also suffice it to say that some of its schools and programs are stronger than others. Likewise, there's good reason to believe the institution as a whole used to be held in higher repute by scholars and other observers across the country than it currently is. And it's also fair to say that our state would benefit measurably if the university were, in fact, to rise once again in both concrete performance and national rankings.

This last point—about performance and rankings—is the most important of the four.

Here's a much-abbreviated synopsis of grades and groupings for universities in the United States.¹⁷

- According to a University of Florida compilation, in 2001 the University of Minnesota ranked among the top three public research universities and among the top eleven American research universities overall. Pretty good.
- According to *U.S News & World Report*, however, in 2001 the university's Twin Cities undergraduate programs ranked in the second tier of all doctoral universities. ("Second tier" being defined as somewhere between numbers 53 and 131.) Undergraduate programs in the Twin Cities ranked nineteenth among public doctoral-degree-granting institutions.
- And according to the National Research Council, in 1993 the U of M stood ninth among public universities and twentieth among 274 ranked institutions across the country. In 1983 the university ranked sixteenth among all ranked schools, four places better than a decade later.¹⁸ (The next NRC study is not scheduled until 2003–2005.)
- In terms of funding, according to the NRC in 2000–01, the average salary for full professors was \$93,600 on the Twin Cities campus, putting it eleventh among public institutions.
- And again according to the National Research Council, based on 1999 data, the university ranked tenth among public research universities and fifteenth among all research institutions based on total research expenditures.

Funding for the entire University of Minnesota system in 1999 totaled \$1.742 billion, with state government picking up 35 percent and the federal government coming in at 16 percent of the sum.¹⁹ Total head count enrollment in the fall of 2001 stood at 59,185 students, of whom 37,719 were undergraduates.²⁰ Undergraduate enrollment on the Twin Cities campus, in 2001, was 26,972.²¹

Outside of the number three ranking among public research universities in the Florida study, it's fair to describe these results as ranging from good to middling to disconcerting. What will

become of the state of Minnesota if they don't improve? It's hard to imagine anything catastrophic befalling us, at least right away. We're not going to start churning out long lines of stupid graduates next week.

But neither will we be served singularly well, economically or in other ways, if the University of Minnesota remains locked where it is.

I'm not opposed to making noneconomic arguments on behalf of the University of Minnesota. Frankly, I gravitate quicker and more viscerally to the social and civic fruits of American higher education than to its economic contributions—not that the latter are anything short of pivotal. At the risk of sacrilege, it doesn't take more than two glasses of ceremonial wine for me to view the University of Minnesota in spiritual terms. Not just as a temple of learning, but as a temple more *wholly*.

Think for a moment about what enterprises like the University of Minnesota say about us as a people; what they say about the foresight and sacrifice that led to their creation, and the continuing good and enlightened sense that have sustained them. We ought to be infinitely proud that billions of public dollars cascade every year so that young men and women can learn oceans of things (if truth be told) that often have only the slimmest connection to selling insurance, planting beans, or otherwise making an everyday living.

But reveries can't be the complete story in justifying the investment of public treasure. Bottom lines need to be in the mix, too. Cold bottom lines, in fact, may be of extra importance in

what is a geographically removed—and world-class cold—state.

The core economic argument for a stronger University of Minnesota goes like this: Given our state's out-of-the-way location, acquired-taste weather, and unattractive tax climate, top-notch high-tech, biotech, and entrepreneurial talent will not move here—or remain here—without other inducements. One such spur, it stands to reason, has to be an exceptional university and the scientific, technical, and other assistance it can provide.

