PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES' FUTURES PROJECT

SITUATING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN TODAY'S LANDSCAPE

PROJECT DIRECTORS:
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About PRUF

The organizational structure, governance arrangements, mission, and funding system for research universities in the U.S. were established in the mid-20th century. Although the strengths of these norms and structures helped make U.S. research universities the envy of the world, this system of governance also has weaknesses that have fueled fundamental problems in recent decades. Some of these problems include political conflict and attacks on academic freedom; constraints in state funding; demographic change; equity and inclusion concerns; changes to the academic workforce; global competition; technological change and AI; and the need to address climate change and other problems facing humanity. Now is the time to engage in thoughtful, deliberative, and generative dialogue to develop new ideas for how U.S. public research universities can transform to meet more fully the demands of the 21st century and beyond. The Center for Higher and Adult Education (CHAE) Public Research Universities' Futures Project (PRUF) embraces an "all hands-on deck" approach, engaging creative thinkers and leaders from around the sector to participate in thoughtful, future-oriented conversation.

The Public Research Universities' Futures Project will address four themes: (1) teaching and learning amidst economic and technological change, (2) the academic profession in transition, (3) balancing competing needs via governance, policy, and finance, and (4) organizations and leadership in volatile environments.

Initially, the Project will include three components.
1. Online public symposia with national experts in postsecondary governance focused on the challenges currently facing U.S. research universities.
2. The publishing of topical white papers, building from symposia conversations.
3. By-invitation conversations between leaders in the field to be held on Michigan State University's campus.

We invite you to be in contact with us about ideas or issues you recommend to be addressed as part of the Public Research Universities' Futures Project.

Contact us: ced.chae@msu.edu

Introduction

Brendan Cantwell & Ann E. Austin – Michigan State University

On March 12, 2015, the Center for Higher and Adult Education convened an inaugural webinar to assess the current landscape for public research universities. Higher education and especially the public research universities have entered a period of challenge, change, and opportunity. Perhaps more than ever public research universities are important to their communities and states, to the country, and to the world. At the same time, questions about who is included, how university priorities are established, as well as about their costs and social and economic returns have been building for years. This project is intended to stimulate creative and innovative thinking about how to respond to these and other questions. Events in the early part of 2025 made it clear that the established relationship between public research universities and the federal and state governments is changing and being renegotiated. The tick-tock of daily events creates a sense of frenetic urgency and sometimes encourages short term-thinking. We are seeking to resist such short-term thinking, and, rather, to take a longer view of critical issues confronting public research universities. The aim of our webinar entitled *Situating Public Research Universities in Today's Landscape* was designed to step back from the hour-by-hour demands put on our attention and take stock of the bigger picture. We asked: What are the major questions public research universities face today? And what do these questions imply about how the sector can fulfill its mission in the medium and longer terms?

To address these questions, CHAE gathered a panel of highly qualified and experienced higher education leaders and invited each to pose and explain a pressing question facing the sector. The speakers included:
- Dominique Baker (Associate Professor of Education & Public Policy, University of Delaware)
- Jenny J. Lee (Vice President for Arizona International, Dean of International Education, & Professor of Higher Education;,University of Arizona)
- Christopher P. Long (Provost & Senior Vice President, Professor of Philosophy, University of Oregon)
- Jennifer L. Mnookin (Chancellor, Chair of Leadership, & Professor of Law, University of Wisconsin - Madison)
- Teresa K. Woodruff (President Emerita & Research Foundation Professor, Michigan State University)

By asking each of our distinguished panelists to raise one big question facing the future of public research universities, we intended to spark conversation and generate ideas about how these vital institutions can prepare for the future. It is no secret that at the time of the webinar a process of unwinding the federal government's productive

relationship with higher education was underway (described in the essay below written by Teresa Woodruff). That process has only continued and intensified since we met in March of 2025 and amounts to the greatest challenge higher education has faced in at least a generation. The Trump administration, picking up where several states had begun over the past several years, is advancing a range of policies that challenge the research mission and academic independence, and which may suppress access to higher education by limiting the availability of financial aid. While the administration and its allies telegraphed many of these policies on the campaign trail and in policy documents such as Project 2025, their implementation is nonetheless alarming. And that alarm understandably dominates much of the conversation about higher education in the first half of 2025. You will see imprints of that alarm in the thoughtful essays composed by the panelists that are presented below. You will also find a set of questions, reflections, and observations that call us to think not only about the challenges emerging today – which University of Wisconsin, Madison Chancellor Mnookin calls potentially "existential threats" – but also to engage in the spirit of curiosity and inquiry that makes public research universities valuable to individuals and society alike.

The essays probe the context and communities of public research universities. Dominique Baker shows us that to think about the landscape for public universities we must first ask what a public university is, and who it serves. She demonstrates that varying the definition of a public university not only brings different campuses in and out of focus, but also changes the picture of their distribution across the states, and draws attention to their missions, histories, and those they serve. Jenny Lee addresses international education. She argues that public research universities link their states to the globe, economically, socially, and intellectually. Lee observes that these universities must acknowledge realities of public skepticism about immigration. However, she urges that leaders should not decouple their campuses from the world, since international education, especially its economic dimensions, can be a source of strength, rather than only a risk to be managed or eliminated.

The panelists also examine the purposes of public research universities and suggest that they can be a platform for human flourishing and progress. Christopher Long, a philosopher, calls us to understand public research universities as sites for the spiritual practice of human inquiry. These institutions invite the public, he says, to gather in a community of critical thinking that is at once essential to political and economic life, but at the same time stands somewhat outside of politics and the economy to allow participants to experience authentic engagement with ideas and each other. Jennifer Mnookin's essay challenges us to think about the ways we have not lived up to the promise of authentic engagement with ideas and each other by pre-supposing that some ideas and positions are superior to others. She shows that enabling engagement across difference is a primary mission for the public research university and a productive tool for overcoming political and social divides. She is realistic about how the fragmentation of knowledge and culture makes this engagement both more urgent and difficult than

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ever before. Teresa Woodruff describes the system of science that contemporary public research universities are built upon and shows the tangible benefits that arise from the translation of curiosity-driven basic science into technologies and therapies that improve the human condition. She makes a forceful argument for the wisdom and returns generated from investing in science through public research universities.

