

Overlooking the Possibility of Massive Disruption

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Universities today face challenges that are both severe and unprecedented. Public funding of higher education has been shrinking for decades, and the funding that remains comes with greater demands for accountability. Tenure protections for faculty have been weakened by state legislatures, threatening long-standing norms of academic freedom. And COVID-19 has upended a business model that depends upon students being enamored with the on-campus experience.

These challenges—with the pandemic acting as an accelerant—are being driven by broad cultural shifts. It's a truism that ours is a knowledge culture; less remarked upon is that universities have hastened their waning cultural role through their very own successes. Academia today suffers from dwindling prestige and authority. What once was rare (7.7% of Americans had a college degree in 1960) is now common (37.5% in 2021). Knowledge production is no longer centered on campus; the private sector performs an increasing percentage of scientific research as compared to federal spending on basic research, most of which goes to universities. Perhaps the greatest element in this decline is found in the rise of the internet. It has displaced the library as the go-to place for information, and its user-generated, non-peer-reviewed content fosters misinformation.

Different parts of the university ecosystem are being affected in different ways. For the high-end segment of the academic market, conditions have never been better. Families begin their efforts to get into Stanford University while their children are in grade

school, while less prominent schools struggle to attract students. Harvard University (private; 35,000 students; endowment \$53 billion) faces a different set of challenges than does Middle Tennessee State (public; 21,000 students; endowment \$109 million). Harvard waives tuition for students whose families make less than \$75,000, while an in-state Middle Tennessee student can expect to pay \$23,000 per year. Exclusive schools treat low admittance rates as a barometer of status, rather than as a market failure.

In *Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China*, William Kirby approaches his topic from the perspectives of a historian and an administrator. He writes from the top of the pyramid: he is T. M. Chang Professor of China Studies at Harvard University, Spangler Family Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, chairman of the Harvard China Fund, and faculty chair of the Harvard Center Shanghai. He has consulted for and evaluated universities around the globe.

Rather than offering an overview of the university landscape, Kirby adopts the case-based approach employed in the curricula of the Harvard Business School. He traces the history of eight institutions whose trajectories he views as exemplary: in Germany, Humboldt University and the Free University of Berlin; in the United States, Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley, and Duke University; and in China, Tsinghua, Nanjing, and Hong Kong Universities. Writing about “the future of the university, in light of its past,” his goal is to “examine three leading global centers of higher education in the twenty-first century from a historian’s perspective.” He identifies three factors as key to university success: “an exceptional faculty; a talented student body; and means of governance that promote outstanding research and teaching.”

Cultural conditions play a decidedly smaller role and are mostly reduced to matters of funding and political interference.

Kirby’s focus is on the internal aspects of higher education debates. He describes the importance of university efforts regarding “finding new ways to streamline administrative costs without sacrificing operational quality” and emphasizes factors such as the percentage of faculty promoted from within, trends in graduation rates, and increases in administrative and managerial staff. Certainly, these matters are important to the efficient running of a modern university. But it’s not clear that they offer much comfort to administrators in times of social upheaval.

The one conclusion that supersedes all others is political in nature. Kirby’s view of intellectual activity is reminiscent of Vannevar Bush’s, the powerful science administrator behind the creation of the National Science Foundation: Kirby advocates a type of intellectual *laissez faire*. Researchers should be left to their own devices, free from interference. Universities succeed, in his view, through the creativity of great administrators who provide the conditions for quality hires; universities decline when they are subject to political interference. UC Berkeley and the Free University of Berlin were harmed by student protests, excessive faculty control over the administration, and the machinations of politicians.

