

## 9 The Modern University and the Question of Contemporary Public Service

At the end of this discussion, one might wonder why early university support of the state found academic leaders occasionally falling short of their ambitions and what implications this has for contemporary considerations. I would argue that the failure of some specific efforts was to be expected, given the haphazard evolution of the state itself. American state building is indicative of American exceptionalism. The fragmentation that allowed universities a defining role in creating the new American state also limited the reach of their success. Beyond specific programs, however, the emerging universities' impact has been so absolute as to almost be unrecognized in retrospect.

Today, doctors who provide care, teachers who educate, and lawyers who define justice are all in some ways regulated by the state, but only after they have been first credentialed by the system of higher education that has its roots in this era. The domains of health care, education, and justice are arguably the most visible, but by no means the only, areas where the university continues to frame the relationship between the state, practitioners, and the citizenry. Just as important, beyond specific domains, administration of the state as a whole is subject to such framing.

### The Modern University and Public Administration

Though historical in its approach, my work seeks to continue the scholarly tradition of studying American political development to illuminate contemporary questions of politics and policy. I am advantaged in

this effort not only by the work of Skowronek and Eisenach, who offer a useful overview of the institutional and intellectual legacy of the era under consideration, but also by Cook's suggestions for a modern approach to public administration.

Having traced the development of America's administrative state from the colonial era to the present, Cook recognizes that America's "fundamental commitment to limited government, the Jacksonian notion of democratic administration, and concerns about the distorting effects of professionalism" have driven historical skepticism and contemporary criticism of government bureaucracy and public expertise.<sup>1</sup> Despite such political and cultural forces, Cook advocates revitalizing public administration in America. Before outlining his plan for revitalization, Cook offers his rationale. Building from the extensive influence of the Progressive Era's pursuit of efficiency, Cook emphasizes that administration is not a neutral instrument but, rather, an influential enterprise. Offering the thoughts of Progressive journalist Herbert Croly, Cook summarizes this role: "Indeed [American government] is organized for efficiency chiefly because in the absence of efficiency no genuinely formative popular political experience can be expected to accrue.' Even from a late-twentieth-century perspective, Croly's initial juxtaposition of two values—efficiency and education—does not seem all that odd."<sup>2</sup> While cautioning readers to be wary of Croly's unquestioning embrace of efficiency and expertise, Cook still finds value in his sentiment and its consequences.

The influential nature of the administrative state thus calls attention not only to the state's activities but to its development as well. Cook acknowledges that the political and cultural forces that have driven the rise in America's skepticism of the administrative state might hinder attention to such development. Despite such a context, Cook argues that an understanding of administration's full influence will not only rekindle emphasis and attention but also redefine how public officials are educated and how the university serves the state. For Cook, the effects of such redefinition are far-reaching: "Recognizing administration's constitutiveness will bring about a reorientation in the education and training of public administrators. It will, more significantly, stimulate changes in the concepts, incentives, and practices of public policy design."<sup>3</sup>

Notably, in keeping with his desire to build from the Progressive Era, Cook almost reflexively looks to universities as the driving force behind such reorientation. In response to questions of what advanced knowledge and skills can offer this process, Cook suggests:

The answer lies in how public administration is constitutive of the regime, particularly in its embodiment and promotion of practical reason in the public sphere. The education of public administrators, and any claims they may make to expertise beyond narrow technical specialties, must center on a commitment to the development and exercise of practical reason in public affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Cook acknowledges he is “not adequately equipped” to offer a treatise on practical reason. He does, however, suggest a role for universities in helping reorient the American administrative state. Such reorientation depends on redefining the education of bureaucrats and government officials. Cook stresses that “first, public administration education must be grounded in political science, but a political science in what might be called its classical sense; theory joined to practice, specifically to the practice of liberal democratic politics.”<sup>5</sup> Cook reminds readers that such an approach was standard in the first forty years of the discipline. However, since the rise of “an aggressive positivist approach to political studies” in the 1950s, Cook explains, “political science and public administration had for all intents and purposes parted company.”<sup>6</sup>

Some scholars of public administration, such as Nicholas Henry, suggest that the split was inevitable and that revitalization of the field is best served independent of political science.<sup>7</sup> Cook argues for the opposite approach.