Taken together, the essays collected here center three elements that are essential for public research universities. The first is the public. These universities must be accountable to and representative of the people and states that host them. But while that representation should be inclusive, it need not be pandering or uncritical. The second is knowledge. Public research universities preserve, generate, and transmit knowledge. The essays suggest that all the economic, social, and political benefits that universities afford flow from their essential commitment to knowledge. The third is that public universities must be self-critical. Just as we ask learners to be open to each other and to interrogate their own thinking, public research universities must open their own practices and values to scrutiny.

Brendan Cantwell and Ann E. Austin, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

A recording of this meeting is available here.
(https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/t/1_60hze9ki).

Public Research Universities?

Dominique J. Baker – University of Delaware
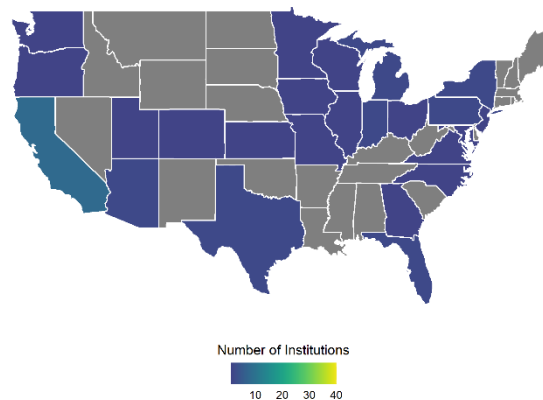Associate Professor of Education & Public Policy

This essay is part of a collection focusing on "Exploring the Public Research University Landscape." Before one can traverse that landscape, it feels pertinent to ensure we have a shared understanding of just what a "public research university" is. At first blush, the definition of a "public research university" may seem self-evident, some version of "a public university where employees devote a substantial amount of time to research." This is a term that is widely used across the higher education landscape and a variety of examples may come to mind easily. But, if one wants to engage in discussion of the history, present, and future of public research universities, it is necessary to push for a clear definition of which institutions are included in this category and why. Otherwise, we wind up talking and researching at cross purposes. I will first explore some of the field's understanding of how we define research universities and then examine just what unifies public universities.

What is a Public *Research* University?

Imagine if one scholar believes public research universities are public institutions that are members of the Association of American Universities (AAU). These nearly 40 institutions are often considered to be the most prestigious public research universities. The requirements for membership include measures of federal research support, postdoctoral workers, and faculty awards, citations, and books (Association of American Universities, 2024). Visualizing these institutions across the United States in Figure 1, you can see that the public AAU institutions are generally located on the coasts and in the midwestern part of the United States. This classification includes such institutions as Michigan State University; the University of California, Berkeley; and the University of Pittsburgh. Even keeping in mind that the figure shows raw counts of institutions per state (that have not been adjusted for state resident population size), it is clear that all states do not have a "public research university" based on this narrow definition.

But, what if a different scholar thinks about public research universities in terms of the Carnegie Classification categories for doctoral research universities? Carnegie Classification is a categorization system of colleges and universities conducted a few times each decade that would produce quite a different set of "public research universities" (as compared to AAU institutions). These universities are generally those that produce a certain number of doctoral degree earners in a year with a minimum amount of total research expenditures, with some institutions labeled "very high research" and others "high research"—the distinction between the two being based on research expenditures, staff, and doctoral conferrals (American Council of Education,

n.d.).[1] Visualizing these two categories in Figure 2, it is clear that both categories cover a larger portion of the United States than the AAU-based definition. At the same time, there are real differences in what one would mean by a "public research university," depending on the Carnegie Classification categories included. There are just over 100 public research universities using the "very high research" classification (Figure 2 panel A). This determination of public research university status would add institutions like Colorado State University, Mississippi State University, and Old Dominion University (relative to a definition based on AAU membership). Yet, once you add in the high research activity institutions as well, there are nearly 200 institutions (Figure 2 panel B). Shifting to this definition adds Boise State University, Morgan State University (a historically Black college), and Wichita State University, among others.

Figure 1. Public AAU institutions in the contiguous United States.

Number of Institutions
10 20 30 40

Or, a scholar could try to be as inclusive as possible when talking about public research universities, given the reality that the eligibility requirements of AAU membership and Carnegie doctoral research classification restrict the resulting set of institutions to ones with larger endowments and student enrollments with larger shares of White and wealthy students, as the construction of these categories aligns with society's notions of "elite" universities (Byrd et al., 2024). This decision might mean relying on the National Science Foundation (NSF)-sponsored Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) survey, a census of institutions with at least $150,000 in research expenditures

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[1] One index represents the aggregate level of research activity, and the other captures per-capita research activity using the expenditure and staffing measures divided by the number of full-time faculty within the assistant, associate, and full professor ranks. The values on each index were then used to locate each institution on a two-dimensional graph. We calculated each institution's distance from a common reference point (the minima of each scale) and then used the results to assign institutions to one of two groups based on their distance from the reference point. Before conducting the analysis, raw data were converted to rank scores to reduce the influence of outliers and to improve discrimination at the lower end of the distributions where many institutions were clustered. Detailed information about how the research activity index was calculated can be found here. A more detailed description of the methodology is available here.

