

# **NEW RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TRANSNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION**

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My theme for this morning is a topic that has become the central commitment of my professional life. I want to speak with you about the role that universities can play in building bridges that unite people across national borders. My central message is quite simple, and it is not particularly novel. But I want to state it in the strongest possible terms.

I believe that universities – inevitably, automatically, and without even paying attention – help to create transnational bridges. I also believe, however, that we can do a much, much better job of building those bridges. To do so we must stop seeing that enterprise as a mere by-product of our “real work.” I am saying that our universities should make it a central, explicit mission to help our students, faculty, and staff to become more effective bridge people. My claim is that, if we do so, each and every one of our universities will make a critical contribution to life on this planet in the twenty-first century.

I want to begin to make this argument by focusing on some institutions who are not in the room with us today. As you all know, I am an American who lives and works at a university in China. For someone like me, and indeed for every one of you here, it has become easy, and a bit self-indulgent, to act as if the only thing that matters today is the relationship between Asia and America. “Asia and America, America and

Asia – this is the crucial axis of innovation, design, production, distribution, and consumption. And how well this relationship develops will determine how well the world goes in the future.”

It is of course every bit as dangerous for us to lapse into this kind of exaggerated thinking today as it was for twentieth-century Americans to lapse into a North Atlantic obsession. To counteract that danger, I therefore want to begin by reminding us of a fact we all know. Our beloved universities did not originate in America, and they did not originate in Asia. The world’s first universities began in North Africa and Europe.

The Madrasa of Al-Karaouine was founded in Morocco in the year 859 as a center of Muslim teaching. It is now called the University of Al-Karaouine and is said to be the oldest university that has been continuously in existence since its founding. 100 years later, the Madrasa of Al-Azhar, now called the University of Al-Azhar, was begun in Egypt. And 100 years after that, in 1065, the Madrasa Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad was begun. Shortly thereafter, a critical group of institutions were begun in Europe -- the University of Bologna in 1088, and Oxford and the University of Paris in 1096.

In thinking about the ways in which universities can create cross-national bridges, it is worth observing that even these very first simple universities gave people a reason to travel. Scholars were willing to cover great distances to be there. They were even willing to cross political borders.

Of course, even from the very beginning political leaders were unsure about this university-stimulated border-crossing. Frederick Barbarossa, the German leader of the Holy Roman Empire – invested in supporting students’ efforts to study at far-away universities, but he required that the students promise to work for the church or the state after they finished their studies. Others, like King Henry II of England, were so worried about “brain drain” that they prohibited their young people from traveling to foreign schools.

Still, these early religious universities stimulated travel. A great example was Charles University, in Prague. That university insisted very early that its students should be admitted on the basis of their academic

merit. By the early 1400's, almost half of its 4000 students were foreigners.

This first generation of universities (which grew to include distinguished universities in colonial America like Harvard and Yale) prospered in their original form for almost 1000 years – until the early 1800's. They were platforms for cross-border mobility. But it should also be stressed that they were rather narrow platforms. They did not look like modern universities.

The mission of this first generation of universities was to teach young men of the church what they needed to know to become good leaders within their communities. They taught religion, medicine, law, and what came to be known as a “liberal education” or a “classical education” -- Latin, Greek, mathematics, philosophy, history, and music. The theory underlying this view of a university was expressed brilliantly in 1852, in a series of lectures by Cardinal John Newman entitled, “The Idea of a University.”

Yet by the time Cardinal Newman delivered his famous speeches, the idea of a university had already begun to evolve. And as the idea of a university grew during the nineteenth century, so did its potential significance as a border-crossing platform.

The initial center for change was what we now call Germany. In 1810, the University of Berlin was founded, and it had a different mission. In the view of its founder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, teachers should be more than just teachers. They should also be scholars who conducted original research that advanced the frontiers of human knowledge. The university was to provide the environment in which they could conduct that research, an environment committed at its core to a principle of academic freedom, whereby researchers could choose what to study for themselves and express their findings without fear that the authorities would punish them.

The new German research university proved to have even greater power than the earlier teaching universities to attract people across national borders. Students from around the world rushed to Berlin to study. Germany would remain the world's center for university education for

almost a century until the attractive power of the university was counteracted by the even more repugnant power of Adolf Hitler.