Every political science program should be tied closely to, if not housed within a political science department. Program curricula should be grounded in normative political theory with empirical research of several different designs tied closely to it. Likewise, any graduate program in political science that does not have public administration scholars on its faculty and does not interweave public administration throughout its curriculum is deficient. The study of the moral, ethical, and constitutional dilemmas faced by administrative officials, in the context of particular agencies and their histories and operations, is particularly important.<sup>8</sup>

Cook’s call is for a modern reorientation. Its roots, as he acknowledges and emphasizes, lie in the Progressive Era’s pursuit of public management grounded in specialized knowledge and expertise. Thus, just as universities were crucial to the process of building a new American state at the turn of the century, they are fundamental for modern reorientation of public administration.

### The Modern University and Its Societal Position

I am highly sympathetic to Cook’s proposal but would suggest that there are contextual hurdles to implementation that also need to be

addressed.<sup>9</sup> I will allow others to debate precisely the best way to educate public administrators. Instead, I wish to focus here on the implicit assumptions that Cook and others make regarding universities' willingness and capacity to pursue the approaches suggested. Cook looks to the Progressive Era's notion of a prescriptive political science as a model for reinvigorating the practice of public policy. The influence of university-based expertise on the development of the American state goes without question. However, understanding the historical process of university support highlights a number of factors that will greatly influence the viability of public administration's revitalization, within political science or elsewhere. The unique societal position held by universities, the modern universities conception of service, and the nature of contemporary political science all continue to shape relations between institutions of higher learning and the administrative state.

As I have discussed throughout this work, the emergence of the American university was predicated on more than its support of the administrative state. Underlying such efforts at service was the development of the university as a national institution dedicated to the promotion of America's democratic community, industrial competitiveness, and intellectual vanguard. The development of leading universities' national identities and their promotion of democratic community, industrial competitiveness, and an intellectual vanguard were not coincidental or supplementary to their pursuit of expertise. Rather, they were fundamental to such pursuit, as they provided a rationale to justify their efforts to those who might criticize as undemocratic or impractical their focus on research and specialized knowledge. Building on their entrepreneurship and coordination, university leaders effectively portrayed their institutions as serving the greater good of the nation, rather than bound to a particular technocratic or administrative agenda. At the turn of the twentieth century, the American university was in the unique position of being an autonomous and largely self-sufficient organization while, at the same time, being a very public institution.

Universities remain very public, very national institutions. However, some critics, such as James Twitchell, have suggested that American institutions of higher learning are no longer driven to pursue and disseminate knowledge as much as they are dedicated to crafting and providing an experience. In a *Wilson Quarterly* essay provocatively titled "Higher Ed., Inc.," Twitchell does not say universities have abandoned the work of ideas; rather, he suggests that such work is no longer central to their identity.

What used to be the knowledge business has become the business of selling an experience, an affiliation, a commodity that can be manufactured, packaged, bought, and sold. Don't misunderstand. The intellectual work of universities is still going on and has never been stronger. Great creative acts still occur, and discoveries are made. But the *experience* of higher education, all the accessories, the amenities, the aura, has been commercialized, outsourced, franchised, *branded*.<sup>10</sup>

Though Twitchell is slightly inflammatory in his tone, his "branded" university does not inherently abdicate its unique societal position. It is still national in its orientation. The promotion of America's democratic community, industrial competitiveness, and intellectual vanguard can still be incorporated within Twitchell's experience-centered institution.