Win Wallin, for example, the former chairman of Medtronic, has argued that “virtually all of the medical industry, wherever you go in the country, you find they are snuggled up against an academic health center.” And, quite simply, “If there were no University of Minnesota, there would be no Medical Alley” in this state.²² Reinforcing the point, an officer of a venture firm recently was quoted as saying, “Where high tech is only moderately driven by academics, biotech is completely driven by it.”²³

Framing matters even more starkly, perhaps it's unrealistic to expect any big or potentially big business to relocate in Minnesota any time soon, if for no other reason than that the flow has been in the opposite direction in recent years, led by the likes of 3M, which has expanded mostly elsewhere, and Honeywell, which just up and vamoosed.

So if large employers will not be moving here in significant numbers, the challenge is clear: we have to conceive, create, and nourish successful

enterprises ourselves. They need to be home grown. In all of this, a university—preferably one that is world class in actual fact as well as perceived that way because of high rankings—is essential. Reputations do matter.

The *Star Tribune* has been correct in hammering home points like these in recent analyses and editorials, though it has a habit of downplaying the hampering effect of high taxes while overstating the magic of light rail transit.

“In a new, mobile economy,” Steve Berg and Dave Hage of the paper’s editorial page write, “the broader blend of community assets must also remain competitive—universities, schools, the arts, transportation, natural beauty and other quality-of-life elements so crucial to retaining and attracting the most valuable commodity of the Information Age: talented people.”²⁴ And in an unsigned editorial, the *Star Tribune* argued, “If Minnesota is to regain a leading place in the knowledge economy, it cannot neglect its greatest intellectual asset [the U of M].”²⁵

A fair question at this point: Research is extensive and persuasive that when it comes to elementary and secondary education, more spending does not necessarily lead to students doing better. In fact, a tie between dollars and learning in K-12 hardly exists.²⁶ Why is there reason to believe that more money for the University of Minnesota would result in the good things suggested here? The difference, I would argue, is due to contrasting compensation policies.

Give a research university more money and it can pay premium salaries

to the best faculty it can find: men and women who are very good at attracting large amounts of research money (which creates jobs), as well as talented graduate students (some of whom will stick around to start important businesses of their own).

Give a school district more money for salaries, however, and it’s almost always beholden to inflexible compensation rules that are oblivious to the fact that some teachers are more effective than others. I’m all for K-12 teachers doing well. But there is too little in common between their pay raises, their performance, and the eventual fruits of their labor. In contrast, the connections in higher education can be much tighter, insofar as compensation decisions are much more likely to be grounded in merit, not seniority.

Yet having contended this, I can’t overlook the state’s current budget problems; this is a year for givebacks, not add-ons. Nor, for that matter, is it cricket for me to overlook the fact that my American Experiment associates and I have made a living over the past dozen years arguing for lower taxes and public spending, as Minnesota taxes and outlays are too high overall. Constraints like these are additional reasons why it’s essential for the university to refine what it does by setting and holding fast to tough priorities.

President Yudof has proposed five of them: digital technology; molecular and cellular biology; design; new media; and agricultural research and outreach. Are these the right five priorities? I have no idea. I have no idea

what some of them *are*. But the important point is that he and his colleagues have blessed some fields and activities more than others, because (in the words of an influential legislator), if the University of Minnesota is to elevate, it must first focus.

Another key question: If the university does adhere to stricter priorities, will the legislature (once the recession and its effects are over) reciprocate by providing it with enough money so that it can, indeed, rise to a next level of national prominence? The question is particularly germane given legislators' greater comfort in making education funding decisions based on size, not quality. As a rule, girth has a better chance of succeeding in St. Paul than goodness. (The definition of what constitutes "enough" money is hereby deferred to another day.)

Perhaps the tallest legislative hurdle has to do with distinguishing, in both philosophical and monetary ways, between the University of Minnesota and the scores of campuses of the Minnesota State College and University system. David Lebedoff, a former chairman of the university's Board of Regents, has written acutely about how the state, in the early 1950s, decided that "all Minnesota residents should have a public institution of higher education located within 35 miles of their homes." The result of that decision, he argues, is that Minnesota, "a prosperous Midwestern state," has been "overburdened by a higher education infrastructure larger than that of some European countries."