per fiscal year. As is shown in Figure 3, simply including public institutions with at least $150,000 in research funding results in the most inclusive categorization scheme, with all contiguous states represented and a healthy number of institutions in several states. Slightly more than 400 institutions across the country would be considered public research universities if we used this classification scheme, and it would add institutions such as Diné College (a tribal college) and Troy University, as compared to the most inclusive Carnegie Classification for doctoral research institutions.
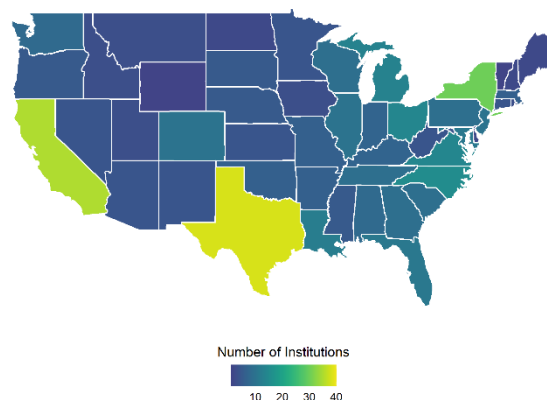
Figure 2. Public institutions in the Carnegie Classification for doctoral research universities in the contiguous United States.
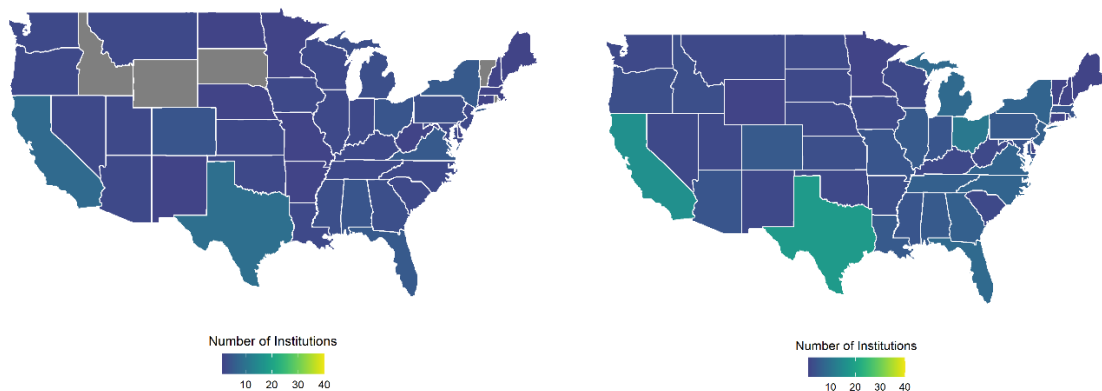
Panel A. Very high research activity   *Panel B. Very high and high research activity*

Figure 3. Public institutions included in HERD data in the contiguous United States.

Of course, the point is not to be prescriptive about what the "correct" definition of a public research university is. Instead, the point is to highlight that two people can be talking about these institutions and be talking about two completely different sets of

institutions, with different needs, strengths, and challenges. For example, if only thinking about AAU institutions, one might imagine environments that historically have had robust university-level research infrastructures and where challenges are more contingent on unique conditions for individual departments or faculty members (e.g., ensuring a particular lab has the right mix of personnel). However, when thinking about the much broader group of institutions included within the HERD data, one might instead envision a broader array of challenges (e.g., having research support staff who wear "many hats"). Assuming that we all understand exactly what the other one means when we say we are invested in understanding public research universities feels like a fool's errand if we are not actually talking about the same sets of institutions. There is vast variation in the number and types of institutions across definitions of public research institutions. Additionally, it is worth noting that every one of these categories I have described (which are typical categories used in research and by institutions themselves) includes a threshold for research expenditures. These definitions do not encompass the types of research that occur without funding or that fall below a set threshold. As a result, conceptualizing public research universities in this way can omit smaller institutions and institutions with a research emphasis in fields such as the humanities and creative arts.

What is a *Public* Research University?

While other essays will spend time engaging more deeply on what it means to be a research university, I am especially curious about what it means to be a *public* university. Even beyond the variation across these categories, there is still the pressing question: just who is the public we are referring to when we discuss public research universities? One would not be chastised for assuming that all public institutions have similar budget structures, with the bulk of their funds coming from their state's government. Still, this could not be further from the truth. For example, the University of Delaware, a state-assisted yet privately governed institution, has a budget that so resembles a private university that its finances in the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System follow the guidelines for a private institution. Yet it is unmistakable that the University of Delaware is the public flagship for the state of Delaware. Therefore, it is not accounting practices that unite these institutions. I would argue that the mission is what defines and unifies public universities. These are institutions whose responsibilities are to educate and represent the interests of the residents of their state ("the public"). I believe that these institutions must be assessed and held accountable for this aim. Below, I chronicle the history of four public research universities to highlight that it has always been contested just who is included as a resident or part of the public.

In the 1830s, Newark College (now the University of Delaware) graduated the first Black person to earn a bachelor's degree from a state flagship (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, n.d.). A few decades later, in the 1850s, the University of Iowa was the first

public institution to go coeducational, allowing women to attend in meaningful numbers (May, 1977). These examples illustrate instances when some public research universities realized that the structural discrimination facing their residents meant that they had too narrowly defined their "public," spurring a need to expand access. However, in the 1950s, a century later, the University of Texas at Austin was sued because it refused to allow a Black man to enroll at its law school (Sweatt v. Painter, 1950). In line with that fact, it would take two additional decades before my alma mater, the University of Virginia, would allow women to freely enroll in the undergraduate college (Bellows et al., 2011). This highlights the substantial role that public research universities have played in helping to segregate our country. These institutions fought tooth and nail to be able to exclude large swaths of the "public" from ever being able to set foot on their campuses.

It is laudable when public research universities choose to make strides to expand their idea of who is included in the public to more align with reality. Yet, in our current sociopolitical environment, it is not clear how committed these institutions are to continuing to broaden their vision of the public rather than reverting to an older, narrower understanding. If mission is what unifies these institutions, it is difficult to understand how research universities that retrench on the stated aims of free inquiry, integration, and democracy can be defined as truly public.

Conclusion

While there are various definitions and criteria to use to determine the "research" part of defining a "public research university," there are also deep mission-related issues to consider when describing a university as "public." Defining these institutions is not just a matter of determining categories such as research expenditures—defining also involves meaningful institutional consideration of its mission, including to which publics the institution is committed. Without a shared understanding of just what a "public research university" is, it is easy to imagine crafting public policies and strategic goals that reflect the needs and challenges of a select few institutions or that destroy opportunities for solidarity across our system of higher education.

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The Uncertain Future of International University Engagement

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Imagine the implications of a world in which universities no longer engage in cross-border collaboration. What would become of research, innovation, or even the nature of teaching and learning? This scenario is no longer a distant abstraction but an emerging risk, as international engagement in higher education faces growing scrutiny and constraint.

Drawing from over two decades as a faculty member and my current role as senior international officer, I offer reflections on the reciprocal relationship between research and policy: research informs higher education policy, and policy, in turn, shapes the conditions under which research can thrive. Amid intensifying populist sentiment in the United States and globally, it is imperative to ask whether internationalization still holds a legitimate place within our universities. To address this question, we must also consider two foundational inquiries: (1) Why should public research universities remain globally engaged? and (2) What are the potential consequences—and institutional strategies—for navigating a climate of international disengagement?