For the history of higher education, two of the most important people who were pulled to Germany by the University of Berlin were a pair of Americans – two young friends who had been classmates together at Yale. Their names were Andrew Dickson White and Daniel Coit Gilman. After completing their studies in Berlin, these two young men went back to America and became the founding presidents of two new universities that reflected German ideas about higher education.

In 1865, Andrew Dickson White became the first president of Cornell University. White's partner in the creation of the university was a businessman named Ezra Cornell, and the two of them created a university that was revolutionary in two significant ways. Ezra Cornell summarized their innovation with the phrase that Cornell should be an institution where "any person" could find instruction in "any study."

When Cornell spoke of "any person," he signaled that, unlike other universities, Cornell would be open to men and also to women, people of all races and religions. And when he spoke of "any study," he signaled that, unlike other universities, Cornell would be committed to teaching practical subjects such as engineering and agriculture alongside the classics. Cornell would be a bigger platform –in terms of both the people it would teach and the subjects it would teach.

And in 1876, Daniel Coit Gilman became the first president of Johns Hopkins University. He defined the central mission of the university to be research – the advancement of knowledge – and insisted that strong research would improve the quality of teaching. And he organized Hopkins to be primarily a center of graduate-level study, focused on the Ph.D. degree.

Over the course of the next century, Cornell's commitment to being a university that is open to all kinds of students and all kinds of study and Johns Hopkins's commitment to being a research university would become accepted as the central defining principles of most great American universities.

During the twentieth century, these great American universities replaced the German universities as the most influential bridges in the world of higher education. They became more and more powerful magnets, drawing students and faculty from around the world to cross national borders and come to America.

During the early 1930's, about 10,000 foreign students were enrolled in American universities in a typical year; by 1955 the number was up to 36,000 students. By 1963, it was 75,000 students. In 2009-10, it was almost 700,000.

This expanding flow of students from overseas has had an important impact on the demographic composition of American campuses, especially when it comes to graduate level education. American universities have, more and more, come to see themselves the way the University of Prague saw itself six hundred years ago – as homes for talent, no matter where in the world that talent comes from. In 1972, American universities gave 15% of their doctoral degrees to citizens of other countries. By 1990, that percentage had grown to 26% -- and in the sciences it was more than 50%.

I will come back to this story in just a minute, but please allow me to make one brief digression on the subject of economic theory, and its limitations. You see, simple economic theory might have predicted that in the age of globalization higher education would evolve one way, and it is notable that in fact higher education has evolved in different ways.

In the 1800's, the economist David Ricardo developed his brilliant theory of globalization and international trade. Under Ricardo's theory, the reduction of barriers to trade should lead countries to specialize in areas where they have what is called a "comparative advantage." Instead of each country trying to do everything from farming to computer programming, each country would specialize in a few areas. One country would become the world's food supplier, another country would become the world's automobile manufacturer, etcetera.

Ricardo's brilliant theory continues to provide the essential intellectual underpinning for the modern period of economic globalization, a period which has seen history's most rapid reduction of global poverty

and its most rapid increase in global living standards. But it is vitally important that we appreciate the limits of this theory.

If one were simple-minded about it, one might make the mistake of applying Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage mechanically to the world of higher education. One might have thought it inevitable that America would simply become "the world's university" – the place where teaching and research would happen while other countries specialized in other kinds of economic activity.

But over the past two decades we have seen a very different set of developments. Around the world, countries have reaffirmed the strategic centrality of their universities. They have determined not to "specialize away from higher education," and that is a very good thing.

For unlike a factory that can only produce a certain kind of private jobs and private profits, a university can produce vast public benefits. Universities are natural platforms for transnational migration, and they can therefore be magnets that pull talented people into a community. And those talented people can then create new ideas that help the local economy and – perhaps just as importantly – also help the non-economic aspects of the society.

In Europe, in Asia, and in the Middle East, governments said this. "Let's look at the German research university, let's see how it was improved in America, and let's see how we might adapt it and improve it in our own country." Perhaps the most visible examples have come in Saudi Arabia and in China. But significant efforts may be identified around the world – efforts to improve quality, to reward competitive excellence, to develop strong international partnerships, and to make English the primary language of intellectual and scientific interactions.

The global flow of students across national borders has continued to accelerate. And it is most assuredly not only about America. Higher education accounted for 36% of Australia's service exports in 2009-2010. Last year, 80% of the students outside the United States who chose to study in another country did so in a country other than America.