Additionally, I would suggest that a focus on students' experience rather than simply their learning is by no means a modern phenomenon. Recall that in a letter (cited in chap. 7) to a prospective student's father, Yale president Arthur Twining Hadley suggested that the student attend Yale or Berkeley rather than MIT or Cornell, not because of the instruction he would receive, but because of the quality of men he would encounter.<sup>11</sup> Historical perspective, however, does not fully dismiss Twitchell's concerns about the intensification of university "branding." The corporatization of intercollegiate athletics stands as just one example of how university efforts to develop their identities and define their communities have threatened to become an end in themselves rather than the means to the greater end of education and service.

Twitchell sees the focus on experience as a danger but not as an inevitability. Others are more pessimistic, fearing that universities have abandoned their greater mission. Support for American industrial competitiveness has long been seen as part of a larger effort of university service. However, Eyal Press and Jennifer Washburn, in their sensationistically titled piece "The Kept University," argue that any assumptions about the public benefit of such work is naive, if not dangerous. Press and Washburn detail the dramatic rise in university research partnerships with major national and international corporations at institutions across the country.<sup>12</sup> While the specifics of such collaboration might not seem to be of immediate interest to those concerned with the university's relationship to the administrative state, its rationale and justification are of vital importance to any assessment of how universities develop and transmit specialized knowledge.

In their piece, Press and Washburn summarize the arguments of Gordon Rausser, dean of the College of Natural Resources at the Uni-

versity of California at Berkeley and a leading proponent of partnerships with large corporations. According to Rausser, such initiatives, “far from violating Berkeley’s public mission, would help to perpetuate the university’s status as a top flight institution.”<sup>13</sup> Press and Washburn note that Rausser’s view is more and more the norm, as academic administrators throughout the country turn to the private sector for an increasing percentage of their research dollars.

This trend greatly concerns Press and Washburn, and they conclude their discussion by offering Rausser’s most compelling argument but then immediately questioning its consequences.

University-industry collaborations, Rausser argues, have brought important new products—anti-AIDS treatments, cancer drugs, etc. to market, and have spurred America’s booming biotech and computing industries.

This is a powerful argument, but a troubling one. In an age when ideas are central to the economy, universities will inevitably play a role in fostering growth. But should we allow commercial forces to determine the university’s mission and academic ideals? In higher education today corporations not only sponsor a growing amount of research—they frequently dictate the terms under which it is conducted.<sup>14</sup>

For Press and Washburn, corporate control, rather than mere corporate patronage, drives such apprehension.<sup>15</sup>

Though darker in their outlook than Twitchell, Press and Washburn do not suggest that universities have abdicated their unique societal position. Rather, they believe that universities are exploiting their position for institutional gain without necessarily serving the public good. Again, historical context suggests more measured concern than alarm. Since its correspondent development with the Industrial Revolution, the modern university has long had corporate patrons, and historians of intellectual freedom would rightfully argue that there has almost always been some tension between the expectations of patrons and the activities of scholars. The University of Chicago’s acknowledgment of Rockefeller as founder on its early letterhead comes to mind (see chap. 7, n. 35). The current context threatens greater upheaval, but it also offers greater opportunity, as institutional entrepreneurs from a broader range of institutions can look further afield for support.

Business and industry are not the only enterprises where some fear that university support has veered from a sense of broader public purpose. While the enterprise of government has long relied on a variety of academic disciplines, political science has historically been fundamental to state initiatives. Interestingly, contemporary concern does not center around a fear that government patrons are somehow inhibiting

scholars from systematically considering contemporary politics and policy; rather, critics question whether political scholars themselves have any interest in shaping the issues of the day. Cook acknowledges that the rise of positivist approaches in the 1950s might have led the discipline away from issues of administration. Yet he assumes that the need for quality public governance is growing so apparent and necessary as to compel political science to return to such efforts.

Jonathan Cohn is less sanguine about the discipline's role. In a journalistic critique titled "Irrational Exuberance: When Did Political Science Forget about Politics?" he argues that the tendency away from a prescriptive political science has only intensified in recent years. After recounting how, even as recently as the 1980s, such scholars as James Q. Wilson and Richard Neustadt were highly active in shaping public policy, Cohn describes the discipline currently.