To answer these questions, we must begin with a keen awareness of public sentiments—whether or not we agree with them. Public opinion on immigration in the U.S. has become more restrictive, with increasing support for deportation and reduced immigration levels. For the first time in over 30 years, a majority of Americans believe immigration should decrease. A recent Gallup poll showed a 30-point increase in this view over just the past four years (Gallup, 2024).

However, the narrative shifts when it comes to international students. According to the American Council on Education (ACE), most Americans recognize their economic and intellectual contributions, with strong support for retaining skilled graduates (Helms, 2021). Highly skilled migrants are seen as strong economic contributors, filling labor gaps in critical fields such as technology and healthcare. They tend to earn higher incomes, contribute more in taxes, and make limited use of public services (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017). Many also drive innovation, with a notable presence among entrepreneurs and patent holders, helping to sustain national economic growth and global competitiveness (Anderson, 2022). International students also contribute significantly to the surrounding communities, states, and the nation. NAFSA's (2024) economic value tool shows that in my home state of Arizona, 27,883 international students support over 8,000 jobs and contribute more than $917 million to the state economy. Nationally, international students

generate over $43 billion in economic impact. These figures matter when making the case to policymakers and everyday citizens, regardless of political affiliation.

We, as scholars and university leaders, also have a responsibility to inform policymakers, especially in areas affecting international scholars and U.S. academics working abroad. Beyond economic impact, international scholars and students drive scientific discovery. The Institute of International Education's Open Doors (2024) report shows that 112,552 international scholars were engaged in research, teaching, and clinical activities at U.S. institutions in the last academic year. Meanwhile, the National Science Foundation (2023) reports that 40% of U.S. science and engineering publications are coauthored with researchers from outside the U.S.

These collaborations often begin when international scholars are graduate students or postdocs in U.S. institutions. A few years ago, John Haupt and I conducted a study on how U.S. and Chinese scholars managed to collaborate despite COVID-related restrictions and geopolitical tensions (Haupt & Lee, 2024). The findings were surprising: the majority indicated that long-term trust, built over years of collaboration beginning in graduate school, sustained their partnerships. Many research breakthroughs would be impossible without this bottom-up collaboration, which provides access to unique datasets, specialized knowledge, and research facilities not universally available. In short, the global scientific ecosystem depends on the mobility of international students and scholars.

Domestic students benefit as well. International students broaden classroom perspectives. Regardless of political leanings, all students gain from exposure to multiple languages, diverse cultural understandings, and globally applicable skills. Moreover, international students support U.S. university prestige through higher retention rates, substantial representation in STEM graduate programs, and contributions to international rankings.

Yet, while university leaders and scholars understand these benefits, we must communicate them more effectively to broader audiences. This means addressing public concerns directly—concerns about competition for university spots, national security risks, and global scientific competition. With evolving geopolitical dynamics, the role of public research universities in internationalization is more critical than ever. Public research universities are uniquely positioned to engage globally, due to their dual mission of serving the public and advancing research. International collaboration not only fuels discovery through diverse perspectives and talent but also reinforces civic and economic responsibilities to local and national communities. By fostering cross-border partnerships, universities amplify their contributions to global challenges—such as climate change, public health, and technological innovation—while preparing students for an interconnected world. Internationalization is thus central to the mission and long-term relevance of public research institutions.

The next question is: What are the risks of international decoupling, and how should universities respond?

There are no clear answers about the future of U.S. alliances. Tensions exist, but their impact on collaboration agreements, scholar exchange, and offshore program delivery remains uncertain. Severing ties with China, imposing travel bans on Muslim-majority countries, or straining relations with the EU, Mexico, or Canada have serious implications. Universities must comply with federal and state policies. While students and scholars may call for resistance, institutional leaders must weigh real consequences in funding and employment when deciding how to act.

But beyond reducing international engagement, what options do public research universities have? As noted earlier, Americans generally recognize the value of international students to the economy and research. At the same time, public opinion is nuanced, and universities must avoid overly broad restrictions that limit their ability to contribute both locally and globally. This is especially important now, as many federal actions apply sweeping limitations to international work without much nuance. Public research universities are uniquely positioned to respond with care—balancing national concerns while sustaining global partnerships that fuel innovation, enrich education, and tackle shared challenges.

For this reason, public research universities must maintain diverse global networks. The breadth of these partnerships ensures that when some avenues close, others remain open. Much like financial portfolios, the best advice is to diversify. For universities, this means aligning strategies to state contexts, academic disciplines, and geopolitical trends. While short-term disruptions are inevitable, institutions that sustain broad international engagement will be best positioned for future growth—through students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

For university leaders and senior international officers, it is essential to clearly communicate the public benefits of internationalization to a broad audience. Universities must educate not only in disciplinary content but also in why they exist and the role they serve in society. International students should be viewed not as liabilities but as assets. Their contributions fuel research, drive innovation, and support economic growth. As university leaders, we must actively advocate for global engagement— through policy, public messaging, and strategy—while also managing security risks in areas such as immigration, travel, and export controls.

At the same time, researchers who study international issues play a critical role in separating facts from myths and stereotypes. Beyond informing scholarly communities, we must produce policy-relevant findings that guide informed decision-making. For instance, immigration scholars have documented the economic contributions of

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international students and skilled migrants, refuting the belief that they displace domestic workers. Global health researchers have countered misinformation during crises like COVID-19, while area studies experts help policymakers understand the complex cultural and political dynamics behind international conflicts. These contributions are not just academic—they provide the foundation for thoughtful, evidence-based policies.

In closing, the challenges facing public research universities in a shifting geopolitical environment are not just about institutional survival—they are about leadership. If universities are to fulfill their mission of advancing knowledge and serving society, they must engage globally—not in spite of the challenges, but because of them.

Internationalization is not a luxury; it is a necessity for innovation, economic growth, and preparing students for an interconnected world. While public sentiment may shift, the responsibility of academic leaders and scholars remains clear: to communicate the value of global engagement, adapt wisely, and ensure that knowledge knows no borders.

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The Public Research University and the Hope of Democracy

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Provost and Senior Vice President

How can the public research university fulfill its public good mission by being a platform for inquiry?