The situation, he continues, has proven especially hard on the Univer-

sity of Minnesota, as all those new four-year and two-year schools "began drinking at the same well, and the well had a bottom." There hasn't been enough money to guarantee quality at all institutions, and those who have "carried the university's bucket" have sometimes been "pushed to the back of the line." They've been "elbowed aside," he argues, by legislators representing new and expanded campuses in Greater Minnesota.

What of Twin Cities legislators?—men and women whom one might expect to be as intent on protecting and improving the University of Minnesota's main campus as legislators from Bemidji and Marshall are determined to safeguard and embellish campuses in their communities. No, they haven't been as persevering, Lebedoff contends, at least not consistently.

Minneapolis- and St. Paul-area legislators, he continues, "have seemed preoccupied with loftier issues, like urban sprawl and extending the franchise to minors. The best of them recognize the importance of the university to the state, but they see so many other urgent urban concerns to be funded that future growth often is sacrificed to present crisis."

Lebedoff's prescription for redirecting more dollars to the University of Minnesota is to close down some number of campuses throughout the state. "Just save the best and close the rest," he declares, "before it's too late."²⁷

As we've seen, however, that's not likely to happen, but not just because of politics, construed narrowly: local

colleges conceived as bacon, with politicians in the business of bringing slabs of it home, not tossing 'em aside like so much fat.

Maybe just as inhibiting is the unwillingness of lawmakers—for all the populist and egalitarian reasons cited here—to favor a giant, powerful, and “elite” U of M over cozier schools down their respective blocks and roads. Add to this the fact (in the words of one of the state’s most discerning observers) that legislators learned years ago that they could hurt the University of Minnesota without paying a political price back home, and it’s even less likely they’re on the cusp of affording it preferential treatment.

This, as they say in diplomatic circles, is unfortunate.

VI. Conclusion

We opened with four questions.

Does the University of Minnesota have the potential to become a “truly world class” institution?

Are the politics and culture of the state of Minnesota hospitable to such heights?

Does it really matter if the university ever achieves such excellence and wins such a reputation?

And what irritates taxpayers about the university, thereby subtracting from their enthusiasm and support for it?

And I’ve answered this way:

The University of Minnesota is already a remarkable, often stunning place that has the capacity to become even more so. It has been loaded with exceptional men and women for a long time.

Nevertheless, it’s hard to imagine the ethos of this state on the one hand, and an unembarrassed drive for unqualified academic excellence on the other, ever showing up in the same picture. Maybe we’re just too short on airs in this part of the country for mountaintops.

Yes, there will be economic and other prices to pay for this modesty.

And whether or not other taxpayers are offended and annoyed by the University of Minnesota’s top-of-the-line political correctness, I, for one, am. In addition, while many critics contend otherwise, the University of Minnesota is not unaccountable or a habitual builder of empires.

There may be another, so far unremarked, reason why the university probably will never improve more than marginally. At less than five million people, our population may be too small.

In the aforementioned National Research Council study in which the U of M ranked ninth among public universities, every single higher-ranked institution was located in a larger state.²⁸ Never mind questions of reserved attitude and disposition, maybe we just don’t have the demographic and fiscal horsepower to get much better.

Maybe all we can realistically hope for is that the University of Minnesota remains the best example in the world of what it fundamentally is: a prodigious land-grant university that takes seriously its historic mission of doing a universe of things in every corner and crevice of the state. “If the University of Minnesota were in Michigan,” a

fund-raiser for the university likes to say, "it would encompass the University of Michigan, Michigan State, and Wayne State in downtown Detroit."²⁹

I wish the university would be allowed to do better by, in a fashion, doing less. We would be better off, I believe. Then again, it's hard to challenge and rewire what the University of Minnesota, along with the state it's in, seems encoded to do.

It's also hard to argue that we haven't prospered in more than a few ways because of these traditions.