The future of political science . . . lies in the hands of a different breed, which is epitomized by a man named Kenneth Shepsle.

Shepsle, too, is considered among the generation's leading scholars of American government. Yet if you look for Shepsle in the Lexis-Nexis database of newspapers and magazines, you will find not one quotation from him on a contemporary debate about congressional reform, let alone an op-ed or longer essay under his byline. . . . He has never served on a government commission, testified before one of the committees he's made a career of studying or otherwise put his expertise to use in a public forum. . . . If that seems at all strange, then you haven't been keeping up with developments in political science over the past two decades.<sup>16</sup>

I would quibble with the blanket nature of Cohn's argument and suggest that there are some political scientists whose efforts influence policy debates and development—Robert Putnam most readily comes to mind.

Cohn's fundamental assertion that much of political science has lost interest in the basic activities of public life may ring true. He is not the first to raise such issues in recent years. However, similar to the views of Twitchell as well as Press and Washburn, Cohn's critique underscores, rather than undermines, the unique societal position of universities. Concerns about the university's ability to usefully address questions of public concern date back to the very origins of political science: one need only recall that the *New York Times* of the 1880s praised Columbia's and Michigan's programs in political science while at the same time wondering whether offerings would include courses in machine-style manipulations and chicanery.<sup>17</sup>

The debate itself shows the vibrancy of the universities' overall con-

cern with issues of policy and administration. As mentioned earlier, some proponents of revitalizing public administration, such as Nicholas Henry, propose actively separating the study of public policy and education of administrators from the study of political science. Cook believes political science is integral to revitalizing the study of administration. Most important, because of the inherently public mission and spiritedness of the university, its unique position, and its entrepreneurial desire, no one is suggesting that such revitalization efforts, wherever located, are not the responsibility of the university.

### The Modern University and the Responsibility of Institutional Entrepreneurship

While arguably the most relevant for specific consideration of universities' societal position and support of America's national community, industrial competitiveness, and intellectual vanguard, the previously mentioned critiques are far from the only ones regarding America's universities. In "The University and Its Critics," an essay stemming from a larger symposium coinciding with Princeton's 250th anniversary (in 1996),<sup>18</sup> Cornell president Frank H. T. Rhodes noted, "in an era when the people are being asked to 'sacrifice' for the sake of the nation's long term strength, universities are perceived as self-indulgent, arrogant and resistant to change." Rhodes recognized that "these critics are, by and large, insiders who have had a greater degree of involvement with universities than most Americans,<sup>19</sup> and that makes their criticisms all the more troubling."<sup>20</sup>

While not necessarily addressing all of its critics, Rhodes broadly responded to criticism of the university by harkening back to Woodrow Wilson's address "Princeton in the Nation's Service," presented at the institution's sesquicentennial celebration. Rhodes continued: "universities have become, both by demand and by choice, far more actively involved in the large issues of public life. They are now citizens, partners in a social compact that places great responsibility and high expectations upon them."<sup>21</sup> Rhodes's characterization is not unique. In fact, the critics Rhodes seeks to address would likely dismiss his rhetoric as hackneyed banalities. I would suggest, however, that his insight that universities' public role is driven as much by institutional choice as by public demand offers a seed for a common fertile ground. The vibrancy and potential of the university is in fact reflected by both the harshness of its critics and the faith of its leaders.

On the broadest level, universities remain fundamentally public

institutions. Thus, debate about their future often reflects a larger and healthier debate about issues of concern to the polity and society. More specifically, to both the practitioner and the researcher of public policy, contemporary questions about the appropriate reach of the national state lead to similar questions regarding the current relationship of universities to government and of expertise to policymaking. Nonetheless, contemporary questions and controversies should not lead us to easily dismiss the university's significance. Rather, in response to such concerns, I would suggest that there is a correspondence between questions regarding the size and scope of the national state and examinations of the leading universities' public role.