This question, posed in March 2025, arises at a moment when the very possibility of the public research university as a platform for inquiry has come under intense political threat in the United States. In reflecting on the importance of the practice of free inquiry for public life in a democracy, I was called back to Plato's *Apology*, that compelling account of the trial of Socrates in which the citizens of Athens find him guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth...and sentence him to death. There is a moment in that dialogue that responds in a poignant way to the present question and to the context in which it is posed. It comes just after the Athenians have found Socrates guilty and his accusers have proposed death as the proper penalty. When Socrates is given the opportunity to propose a counter-penalty, he subversively suggests that the most fitting punishment for the life he has led, attempting to orient each citizen and the city itself toward what is true and just and beautiful, would be for the citizens to provide him with free meals in the Prytaneum, the most honored place in the city (Plato, 2002). This is Socrates at his most audacious, for the Prytaneum was the site of the hearth of Hestia, a powerful place of social integration where the practices of Socratic education would be woven into the fabric of the community. Of all the things Socrates says in his defense, this was perhaps the most provocative, and it likely cost him his life.

We might, however, trace the idea of the public research university to this very provocation; for it invites us to imagine what it might mean to situate the search for truth and the love of wisdom at the very heart of civic life so that the city and its citizens might cultivate the habits of dialogue and discovery that enrich our relationships with one another and deepen our understanding of the world we share.

In the late 18th and throughout the 19th century in the United States, citizens recognized the value of setting up public research universities to serve the public good in the twofold way Socrates served the city of Athens, through research and education, by exploring and generating new ideas and by teaching future citizens to discern how to live meaningful lives. In 1894, the vital importance of research was affirmed by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin when they insisted that the university "should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found" (Herfurth, 1949). And in 1862, during the Civil War, an enduring commitment to public higher education found its voice in the passage of the Morrill

Land-Grant Act with its promise "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (National Archives, 2021).

Research and education have long animated and enriched the civic life of our democracy, for as the 1965 legislation that created the National Foundation for the Arts and the Humanities so succinctly puts it: "Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens" (National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, 1965).

A Sacred Space of Research and Learning

To make good on this demand of democracy itself, we must support, sustain, and defend the public research university as a sacred space of inquiry and learning. To call the university a "sacred" space is not to infuse it with a holiness founded upon religious dogma, but to recall the connotations of the Latin *sacrare*, which means "to set apart" and "to dedicate" (Harper, n.d.). The university is set apart as a space dedicated to the search for truth and the cultivation of the habits of dialogue and thinking that awaken us to the world and deepen our relationships with one another.

The university is a sacred space for thinking in its most active voice. The activity of thinking is rooted in what Hannah Arendt calls the human condition of natality, the capacity to bring something new into the world (Arendt, 1958, pp. 178–179). Thinking thus acts in unpredictable ways. This is one reason idealogues and demagogues find universities so dangerous and seek to control them. The university, however, can only be a catalyst for new and unexpected ideas if it is protected and sustained as a sphere of free inquiry, intellectual humility, and responsible dialogue.

If the activity of thinking shapes the research life of the university, the spiritual practice of learning shapes its educational life. Here, I use the term "spiritual" in the sense in which Parker Palmer speaks of "authentic spirituality" in his book *To Know as We Are Known* when he writes:

> Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth—whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. (Palmer, 1983, p. ix)

Fear of uncertainty, ambiguity, and difference destroys the space of learning and inquiry. Diversity of perspective, identity, and lived experience is a condition for the possibility of research and teaching excellence. Authentic spirituality is thus rooted in the courage to create and hold spaces of plurality, paradox, and ambiguity that are animated by a shared commitment to seek truth wherever it leads. To seek truth is not to presume to possess it. Truth is subverted whenever it is made into an instrument of

power, for the power of truth lies in its capacity to draw us together in a common endeavor of searching and researching.

Danger from Two Directions

In her book, *Nihilistic Times*, Wendy Brown (2023) recognizes the importance of protecting the university as a sacred space of thinking:

> Preserving the scholarly realm for the relative autonomy and integrity of thought, indeed, for thinking itself, means resisting both hyper-politicization of knowledge and its structuration by relations of political economic dependence—state, economic, or philanthropic. (p. 98)

Brown points here to dangers from two directions. First, the hyper-politicization of knowledge threatens to undermine the research and educational mission of the university. Partisan ideology has come to saturate every facet of civil society, but when it seeps into the classroom, the laboratory, or the studio, the creative play of thinking is hampered, the horizons of discovery constrained. To resist the politicization of knowledge against which Brown warns us, a different kind of space must be prepared and maintained—a space set apart and dedicated to thinking in its most active voice, to the fearless search for truth wherever it may lead. This requires curation, rooted in care, and a lived commitment to free inquiry and responsible dialogue. The university is not a place of neutrality but of restraint informed by intellectual humility.

A second danger to the public mission of the university announces itself here; for the university cannot be maintained as a sacred space of thinking and authentic spirituality if it is economically dependent upon a politics that imposes direction on its inquiry, limits the scope of its purview, or circumscribes its sphere of discovery. This returns us to that provocative suggestion Socrates makes in the *Apology* that puts education at the center of civic life. The well-being of the city depends upon its willingness to create, sustain, and support a space of free inquiry and responsible dialogue. But the idea that such places dedicated to the practices of research and education should be maintained in perpetuity by the city for the sake of civic life remains as unwelcome today as it was in ancient Athens. Then as now, the idea is unwelcome because the citizenry does not, as James Baldwin reminds us, "trust the independence of mind, which alone makes a genuine education possible" (Baldwin, 2021, p. 192). Now as then, however, the idea is essential because the civic life of democracy itself depends upon independence of thought and integrity of judgment.

Between the unwelcome and the essential lies the difficult but possible—this is just the site the public research university must inhabit if it is to fulfill its public good mission by being a platform for inquiry, a place of fearless sifting and winnowing that cultivates in citizens the wisdom and vision democracy demands. If the space the university thus inhabits is political, it is political in the sense in which Socrates was political, serving the

public good by cultivating habits of dialogue, by provoking citizens to think.[1] In this sense, however, the public research university is no more divorced from partisan politics than was Socrates; like Socrates, the public research university is situated within and vulnerable to the factional fighting that seeks wealth, power, and control. Indeed, in the degree to which the university depends on such partisan politics, it too must be engaged with them. But the aim and extent of this engagement must be to protect and defend the university as a sacred place dedicated to inquiry and learning, for this is the ground upon which our politics will either enliven and enrich civic life or deaden and impoverish it.