Notes

1. Steven Dornfeld, "A Bold, New Vision for Higher Education: A High-Level Commission Is Needed to Help Refine the Missions of State Institutions and Stretch Resources," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 23, 2001, p. A7.
2. David Lebedoff, "Save the Best and Close the Rest," *Star Tribune*, January 28, 2001, p. A17.
3. Lisa Ruddick, "The Near Enemy of the Humanities Is Professionalism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 23, 2001, pp. B7-8.
4. Mary Ellen Ashcroft, "Risky Business? Teaching Literature at a Christian Liberal Arts College," *American Experiment Quarterly*, Winter 1999-2000, p. 24.
5. Maura Lerner, "'U' Classes Are Focus of Feminist Feud," *Star Tribune*, July 7, 1994, p. 1A.
6. "Political Correctness and Academic Freedom at the University of Minnesota," a conversation with Nils Hasselmo and Ian Maitland, Center of the American Experiment, April 1995, p. 5.
7. *Ibid.* As quoted by Professor Maitland.
8. Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (New York: Free Press, 1998), p. 174.
9. Mary Jane Smetanka, "The University of Minnesota at 150," *Star Tribune*, February 18, 2001, p. 1A.
10. After ten years as president of the University of Minnesota, Peter Magrath spent almost seven as president of the University of Missouri system. He has served since then as president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, in Washington, D.C.
11. Quote credited to Jean B. Keffeler in reference to the university's overall status at the time, not just to General College. Keffeler served as chair of the Board of Regents from 1993 to 1995. *The University of Minnesota: 1945-2000*, by Stanford Lehmborg and Ann M. Pflaum (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 213.
12. *Ibid.* David Taylor, dean of General College, cited, p. 214.
13. *Ibid.* The quote is attributed to Jean Keffeler. It's important to note that General College has, in fact, changed emphasis, adding more research to its mix, and focusing more explicitly on "identifying ways to improve the teaching of under-prepared students."
14. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-97.
16. "University Plan, Performance, and Accountability Report: 2001," Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost, University of Minnesota, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
18. Lehmborg and Pflaum, p. 329.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

20. "University Plan," Appendix C, p. 2.
21. *Ibid.*, Appendix C, p. 5. Given various charges over the years about how attempts to improve the Twin Cities campus threatened undergraduate enrollments, it's interesting that undergraduate head counts on that campus have grown from 24,352 in 1993 to almost 27,000 as cited above in the main text.
22. Lehmberg and Pflaum, p. 248.
23. Chris Gabrieli, as quoted in "Harvard: Larry Summers Has an Ambitious Agenda to Remake the Nation's Leading University. Can He Do It?" *Business Week*, February 18, 2002, p. 78.
24. Steve Berg and Dave Hage, "Smug Too Long, State Starts to Fall Behind," *Star Tribune*, April 9, 2000.
25. "Intellectual Engine: Put the University in High Gear," editorial, *Star Tribune*, April 9, 2000.
26. See, for example, Eric A. Hanushek, "The Impact of Differential Expenditures on School Performance," *Educational Researcher*, May 1989.
27. Lebedoff, "Save the Best."
28. Lehmberg and Pflaum, p. 329. The higher-ranked public universities, starting at the top, were these in 1993: University of California, Berkeley (1); University of Michigan (4); University of California, Los Angeles (8); University of Wisconsin, Madison (12); University of Texas, Austin (14); University of California, San Diego (15); University of Washington (16); and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (19). Minnesota's population in 2000 was 4,919,479. The next two smallest states were Wisconsin, at 5,363,675, and Washington, at 5,894,121. Census data for 2000 can be found in *The Almanac of American Politics: 2002*, by Michael Barone, Richard E. Cohen, and Grant Ujifusa (Washington, D.C.: National Journal).
29. As cited by Ann Pflaum in a personal correspondence. ■