As Skowronek emphasizes and many others have noted, the United States has always had "the problem of the state." On the one hand, there is "America's remarkable capacity to regenerate its government peacefully." On the other hand, "there were no unqualified triumphs in building a new American state."<sup>22</sup> Summarizing the complexity this entails, Skowronek stresses:

The path taken in modern American institutional development has now fully eclipsed the sense of statelessness that so clearly marked our early politics, but that past was not without consequences for present difficulties. Its impact is uncovered in the political and institutional struggles that attended the formation of the state in which we now live.<sup>23</sup>

Correspondingly, while the university was the most significant contributor to the development of the new American state and was arguably the most influential institution to emerge from the era, its success was also not unqualified.

Needless to say, the American state and the nation's leading universities were and are distinct institutions. However, owing to their related growth, they are, to some extent, committed to shared fates. As I discussed earlier in this work, one of the major qualifications of the universities' triumph was the fact that no matter the nature and extent of their public service, universities have been criticized at various times for being elitist. At its worst, this criticism has found universities characterized as unresponsive to popular opinion and unaware of genuine public concerns. The American system's federalism and pluralism make it difficult for any public institution to be universally praised. Therefore, despite their regional appeal and sporadic efforts at inclusiveness, American universities have found themselves under attack from the public they have sought to serve.<sup>24</sup>

With this in mind, one could argue that contemporary condemna-

tions of higher education are simply reflections of the inherent, historic limits of the reach of both higher education and the national state. The questions raised by such condemnations do not simply concern how universities are called on to support the national state and how they offer to do so. Instead, the questions involve the more fundamental matter of what issues are deemed to be of public concern. While supplying the manpower for the national state, universities have also defined its capabilities. Since their emergence in the later half of the nineteenth century, universities have defined which social and political issues are appropriate state concerns and how the state should go about addressing those concerns.

Obviously, university efforts at agenda setting are driven somewhat by government incentive and public sentiment. However, universities have frequently brought to issues the initial awareness that fostered government incentives and nurtured public sentiment. Beyond illuminating the process by which university-based expertise came to be crucial for the development of the new American state and its associated reforms, appreciation of universities' role in agenda setting further highlights the contemporary significance of institutions of higher education in shaping the parameters of policy and the scope of reform.

To those of us witnessing the current climate of university relations with the national state and understanding universities' fundamental role in supporting and defining state capacities, it seems appropriate to begin asking the broader question: as the development and application of public policy evolve, how, too, will the university-based system of expertise? This is not to say that the system of university-based expertise created in concert with the development of the national state is irrelevant to contemporary concerns. However, as the national state has been and will be questioned with regard to its efficiency and equity, the system of university-based expertise has been and will be similarly scrutinized.

University support for the American state was fundamental to the Progressives' efforts at reform and to later expansions of the federal government in the New Deal and Great Society eras. Though without pithy definition, the current era has been marked by the enactment of welfare reform, calls for redefinition of education and health care, and renewed attention to America's role in the world (stemming from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), all of which have significantly altered the expectations and practice of administration as well the overall relations between the state and its citizenry. Responding to both demand and desire, universities have, to varying degrees, shaped this

redefinition. In the American state, the university's authority—its ability to support such redefinition—derives from its credibility and its relevance. The biggest threat posed by the critics that Frank Rhodes and others address is not their critique; it is their potential indifference. If the university comes to be broadly perceived as simply a vested interest inhibiting the consideration of reform, rather than as an agenda-setting institution, its unique societal position—its relevance—is lost. This is not to say that the university does not possess and pursue a public agenda; even the state itself occasionally acts as a competing political interest. But acknowledging the agenda-setting role of the university emphasizes that the privileged position the university has held—the unique role it has played—stemmed from its place as a forum for transparent competition between public ideas as well as its position as a mechanism for national coordination of them.