All of these trends are, I believe, for the good. But my central point this morning is that we, as universities and as societies, are missing a tremendous opportunity if we think that the benefits of transnational interactions on university campuses will come to us, as it were, by accident. To capture those benefits for our institutions and for our societies, we need to take conscious and affirmative action.

Last year, Ben Wildavsky published a wonderful book, The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities Are Reshaping the World. I approve of much of what Wildavsky writes in that book. But I believe it is also incomplete.

Wildavsky focuses his attention on the contribution that great universities make to their home countries' economic competitiveness. He says that the reason why countries should invest in their universities is that "economic growth and global competitiveness are increasingly driven by knowledge, and ... universities can play a key role in that knowledge. ... Great universities will keep more students at home, perhaps attract more from abroad, and above all create innovative and prosperous economies."

Wildavsky quotes the leader of South Korea's new program to facilitate global academic partnerships, who says, "Our focus is on supporting new growth-generating technologies that will spearhead national development."

Wildavsky supplements this point with the idea that international education experiences are "less a matter of seeking new cultural or linguistic experiences than simply of finding the best available scholarly brand." In this discussion, Wildavsky suggests that what matters for the student is to get the best possible credential and to get plugged into the best possible network of fellow alumni. He describes the world as becoming a world of "academic free trade," where student and faculty talent of all kinds moves smoothly around the world unless governments choose to interfere with the natural process of what he calls "talent-based mobility."

Let me be clear. I do not disagree with Mr. Wildavsky's general direction. I believe that great universities contribute to economic growth

and development, that knowledge is becoming key to that process, and that it is good to allow talents to move freely around the world.

But I have problems with what is missing from this story, problems that are similar to the problems I have with Tom Friedman's enormously influential book, The World Is Flat.

I daresay everyone in this room has read The World Is Flat, and so you are all aware of Mr. Friedman's contention that technological change has pretty much eliminated the significance of distance and national boundaries.

We can all agree that technology has made the world flatter than it used to be. Technology has made it less expensive and faster to collaborate around the world. But has it made the world completely flat? Anyone who has worked with a business that crosses national borders will tell you immediately that the answer is no. Culture still matters.

Please let me be clear. On almost all the really big, really important things, when it comes down to the deep value questions, I do not believe that cultural differences matter at all. People are people. They want to avoid physical and emotional pain; they want to enjoy pleasure; they want to love and to be loved. In every culture, people are not supposed to hurt each other. And people are supposed to be honest and follow the rules.

But different cultural traditions matter enormously when it comes to the question of how people are expected to show respect for those really big value questions while they go about living their daily lives.

A very interesting psychological literature has documented how children who start out the same can develop different cognitive patterns by growing up in different cultures. They can actually perceive things differently, because when they were growing up, they were taught different answers to the question, "What matters? What is important in this situation?"

Interest in this field of research was accelerated by the publication in 2003 of the book The Geography of Thought by Richard Nisbett. The book is filled with provocative examples, drawn from rigorous psycho-

logical experiments. And these examples give powerful support to the following proposition: that people from Asian cultures tend, in their observations of the world, to focus more on characteristics of objects that relate them strongly to their context; while people from Western cultures tend to focus more on those characteristics that do not change if the object moves to a different context.

Let me give you another example of a culture-based difference, one that I stumbled on accidentally in the course of my work in China. The example has to do with how Americans and Chinese people deal with units of time.

If you were to ask an American what day tomorrow is, most of them would say, "It's Tuesday." If you were to ask a Chinese, most of them would say, "It's the 21st." For Americans, the most important time interval is the week. For Chinese, it is the month.

So if one of my Chinese colleagues says to one of my American colleagues, "Why don't we get together for coffee on the 24th?" the American will probably respond, "Do you mean Friday?" And if one of my American colleagues were to say to one of my Chinese colleagues, "Why don't we get together for coffee on Thursday?" the Chinese will probably respond, "Do you mean the 23rd?"

I love this example because neither culture attaches any moral significance to which period of time you use most. Once people understand the difference, it is easy to overcome it. Americans can learn to frame things according to the day of the month without any emotional anxiety, and Chinese can learn to frame things according to the day of the week in the same way.

But other cultural differences are more difficult: they have value judgments attached to them. To a Chinese person it might be disrespectful to express a disagreement directly, especially to someone who is in a position of authority. To an American it might be disrespectful to fail to express a disagreement directly, especially if the situation is one where the authority figure really wants to know whether others disagree.