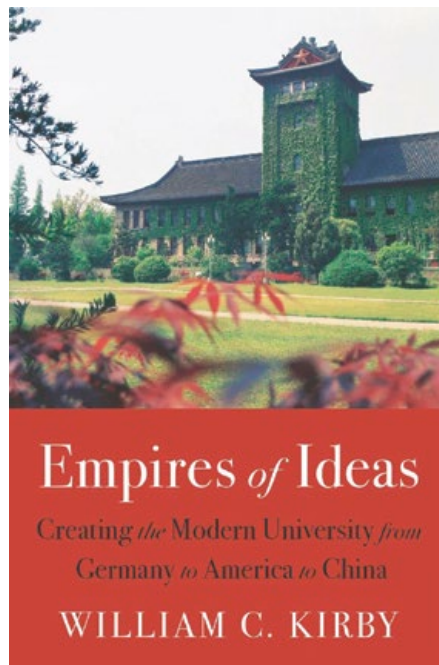
At a much greater scale, Humboldt University, Tsinghua University, and Hong Kong University suffered disorder at the hands of, respectively, the Nazis in the 1930s, Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, and Xi Jinping as China asserts increasing control over Hong Kong. Kirby makes it clear that political interference from the Chinese Communist Party is the central challenge to the continued rise of Chinese universities. He cites the dangers posed by a directive known as Document 9, circulated by the party in 2013,

which listed seven forbidden topics of discussion in Chinese universities, such as “universal values” and civil society.

There are advantages to Kirby’s case study approach. Tracing the history of an individual institution offers the reader a vivid sense of the interplay of historical contingency, policy mandates, and individual actors. At the same time, one can raise questions about his choices. Why no chapter on Stanford University, whose ties to Silicon Valley have charted a path that is being emulated worldwide? Or on Arizona State University, which seeks to abandon the exclusivity of top-tier institutions while maintaining high academic standards? Or about a university such as Georgia Tech, which has notably raised its game in recent years?

The more fundamental issue is whether the past success of top-tier universities provides a useful model for the challenges they will face in the future—or for those the broad middle level of universities will encounter. Concerning the latter, places such as Gonzaga University and Western Michigan University are not likely to climb far up national rankings or acquire a huge endowment. But such schools are where most American undergraduates attend college.

This raises the question of Kirby’s assumptions concerning the cultural status quo. His analysis ignores the possibility that the future of higher education should or will be different from its past. Kirby seems to believe that there is only one model for a successful university, defined in terms of higher test scores, more research productivity, greater success at internationalization and in cultivating relationships with the private sector, and a growing endowment. The possibility of there being different goals for higher education is not broached. Instead, readers are offered extended discussions of the effects of different academic governance structures and the particularities of how a given university has set up relations between chancellor,



Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China

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president, provost, senior management team, and faculty.

Kirby’s account passes over the possibility that universities could face a significantly different future, where cultural and political forces push knowledge production in new directions. The shutting of a significant number of schools, a decisive move toward online education, the rise of badges or tests administered by businesses, and the end of the current faculty tenure system are not mentioned, despite being distinct possibilities. Nor does Kirby discuss the civic responsibilities of universities, the future of the humanities, or university competition with private entities doing research. He ignores the effects of disinformation on intellectual life and how universities might influence efforts to combat it. The idea that environmental sustainability could become the common denominator of

university teaching and research also does not appear.

Faith in the traditional methods of evaluating the health of universities (national rankings, size of endowments, faculty awards, student retention rates, etc.) is understandable. But the possibility of massive disruption exists. The twenty-first century research university may face fundamental challenges including the possibility that non-elite institutions close their doors or move to online or hybrid models of instruction, where students get degrees online at a fraction of current prices. An account of the future of the university should include the possibility that its future may consist of something other than attempts to emulate the most elite schools. There is also the question of whether the basic business of universities as engines of innovation for a culture addicted to endless scientific and technological progress should continue.

The incessant focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education assumes that science and technology should remain the unproblematic goal of modern culture—at a time when civics education is clearly lacking. But what if the age of uncritical knowledge production is about to be challenged in terms of both its trivialities and dangers? Facebook’s now-abandoned motto, “move fast and break things,” still applies to the advances emerging from research universities. After all, another word for innovation is disruption. It’s possible that innovators are reaching the limits of what humans will tolerate in terms of having their lives constantly turned upside down. Which would leave the question of the future of the research university truly up for grabs.

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