Values-Enacted Leadership

The ultimate direction taken in this regard depends on the culture of leadership we develop within and between our public research universities. To cultivate and maintain the university as a sacred space of research and authentic spirituality requires a values-enacted approach to leadership that intentionally aligns the values for which we say we care most deeply with the lived experiences of our students, staff, faculty, and community partners. Values-enacted leadership is as difficult as it is powerful.[2] The difficulty lies in remaining always attentive to the deeper purpose of the university, to its core values of free inquiry, intellectual humility, and responsible dialogue even, and especially, when the dissonant noise of partisan politics seeks to deplete our energy and divert our attention. The values-enacted approach to leadership is powerful because it recognizes that values must be navigated anew each time they are invoked. Relationships deepen as values are identified as shared and put into intentional practice each day, in every decision we make and in every interaction we have. Trust takes root as we work together to weave these shared values into the intellectual life of the university. Ultimately, the power of values-enacted leadership in higher education lies in its capacity to sustain and nurture the habits of thinking and dialogue, rooted in trust, that cultivate the wisdom and vision democracy demands.

If, in these reflections, we are called back to the trial of Socrates, it is because his life has long stood as an enduring reminder that free inquiry, intellectual humility, and responsible dialogue have always been the greatest threat to demagoguery and the best hope for democracy.

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[1] For a detailed discussion of the nature of Socratic politics, see Long (2014).

[2] For a discussion of values-enacted scholarship in general, see Agate et al. (2020).

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Embracing Pluralism

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Chancellor

At their core, universities are defined by a commitment to the production of knowledge, and to sharing that knowledge both with students and with the broader world. We want to grow the storehouse of human knowledge about the world — both for its own sake, because we see that knowledge as an inherent good, and for the ways that knowledge can be translated into impact, whether that means new medical treatments, new life-changing discoveries and inventions, new understandings of politics, economics, or culture, or through new artistic creations from dance to art to literature.

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, we often talk about "sifting and winnowing," a reference to a famous 1894 report by our Board of Regents, written by the then-President of the university, Charles Kendall Adams:

> In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found. (Herfurth, 1949, Ch. 1)

Given that none of us has easy or simple access to "the" truth, our only pathway is, drawing upon this agricultural metaphor, to "sift and winnow" in our efforts to improve our storehouse of collective knowledge. Whatever our field of work, we must therefore engage with a variety of rival assertions, claims, and viewpoints, looking for what part of the truth, if any, each offers to us. Truth is critical, but it is also provisional, needing to be tested and re-tested against rival ideas and novel evidence. This testing is best achieved not by bringing people together who all see the question, or the best answer, in the same way, but by embracing *pluralism*: constructive engagement across differences, including differences in disciplinary perspective, differences in background and experiences, and differences in beliefs. At its best, a university that embraces open expression, evidence-based engagement, and the lively exchange of rival truths can also be a training ground for the skills necessary to be a full participant in our pluralistic democratic society, teaching its students to be curious learners, capable leaders and educated citizens.

In a moment when universities face a panoply of serious, possibly even existential threats — to our research ecosystems, to international academic partnerships, and to core values of fairness, opportunity, and human dignity, to name only a few — it may be tempting to move the work of supporting democratic pluralism on our campuses to a

back burner. But in my view, university leaders, perhaps especially at large public research universities, must resist this temptation.

Rather, we should take this issue as seriously as we take scientific research and our curriculum. We need to embrace the importance of teaching students to engage across their differences, whether those differences stem from their identities, their life experiences, their beliefs, or some combination thereof. Embracing pluralism isn't optional, and it's not merely a "nice to have." I'd suggest, rather, that it's foundational to what we need from top research universities for our students, our institutions, and our democracy. Embracing pluralism strengthens our efforts at civic engagement while also strengthening our efforts at that sifting and winnowing so necessary for discovery and invention.

Deliberation

I recently had dinner with a group of ten students and a faculty facilitator who have been gathering roughly once a month for the past six months to discuss complex and contested issues like gun control, immigration, and abortion. Our group was one of 20 in the program; each had been meeting for lively dinner discussions, and each group, by design, included students from across the political spectrum, and from a variety of backgrounds.

We call these Deliberation Dinners. The students are grouped to ensure viewpoint diversity (based on their responses to a short Pew political typology instrument), and each group is led by a trained faculty facilitator, who helps the group engage with controversial and sometimes very emotional issues in a way that's productive and that recognizes each person's humanity. We piloted the Dinners last year, doubled their size this year, and are now in some exciting discussions about a possible further expansion because the results have been remarkable.

One strongly pro-choice student told me after a deliberation that focused on abortion that she understood for the first time where people on the other side of that issue were coming from. Another described how much he appreciated being able to share his view on gun control with his peers in his deliberation group, who largely saw the issue differently, but respected his position and engaged with him in ways that sharpened both his own perspective and theirs in a constructive way. Another wrote:

> I often view the "progressive left" as moral grandstanders not worthy of respect, but after having conversations with many of them I learned that they are people, like me, with good intentions and I hope they realize that in me, too.

Sitting in on that dinner confirmed for me that pluralism can be a powerful antidote to polarization, and that there is no other place on earth better situated to promote

pluralism than a university where so many different ways of seeing the world from different disciplines and different perspectives are brought together in an intentional way.

Embracing pluralism can be cacophonous at times, but it also may be our best tool to create pathways to bring people together across their differences, not to change their views of the issues, but to change their views of one another. To help them approach each other with curiosity before judgment, and to do so not just for one afternoon or one debate, but for common projects and activities that build relationships and cultivate understanding.

The author, civic leader, and CEO of Interfaith America, Eboo Patel, invites us in his essay "How to put a country back together" to think about how well we're preparing our students to engage productively and seek common ground in the face of deep divisions. He writes:

> If the chair of a school board or the president of a city council tearing itself apart over identity differences were to come to a university leader and say, "I want to know how different people can learn from one another without coming to blows. Can I spend a week on your campus to see what that looks like?" — if someone asks this, our universities should feel confident that their students are up to the task. (Patel, 2024)

Are we? My honest answer is that our work on this front is important, but it is also significantly incomplete. We have many times and places where sifting and winnowing and the embrace of pluralism are flourishing within our walls. But we also have plenty of occasions where, even in our universities, people engage within bubbles rather than bringing curiosity and empathy to their engagements with those who think differently. This means we have an important opportunity to keep working to better prepare our students to listen productively, question their assumptions, and work on solutions that pull people together rather than apart.