Now I want to stipulate that there is something discomfiting about this view of the world. Many people are made quite uncomfortable by the suggestion that culture – the way people are raised from birth until adulthood – can shape the way they perceive and think about their environments. When I was a college student people who talked about things like “national character” were sometimes dismissed as closet racists. And more recently, when I was a defendant in a lawsuit involving affirmative action in law school admissions, it made people extremely uncomfortable to suggest that cultural background might affect people’s perceptions of such “natural” domains as science.

So please think carefully about whether my intuitions on this topic are misguided. Please explore this fascinating literature on cultural differences, and draw your own conclusions about whether and how much they matter.

But for this morning I ask you to assume that I am right – that they do matter, at least some of the time. And I ask you to think with me about what the implications of that assumption might be.

One positive implication is that cultural differences offer us an enormous potential benefit, waiting to be tapped. In a world where technology makes it easier for people to work in diverse teams, across great distances, there is a tremendous opportunity – for businesses certainly but for the non-business aspects of society as well. Culturally diverse teams would have the possibility of seeing issues in more complex, subtle, and accurate ways because the members of those teams would bring different perspectives to every problem, and the group could integrate those different perspectives in ever more powerful ways.

But this tremendous benefit comes inseparably joined to a tremendous problem. I have assumed that this culturally diverse group of individuals can come together and transcend their differences to produce a richer, more subtle, group analysis. But that assumption will be manifestly false if members of a diverse team are unable to work together because of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

In the years ahead, I believe that one of the most valuable skills that any person can have is the ability to help culturally diverse groups to

work well together, to recognize cross-cultural misunderstandings and help the team to get past it. That set of skills is what I call the skills of the bridge person.

An effective bridge person must have three qualities. He or she must be able to see the world from his or her own culture's perspective and also from that of a different culture. He or she must be able to engage sympathetically with all perspectives, without rushing to say that one perspective is right and the other perspective is wrong. And finally he or she must be able to explain how the cross-cultural misunderstanding occurred in a way that allows everyone to appreciate it and work towards a solution without feeling that they have lost face.

I submit to you that the skills of the effective bridge person are higher-order skills than, say, the ability to run a least-squares regression. They are important for more than their ability to yield discrete outcomes.

The skills of the effective bridge person are catalytic. They are technologies that drive new kinds of processes. They multiply the force that individuals bring to bear on any given problem.

And that, ultimately, brings me back to the role of the university.

I would submit that we are failing in our responsibilities if we simply assume that the students, faculty, and staff who inhabit our campuses will become effective bridge people by accident, simply because our communities happen to be more diverse than they once were.

I would submit that it is not enough for us to assume that by putting together a class that includes Asians and Europeans, Africans and Americans, we will have prepared them to make the kinds of contributions the twenty-first century will need them to make.

We need to take the bull by the horns.

We need to step forward and assert that every student who passes through our doors will be actively and explicitly helped to think about cultural differences.

We need to step forward and assert that every member of our community will become ever more thoughtful about when such differences are irrelevant and when they matter greatly.

But here I must be completely candid. Today, right now, we do not yet know how to deliver on this promise. The research on cultural differences is still developing. Even more importantly, our understanding about how to turn that research into pedagogic practice is truly primitive.

We need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what cultural differences exist, and how they matter. Even more, we need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what techniques individuals can use as members of heterogeneous groups to interpret and transcend difference and mutual misunderstanding. Finally, we need to develop a pedagogy, a mix of didactic instruction and practice-based experience that will effectively nurture these understandings in people – a way to help them become the most effective bridge people possible. We need to determine how we can best help them become people who are able both to diagnose culture-based misunderstanding and to treat it, people who are able both to recognize the opportunities for deeper multi-perspective-based understanding and to help a group to realize those opportunities.

But consider the possibilities that await us if we choose to direct ourselves towards this new horizon. Modern, transnational universities will do more than just provide any person instruction in any subject, and they will do more than just conduct path breaking research. They will also be the fertile soil in which multi-cultural bridge people are planted, are nourished, and blossom. Their students, their faculty, and their staff can all become known as the kind of people who make multi-cultural teams effective. They can be bridges around the world, pathways that enable the peoples of our planet to work together in close cooperation, using their separate and complementary strengths together to solve the most difficult challenges that face human beings in the twenty-first century.