This is easier said than done in a moment when the drumbeat of questions about the value of our universities grows ever louder. The precipitous decline in public trust and confidence in higher education over the past decade continues (Deane, 2024). In a Pew Research survey conducted one year ago, just 36% of respondents indicated they have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in higher education, down from nearly 60% in 2015 (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2024).

Polls show there is a partisan divide in how people answer these questions — distrust of us is greatest among those who identify as Republicans — but distrust has been increasing steadily across all political groups. At the same time, to be sure, distrust in *all* institutions has been increasing (and universities fare better than numerous other

institutions). Still, it's critical to recognize the number of people in the broader community who feel angry, unseen, and unheard by us.

There are many reasons for the decline in trust and confidence; I'll suggest just two that I think are relevant to the question of how we support pluralism and engagement across difference on our campuses.

The first goes back more than 50 years and is simultaneously a positive development and a challenge — the movement away from a shared sense of a traditional literary and academic canon. There used to be a largely shared conception of the "greats," the core novels of our time, the most important historical works, or works of political theory. No more. Our broader and more inclusive conception of whose voices are heard and whose texts and stories matter is, in my opinion, largely a good thing. But to build community in the absence of a foundational or core curriculum that creates a shared body of knowledge is absolutely more challenging. We see similar dynamics with, for example, the media — there are no longer broadly shared sources of trusted information. A second factor giving rise to distrust in higher education is the perceived lack of intellectual diversity on university campuses, and the belief that, at times, we silence dissenters and erode the very principles we purport to value, including evidence-based inquiry, academic freedom, and the free exchange of ideas.

There is some validity to these criticisms. My university, like others across the nation, conducts periodic surveys of our students. The most recent showed a significant gap between liberal and conservative students on the question of whether they feel comfortable speaking out in class on controversial topics, with conservatives feeling less comfortable sharing their views than more liberal students (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023). (Notably, the biggest reason students did not feel comfortable had far more to do with their concerns about disapproval from their peers than it did with our faculty.) Also concerning: When asked whether invited speakers with viewpoints that could be offensive to some people ought to be disinvited, 43% of our students said yes — and we see similar statistics broadly across universities, even large research institutions like ours that should be places where a commitment to breadth and pluralism is foundational.

If we take sifting and winnowing seriously, and we should, we need viewpoint diversity to be a priority, even when it is not always comfortable. We have further work to do to make this a reality. We need to continuously ask, "Whose perspectives are shaping the conversation? Whose voices are missing? What skills do our students need in order to connect across their differences? And how can we create space for constructive learning from one another?"

Enacting Pluralism

A number of schools, both public and private, are trying new things in this space. Some are further along; some are just beginning. The university I lead is somewhere in the middle. In addition to the Deliberation Dinners, we are simultaneously challenging our assumption that classrooms grow organically from the course materials and don't require any special skill. In fact, research suggests that leading quality discussions is a skill that can be explicitly taught.

We have been fortunate at UW–Madison to have one of the world's leading experts in this arena, Professor (and School of Education Dean Emerita) Diana Hess, who has built the Discussion Project, an evidence-based curriculum that teaches teachers to create productive and engaging learning environments. More than 1,000 of our faculty and staff (including the Deliberation Dinners facilitators) have gone through it, and we've brought the curriculum to a number of other schools. For us, it's been a game-changer. One of our faculty wrote: "I am not exaggerating when I say it has changed my life. This has made me think differently about my teaching and I am quite sure the students' experience is all the better for it."

Of course, our work to create space for productive discussion must reach beyond our classrooms and out into the world. I'll close by sharing one more program we've created in our very purple state to help bridge divides in the community.

The Main Street Agenda, created by our La Follette School of Public Affairs (n.d.), brings faculty into communities across the state to facilitate conversations on controversial issues. In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, the project organized dinners that brought together close to 400 people with diverse beliefs and political viewpoints for conversations about divisive issues like healthcare and the environment. Participants were told: You don't have to persuade one another. Just talk, listen, acknowledge, and respect disagreements.

When the faculty director walked through those packed conference halls, she heard laughter and incredibly engaged conversations (La Follette School of Public Affairs, 2024) and saw people exchanging contact information so they could continue to talk. She knew something powerful was happening that could help us begin to address the often-legitimate feeling people have that we haven't treated their perspective as valued and valid.

Effective inclusion requires pluralism, and there is no better incubator for pluralism than a big, complicated university where so many different perspectives come together. In short, we must simultaneously enhance viewpoint diversity on campuses and substantially strengthen the campus culture of civil dialogue, in which different points of view are welcomed and in which listening for understanding and disagreeing with

respect are the norm. By making pluralism a central part of the education we provide, we will prepare a new generation of problem-solvers capable of recognizing how often they have something to learn from those with views different from their own. We will be training graduates who will understand that they can work effectively and constructively with others on an issue of importance without having to agree with them on everything. Helping our students develop that set of skills will serve them well. It will equally benefit our civic culture and our nation, while simultaneously further strengthening our commitment to sifting and winnowing, and to the production of new knowledge and transformative discoveries at the core of our mission.

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The Role of Public Research Universities in Advancing Scientific Research

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As part of the dialogues on the *Future of the Public Research University,* I address the question, "What role do public research universities have in advancing scientific research to expand frontiers of knowledge"?

To begin our thinking, we need to know that teaching, research, and scholarly exploration are the cornerstones of public universities. Indeed, the 1862 Morrill Act established land-grant institutions in each state to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanical arts to the members of the working classes so they could obtain a practical education. Further inculcating research into the public land grants was the creation in 1887 of the agricultural experiment station programs where our knowledge of hybridization, weed and insect management, and soil and water research was born. So, land-grant universities were constructed around the broadening of the kinds of entrants into the university, to research as a core function of the public university, and third, and important to my argument today, is that in 1882 and 1887 and in every Congress through today, universities have been federally supported in a bipartisan way to enable scientific discoveries (Liu et al., 2024). That federal support is pooled funds of the individuals of the country – our tax dollars – used in our shared best interests to do things an individual cannot accomplish on their own. The fundamental idea then, and debated now, is that the public is made better by fundamental and applied research that is supported by all of us. And in the United States, that work in the public's interest is done at research universities.

So how was research in the public interest accomplished in the past? Research was supported by nearly all the traditional Cabinet-level departments of government, through Congressionally-allocated funds to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) with additional dollars targeting specific work through U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Department of Education, National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA), U.S. Department of Agriculture and others. This government contracted work through research universities has solved problems and made the world better for each generation. Indeed, one of the reasons America has led in research is that the central government has not tried to do all the work on its own. The NIH has laboratories that account for 21% of their research budget, with the remaining dollars allocated to scientists in every state of the nation (National Institutes of Health, 2024). And that research is programmatically directed, or it is untargeted basic research. A good example of directed research is this nation's war on cancer. In 1971, Richard Nixon

declared a war on cancer to find cures by studying the disease in each organ. In 1971, a cancer diagnosis was a death sentence, particularly for young individuals. Today, the five-year survival rate for adolescent and young adult patients is 85%. This improvement in life expectancy is the direct result of increases in our understanding of the origins of cancer and the development of new chemotherapeutics and biologics (a term that didn't exist in 1971) and better usage of radiotherapy and other atomic treatments.

And, for all the research that is targeted to a particular problem, an equal amount of work is done in an unstructured way. NIH doesn't dictate what question to ask; scientists ask the next most reasonable question and pursue it to its logical endpoint. The key is to convince your fellow scientists that the question is important, and the approach is valid. My own research in this fundamental or 'untargeted' science arena led to the development of a field of medicine called oncofertility, fertility management for young cancer patients.

I am a reproductive scientist and was funded to ask this question: How are the ovarian follicles of the female reproductive cycle controlled over decades of life? This is a critical question to ask because it tells us something about our biology, but it had nothing to do with cancer patients. I didn't know that I could apply this work to help children and young adults with cancer when I began, nor did the NIH, nor did my graduate students. But we know that asking the right fundamental questions opens new vistas to understanding, creating new content in our textbooks for us to teach and to learn, and adds to the possibility of new drugs and treatments that improve the health of the population. Today, across the globe, young cancer patients are not only surviving their cancer, but they are also provided options for the post-cancer survivorship years, including fertility options for family building long into their future. Our system of targeted problems, like cancer, and untargeted scientific discovery, like the ways ovarian follicles grow in an ovary, are direct evidence of the way knowledge accrues; it does not amortize. It's like compound interest – you get more out than you put in.

I did this work as a professor and research scientist while I was teaching undergraduates and graduate students. I truly believe that at our public research universities, great research is interoperable with great teaching. Fundamentally, we teach both what is known **and** how to ask questions and solve problems. Learning what went before is what I call horizontal learning; you open a book and learn the answers to questions asked in the past. Vertical learning occurs when you teach a student how to tackle the unknown, how to ask questions, how to value evidence, how to understand the limits of knowledge and not be afraid when new evidence suggests a different path. A society that enables this kind of teaching and learning is a confident society and one that is investing in itself and its future. Fundamental, unstructured, basic research and applied research accomplished in our public universities, taught to students, funded by taxpayers who

want better for their neighbors creates the possibility for new fields of medicine, a healthier, more knowledgeable, and more intellectually engaged population.

One might argue that we should let industry do the research. At one point there was research in private companies but that came largely to an end when Bell Labs, the most successful research enterprise funded by a company, was broken up. Shareholders wanted value, and fundamental science does not provide a quarterly report that can be easily monetized. Curiosity-driven research at Bell Labs in the forty years before their breakup ultimately led to inventions such as the transistor, laser, photovoltaic cells and the award of 11 Nobels among other notable outcomes. And, notably, those scientists were trained in the great universities of America.

Since that time, the private sector has not followed the Bell Labs model of deep investment in fundamental research. Today's corporations instead utilize the discoveries that have been made in universities, and every employee comes from those same universities. And the reason corporations can afford to focus on applications and markets is because they rely on public research universities for the unstructured discoveries – those that effort alone can't make. The bottom line is that research universities support the interests of businesses, which rely on the technologies discovered in universities and the talent developed in universities. A virtual flywheel. This economic value proposition was laid out in a report commissioned during World War II entitled "Science, the Endless Frontier" (Bush, 2020). Its author, Vannevar Bush, laid out the virtuous cycle that is at the core of America's successes, wherein tax-payer support of fundamental research in universities provides the driving forces for the growth of a robust and highly innovative economic system. The roles of universities in this growth cycle are three-fold: First, they provide the essential feedstock of high-value employees for industry. Second, through unstructured research, publication and patenting their results, they provide the breakthrough ideas that advance the health and wellbeing of the taxpayers who provide the support. And third, each dollar of a government grant to a university generates about $2.50 of local economic activity (United Medical Research, 2025). In these ways, universities are an essential part of the robust and highly innovative economy in the United States far exceeding what might have been done even in the best of corporate America. Today, we are realizing the fruits of that virtuous ecosystem that America adopted and are prepared to push the boundaries of knowledge and application further than could be imagined.

A confident country invests in its future – it wants short-term gains, but it also invests in long-term greatness. Research in public universities has made America healthier and smarter. It has ensured that young women who would have been sterilized by their cancer treatment now survive and are able to have families in their expectant futures. Adaptation is being done by universities as the way in which federal funds flow is being reimagined. As an industry, we are reassessing the infrastructure of research, the kind of research, and the number of trainees and entrants into that research

domain. We are a nation of thinkers and of problem solvers and our great public universities will continue to make the argument that taxpayers' interests are best served by a vibrant research agenda in the public sphere.

So, what role do public research universities have in advancing scientific research to expand frontiers of knowledge"? The ideals of the Morrill Act signed during the depths of the civil war still hold true. That is, that an education including research principles will make every state of this nation, greater, generation after generation. And the 'endless frontiers of science', imagined during World War II is even more true today - that public research is an economic engine for the nation. Public universities are the holders of each of these promises and partners with the public whose interests are represented by the federal government. And those interests and promises are to each of us, to our neighbors, and to our nation.

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